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Implications for Professional Counselors When Working With Adult Third Culture Kids

Paper based on a program presented at the 2013 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, October 18, Denver, CO.

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Abstract

As society continues to globalize, increasing numbers of our clients are having to live and function within multiple cultures. Third culture kids (TCKs) and adult third culture kids (ATCKs) spend a significant part of their formative years in another country or countries due to the work choices of their parents. TCKs and ATCKs share a distinct experience that lies within the idea of a third culture, which is neither the home nor the host culture. TCKs and ATCKs experience many transitions. These transitions are intensified because they are not only changing locations, but in many cases, cultures as well. We as counselors must be prepared to work with this population in a culturally competent manner. This article, which focuses on this population in adulthood, seeks to (a) increase the knowledge base of professional counselors in their work with ATCKs, (b) define the ATCK transition experience, and (c) offer culturally competent counseling strategies.

Keywords: adult third culture kids, practice competencies, counseling strategies

Introduction

The effects of globalization have resulted in the increased connectedness of diverse cultures as well as larger emigration flows (Arnett, 2002; Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). This ultimately leads to higher numbers of people settling into unfamiliar areas. As a result of this globalization, people are having to live and function
within multiple cultures (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). Transculturals are defined as people who spend a significant part of their formative years in another country or countries due to the life and work choices of their parents (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Transculturals are also known as “third culture kids” or “adult third culture kids” (Useem & Downie, 1976, p.103). Defining this population can be challenging due to the fact that there is currently no consensus surrounding what qualifies a third culture kid (TCK) in regards to age of migration, number of countries, and length of time in each country (Choi & Luke, 2011). This population can consist of the sons and daughters of corporate employees, international business persons, missionaries, and government and military personnel (Moore & Barker, 2012). While TCKs may be of any age, ATCKs are considered the adult subset of TCKs (Miller, 2012). For the purpose of this article, we will use the terms TCKs and ATCKs interchangeably, while focusing on this population in adulthood. It has been estimated that 37,000 third culture kids (TCKs) will return to the United States to attend college every year (Gaw, 2000). According to Melles and Frey (2014), the numbers of TCKs will continue to increase as a result of continued globalization. In spite of the increase in numbers of TCKs, the literature on this population is scarce (Mortimer, 2010). Due to the fact that there have been limited studies on the ATCK population, this article seeks to (a) increase the knowledge base of professional counselors in their work with ATCKs, (b) define the ATCK transition experience, and (c) offer culturally competent counseling strategies.

**Distinctiveness of Third Culture**

The distinctiveness of the experience of TCKs and ATCKs lies within the idea of a third culture. This term describes the unique experience of the lifestyle created by people who are having to, or in the process of, adapting and relating the society they are originally from, to the new one in which they live (Barringer, 2001). The first culture, or the home culture, is the country from which the person holds his or her passport. The second culture is the host culture, or the culture in which the person is living without citizenship. Finally, the third culture is the culture that is neither the host nor the home culture (McDonald, 2010). It has been described as the “culture between cultures” (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009, p. 755). According to McDonald (2010), the third culture is made up of the shared commonalities of those living a global lifestyle.

In addition to sharing these commonalities, TCKs and ATCKs often times have other shared experiences such as: (1) being distinctly different from those around them; (2) the eventual expected return to their home country; (3) a privileged lifestyle; (4) and a system identity (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Many TCKs and ATCKs are raised in cultures in which they are visible minorities. This becomes an integral part of their developing identity. Even if TCKs and ATCKs live in a host country in which they do not differ physically from the host country’s population, they still have a very different perspective of the world in comparison to their peers. The next aspect that differentiates this population is that, unlike immigrants, they expect at some time to return to their home country. Additionally, the aspect of TCKs and ATCKs living a more privileged lifestyle is indicated by the fact that there are certain benefits and perks designated for the families of employees working for international businesses, the diplomatic corps, or missions organizations. These privileges may be offered to members by the sponsoring
organization or the host culture, or a combination of both. Privileges can include everything from personal chauffeurs to domestic service personnel. Finally, TCK and ATCK communities tend to be keenly aware of the idea that they are representations of more than just themselves. Jobs can be based on how the behavior of adults or the behavior of their children reflects the standards of the sponsoring organization (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

