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Navigating the Unknown: College Transitions of Third Culture Individuals

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ABSTRACT

Research on third-culture individuals (TCIs) is an emerging topic in college student development. However, while emerging literature on TCIs exists, research on TCIs' personal development in postsecondary contexts is still lacking. This literature review addresses this issue. In this review, I argue that the literature predominantly illustrates that TCIs experience a negative transition to college that negatively impacts their personal development. I then synthesize the literature, identifying the background of the research surrounding TCIs. Next, I summarize the four main themes that the literature identifies as struggles that TCIs experience while transitioning into college: family, social connections, mental well-being, and identity construction. I then highlight the important contribution that resilience has to TCIs' lives in college. I conclude by arguing that recommendations from the literature and practice should be adopted by all postsecondary institutions to better support TCIs.

Keywords: Third-culture individuals, identity development, higher education

In 2004, Mark Waters released the award-winning movie *Mean Girls*, a household classic for many Americans. While *Mean Girls* is undoubtedly a comedic film that illustrates how female-identifying high school students navigate the social hierarchy of the "girl world," it is also a story about a third culture individual (TCI)—Cady Heron—transitioning into her parents' culture after living on the African continent for most of her life. Cady experiences several challenges transitioning into high school, such as social isolation, missing cultural context from her peers, and missing friends she made abroad, among other challenges (Waters, 2004).

A woman's experience is not an anomaly. In fact, many TCIs experience similar challenges as they transition from their cultural upbringings to college. In this review, I argue that the literature predominantly illustrates that TCIs

experience a negative transition to college that negatively impacts their personal development, utilizing the theoretical framework developed by Purnell and Hoban (2014). I conclude by arguing that institutional recommendations from the literature and practice should be adopted by all postsecondary institutions to better support TCIs.

UNDERSTANDING TCIS: SYNTHESIS OF THE LITERATURE

Background of TCIs

Before I begin discussing the literature, it is paramount that I define who TCIs[1] are. TCIs, as a subpopulation of international students, diverge from the traditional definition of international students because they "are not a monolithic group" (Trimpe, 2022, p. 1023). While there is scholarly debate on who constitutes a TCI, most researchers use Pollack et al.'s (2017) definition of TCIs, which are students who "grow up (or grew up) outside their parents' passport country and culture for many different reasons" (Pollack et al., 2017, p. 4). TCIs are often children of parents who are diplomats, armed service members, missionaries, and work in international business (Pollack et al., 2017). Some researchers have an expansive definition of TCIs, arguing that the definition includes "refugee[s], asylum seeker[s], [and]...migrant[s]" (Murphy-Lejune, 2002, p. 101). Pollack et al. (2017) and Muphy-Lejune (2002) both agree, however, that TCIs are students who are integrated into their parents' passport country after spending significant time abroad, developing multiple identities.

Useem et al. (1963) first coined the term "third culture" to describe how children develop outside of their parents' culture (i.e., the primary world) and the cultures they grow up in (i.e., the secondary world). The term "third culture" describes how TCIs form their own integrated world (i.e., the tertiary world) in relation to their primary and secondary worlds (Useem et al., 1963). Because TCIs often live in several countries and are brought up in many different cultural environments, TCIs often have great social perspective-taking skills (Williams, 2023), which is the ability to take many other perspectives outside of one's worldview (Selman, 1980). TCIs are often interculturally sensitive and open-minded because of their experiences growing up in multicultural worlds (De Waal & Born, 2020). TCIs are also multilinguistic, a skill they develop from living in multiple cultures (Abdalla, 2024; Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015).

[1] While terminology, such as "third culture kid" (TCK), exists, I utilize the term "third culture individual" in this literature review. The term "TCK" may be appropriate in other contexts, but this literature review seeks to understand the experiences of third culture individuals in postsecondary contexts, making the term TCK infantilizing toward the TCI community, as many TCIs function beyond their childhood in their postsecondary status.

