Where I’m from? Third Culture Kids about their cultural identity shifts and belonging

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the affect of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) towards their home and host culture(s) and how this affect may indicate possible cultural identity shifts as distinguished in Sussman’s (2000) cultural identity shift model. To this end, the method of poetic inquiry was used. The poems were concerned with TCKs’ affective experiences (Prendergast, 2009). We also investigated whether TCKs described their belonging in terms of personal relationships rather than in terms of geographical locations.

Twenty TCKs, ranging in age from 26 to 70 years and from five ‘home cultures’, expressed their early cross-cultural experiences through the free verse poem of “Where I’m from”. A mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative research was applied, by combining poetic inquiry using a free verse poem format and clustering these data by means of coding in Atlas.ti. TCKs’ poems were analyzed using belonging, affect, and practices-food-nature-events as key codes.

Findings revealed that TCKs expressed stronger positive affect towards their host cultures than towards their ‘home cultures’, indicating a subtractive cultural identity shift. We also found that TCKs defined their belonging more in terms of personal relationships than in terms of geographical locations. This study shows that TCKs’ sense of belonging seems more related to the question who than where I am from.

“I am from everywhere, that’s a long story, what do you want to know, where my house stands, where I woke up this morning, where the color of my hair comes from or where I grew up. I am from Dutch origins, and French and Surinam and Indonesian, but in my heart I’m African, and not, because I’m not black and I don’t know their culture.” (Christa)

Introduction

The number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow rapidly in recent years, reaching 272 million in 2019 and implying an increase of 51 million since 2010 (United Nations News, 2019). Never in history were the numbers of people migrating this

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Addresses topics with clear affective dimensions and can be distinguished between participant-based and self-study foci, (balance out in combination with the affect developed for the host culture(s).)

The experiences of twenty adult TCKs were captured with a free verse poem format. 

TCKs, their cultural identity shifts, and their belonging

TCKs are traditionally defined as children of corporate employees, military and government personnel, and missionaries and aid workers, who have experienced a variety of cultures while their parents moved from one country to the next (Moore & Barker, 2012).
As a result, TCKs renegotiate their cultural identity throughout their life. “Identity is continuously constructed and reshaped during interaction with “outsiders, strangers, foreigners, and aliens – the others” (Cutcher, 2015, p. 121). Lijadi (2018), and Lijadi and Van Schalkwyk (2014, 2017) studied TCKs’ commitment and reticence in interpersonal interactions. They found that, because of TCKs’ frequent moves, often “the only stable relationship for TCKs was within their own family” (p. 9), and that TCKs “could not reach a deep level of friendship as they were constantly on the move” (p. 11).

The reason for TCKs to transition differs from economic migrants and refugees, who transition out of a need for a safer life or because of war or natural disasters. People who were ‘working abroad’ were often from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and employed in former colonies of Western countries by the so-called sponsor organizations (Bhabha, 1994). Related to these backgrounds, Tanu (2020, p. 7) recently wonders: “In such situations, does the intercultural understanding gained by TCKs extend to an understanding of the culture of those who are less privileged?”

Every transition from country to country, even transitions within countries to different housing, will have influenced the cultural identity of TCKs in a different way, depending on their age, duration of stay in a country, preparation for the transition and the prospect of possibly returning to what is often called home culture by the parents (Sussman, 2000). When adjusting to a new culture, “personal values, cognitive maps, and behavioral repertoires” can change and are part of the process of a cultural identity shift (Sussman, p. 365). The newly developed identity after transition will have developed differences with the home cultural identity. On repatriation, this new identity will be evaluated against the home culture. Transitions may lead to positive as well as negative affect towards one’s host and home culture(s). Strand (2011) summarized positive affect as “feelings or emotions that reflect pleasurability engagement with environment such as interest, excitement, contentment, joy, engagement, love, and enthusiasm” (p. 72). In contrast, negative affect refers to negative feelings and emotions such as anger, sadness, depression, anxiety, and stress (Watson, 2000).

Sussman (2000) labeled the cultural identity shifts which she distinguishes as subtractive, additive, affirmative, and intercultural shifts. Each shift refers to different aspects of so-called "disturbance in the self-concept." In our study we apply Sussman’s model to TCKs to identify TCKs’ possible cultural identity shifts. As can be seen in the following description of these shifts, this model assumes that cultural identity shifts can be assessed by focusing on the individuals’ expressed positive affect.

The subtractive identity shift entails that individuals, in our case TCKs, show more positive affect towards the identity, values and norms of their host culture(s) than of their home culture. Such shifters are therefore more adapted to the host culture and will likely experience repatriation distress, because they feel alienated and less like their compatriots (Siok & Chng, 2006; Sussman, 2000). At repatriation TCKs might even experience entering another world, as sometimes children from the dominant culture make fun about their accents, different habits, or bully them.

An additive cultural identity shift entails that the degree to which TCKs show positive affect to their home culture remains the same, and that, in addition, the degree to which they show positive affect towards the host culture increases. TCKs might experience distress after returning to live in their home countries. However, according to Sussman (2000), and Siok and Chng (2006), this distress is not caused by alienation, but by having embraced many aspects of the host culture’s identity.

The affirmative cultural identity shift can be described as one in which the home culture identity is maintained and strengthened throughout one’s transitions. This shift implies that one shows positive affect mainly for the home culture. Affirmative shifters develop a low adaptation to the host culture and, as a result, develop a cultural self-concept that remained highly stable and unambiguous. Therefore, they will experience little repatriation distress, because they are grateful and happy to return to their home culture (Siok & Chng, 2006; Sussman, 2000).

Lastly, an intercultural or global identity shift implies a more complex identity shift. This type of shift is defined as a “modification that enables expatriates to hold multiple cultural scripts simultaneously and draw on each as the working self-concept requires” (Sussman, 2000, p. 368). This shift is comparable to what others have labeled as a multiple cultural identity (Moore & Barker, 2012). Thus, individuals who have identified with an intercultural identity shift do not show more, or less, positive affect towards their home or host culture, but rather show positive affect to many cultures. Therefore, they will experience little distress living in their home culture again. How positive affect indicates a cultural identity shift is depicted in Table 1.