**Ethical Obligations to ATCKs**

ATCKs might be considered an invisible minority in society (McDonald, 2010), and, therefore, counselors are ethically obliged according to the American Counseling Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics* (2014), to identify and prepare ourselves to deliver services for the welfare of this population. Counselors have a professional responsibility to learn about the cultural experience of the ATCKs, especially due to the fact that their experience is uniquely characterized by living in a third culture that goes beyond the limits of the native and host cultures (ACA, 2014; McDonald, 2010). Thus, counselors must develop multicultural competencies in this domain in order to serve the growing population of ATCKs in the United States.

According to Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, and McCullough (2015), the important measures of the Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies of a counselor are within the developmental domains of: (1) counselor self-awareness, (2) client worldview, (3) counseling relationship, and (4) counseling and advocacy interventions. Within the first three domains lie the aspirational competencies of: attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action (Ratts et al., 2015). Thus, counselors must have the ability to develop knowledge and self-awareness of their own attitudes and beliefs, which might affect the client. According to Roysircar, Arredondo, Fuertes, Ponterotto, and Toporek (2003), it is important for counselors to address their own assumptions and biases, for instance, about the perceived privilege they believe their clients might have, and acknowledge them as part of an invisible minority when they return to their home cultures. Culturally competent counselors also make attempts to gain knowledge and understanding of the client’s worldview and to develop skills to provide culturally responsive services (Ratts et al., 2015). Additionally, according to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2016) Standards, which inform effective counselor preparation, counselor education programs are required to provide students with an understanding of the “multicultural and pluralistic characteristics within and among diverse groups nationally and internationally” (p. 10), thereby making it important to study the issues faced by ATCKs, even though the literature on this subject has been sparse.

**Identity Development**

Identity development is often a complex process influenced by many factors (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). While identity is considered to be a lifelong process, Josselson (1987) stated that it is late adolescence that is most crucial in identity development and plays a large role in the development of adult identity. ATCKs progress through developmental stages in the same way as the rest of the population, but according to McDonald (2010), they must also contend with the challenges associated with cultural
differences as they travel from location to location. Furthermore, ATCKs may identify with multiple cultural identities, which according to Van Reken (2004), can make identity formation challenging. Even an ATCK with a firm sense of identity can be tested in the face of government red tape and paperwork such as applying for a passport, in which one national identity might be required (Stultz, 2002).

Wrobbel and Plueddemann (1990) stated that TCKs may approach developmental crises in a different way, which will ultimately have an effect in adulthood. For ATCKs finding a sense of identity can be especially challenging because, in many cases, they will have moved from one culture to another, all during their formative years. While there are currently no identity development models specifically for ATCKs, Erikson’s (1959) lifespan model can inform identity development in the ATCK population. Erikson devised a lifespan model of development that consists of eight psychosocial stages. Using Erickson’s model as a framework, a study conducted by Wrobbel and Plueddemann (1990) indicated that adult children of missionaries (ATCKs) were not as successful in resolving developmental crises when compared to non-ATCK peers. While this study seems to support previous authors in suggesting that ATCKs experience a delayed adolescence (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001), it may also be that the current models of identity do not accurately address ATCK development. There is a need for more research in this area.

The ATCK Transition Experience

Two of the major characteristics that can potentially affect the transitional experiences of ATCKs are the fact that they live within multiple cultures and tend to move often from one culture to another (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). This results in ATCKs experiencing major transitions more frequently than other people. These transitions are intensified because they are not only changing locations, but in many cases, cultures as well. According to Cockburn (2002), when ATCKs move to a new location and culture, they may identify as temporary residents or as members of their new culture as opposed to their first culture. According to Pollock and Van Reken (2001), TCKs and ATCKs go through five stages with each transition. The stages are: (1) Involvement, (2) Leaving, (3) Transition, (4) Entering, and (5) Reinvolve-ment.

Involvement Stage

The involvement stage is characterized by the recognition that the TCKs and ATCKs feel comfortable and that they are a part of the community. They are recognized by others living in the community and tend to be focused on the present and not on the past. In this stage they are also not overly concerned about the future. The ATCK is able to easily follow traditions and customs of the community. The other members of the community are familiar with the ATCK’s interests, history, and reputation.