Context of Research on TCIs

Despite there being over 200,000,000 TCIs globally (Iyer, 2013), research on TCIs is lacking, primarily because the population is misunderstood and overlooked in the literature (Thurston–Gonzalez, 2009). Much of the literature on TCIs illustrates that TCIs thrive in academic spaces (Tajibayeva et al., 2023; Useem & Cotrell, 1993). However, it is important to note that TCIs are not monolithic and may struggle academically in college. In fact, researchers have found that not only do TCIs stop out of college (Pollock et al., 2017), they do so because they feel that institutions do not understand them and that they do not belong (Smith, 2011). Because belonging is a crucial variable that mediates student persistence in higher education (Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Strayhorn, 2019), it is a topic of primary concern for higher education administrators.

In addition, much of the literature focuses on children of white, Christian missionaries of the Global North. This focus problematizes how applicable research can be applied to TCIs of the global majority, interfaith TCIs, etc. New research must be developed to understand how TCIs of historically minoritized identities develop in college. With that said, emerging research is beginning to develop that is focused on TCIs from the Global South, particularly in Central East, South, Southeast, and Southwest Asia.[2]

Because there is a gap in the literature on how TCIs develop in postsecondary settings, the purpose of this literature review is to understand how TCIs develop in colleges. I do so by reviewing specific elements of TCIs' postsecondary development that have been documented in the literature. Important aspects of TCIs include how TCIs find communities on campus, what support systems TCIs have while in college, and how TCIs identify in college. By understanding how TCIs develop in postsecondary contexts, higher education administrators can better serve this important population.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework underlying this literature review is the Third Culture Kid Transition into University Model, developed by Purnell and Hoban (2014). In Purnell and Hoban's (2014) original study, the model described the experiences of 12 TCIs transitioning into postsecondary institutions in Australia. This model describes how TCIs transition into colleges, making this model an important framework for this literature review.

This quadripartite model describes how TCIs' childhood and early adult experiences shape their experiences in postsecondary contexts. The first stage is

[2] I use the term "Southwest Asia" in this literature review to describe the region formally referred to as the "Middle East." This use of terminology reflects the transition away from the Orientalist linguistic practice of describing the world in relation to the West (i.e., "Far East," "East Indies") (Bishara, 2023). By transitioning away from Orientalist terminology, I offer a decolonial approach to academic discourse.

the preparation stage, in which TCIs begin moving to their parents' country of origin (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). In this stage, TCIs may grieve of the loss of experiences made abroad and begin researching the context of their parents' passport country to prepare them for university (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). The second stage is the initial transition stage, in which TCIs begin navigating their parents' passport country (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). In this stage, the reality of living in their parents' passport country creates culture shocks for TCIs (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). Aside from the natural realities of navigating early adulthood, TCIs may feel that excitement integrates into the populace but disengages from their peers at the institution they attend (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). This stage lasts approximately six months after arrival (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). The third stage is the adaptation stage, in which TCIs begin developing strategies to adjust to their new cultural setting (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). In this stage, TCIs "settled into" their new environment at the university and developed routines in their social life yet still feel disengaged from their peers (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). This stage lasts approximately six months to two years after arrival (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). The fourth and final stage is the stabilization stage, in which TCIs have acclimated to their university experience (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). In this stage, TCIs recognize that while they have found connections in their new environment, the desire to seek connections abroad is alive for TCIs (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). TCIs also begin seeking professional mental health services in this stage (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). This stage lasts approximately two years or more after arrival (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). Overall, this model provides a practical overview sufficient to analyze the developmental experiences of TCIs in postsecondary contexts.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

While the literature has many different insights applicable to TCIs, I focus on four specific areas that impact TCIs: familial support systems, friendships and social relationships, mental well-being, and identity development. These areas are not the only challenges that affect TCIs in college but are the four most recurring challenges that the literature identifies TCIs face. Moreover, I highlight how resilience plays a role in TCIs' experiences in college.