Belonging can be regarded as a crucial part of creating one’s cultural identity. Shaules (2010) phrases this process as defining “our own sense of personal and cultural territory. We must develop a sense of where we belong [italics by the present authors], the values we want to live by, the kind of person we want to be, how we want to communicate, and so on” (p. 81). TCKs’ belonging is often challenged when they transition. In defining belonging, the feeling of fitting in is often emphasized, referring to a systemic approach, that is being a member of a group, a community, or a family (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsma, & Collier, 1992). Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 505) even see belonging as a basic human need: “The main emotional implication of the belongingness hypothesis is that real, potential, or imagined changes in one’s belongingness status will produce emotional responses, with positive affect linked to increases in belongingness and negative affect linked to decreases in it”. For TCKs, the need to define one’s belonging can be regarded as being even more important, because they are children growing up in different countries in their formative years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural identity shift</th>
<th>Affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subtractive</td>
<td>More positive towards host culture than home culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative</td>
<td>More positive towards home culture than host culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additive</td>
<td>Positive towards both home culture and host culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural</td>
<td>Positive towards more cultures than only home culture and host culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Especially when experiencing hardship while growing up, belonging functions as a core component for identity construction and meaning making (Noble-Carr, Barker, McArthur, & Woodman, 2014). Noble-Carr et al. (2014) studied the narratives of 24 young people, aged 15–25 years, who had experienced hardship, adversity, and trauma and the importance of connectedness for their identity construction and meaning making. Achieving a belonging was found to be a critical factor for identity development and was described by Noble-Carr et al. (2014, p. 395) as follows: “a deeper connection with others that would provide them with a more permanent sense of community in which they were fully accepted, could trust in, and have reciprocal care and support relationships”. Similarly, Corrales et al. (2016) reported that belonging could contribute towards understanding how childhood adversity relates to psychosocial outcomes when becoming an adult. These researchers studied the relationship between childhood adversity and belonging. They found that belonging negatively (although weakly) mediated the relationship between childhood experiences of adversity and psychological distress and educational engagement, although it did not mediate the relationship between childhood experiences and even becoming a parent in emerging adulthood. One could wonder if the cross-cultural experiences of TCKs can be defined as experiences of adversity while growing up. In comparing TCKs with non-TCKs (who grew up in the USA), Peterson and Plamondon (2009) argued that it could be expected that especially multiple transitions - in their research transitions specifically referred to repatriations - would form adversaries, as each repatriation will confront TCKs with other children who are growing up mono-culturally. Children growing up mono-culturally could in their view build a stronger sense of stability. Taking this line of thought further, they concluded “All other things being equal, those TCKs who repatriated only once at some point in their lives should be better adjusted to their home cultures than TCKs who were taken abroad multiple times and experienced multiple repatriations” (p. 756).

A result of the mobile lives that TCKs have led, is that they will deal with grief and loss (Pollock et al., 2017). Having had to leave things and people behind involves several hidden losses, such as losing the world as they knew it, a potential loss of status, a loss of appearance and thinking, repatriation will imply having an alike physical appearance but thinking differently from the surrounding culture. This state is labeled by these researchers as being a ‘hidden immigrant’. Many TCKs thus may experience stress on repatriation when they look like those in the dominant culture, but do not know this surrounding culture. Because of their ‘hidden diversity’, others from the dominant culture may reject or even scorn them for being ‘stupid’. Relatedly, Moore and Barker (2012) reported that when returning to their home cultures, TCKs often perceived themselves as culturally marginal. We assume that this marginality might express itself in TCKs’ developed positive or negative affect towards their host and home culture.

Research questions

The following two research questions were formulated as derived from the above literature. Research question 1 relates to the work by Sussman (2000) who stated that positive affect towards one’s home or host culture is an expression of a cultural identity shift. For instance, as mentioned earlier, in her model expressing more positive affect towards the host cultures than to the home culture indicates a subtractive identity shift. Research question 1 can therefore be phrased as follows:

RQ1: Does the extent of positive affect for their host culture(s) and for their home culture differ in TCKs’ narratives? Which type of cultural identity shift does this finding point to?

Research question 2 builds upon Pollock et al.’s (2017) idea that belonging for TCKs often implies an identification with others who have a similar background or with their close family. We therefore formulated research question 2 as follows:

RQ2: Do TCKs define their belonging more to people or to a geographical location, when they answer the questions from ‘Where I’m From’?

Method

Poetic inquiry

One of the forms of qualitative research implies collecting data through auto-ethnographic poetry to comprehend individuals’ cultural experiences more (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Faulkner (2007) indicated that poetry can be used as a tool and method to present research data, as well as a source of data and data analysis. Collecting qualitative data in the present study was done using a free verse poem format, followed by semi-structured interviews with the participants about their auto-ethnographic poems. This method of data collection is defined by Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor (2010, p. 5) as “ethnographic poetry, verse written by researchers based on “field” study’. In this way, TCKs were facilitated to tell their stories about growing up cross-culturally with the help of poetry, creating auto-ethnographic poems.

Through life stories, also labeled as narratives, people express their identity and find a way to understand themselves (Clandinin, 2007). A life story is “an internalized and evolving structural script or structure that provides an individual’s life with some degree of meaning and purpose while often mirroring the dominant and/or the subversive cultural narratives within which the individual’s life is complexly situated” (McAdams et al., 2006, p. 11). The life story theory of identity of McAdams et al. states that stories about one’s lives creates meaning and one’s identity. Having no stories to tell could almost imply having no identity (Young & Saver, 2001).

“Because a successful narrative or lyric poem can echo or resonate so powerfully with the emotional experience and sense of identity of cultural insiders, it allows us to see the nuances and complexities of culture” (Maynard & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010, p. 6). Narratives, the choices of the things being said, and the things left unsaid, all form part of the story and the life of the storyteller. They
are always ‘anecdotes of destiny’ (Cavarero, 2000). Shaules (2010) regards life as “a multiplex theatre in which several movies run at the same time. (…) When I am being asked where I feel that I most belong, I say that it’s not in any of the particular theatres, it’s in the multiplex itself” (p. 82). Given that their life has taken place in many cultures, it can be imagined that many TCKs will be able to relate to Shaules’ description of life.

The researcher as listener

Polkinghorne (2007) noted that narrative methods entered the social sciences methodology as a result of the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and Bruner (1991, 1998). The latter researcher introduced the term “narrative modes of knowing” within which the construction of self and identity plays a key role. With this tradition, a central framework for the psychological study of autobiographies, stories, and life narratives was set. Clandinin (2007) emphasized that Bruner’s contribution of exploring human identities and lives through narratives has become a definite part of the discipline of psychology.