Leaving Stage

The leaving stage begins when ATCKs realize they will be leaving and begin to mentally and physically prepare. This stage is characterized by relinquishing work responsibilities and emotional ties. There is a detachment that occurs that can produce strain and frustration in relationships. This has been described by Pollock and Van Reken
Denying the feelings of sadness or grief is a coping strategy in which TCKs and ATCKs may try to make the leaving process as painless as possible. However, according to Pollock and Van Reken, this only leads to carrying this grief over into the next phase of transition. Furthermore, this unacknowledged grief can lead ATCKs to disengage emotionally from future relationships, because they learn that relationships and friendships ultimately end (Melles & Frey, 2014). This population will often experience higher levels of stress caused by the grief and loss they experience as a result of their transitions to new places (Davis et al., 2010). Also according to Davis et al. (2010), this can result in feelings of vulnerability and a lack of control.

**Transition Stage**

The transition stage begins when the TCKs and ATCKs have left their previous location and does not end until they have made the decision to become a part of the new community. This stage is characterized by making constant adjustments due to the fact that their support base no longer exists and they have not yet learned their new responsibilities that come with being in a new community. Their old roles and responsibilities have changed. This is also a time in which TCKs and ATCKs can begin to withdraw because of difficulties in finding new social groups that in many cases are already established. ATCKs tend to utilize certain strategies to help them cope with the lack of social connections. In a study conducted by Choi and Luke (2011), it was found that some TCKs, to cope with a lack of social connections, made intentional efforts to disengage with others and were very selective in what they revealed about themselves. TCKs in this study also talked about not showing their emotions as a way to deal with their frequent transitions. It is important for counselors to be aware of this tendency in the ATCK population.

Another aspect that counselors must be aware of is the fact that the transition stage is also a time in which the ATCK might experience a severe loss of self-esteem. As stated by Pollock and Van Reken (2001), when moving from one culture to the next, TCKs have to learn everything over again. This can produce intense stress, as even a basic cultural or mistake in language can produce anxiety and shame. Additionally, the TCK’s past knowledge related to people and processes may not be applicable in the new setting. The TCK’s abilities, accomplishments, and personality are unknown to others in the new community. Pollock and Van Reken (2001) stated that TCKs may feel as if their past accomplishments were not as meaningful as previously thought.

**Entering Stage**

The entering stage is characterized by ATCKs reaching the point in which they are starting to adjust to their new environment. Emotions fluctuate between feeling excitement about the new aspects of their environment, and still missing the familiarity they had in their previous locations. This stage is much less chaotic than the transition stage. There is a conscious decision to integrate into the new community, but ATCKs may still feel tentative as they continue to learn the new environment. The ATCK may still have concerns about whether he or she will be accepted in the new community, as well as fears about making breaches in etiquette. Pollock and Van Reken (2001) made the case that it is this fear that leads ATCKs in this stage to exaggerate their usual personality.
traits. ATCKs who are usually outgoing may come across as overbearing and loud, while those who are quiet may come across as withdrawn. Awareness of the tendency of ATCKs to exaggerate personality traits can be helpful for counselors working with this population.

Reinvolvement Stage

The reinvolvement stage is the final stage that ATCKs experience as they transition to new locations. At this point, they feel as if they are a permanent part of the new community. In this stage they are also back to focusing more on the here and now, as opposed to frequently reminiscing about the past (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). The ATCK is now comfortable in the new community and feels as if he or she has been embraced in the new environment. However, Fail, Thompson, and Walker (2004) found from interview data from TCKs that the amount of time spent in the new community does not change the fact that they still have feelings of being marginalized. ATCKs may still feel different, but it does not make them feel uncomfortable (Fail et al., 2004). Fail et al. referred to this as constructive marginality, in which ATCKs take pride in their ability to settle and to feel comfortable in different communities.

While the process of transition may not look the same for every client, it is important for counselors to be aware of these stages when working with this population. Many ATCKs are able to move successfully through these stages of transition, but counselors need to be alert to some of the added stressors that can appear as they move through these stages (McDonald, 2010). It is also important for counselors to have an understanding of these transitional stages so that we can best provide ethical and culturally competent services.