Family

The first conclusive insight that the literature illustrates is that family plays a critical role in a TCI's life. Family is at the core of TCIs' identity, as their transition from one place to another is centered around familial decisions. Accordingly, TCIs need familial support as part of their transition into college. For example, Huff (2001) reported that family presence is positively correlated with TCI adjustment because parents help prepare their students for the cultural norms of college. Without social preparation from their parents, TCIs find it difficult to navigate collegiate cultural norms (Purnell & Hoban, 2014), just like Cady in Mean Girls found it difficult to understand social cues in high school. Similarly, Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2014) reported that families play a critical

and paramount role in socializing TCIs in college because families provide the most stability in the lives of TCIs. For example, in that study, participants reported that families had been present at critical moments in TCIs' lives, whereas friends and other peers were temporary connections compared with the longevity of familial relationships (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014). Additionally, Ra et al. (2023) reported that the relationships that TCIs had with their family helped them adapt to their institutional setting. For example, families help prepare TCIs for the college application process (Williams, 2023). Overall, we find that families play a significant role in the lives of TCIs as they transition into college.

Social Connections

With respect to social connections, the literature illustrates divergent findings concerning TCIs' personal development. Choi et al. (2013) identified two main types of friendships that TCIs develop in college: (1) functional connections and (2) social and emotional connections. Functional friendships are friendships that serve a purpose outside of the social and emotional realm (Choi et al., 2013). Conversely, social and emotional friendships are friendships with deeper connections (Choi et al., 2013). TCIs develop functional connections before developing social and emotional connections because doing so serves as a protective strategy (Choi & Luke, 2011). TCIs fear the grief that stems from losing deep friendships, a symptom of past traumatic transitions, and thereby keep friends at a distance to avoid these negative emotions (Choi & Luke, 2011; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014; Purnell & Hoban, 2014). Additionally, Smith and Kearney (2016) reported that TCIs shift their personalities to the social context they need to serve. TCIs do not form friendships with non-TCIs, as non-TCIs do not share the same experiences with TCIs, thus lacking the affinity necessary to form close attachments (Choi & Luke, 2011; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023; Firmin et al., 2006). Overall, while TCIs desire friendships, forming intimate connections may be difficult on the basis of their traumatic experiences of cultural transitions abroad (Choi & Luke, 2011; Moore & Barker, 2012).

TCIs who formed social and emotional friendships did so primarily with other TCIs or with students from backgrounds of cultures they experienced in their childhood. For example, researchers have reported positive transitions to college when TCIs bond with other TCIs (Hervey, 2009; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023; Smith & Kearney, 2016). In addition, Hervey (2009) reported that TCIs also make rich connections with other students from the countries they lived in during their upbringing. TCIs look for relationships that foster uniqueness and independence, as TCIs are instilled with independence from a young age (Choi et al., 2013; Williams, 2023). By forming connections that foster uniqueness and independence, TCIs are able to grow in close friendships.

However, friendships were not always associated with positivity. For example, Purnell and Hoban (2014) reported that while TCIs did make friendships with other TCIs, some TCIs avoided developing social and emotional intimacy because of the alcohol culture associated with the universities in the study. Moreover, because TCIs prefer independence, they may not desire to form social

connections at all, which can contribute to social isolation (Downie, 1976; Gaw, 2000).

Accordingly, social relationships are often a component of engagement in college student development (Astin, 1984). TCIs' level of engagement in college has mixed findings, however. On the one hand, Ra et al. (2023) reported that extracurricular activities and service-learning opportunities were important parts of putting academic coursework into practice and establishing a sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, Tyler (2002) reported that—in the context of high school students—TCIs were able to make friends when they were placed in extracurricular settings that matched similar interests with newly made friends. However, Espada–Campos (2018) reported that TCIs may not seek out cultural extracurricular activities in college because of the stigma of not belonging on campus, especially if TCIs do not share a cultural heritage with a cultural group on campus despite spending extensive time with that culture in their formative years of development. Overall, friendships made in college serve multiple purposes, depending on the context of the situation. In addition, TCIs' involvement in undergraduate activities has a positive effect on their personal development, but perceived barriers may still exist.