An important aspect of poetic inquiry as a method focuses on the listener to the story, who in the present study is the interviewer, that is the researcher. For a story to be heard, one needs an audience, a listener. If meanings are formed in a discursive activity between people, this includes not only social groups but also researchers and participants (Aldred, Gillies, Billig, Kroger, & Burman, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the method of interviewing falls within a constructivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality is subjective and influenced by an individual’s experience and context (Ponterotto, 2005). The interaction between the researcher and autobiographer is instrumental in describing the lived experiences of the autobiographer and constructivism recognizes that the researcher’s values and own lived experiences cannot be and should not be separated from the research process and do, in fact, have an impact on the outcome of the research. Both researchers in this study are Third Culture Kids. The experiences of the TCKs in this study resonate with their experiences.

Narrators and qualitative researchers are still exploring how poetry can best be used, especially auto-ethnographic poetry, to get to the heart of the research matter. Hanauer (2010, p. 84) asserts that “Poetry writing is particularly suited for the exploration of research questions that address experiences with emotional content”.

Participants and procedure

We aimed to reach an equal number of male and female participants, a variety in age, and a good representation of different types of traditional TCKs in the sample. This method of recruitment is called purposive sampling, which is a non-random sampling method used to identify the most suitable participants who have had experiences in the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2003; Groenewald, 2004). The final sample consisted of 20 TCKs. 19 of the 20 participants had participated in earlier research regarding TCKs and leadership by the authors (Anonymous, 2020). One participant was added as result of the recommendation by a sibling. All TCKs were adults who had spent ‘a significant part’ of their developmental years outside their home culture. According to Pollock et al. (2017), a significant part is defined as one year or longer. All participants were given alias names, even though the majority did not object to using their own name.

The 20 participants were between the age of 26 and 70 years (ages during the data collection for the first study in 2012) with a mean age of 46.6 years (SD = 11.85). Related to this age range, it needs to be noted that, according to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998), memories of experiences are always emotionally significant and unrelated to age. Memories are personal creations; they consist of choices, distortions, and inventions of past events in a manner that befits the individual’s current goals, interests, or moods (Visser, 2010). In their study on autobiographical memory over the lifespan of Hispanic immigrants to the United States, Rubin, Scharuf, and Greenberg (2003) and Faulkner (2007) found immigration to be a traumatic event and reported that their participants showed an increase in autobiographical recalls corresponding to their ages at immigration. This finding seems relevant to the lives of TCKs, who may undergo multiple transitions which can be experienced as traumatic events and add to adversity.

The sample consisted of 50 % male participants (n = 10) and 50 % female participants (n = 10). For 75 % (n = 15) of the participants, one or both parents were of Dutch origin. 20 % (n =4) had one or both parents of German origin. Other parents’ backgrounds were Indonesian, British, or Polish. Examples of differences in host and home cultures could be found in climate, population density of the area, economic factors, and religion. How the differences between the host and home cultures impacted the transitioning is beyond the scope of this study. Two of the participants were an only child, whereas 50 % (n = 10) had one sibling. Eight participants grew up in a family with more than one brother or sister. Four interviewees mentioned coming from parents who divorced during their youth.

All participants indicated their level of finalized education to be higher education. As TCKs are known for often having achieved higher levels of education (Cottrell, 2002, 2007), it is not surprising to see this educational level among the participants. Information on the educational system which TCKs had attended was not available for all respondents, although some had had home schooling, whereas others had experienced boarding schools or international schools. The level of understanding and speaking English for all interviewees was adequate, although no previous testing about the level of English has been done. Two TCKs were native English from the UK.

The so-called sponsor organizations that employ parents of TCKs are traditionally found in international business (corporate), foreign service, military, missionary, and other international organizations (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999/2009Pollock & Van Reken, 1999/2009). Based on these categories we identified seven corporate, three foreign service, one military, four missionary, and five other (of which two TCKs with parents working in non-governmental organizations, and three academic) TCKs.

An overview of the main characteristics of the participants, including their aliases, number of transitions, gender, home host culture (s), and siblings (number of brothers and or sisters) is provided in Table 2. The information in Table 2 is ranked according to how many
transitions the TCKs had experienced, starting from one transition. Appendix B depicts the home and host cultures and transitions of all TCKs on a world map.

The number of transitions to another country varied from 1 to 8 in the period of 0–18 years of age (M = 3.4, SD = 2.04). Most (15) of the interviewees transitioned within the period between 0 and 4 years of age at least once, while one of them even transitioned three times. Between 4 and 8 years of age, 13 of the interviewees knew at least one transition, with four of them having transitioned twice. The number of transitions within the period between 8 and 12 years of age was at least once for 14 of the interviewees, whereas two of them moved as much as three times. Within the period between 12 and 18 years of age, 8 of the interviewees transitioned at least one time, while one of them transitioned twice. In applying the concept of cultural identity shifts to our study, we did not distinguish between each host culture of a TCK, but instead treated these as one host culture as opposed to one’s home culture. Table 3 provides an overview of the number of transitions per participant, including the specific home and host cultures and the period in which these transitions took place. The participants in Table 3 were ranked according to the number of transitions instead of according to the alphabetical order of the alias names.

Table 2
Demographics of Participants, Rank Ordered According to Number of Transitions between Countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Host</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benno</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>only child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>1 brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>only child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>2 sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>CH, IT</td>
<td>1 sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudolf</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>1 brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>NL, PL</td>
<td>US, BE</td>
<td>2 brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginny</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>1 sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetty</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>UK, MA</td>
<td>1 brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bea</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>UK, BE, US</td>
<td>2 brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>1 brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>NL/ID</td>
<td>GW, UK, BF</td>
<td>1 sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joost</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>BN, OM, NO</td>
<td>1 brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>IE, FRA, NL</td>
<td>1 sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>NL/DE</td>
<td>NG, SY</td>
<td>1 sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>SG, HK, UK</td>
<td>1 sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>ID, PK</td>
<td>2 brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>2 sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>IT, NG, USA, UK</td>
<td>1 sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinke</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>IT, NG, USA, UK</td>
<td>1 brother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Countries (alphabetically): BE - Belgium; BF - Burkina Faso; CH - Switzerland; IE - Ireland; ID - Indonesia; IT - Italy; DE - Germany; FR - France; GW - Guinea Bissau; HK - Hong Kong; KE - Kenya; MA - Morocco; NG - Nigeria; NL - the Netherlands; NO - Norway; OM - Oman; PK - Pakistan; PL - Poland; SE - Sweden; SG - Singapore; SY - Syria; UK - United Kingdom; US - United States of America.

a Alias: Names are aliases. Although 18 of 20 interviewees agreed to use their own names we decided nonetheless because of the mentioned intense personal traumas and stories.
b #: How many times TCKs moved between countries, excluding moving within the countries.
c Gender: Male (M) or female (F).
d Ages: Ages at the time of the first study in 2013/2014.
e Home: Passport cultures of the parents.
f Host: Countries lived in.
g Siblings: Sisters and brothers, not including stepbrothers/stepsisters.