Implications for Professionals

We as counselors must be prepared to provide culturally appropriate counseling services for ATCKs, but there is very little in the literature as to how best to provide these services (Barringer, 2001). Previous research has indicated that TCKs do experience various challenges, such as lower levels of psychological health, and would benefit from counseling services (Klemens, 2008). However, Mortimer (2010) found that 42% of ATCKs had gone to counseling, but of that group, 46% felt as if the counselor lacked understanding in ATCK concerns. The following section provides counselors, counselor educators, and clinical supervisors with culturally sensitive strategies to help inform their work with this population.

Open-Ended Questions

The distinctiveness of the ATCK experience makes it important for us as counselors to ensure that we do not ask questions that fall into our predetermined notions as to how clients experience their cultures. Therefore, it is recommended that counselors ask open-ended questions that give the ATCKs an opportunity to answer in the way that most saliently describes their lived experiences (McDonald, 2011). McDonald (2011) has indicated that ATCKs have expressed dissatisfaction with closed-ended questions, as they were found to be too constrictive in capturing their experiences. While closed-ended questions tend to set parameters that might limit the understanding of the scope of an
ATCK’s experience, open-ended questions give them an opportunity to explore, as well as explain, their lived realities. An example of this would be having more culturally sensitive intake forms. According to McDonald, including open-ended questions about ATCK identity on intake forms could be an effective first step. Giving ATCKs the opportunity to explain their demographic information, particularly asking about the number of countries in which they have lived, the reasons for their mobility, and how that mobility has affected their life experiences, can be good starting points to rectify any preconceived notions that the counselor might have. Furthermore, using certain open-ended questions either during intake or counseling could be specifically geared towards identifying this invisible minority. Open-ended questions such as “Where do you come from?” (Cockburn, 2002) or “How many schools have you attended?” (Stultz, 2002), are good screening questions for identifying potential transcultural populations and consequently using appropriate therapeutic interventions.

**Identifying Strengths**

Identifying the strengths of the ATCK not only helps in building a strong counseling relationship, but also in empowering the client (Roysircar, 2009). According to McDonald (2011), counselors should assist their ATCK clients in identifying their strengths. One of the identified strengths of the ATCK population is their ability to achieve and maintain high levels of wellness despite some of the potentially challenging issues related to their mobility (McDonald, 2011). According to Moore and Barker (2012), some of the ATCKs’ strengths that resulted from a global and multicultural lifestyle included adaptability, cultural awareness, fluency in multiple languages, and open-mindedness. Adaptability helps them successfully navigate between cultures and form relationships that transcend cultural boundaries. The cultural awareness that comes from living in different cultures helps them develop an intercultural communication competence, which addresses having culturally appropriate behaviors and actions across different cultures as well as developing the sensitivity to pick up on subtle cultural differences and adapting to them accordingly (Moore & Barker, 2012). Furthermore, according to Lam and Selmer (2004), ATCKs would make “close to the ideal business expatriates” (p. 119) because of their experiences of living in different cultures. The specific characteristics that they highlighted as salient to this population were an orientation to the future, an enthusiasm for travelling, and an acceptance of cultural and language diversity (Lam & Selmer, 2004). Their cultural competency, resulting from their bicultural experience or global lifestyle, is also identified as a strength (McDonald, 2010). Counselors could work towards highlighting and developing these strengths within their ATCK clients as a matter of providing support and solidifying the counseling relationship.

**Language and Narratives**

According to Sears (2011), TCKs, and ultimately ATCKs, want the opportunity to vocalize their narratives in order to preserve their sense of identity. This could be accomplished by providing a space for them to tell their stories about growing up in a different culture, celebrating holidays etc. (Limberg & Lambie, 2011). According to McDonald (2010), using their own narratives and language helps ATCKs feel a greater
sense of community, alleviates any feelings of isolation, and validates the universality of their experience.