Mental Well-Being

Mental well-being is an area of transition in college that TCIs may especially struggle with. As TCIs move from one place to another, the constant state of transition during TCIs' most formative years of identity often causes mental well-being struggles (Melles & Frey, 2014). When TCIs enter college, these mental well-being struggles can persist and may even increase.

The literature shows that TCIs experience mental well-being struggles, such as anxiety and depression, in their transitions into college (Gaw, 2000; Habeeb & Hamid, 2021; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014; Purnell & Hoban, 2014; Smith & Kearney, 2016). However, the explanations for why students experience these mental well-being struggles are different. One reason is that, for some TCIs, mental well-being struggles are a natural part of the acculturation process, where reverse culture shock, the ability to orient oneself back to one's home culture, causes significant challenges to a TCI's psychosocial health (Gaw, 2000; Hervey, 2009; Huff, 2001; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014). This may be temporary, in which TCIs eventually adapt and integrate their past experiences into college (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014). However, some never recover from reverse culture shock and never reach stable well-being (Purnell & Hoban, 2014).

Another possible explanation for the decline in mental well-being is that some TCIs feel homesick and cannot adapt to the new cultural environment (Hervey, 2009). Homesickness over their past lives involves a significant acculturative challenge where TCIs miss the friends, family, and environments in which they grew up (Hervey, 2009). For other TCIs, adapting to their parents' cultural environment functions as a new culture in which they never grew up, thus causing acculturative challenges. For example, Habeeb and Hamid (2021) reported that

the orientation to a Western culture that values individualism from an Eastern culture that values collectivism contributed to TCIs' depressive symptoms.

The last possible explanation documented in the literature is childhood attachment issues that manifest in college. Attachment theory argues that the ability to form social connections in adulthood can be explained by the attachment one has to one's caretaker in childhood and adolescence (Bowlby, 1982). Mortimer (2010) argues that because TCIs grow up experiencing multiple abrupt transitions in life, they develop dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles, which, in turn, prevent TCIs from developing secure relationships. These attachment styles may cause TCIs to experience mental well-being struggles where TCIs may strive for deeper connections with others but do not invest in connections in the case of another transition in one's life, increasing psychosocial stress (Hervey, 2009). Finally, Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2014) reported that moving from one culture to another in early childhood left TCIs with abandonment wounds, thus influencing their experiences with mental well-being in college, such as interpersonal relationship conflict. Overall, the literature has demonstrated that TCIs may experience negative mental well-being struggles in colleges that can persist into adulthood.

Identity Construction

The formation of identity for TCIs transitioning into universities is multifaceted. The literature identifies themes related to the loss of cultural identity, discrimination, and self-identity. Beginning with the loss of cultural identity, researchers have found that TCIs struggle to identify where home is, as TCIs are in constant transition (Downie, 1976; Kortegast & Yount, 2016). As a result, because TCIs cannot identify where home is for themselves, they struggle to identify who they are (Downie, 1976). Moreover, Hervey (2009) reported that TCIs who had difficult and traumatic transitions during their early childhood experiences correlated positively with negative identity development into college. In addition, Fail et al. (2004) reported that TCIs can experience identity confusion in college when they are not well adjusted to institutions. However, recent research has shown that TCIs use acculturative strategies, such as finding elements of experiences abroad in a new environment, to renegotiate where home is for them (Kortegast & Young, 2016).

Research shows that TCIs' identity development can also be hampered by racial discrimination. For example, in Gambhir and Rhein's (2021) study on Indian TCIs in Thailand, TCIs described being questioned by their peers about their linguistic capabilities and racial identity in college. For example, TCIs who were born in India were asked why they spoke Thai so eloquently, which initially caused psychosocial stress but later displayed resiliency after such instances of discrimination (Gambhir & Rhein, 2021). In addition, Smith and Kearney (2016) reported that TCIs were socially excluded from their peers because cultural traditions formed abroad did not translate well into college. Moreover, Firmin et al. (2006) reported that TCIs often face stereotype threat in college. These

challenges pose significant obstacles to identify construction and development for TCIs who are already entering a difficult transition in their lives.

While much of the literature has reported overall negative identity development in TCIs' transitions into college, it is also important to acknowledge that TCIs experience positive identity development in college. For example, while TCIs struggle to assimilate the host culture, TCIs identify with a multicultural identity and can communicate cross-culturally (Moore & Barker, 2012; Mortimer, 2010). Moreover, Habeeb and Hamid (2021) reported that TCIs often self-author their identity, often choose to identify outside or in addition to their passport country's heritage, and that self-authorship is crucial for success in college. Overall, identity development is complex and fluid for TCIs, who identify with a multicultural identity in one instance but fail to identify themselves in other instances.

Resilience

However, TCIs develop resilience in postsecondary settings, despite the challenges they face. Resilience in TCIs is associated with an increased sense of adaptability surrounding life transitions, such as beginning postsecondary education, which reduces stressors during these transitions (Jones et al., 2023). In many cases, community and mentorship are critical factors that help TCIs develop resilience. For example, Espada-Campos (2018) and Weigel (2010) reported that TCIs identified communities among international student communities in colleges, fostering a positive peer support system when navigating the cultural transition to their parents' country of origin. In another study, Purnell and Hoban (2014) reported that a virtual mentoring program that centered on personal skill development was crucial for TCIs transitioning into institutions in their parents' passport country. Furthermore, Mizutani and Waalkes (2023) reported that TCIs in their study reported a sense of belonging when they connected with other students in colleges who had similar backgrounds and identities, corroborating literature findings that affinity is a critical necessity to feel a sense of belonging in collegiate settings (Astin, 1984; Cooper, 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1993). In short, TCIs are complex students and develop strategies to cope with the challenges they face when they attend postsecondary institutions.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this literature review have several implications for higher education institutional practices. Beginning with the topic of familial support, because researchers have emphasized how crucial the role that family plays in the lives of TCIs, institutions must prioritize a familial approach to student support. Some institutions have taken a familial and collectivistic approach to student support before it has produced tangible results for first-generation college-going (first-generation) students. For example, when Stanford University evolved its approach to support first-generation students, such as sending acceptance letters

using collectivistic and family-oriented language, first-generation students' performance in academic classes improved (Stephens et al., 2012). While this study focused on first-generation students, it is reasonable to expect similar results for TCIs, who are more likely to persist and succeed when families are engaged in the college-going process. Moreover, Marrun (2020) argues that, in the context of Latino/a/e/x/* student engagement, institutions should follow the approaches of the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign (UIUC). UIUC implemented activities such as family weekends and established departmental offices for family engagement, which were successful for Latino/a/x/e/* students (Marrun, 2020). This translates well to TCIs, as families play similar yet critical roles in their students' sense of belonging on campus as Latino/a/x/e/* families do.

Institutions should similarly adopt familial approaches to help TCIs transition into universities. For example, similar to Marrun's (2020) research, institutions could implement family weekends during the semester to emphasize the relevance that families play in TCIs' lives. During these weekends, institutions hold events and informational sessions that emphasize the closeness of family, such as faculty-parent-student events, tours of the institution, and sporting events (Jurich et al., 2015). In addition, new student orientation departments could incorporate families as part of their students' transition into the university, such as designing informational sessions with families and students as opposed to separating families and students. Institutions, such as the University of Michigan (n.d.), have already implemented this approach. Thus, institutions should follow the approaches of the aforementioned institutions to replicate familial support for TCIs.

Another recommendation for institutions to consider is creating affinity spaces for TCIs to interact with other TCIs or international students of backgrounds that TCIs grew up with. The literature has demonstrated that involvement in extracurricular activities is correlated with TCIs' academic success (Ra et al., 2023). Thus, TCIs should be bonded with other TCIs and other international students to increase their sense of belonging on campus (Weigel, 2010). For example, Lewis & Clark College (2023) implemented the "Third Culture Kid Program" in 1992 to help other TCIs on campuses develop meaningful friendships with one another through social engagements, such as English tutoring programs and biweekly dinners. Spangler (2021) also recommends mentorship programs that link newly admitted TCI students with other TCI students at universities to help navigate the transition easier for TCIs. Programs such as this help establish spaces for TCIs to develop friendships with peers during difficult transitions in college that only TCIs can understand (Cranston, 2017). Programs such as these also positively impact TCIs' identity formation by relating to other TCIs who understand the collegiate challenge.

Another consideration for higher education institutions is the efficacy of transition programs for TCIs. Transition programs, or reentry programs, are programs meant to orient TCIs back to their passport country and help alleviate potential challenges TCIs face in their transition into college (Spangler, 2021). Orientation programs such as these significantly increase TCIs' self-efficacy and belonging to other TCIs on campus (Cranston, 2017; Davis et al., 2010). For

example, Klemens and Bikos (2009) identified the student organization, Mu Kappa, in their study, which helps TCIs transition into college through programs such as retreats and campus activities. Purnell and Hoban (2014) identified "Sea Change" as the mentoring program for TCIs, which provides virtual mentoring and interpersonal development skills for incoming TCI students. As such, institutions must develop concrete and effective transition programs, such as programs as part of their orientation programs to ameliorate the challenges TCIs face in their transition into college.

Moreover, institutions need to respond to the mental well-being challenges that TCIs experience in college. It is clear from the literature that institutions are failing TCIs. To combat the mental well-being challenges that TCIs face on campus, Stultz (2003) argues that chief student affairs officers should prioritize training student affairs personnel on TCI experiences in college to better respond to TCIs' challenges. Institutions should prioritize diversity training on TCIs. Applied intervention strategies, such as diversity training, have been shown to reduce the prejudice of historically marginalized populations (Hanover & Cellar, 1998) and increase workplace humility (Smith & Silk, 2011). A lack of knowledge about TCIs from student affairs practitioners may lead TCIs to not engage with campus resources (see Pope et al., 2019). In the words of Mead (2021), "It is vital that student affairs divisions measure their effectiveness in helping students from underrepresented backgrounds succeed, while also using outcomes-based assessment to improve these efforts continually" (p. 120). Thus, institutions must train their student affairs personnel in TCI populations.

Ra et al. (2023) argued that institutions should invest in mental health offices on campus. Munn and Ryan (2016) further argued that institutional mental health departments must be trained to understand the mental well-being challenges that TCIs face in college. Spangler (2021) corroborates this, adding that institutional mental health departments need trauma-informed practices for TCIs, an area in which institutions are currently lacking. An example of a trauma-informed therapy practice that is effective for TCIs includes relational-cultural therapy, a therapeutic practice that acknowledges the cultural context of an individual's upbringing and emphasizes building relationships through interdependent growth (Jordan, 2018). In fact, this therapy was effective for TCIs to develop interpersonal relationships following the challenges they experienced in their upbringing (Melles & Frey, 2014). Institutions should employ similar practices in their mental health departments. Without these critical recommendations, TCIs are at risk of stopping college (Quick, 2010; Smith, 2011), causing retention concerns among this historically marginalized population within higher education.

Overall, these multidimensional recommendations are necessary to confront the concrete challenges that TCIs face in college. Without these necessary changes, TCIs will continue to navigate their social and developmental contexts in college with little to no institutional support. TCIs deserve better and more equitable environments in college so that they can thrive during some of the most formative years of their lives. The time has come for institutions to rise to this challenge.

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