The free verse poem ‘Where I’m from’

Many empirical studies on TCKs have focused on qualitative data analysis, often based on interviews. This focus has the advantage of allowing TCKs to describe their personal values and perspectives, instead of restricting their responses to answering structured questions (Klenke, 2008). The free verse format of the poem ‘Where I’m from’ (Lyon, 1999) forms a set-up for this type of research. After filling in the blanks in the poem with their experiences to the poem, the participating TCKs created their auto-ethnographic poems. Subsequently, in a personal interview they elaborated on their experiences, meanwhile indicating positive and negative affect towards host and home culture. The poem helps TCKs in their quest to find out how to phrase one’s belonging. By remembering and naming all the things that stand out as important in one’s childhood, people can put things into perspective.

The free verse format of Lyon’s poem (1999) ‘Where I’m from’ was used to frame the experiences of TCKs. Lyon explains how this poem originated from her response to a poem in ‘Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet’ by Tennessee writer Jo Carson (1989). Her work was
Method of analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The poems with the added explanations were imported in ATLAS.ti (version 7.0), a

Table 3
Overview of Number of Transitions (#) to Different Countries for each TCK in Four Time Periods of that TCK’s Life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Sponsor type</th>
<th>0–4 yrs</th>
<th>4 – 8 yrs</th>
<th>8 – 12 yrs</th>
<th>12–18 yrs</th>
<th>Home and Host</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benno</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>US, DE</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SE, NL</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>US, NL</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IT, UK</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>ITA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CH, IT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudolf</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Missionary</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NL, PK, NL</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>BE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>US, NL, BE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginny</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Foreign Service</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td>DE, NL, DE, NL</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetty</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>DE, MA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DE, UK, DE, MA</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bea</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Foreign Service</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>BE</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td></td>
<td>UK, NL, BE, US</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Missionary</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>PAK</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>NL, PK, NL, PK, NL</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>GB, NL</td>
<td>GW</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td>GW, GB, NL, BF, NL</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joost</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>OM</td>
<td>NL, NO</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td>BN, OM, NL, NO</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Foreign Service</td>
<td>IE, UK</td>
<td>FR</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td>UK, IE, UK, FR, NL</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Military</td>
<td>NG</td>
<td>SY</td>
<td>DE, NL</td>
<td></td>
<td>NL, NG, SY, DE, NL</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>SG HK</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>UK NL</td>
<td></td>
<td>SG, HK, NL, UK</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Missionary</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>PK, NL</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>ID, NL, PK, NL, PK</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Missionary</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>NL, PK</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td></td>
<td>NL, PK, NL, PK, NL, PK</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>NL, NG</td>
<td>NL, US</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>KE, NL</td>
<td>IT, NL, NG, NL, US, NL, KE, NL</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janke</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>IT, NL, NG</td>
<td>NL, US</td>
<td>NL</td>
<td>KE, NL</td>
<td>NL, IT, NL, NG, NL, US, NL, KE, NL</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Countries in alphabetical order: BE- Belgium; BF- Burkina Faso; CH- Switzerland; IE- Ireland; ID- Indonesia; IT- Italy; DE- Germany; FR- France; GW- Guinea Bissau; HK- Hong Kong; KE - Kenya; MA- Morocco; NG- Nigeria; NL- the Netherlands; NO- Norway; OM- Oman; PK- Pakistan; PL- Poland; SE- Sweden; SG- Singapore; SY- Syria; UK- United Kingdom; US- United States of America.

A: Alias: Names are aliases, although 18 of 20 interviewees agreed to use their own names. We decided nonetheless because of the mentioned intense personal traumas and stories.

# = Transitions: How many times TCKs moved between countries, excluding moving within the countries.

B: Sponsor type: Sponsor type organization of the parent: Corporate, Foreign Service, Military, Missionary, and Other (including Academic organizations and NGOs).

c: Age periods: (Choice of) Brackets in which transitions took place, being 0–4 years, 4–8 years, 8–12 years, and adolescence as one period from 12 to 18 years of age.

d: Home and host: All cultures in which participants have lived, abbreviations below.

f: Country: Number of countries participants have lived in, including one’s home country.

The contextualized poem was sent to the respondents to have them describe their TCK-narrative by means of adding their experiences to the poem. In this way, they each created their own poem by filling in the blanks in the free verse format poem. Various items about events that may have made the participant happy or sad as a TCK-child, and things that were carried along or left behind when transitioning, were included in the poem, relating to the experienced adversity, as earlier described and based on research about TCKs’ loss and grief (Pollock et al., 2017). They added their personal experiences to the format of which they created their own poem and sent it to the researchers after which an interview took place. The participants provided their informed consent for the study.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audiotaped and transcribed, as advised by qualitative research methodology (Chaitin, 2004; Groenewald, 2004). All interviews were held with two interviewers, of whom one directed the interview and the other had responsibility for the recordings. The face-to-face interviews took place in several cities in the Netherlands and Belgium, namely Delft (7), Amsterdam (3), The Hague (2), Leiden (1), Leuven (1), and Utrecht (1). Five interviews took place via Skype or phone because neither the participant nor the interviewers were able to travel to meet face-to-face in that period. Each interview took between 45–60 min.

The interviews started with the participants reading their poem out loud while being filmed and recorded. Then, the participants were asked to elaborate on certain elements and would be asked questions to elaborate. The interview ended by asking what the participants thought of the method (poem) that had been used and if they would want to share any other feedback with the researchers. All interviews were held in English to maintain consistency and were audio recorded to facilitate the transcriptions. In the poems and in the interviews, respondents used some terms in other languages than English, for instance Köttbullar (the Swedish word for ‘a Swedish cinnamon bun’), Wir Vier (German for ‘the four of us’), and Chapati (the Urdu (Pakistani) word for ‘flat bread’).

Most circumstances concerning privacy and physical positioning of researchers and participants were kept as similar as possible. At the end of the interview all participants were asked to define what ‘belonging’ means to them.

Method of analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The poems with the added explanations were imported in ATLAS.ti (version 7.0), a
software program used to code text. Codes were then assigned to the total of 1589 quotations. The coding process for ATLAS is a
top-down, inductive process. Families of codes were created which related to the basic concepts in the research questions: Positive and
Negative Affect, Belonging, and Practices. The coding research team added a Master student of Psychology, who added and com-
plemented the coding. After creating sub-codes to each of the families, a total of 24 codes was used. For an overview of the codes used
in ATLAS.ti (see Table 4).

All quotes in the poem containing names of family members and other names were coded as indicators of belonging, because family
members and other people are linked to relationships. Since the poem asked participants to name family members, different sub-codes
were added for immediate family members and for extended family members, friends or other relationships. While the place of birth

Box 1
“Where I’m from” - contextualized free verse poem from Lyon (1999), added items are bold, deleted items are underlined.

I am from
… (specific ordinary item remembered from your growing up life), from
… (specific food (only one), remembered from your growing up life) and
… (another item remembered from your growing up life...can be anything)
I am from
… (plant, flower, natural or urban item), …… and… (plant, flower, natural or urban detail).
I am from
… (home description, adjective (only one) sensory detail) and
… (which specific place, country or city you would call home)
I am from
… (place of birth (“and family ancestry”)
… (your particular introduction where you’re from when you meet new people)
I am from
… (family tradition) and … (family trait instead of 'family tendency'), from
… (name of family member) and … (another family name).
… (something you were told as a child with an impact on your life now) (only one)
I am from
…. (name of childhood friend) and
… (characteristics of a school that you went to, including home schooling)
I am from
… (representation of religion, or lack of it with further description)
…. (way of life and personal values),
From
… (specific story about a family member or a friend),
… (another detail about another family member or dear childhood friend).
I am from
… (location of family pictures, mementos, archives) and
…. (specific ordinary item that you always kept or still hold close to you) (not: importance of family items)
… (specific ordinary item you left behind when transitioning from one country to another)
I am from
… (specific skill or behavior you learned as a child and still do)
… (specific story or event that made you really sad)
… (specific story or event that made you really happy)
… (specific experience that makes you proud from your growing up life)
indicated an objective place (name of a village or town in a country, naming a geographical location), coding of ‘place objective’ or ‘place subjective’ was added. Table 5 shows the sub-coding used for belonging.

To extract information about affect and belonging from the poems and the narratives, from each poem a selection of quotes was made about belonging and of quotes with which the participants appeared to indicate their cultural identity. Then the poems were coded. To ensure a maximum of intersubjectivity in transcribing and coding, four people in total - a librarian, and three psychology students (Bachelor and Masters) - formed the team for transcriptions and reviewing. The final text that was uploaded for each of the narratives in ATLAS.ti. contained the poems of the TCKs with quotes from the interviews that provided more context. The coding was done by two of the team members independently, comparing their respective codes after they completed their own coding process. The recorded videos were reviewed to seek possible visual nonverbal confirmation for coded affect, such as smiles or tears, by another team member than the two coding members. A minimum difference of three positive affect coded experiences between home and host culture(s) was used to indicate the direction of the cultural identity shift.

Results

Research question 1: positive affect and cultural identity shifts

Research question 1 was formulated as follows: Does the extent of positive affect for their host culture(s) and for their home culture differ in TCKs’ narratives? Which type of cultural identity shift does this finding point to? We counted the number of interviewees who made more statements with positive affect regarding their host culture compared to their home culture: seventeen of the 20 TCKs expressed more positive affect towards the host culture than towards the home culture. For three TCKs the opposite was true.

When comparing positive affect for TCKs’ home culture with positive affect for the host culture(s) the cultural identity shifts for the participating TCKs could be described as follows: For fourteen participants we found an indication of a subtractive cultural identity shift, showing more positive affect towards the host culture than to the home culture. The positive affect of four participants indicated an additive cultural identity shift, because the number of positive affect coded experiences was equal for the host and the home culture. The number of positive affect coded experiences of two participants towards the home culture could be interpreted as an affirmative cultural identity shift. Table 6 provides an overview of TCKs’ cultural identity shifts. In sum, in answer to research question 1, most TCKs showed a subtractive identity shift.

Table 4
Codes in Atlas.ti, used for the present study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codename</th>
<th># of quotes coded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affect negative</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect negative host culture</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect negative parents’ passport culture</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect positive</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect positive host culture</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect positive parents’ passport culture</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person extended family</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person friends</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person immediate family</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person other</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging place other</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging place objective</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging place subjective</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices food nature</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices food nature host culture</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices food nature parents’ passport culture</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices items events</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices items events host culture</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices items events left behind</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices items events parents’ passport culture</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Sub-Coding on Belonging.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codename</th>
<th># Quotes coded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person extended family</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person friends</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person immediate family</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging person other</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging place objective</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging place subjective</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| a Codename: Name of the code used in Atlas.ti. | b # quotes: Number of quotes coded accordingly. |
Table 6
Number\(^a\) of Positive and Negative Affect Coded Quotes Related to Host and Home Culture, Indicating Cultural Identity Shifts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias(^b)</th>
<th># Quotes(^c) positive affect</th>
<th># Quotes(^c) negative affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home(^d) vs Host(^d)</td>
<td>Home(^d) vs Host(^d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Subtractive cultural identity shift(^d)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerry</td>
<td>4 vs 14(^f)</td>
<td>4 vs 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>0 vs 16</td>
<td>1 vs 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td>0 vs 15</td>
<td>0 vs 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>4 vs 10</td>
<td>0 vs 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetty</td>
<td>5 vs 14</td>
<td>3 vs 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beal</td>
<td>4 vs 11</td>
<td>0 vs 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lia</td>
<td>6 vs 15</td>
<td>0 vs 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christa</td>
<td>8 vs 21</td>
<td>4 vs 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joost</td>
<td>2 vs 12</td>
<td>1 vs 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>9 vs 12</td>
<td>0 vs 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>6 vs 12</td>
<td>0 vs 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddy</td>
<td>1 vs 16</td>
<td>4 vs 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinkke</td>
<td>12 vs 24</td>
<td>1 vs 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Affirmative cultural identity shift(^d)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benno</td>
<td>17 vs 1</td>
<td>5 vs 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>11 vs 4</td>
<td>1 vs 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Additive cultural identity shift(^d)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudolf</td>
<td>8 vs 7</td>
<td>0 vs 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginny</td>
<td>5 vs 8</td>
<td>1 vs 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>7 vs 10</td>
<td>2 vs 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 No clear cultural identity shift(^d)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>5 vs 8</td>
<td>2 vs 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>8 vs 11</td>
<td>2 vs 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>122 vs 241</td>
<td>31 vs 50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Aliases: Names are aliases, although 18 of 20 interviewees agreed to use their own names. We decided nonetheless because of intense personal traumas and stories shared.

\(^b\) # Quotes: Number of quotes coded as positive affect or negative affect.

\(^c\) Home: Passport cultures of the parents.

\(^d\) Host: Countries lived in as a TCK.

\(^e\) Cultural identity shifts: Subtractive; Additive; Affirmative; Intercultural, or not clear.

\(^f\) When the difference between the number of positive affect and negative affect codes was three or more, this was treated as an indication for a turning point towards a certain cultural identity shift.

Additionally, we investigated the total number of coded experiences concerning affect in either direction, that is, both positive and negative affect. 75 % of the TCKs (\(N=15\)) showed more affect in general towards the host culture(s) than towards their home culture, whereas 10 % (\(N=2\)) showed more affect towards their home culture than to the host culture(s). This finding might seem obvious as half of the participants had experienced more than one host culture. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that more factors than sheer numbers are at play here, that influence developing positive affect towards host cultures, for example the cultural distance between the host and home culture or the contact with the host culture, which is at turn again influenced by the sponsor organizations of the parents’ work. Three participants mentioned an almost equal number of positively and negatively coded affect towards their host and home cultures.

To illustrate two types of cultural identity shifts, the transitions and developed affects in the lives of two TCKs, Paul and Nina, are the following. Paul, with a Dutch home culture, was born in Singapore, then lived in Hongkong, moved to the Netherlands, then to the UK, and back, finally to the Netherlands. In Table 6 one can read that Paul showed a clear positive and overall affect for his home culture, indicating an affirmative cultural identity shift. In contrast, Nina was born in Italy of British parents, and moved back to the UK for boarding school when she was 12 years old. Nina’s cultural identity shift can be indicated as subtractive: only 1 out of 18 Nina’s positive affect coded experiences was about her home culture, the UK.

We did not differentiate between the different host cultures and combined all host cultures. 66 % of all quotes coded as positive affect and 62 % of the quotes coded as negative affect were statements about the host cultures without distinguishing between these cultures.

Table 7 shows that codes also included \textit{practices}, which can be divided into food, nature, and events. Lyon’s original poem invited the TCKs to explicitly mention memories of flowers, food, or events in the period of growing up between 0 and 18 years of age but did not include a differentiation between host or home culture. For the TCKs in the present study, the number of quotes that were coded as positive affect related to practices was higher with respect to the host culture(s) than to the home culture. The number of quotes coded with negative affect for practices/events related to host culture was also higher than for practices/events related to home culture. It can thus be concluded that the impact of the host culture(s) seemed to be more dominant for the participating TCKs when they were asked...
to express experiences from their upbringing, although the home culture experiences were certainly not absent. Box 2 shows some examples of quotes coded with positive, negative or unspecified negative affect.

Research question 2: defining belonging

Research question 2 was formulated as follows: Do TCKs define their belonging more to people or to a geographical location, when they answer the questions from ‘Where I’m From’? We first investigated how the participants defined their belonging and then looked into the coded quotes about belonging. Box 3 shows each TCK’s definition of belonging. The box starts with definitions provided relating to geographical locations (places) followed by definitions provided which related to people.

The quotes in Box 3 clearly showed that more individuals \(n=15\) related their belonging to relationships, especially to family having had that same experience of living abroad, than to geographical places \(n=5\). Some of the definitions indicated that when family was split up or dispersed during that period of growing up, the belonging was less strong with the family. An example of this is the following quote:

“We have concluded that the family has never lived more than 2 years together in the same house with the same people. (…) I think the bonding was not so good.” (Eddy).

Coding could be done two ways regarding belonging in Atlas.ti: defining belonging to relationships (1) or belonging to places (2). All quotes in the poem containing names of family members and other names were coded as belonging, because these are indications of relationships. Since the poem asked participants to name family members, different sub-codes were added for immediate family members and for extended family members, friends or other relationships. While the place of birth indicated an objective place (name of a village or town in a country), coding as ‘objective place’ or ‘subjective place’. When participants described a place that could not be identified with a name of a village, town or country, we coded this as a subjective place. One example would be:

“Green gardens in yellow burnt landscapes” (Christa).

The highest number of attributed codes about belonging were to immediate family (221). One TCK used the words father and mother instead of the names of the parents. Some others did not mention the names of both parents and chose to mention only one of the parents and names of siblings. Quotes that indicated a strong relationship with people, revealed that TCKs in these cases meant the immediate family:

“We Vier.” (Ursula);
“A loving family.” (Paul);
“I am from a patchwork family, which has gifted me with new family relations and siblings after my parents separated.” (Jetty);
“Our family, the three of us have always been together (after the divorce of the parents).” (Elsa).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7</th>
<th>Codes Related to Positive Affect, to Negative Affect, and to Practices (with Sub-Code Food/Nature And Sub-Code Events), as Linked to Host and Home Culture.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect: positive</td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect: negative</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices: food/ nature</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices: events</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research question 2 was formulated as follows: Do TCKs define their belonging more to people or to a geographical location, when they answer the questions from ‘Where I’m From’? We first investigated how the participants defined their belonging and then looked into the coded quotes about belonging. Box 3 shows each TCK’s definition of belonging. The box starts with definitions provided relating to geographical locations (places) followed by definitions provided which related to people.

The quotes in Box 3 clearly showed that more individuals \(n=15\) related their belonging to relationships, especially to family having had that same experience of living abroad, than to geographical places \(n=5\). Some of the definitions indicated that when family was split up or dispersed during that period of growing up, the belonging was less strong with the family. An example of this is the following quote:

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“We Vier.” (Ursula);
“A loving family.” (Paul);
“I am from a patchwork family, which has gifted me with new family relations and siblings after my parents separated.” (Jetty);
“Our family, the three of us have always been together (after the divorce of the parents).” (Elsa).

Box 2
Examples of quotes coded with positive, negative or unspecified affect.

Quotes with positive affect related to the host culture, more specifically foods:
“Chapatti, nice making it, nice eating it, has some nice odor” (Lia);
“Kanelbullar, typical Swedish delight” (Elsa);
“Jim dandy, ice cream, it was just massive, it was a happy time and it was great food” (Gerry).

Quotes with negative affect towards the host culture:
“Leaving my dog behind (that was bad), leaving my friends behind (that was bad)” (Gerry).

Examples of quotes, expressing negative affect, coded as unspecified, meaning not related to home or host culture:
“I don’t know who I am” (Eddy);
“Divorce of my parents” (Jeroen);
“The background of our family; the diversity (…) the misunderstandings after the war lead to that - this family also fell apart.” (Ted).
Box 3
All TCK’s definitions of belonging.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS
1. “I belong more to the town where I lived before because there, I still have many friends, that’s also where my parents live.” (Benno)
2. “Well, the Netherlands is very important to me, so I don’t want to live anywhere else. No. But then I have a quite universal feeling also.” (Lia)
3. “It is eventually related more to an area than to people, the vegetation, the clay, the view, the rivers. It’s a feeling.” (Arthur)
4. “I always had the feeling a place is just temporary. Now, this is the first place I belong.” (Jinke)
5. “Belonging is something, which is people, yes, but it can be places as well, or it can be belong is…something you own, that belongs to me (…)” It’s an emotion.” (Fred)

PEOPLE
1. “I belong to where I think I belong, I belong to my family, my friends.” (Elsa)
2. “My belong I guess is where you feel at home, but it is not a place. It’s with whom you feel at home.” (Gerry)
3. “Feeling comfortable somewhere. “(Nina)
4. “I would never say it’s a place, belonging is where the people are, that live with me. “It’s the whole thing, and this is actually something that I cannot share with someone, because, belonging, you belong to yourself.” (Ursula)
5. “The fact that I’m from a family which is still together, with my brothers and sisters, so we meet a lot, twice a year, that’s important to me, that’s belonging.” (Rudolf)
6. “It really doesn’t mean anything. In my eyes it is more or less transactional.” (Alex)
7. “I belong with the people around me, the people I’m close to. As long as I am with my husband, especially now, or back then with my parents and my sister.” (Ginny)
8. “Belonging is where the heart is. It’s pretty much the people that I have around which kind of define my belonging.” (Jetty)
9. “I belong to my family, which is my husband, brothers and sisters.” (Bea)
10. “I think belonging for me means the family, so it’s what I want to give my kids - is that they have a place where they always feel safe.” (Paul)
11. “Something I had to learn, maybe which I’m still learning. I had learned to hide where I came from, and I had learned to put on a mask.” (Christa)
12. “I belong to the expat community in the world, fast-moving friendships and connections. You get a bit emotionally insensitive to relationships.” (Joost)
13. “Belonging is a connection, with a place or people, and it stays when you move. I feel I belong to the nomads, with the no-nationality.” (Jennifer)
14. “Belonging is, well, of course because you don’t stick to a nationality. You don’t stick to a geographical location; community sense is becoming value number one.” (Ted)
15. “I think I learned that I belong to myself. You belong in two worlds.” (Eddy)

Because the poem specifically asked for names of people as well as place of birth, the number of quotes connected to specific names of people compared to the number of quotes connected to specific geographical locations could not provide indications for cultural identity shifts. The answer to research question 2 thus is that TCKs direct their belonging more towards personal relationships than towards geographical locations.

Additional findings

This section describes several findings which are unrelated to our research questions but are worth mentioning about typical TCK experiences, like the following quotes:

“I am from snow and calling it hot, because I had no sensation for cold.” (Joost);
“I am from going to the cinema: to a really, really African movie and there was no roofing, so it was under the stars.” (Christa).

Also, while geographical locations were objectified through naming places of birth, the narratives showed that nineteen participants did not identify themselves coming from that particular place of birth. More intensity was shown when describing subjective places instead of geographical locations to indicate a belonging. Examples are:

“having long dinners at the dining table” (Joost);
“apple trees” (Benno);
“freedom” (Eddy);
“green surroundings” (Fred).

The questions in the poem about sad stories or events evoked narratives about sad, even traumatic events during the TCKs’ childhood or adolescence. As a result of these question, all TCKs included stories of negative events which had occurred in their
childhood and how this had affected them. 16 out of 20 had experienced traumatic events such as having been abused as a very young child, having a friend killed by accident or murdered, being bipolar themselves, having had to deal with a bipolar, schizophrenic, chronically sick or depressed parent, or other irregular family events such having had to deal with the fact that one’s mother had committed suicide. For most TCKs, the sad stories or traumatic incidents had happened before their repatriation. In the narratives following the reading of the poem, most of the traumas were elaborated upon, Box 4 presents several of these.

Anxiety and fear were in some cases relieved during reading the poems aloud making the interviews intense. As mentioned earlier, Corrales et al. (2016) studied the relationship between childhood adversity and belonging. One wonders if experiencing such sad stories and traumas is specific to TCKs. As there are no indications to interpret these results otherwise, we take these findings as a coincidental result within this sample of TCKs.

Discussion

The present study unfolded through poetic inquiry how Third Culture Kids (TCKs) tell their stories about their cultural identity and belonging. Twenty TCKs, now adults, from five different ‘home cultures,’ including three bicultural TCKs, expressed their early cross-cultural life-experiences through the prose poetry of ‘Where I’m from’. “Bicultural individuals are typically described as people who have internalized two cultures to the extent that both cultures are alive inside of them. Many bicultural individuals report that the two internalized cultures take turns in guiding their thoughts and feelings” (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000, p. 710). In this way, the TCKs gave a taste of their memories of growing up in more than one country and how this affected their cultural identity. Furthermore, they provided what belonging meant for them.

Regarding research question 1 about cultural identity shifts of TCKs, the results clearly showed that TCKs have more positive affect to anything related to their host culture(s) than to their home cultures. From the viewpoint of the model of Sussman (2000), that focuses on differences between positive affect related to the host culture(s) and one’s home culture, these results mainly are indications for subtractive cultural identity shifts. Most TCKs seemed to show a subtracted cultural identity shift. One of the explanations for the higher occurrence of subtracted cultural identity shifts, is that the poem invited a trip down memory lane, which for TCKs meant that their memories also led them to their childhood periods in their host countries. Another possible explanation could be that the TCKs had experienced repatriation distress, because of having felt alienated and less similar when returning home. These experiences of distress would be in line with earlier research, for example a study by Siok and Chng (2006).The TCKs also expressed negative affect, although much less than positive affect, both towards their host culture(s) and their home culture. An explanation for negative affect towards the host culture could be found in the intensity of the trauma and adversity of many of the TCKs which they had experienced during the periods in their host cultures. These negative experiences do not necessarily seem to lead to a more positive affect towards the home culture. One could wonder how these findings align with more positive affect towards the host culture(s) among the majority of the TCKs. The complicated psychological reactions of TCKs to all their transitions in their developmental phases of life can, of course, not be simplified by looking at positive or negative affect only.

Research question 2 looked into TCKs’ definition of their belonging, and whether this would be more in terms of personal relationships than in terms of geographical locations. We found that TCKs emphasized relationships more than geographical locations in defining their belonging, especially their relationships with the immediate family. This seems logical, because immediate family form the constant factor in a life with transitions for TCKs. The group that the TCK travels with consists of their immediate family, and especially the friends who are part of the same lifestyle.

When reflecting on the use of a free verse poem to tell their narratives, almost all individuals expressed some initial hesitation to write down their memories, for different reasons. Some of them were hesitant because the poem did not have the format of a traditional poem, for example with rhyme. Others feared the trip down memory lane. However, all expressed a positive feeling after the interview, in which they had had the chance to elaborate on their poems. A clear appreciation was summarized in the following quote from Alex, a university teacher and PhD student at the time:

“I thought it was a very interesting technique. At first, I was rather skeptical, how can this lead to quantifiable research results. On the other hand, though, I feel that a lot of necessary nuance is lost on traditional surveys and questionnaires. And this technique of asking someone to fill in the blanks in a poem really probes deep into your subconscious and captures a lot of that nuance that a traditional questionnaire does not capture. It was a very good insight and a very enriching experience.”

Limitations and implications for future research

This study has several limitations. Our study had twenty participants. This research, however, found that stories of TCKs provided information on their intercultural identity shifts and what they meant with the term belonging. One needs to be careful to formulate generalized conclusions from these twenty unique stories. The nature of qualitative research implies that control groups generally are not applicable, and that a sample size as used in the present study is generally accepted (Emmel, 2013). Referring to Patton (2002), Emmel mentions that main deliberations in justifying sample size in qualitative research are more related to the information richness of the cases selected for their validity, meaningfulness, insights, and resource expenditure of researchers than to sample size per se.

Moreover, to put our sample size into perspective, we checked earlier published qualitative TCK-research. In the 19 empirical studies on TCKs from 2004 to 2020 which we were able to trace (Bikos et al., 2014; Bjørnsen, 2020; Désilets, 2016; Fanning & Burns, 2017; Gambhir & Rhein, 2019; Gilbert, 2008; Greenholtz & Kim, 2009; Kwon, 2019; Liard & Van Schalkwyk, 2014; Park, 2019; Moore & Barker, 2012; Murai, 2016; Poonoosamy, 2018; Purdon, 2018; Purnell & Hoban, 2014; Smith & Kearney, 2016; Walters &
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Box 4

Striking quotes from sad stories in the poems.

“Life can get out of control. Someone can die and the body is still alive. A family where my mom announced the Apocalypse.”

(Benno)

“I went from, you know, you get detention on Saturday if you drop a pencil, to the student calling the teacher a shit-head. And then the teacher turning around and swearing back at the student. I thought I almost had a heart attack. It was a major culture shock.”

(Gerry)

“Being sent to UK for boarding school and being discriminated against. (...) They used to sing this little song to me: ‘What’s up, nigger mind, you go to bed and you’ll be all white in the morning’, although I hold a British passport.”

(Nina)

“My mother had a bad accident when I was sick. (...) My friend Susanne died at age 7, after a hit and run accident.”

(Ursula)

“I am from ‘no Jews or people of color allowed’. (Sign on the street in Washington where we lived).”

(Beat)

“I am from strand: very strict evangelical school: it was quite scary. It was also important that you would let the Lord into your heart. And open your heart up, and I thought: how must I do that? I was worried, because I thought well, maybe the world comes to an end, and I haven’t opened my heart yet. What will become of me?”

(Lia)

“Not an easy family, complex, because my father and my mother are stepbrother and stepsister from divorced families.”

(Joost)

Auton-Cuff, 2009; Westropp, Cathro, & Everett, 2016) the following sample size information was found. Only five studies had sample sizes larger than 20 (27, 30, 42, 43 and 74), one study had a sample of 20 TCKs, and 14 studies had sample sizes which were smaller than 20. The mean sample size of these studies is 18 (median N = 11), which is heavily weighted by one study with the largest sample size of 74 participants.

As is common in qualitative research (cf. Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007), no use was made of a control- or comparison group of non-TCKs. One could, for instance, have compared the group of TCKs to another category within the broader group of Cross-Cultural Kids. This broader category, among others, includes immigrant youth (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Thompson, 2002) and biculturals (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Hong et al., 2000). As our focus was on comparing TCKs’ positive affect towards their home- and host cultures and on their sense of belonging, we cannot draw any conclusions about non-TCKs’ affects and sense of belonging.

Results were not further differentiated according to the type of traditional TCKs (namely corporate brats, foreign service kids, military brats, missionary TCKs or other TCKs; Pollock et al., 2017). It would be interesting to examine to what extent stories of different types of TCKs may differ and may be similar to each other, based on the assumption that different levels of contact with the host culture can lead to a different feeling of belonging, such as a stronger belonging towards one’s home culture resulting from living on an enclosed compound.

Another interesting research question may focus on whether more transitions as a child may result in becoming a sojourner in one’s adult life, especially when this choice for travelling and living abroad can be linked to one’s intercultural identity shift, as identified by Sussman (2000). More research could elaborate on this idea with a focus towards the periods in which transitions take place and what kind of impact this has on TCKs. In this narrative study of 20 TCKs we limited our focus to cultural identity shifts and belonging. The size of the sample would be too small to give any valid indications for relations between periods of transitions and further identity development or sense of belonging.

As a final limitation, cultural differences between the home and host cultures were not included in the scope of this study, such as climate or languages spoken. Further research could be done in this area. Taking the suggestion of Selasi (2014) further to ask where people are local instead of where they are from, may inspire researchers to develop free format poems which could result in additions to the conceptual framework that we have used. Related is the issue of ‘hidden immigrants’ or, as labeled more recently, ‘hidden diversity’. It could be interesting to study how ‘hidden TCKs’ experience their stay in a host culture in which they ‘look alike but think differently’.

Conclusion

This study found that most of the TCKs showed more positive affect towards their host culture(s) than towards their home culture, as expressed in their stories through Lyon’s (1999) free verse poem “Where I’m from”. This result implies that the TCKs display a subtractive cultural identity shift. Furthermore, TCKs expressed belonging in terms of relationships more than in terms of geographical locations. They therefore will most probably prefer answering the question ‘Who I’m from?’ rather than ‘Where I’m from?’

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Appendix A. Original poem of Where I’m from -George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.  
(Black, glistening  
it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush,  
the Dutch elm  
whose long gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.

I am from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.  
I’m from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-ons,  
from perk up and pipe down.  
I’m from He restoreth my soul  
with cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

I’m from Artemus and Billie’s Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.  
From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.  
Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures.  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.

I am from those moments –  
snapped before I budded –  
leaf-fall from the family tree.

Appendix B. Home and host cultures of participants represented on the world map