**Use of the Wheel of Wellness**

The concept of wellness has gained increased support in direct response to the more traditional medical model in which disease and illness is more of a focus (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000). Wellness is defined as “a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community” (Myers et al., 2000, p. 252). It has been described by McDonald (2011) as a less Westernized premise than disease and is well suited to the ATCK population due to the fact that many do not identify with Western culture. Using this model allows the client to select and work on improving the quality of wellness in a particular area (McDonald, 2011). McDonald stressed the benefit for ATCKs when counseling is broken down into “manageable facets” (p. 249). The Wheel of Wellness Model empowers the client to access his or her overall wellness in different areas, including cultural identity, emotional awareness and coping, and stress management.

**Observation of Local Culture**

According to Roysircar (2009), observation of a client’s local culture is when the counselor seeks to understand and connect with the client based on the client’s cultural context. Central to the identity of many ATCKs is the concept of the third culture, which could also be considered the client’s local culture. Furthermore, McDonald (2010) stressed the importance of integrating the concept of the third culture as it relates to the client’s identity. It is within this third culture that ATCKs may feel that their true identity lies, and it is the development of this cultural identity that, according to LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993), can be useful in navigating “bicultural challenges and obstacles” (p. 395).

To further process the complex nature of the ATCK client’s concept of identity, the Dimensions of Personal Identity Model (Arredondo et al., 1996) can be utilized. This model “describes multiple fixed and flexible dimensions” (p. 105) that may add to the client’s conceptualization of identity. As posited by McDonald (2010), it can be a useful tool to assist in the ATCK client’s understanding of the different aspects that compromise his or her identity. It can be especially beneficial for this population due to its inclusion of people who are not visible minorities, as many ATCKs are upon their return to their home countries. As counselors, we must be mindful of the fact that some ATCKs who appear to be members of the majority, may in fact identify differently (McDonald, 2010).

**Identifying Losses**

The ATCK experience has been characterized by frequent relocations in which he or she has had, on multiple occasions, to say goodbye to close friends, prized possessions, and familiar surroundings. These relocations can bring about intense feelings of grief and sadness (Gilbert, 2008). In fact, according to Pollock and Van Reken (2001), TCKs deal with more intense levels of grief in their early years when compared to non-TCKs. If these feelings are not resolved, and the TCK is not able to process them, the feelings of grief can resurface in adulthood (Gilbert, 2008).
According to Pollock and Van Reken (2001), it is important for ATCKs to reflect on their past experiences in efforts to identify the losses they may not have been aware of previously. Counselors can assist ATCKs as they process these past experiences. Encouraging ATCK clients to keep a journal can help them with this process (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Once ATCK clients are able to identify their past losses, the counselor can help them with the grieving process. Some ATCKs have experienced losses such as sexual abuse they never disclosed, civil war in their host country, and the death of a family member while in their host country (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). It is important to mention that newly expressed anger can accompany the ATCK client’s new awareness of his or her hidden losses (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

**Relational Cultural Therapy (RCT)**

In a study conducted by Mortimer (2010), ATCKs reported that challenges related to friendships and relationships were the issues that would be most beneficial for them to address in counseling. Due to the interpersonal concerns expressed by ATCKs, a framework that directly addresses relational development and its connection to identity formation would be beneficial (Melles & Frey, 2014). Relational Cultural Therapy (RCT) is a theoretical framework in which the focus of helping is centered on the premise that healing occurs within the “context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships” (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 279). Strategies of disconnecting, according to RCT, are considered to be the origin of psychological issues (Melles & Frey, 2014). It is thought that these disconnections develop early in life as a result of continuous disconnections within the client’s family. According to Melles and Frey (2014), RCT is very well suited to address the concerns of ATCKs because it allows the ATCK to identify and process their relational patterns and how they have impacted their relationships.

**Conclusion**

As the world becomes more connected, and as a result more globalized, the numbers of ATCKs will continue to increase (McDonald, 2010). It is important that we as counselors have the necessary knowledge, skills, and self-awareness to be able to work with this population in a competent manner. This includes an awareness of the uniqueness of the experiences and needs of ATCKs. We as counselors must be able to support and encourage TCKs and ATCKs as they progress through the stages of transition (Limberg & Lambie, 2011), address some of the complexities that ATCKs can experience in finding their sense of identity, and offer culturally competent counseling strategies.

**References**


*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas*