

Narratives of Third Culture Kids: Commitment and Reticence in Social Relationships

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The lives of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are characterized by their experiences of living among different worlds that could isolate them from social interaction and establishing long-term friendships. Exploring the experiences of ten TCKs, this paper reports on primary data gathered through the Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique (CLET) in order to gain an understanding of the meaning making of TCKs and their commitment and reticence in establishing relationships during their developmental years. In-depth thematic analysis indicated a struggle building intimacy and companionships and deep friendships, as well as difficulties with maintaining relationships with others and a possible fear of commitment. Implications for counselling of TCKs and their families are discussed. Keywords: Autobiographical Remembering, Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique, Friendship, Social Relationship, Third Culture Kids

International mobility is a distinctive feature of today's world, with individuals and groups of people moving voluntarily or involuntarily across borders and around the globe. For children and young people who follow their parents and the continuing pattern of relocation, mobility is a part of life. These children have experienced a number of changes and lived most of their young lives in different countries where they had to adjust to the new location, cultural norms and values, language and education systems. The concept of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) refers to three cultural statuses children living a high-mobility lifestyle adopt at any given point in time. The first culture refers to their country of origin or passport country, and the second culture to the current country of residence or host culture. The third culture refers to the global trans-cultural phenomenon and interstitial culture experienced by children in families that regularly relocate to a new country for living and working (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Whereas the first and second cultures are tangible social structures, the third culture is transient and intangible in nature, and continuously changing as the TCKs group together with others experiencing the same trans-cultural phenomenon. It is this third culture, rather than the first or second culture that gives them a sense of belonging and being understood among others with similar experiences.

As the product of high mobility and cross-cultural lifestyle, TCKs are exposed to multiple cultural settings (Downie, Koestner, ElGeledi, & Cree, 2004); part of an international diaspora of globally mobile expatriates (Heyward, 2002). They may change aspects of themselves in an attempt to interact with the host culture and social groups, mostly when they find that behaviours considered socially appropriate in one context, are not be accepted in a new country or culture. Parents of TCKs often express concern about leaving familiar friendships, making new friends, entering a new school, and the potential disruptions of their chosen lifestyle on the child's social networks and academic performance (Sears, 2011). Hervey (2009) reports that TCKs also experience a reverse culture shock when returning to their passport country, as they did not learn the important intricacies of the home country's cultural nuances, such as behaviours, language, and social skills. Research on TCKs has, for the most part, focused on issues related to their emotional development such as suffering ambiguous losses (Gilbert, 2008), difficulties in adjustments (Hervey, 2009),

distance from others in anticipation of future separation, and protective mechanisms (Barringer, 2000). However, much of this previous research has been hindered by the TCKs' own reticence expressing their feelings in self-report surveys.

Therefore, aiming to gain a better understanding of the ways in which TCKs make sense of growing up in multiple cultures, this study explored the central question: *How do TCKs make sense of their (social) relationships when growing up in multiple cultures?* We were particularly interested in how TCKs would commit to social interactions leading to friendship formation. We also assumed that there would be some reticence engaging in close friendships as TCKs frequently has to move on to new destinations. Adopting an autobiographical approach rather than self-report surveys, the study focused on the role of friendship in the TCKs developmental phase from early childhood to late adolescence and the challenges of establishing and maintaining social relationships across borders.

Vernberg, Greenhot, and Biggs (2006) claim that friendship emerges from social relationships; a natural outflow of relationships that helps the adolescent find her or his social voice and positioning. Friendship involves a sense of intimacy and companionship when there is commitment to the social relationship. Intimacy emerges from the self-disclosure, trust, and feelings of connectedness, and flows from with a sense of being accepted in and committing to social relationships. Companionship, on the other hand, evolves through the amount of time friends spend together in various contexts and activities, providing space for meaningful actions, and forms the basis of the intelligible self. Gergen (2009) proposes that a sense of self emerges from "a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self ... always already emerging from relationship" (p. xv), and that the interactions of individuals within a society form the bedrock of individual psychological functioning. Thus, social relationships are at the source of the processes through which the individual emerges as separate entity. Inability in forming friendships could therefore add to personal distress, feelings of loneliness and isolation, and reticence to invest in relationships.

As a parent of TCKs (first author) and an expatriate psychologist living and working in a foreign country (second author), we have been witnessing the developmental challenges of a cross-cultural lifestyle, high mobility, and expected repatriation of the expatriate families—the repeated patterns of forming friendship and of saying goodbye. Almost predictably, the TCK families fall into the same pattern of residing in similar residential areas, making friends with other TCKs, sending the children to the same school (mostly English-based or international schools), and getting involved with English speaking associations or international/expatriate communities. TCK families also share an enthusiasm for living abroad and seeking out a better future for them and their children—that is, families who decide to move to another country for better lifestyle or children education after completion of contract, families who job-hop between continents moving whenever new and better opportunities arise. Moving has become ordinary and expected; leaving the current home and moving to a new home in a new country is just a matter of changing one's mailing address and phone number. Despite accepting their high mobility lifestyle as inevitable, parents of TCKs express concern about the potential disruptions of their chosen lifestyle on the child's social networks. In this project (and others) we aim to explore what may contribute to the commitment and reticence showed by TCK in meaning making of their high mobility lifestyle in particularly building and maintaining social relationships. The findings in particular, may benefit international schools, institutes and organizations dealing with support and intervention for family who relocate overseas, and the families of TCK in ensuring the well-being of TCK.

Method

We opted for an autobiographical approach to explore the ways in which young TCKs make sense of their social relationships throughout their developmental years. The Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET; Van Schalkwyk, 2010) is a technique that stimulates autobiographical remembering allowing participants to construct their stories and emotions in non-verbal and verbal modes through collage making and semi-structured interviewing. With the CLET, we could elicit rich narratives that would allow us to explore the TCKs own voices, what it was like living in the third culture, and how their relationship realities emerged as they moved from one country to another. We assumed that TCKs participating in co-constructing the CLET would reflect upon and represent how they committed to and established social relationships and friendships. We also assumed that the TCKs would represent in the collage and storytelling how their socialisation processes evolved given the transient nature of their life style.

Participants

As a parent of TCKs, and living within expatriate community, the first author gained access to TCKs who could participate in this study. Using snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), we recruited ten TCKs

- (i) aged 18-22 years, and
- (ii) who have lived in at least three or more countries at the time of the interviews.

Eight females and two males with an age range of 18-23 years volunteered to participate in the study during the summer of 2012 and 2013 when the TCKs were visiting with their parents. Finding participants in the local population, who complied with the stated criteria was not easy. According to local statistics (DSEC, 2011), foreign individuals or TCKs aged 15-24 years constitutes about .08% of the local residents. Some late adolescent and early adult TCKs had also repatriated to their passport country or had gone overseas to pursue further education. All the participants came from families who worked in the business or education sectors, and except for two TCKs (Hiroko and Sandra), all the others were bi-racial coming from families where the mother and father had a different country of origin. Three participants were an only child (Margot, Karolina and Glen), while the others had either one (Ben, Hiroko, Sandra and Erin), two (Niamh and Lua) or four (Micha) siblings. As expected, all participants have moved several times (i.e., 3-9 times) during their developmental years, were fluent in 3-4 different languages, and have attended at least 4-9 different schools K1-12.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university and adhered to in all aspects of the project. The individuals all agreed voluntarily to participate in the project and did not receive any compensation for participating. No one had a clinical diagnosis of any kind at the time of the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose and confidentiality of their participation and their informed consent were documented. All records were archived electronically and according to ethical prescriptions for psychological research, and names, countries and other identifiable affiliation were changed and pseudonyms used to protect their identities in this report. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their privacy while privileging the participants' voice by not merely assigning a number.

Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique (CLET)

Van Schalkwyk (2010, 2013b) specified five steps to elicit both verbal and non-verbal narrative representations during a semi-structured interview:

- (i) collage making (selecting images from local magazines in their current locale), guided by the question: “How does this picture/image/drawing represent something important or memorable about relationships in your life?” (Figure 1);
- (ii) storytelling (participant told a story related to each of the images in the collage);
- (iii) positioning of the self (in the collage) and eliciting silent voices (image not find but wanted to add to the collage);
- (iv) juxtaposition (explicating the dynamic conflict considering differences and similarities between images on the collage); and
- (v) reflection (overall thoughts and emotions after completion of CLET) and debriefing (if necessary, in anticipating of the emerging of traumatic events).

All interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face by the first author, and took place in a private setting free of interruptions, lasting approximately 90 minutes each. The conversations were audio-recorded and the materials generated during the interview (i.e., collages and field notes), except for three participants who wrote the narrative for each of the images on the collage and participated in further on-line interview for clarification and completion of steps 3-5.

The CLET has great potential as visual research method in different contexts and for various populations. Developed to explore life story remembering in cross-cultural settings where various obstacles prevented verbal narrating, the combination of non-verbal (visual) and verbal strategies provide a way to access populations otherwise excluded from participating in narrative and autobiographical research projects. Underpinning the development of the CLET is the explanatory/theoretical framework proposed by the narrative and social constructionist approaches to knowledge construction. Burr (2003) and Gergen (2000) argue, in the social constructionist approach, that language, also non-verbal or visual languages (e.g., artefacts), is an important social process through which we co-construct our thoughts, intentions, experiences, memories, creativity, and co-action. Thus, as relational beings and through the social action of shared languages we fashion our actions and co-actions within relationship. In collaboration with the researcher, the individual co-creates experiences and stories about her/his world taking co-ownership for her/his representations of reality as perceived and experienced.

Remembering and telling stories are necessary tools for the development of a sense of self and identity (Brannen, Mooney, & Statham, 2009; Chasiotis, Bender, Kiessling, & Hofer, 2010). As they grow up, children interact with their parents as well as the social environment to develop their narrative skills and cognitive capacities (Page, 2001; Peterson & Jesso, 2008), and eventually co-construct identity in relation to the social world. In a study with emerging adults in late adolescence, Van Schalkwyk (2010) explicated the utility of the CLET showing that the technique enabled the young people to reflect on their past and integrate this with the present in view of an anticipated future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The collage making stimulated their remembering to elicit rich narratives that would otherwise have been difficult to perform given the cultural inhibition towards self-disclosure and performing in a non-native language (i.e., English). The CLET has also been used to

explore topics in the lives of children across three different settings (Van Schalkwyk, 2011; Van Schalkwyk & Lijadi, 2013), middle-aged adults (Van Schalkwyk, 2013a), and families living with autism (Lao & Van Schalkwyk, 2012). As a work in progress, the utilization of the CLET continues to provide us with ways to elicit unstructured and spontaneous versions of the individual's perspective of the topic under investigation, particularly if the topic is challenging, sensitive in nature, and when the participant has difficulty recollecting her/his self-defining memories.

CLET Analysis

The analysis of the data unfolded in two parts. We first examined the CLET protocols for coherence and construction of the narratives (non-verbal and verbal) according to the categories listed in Table 1. This allowed us to determine the relevance of the collage and storytelling to the topic under investigation, namely social relationships in the developmental years of TCKs. Secondly, we explored the various units of analysis (i.e., the collage, the storytelling, self-positioning and dynamic conflict) employing in-depth thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and examining emerging themes related to the research question. Whereas the collage provided initial codes, the analysis of the stories for each image on the collage, the self-positioning and the dynamic conflict provided a deeper understanding of the emergent themes and allowed the participants' voices to be "heard". In the discussion below, we include some extracts from participants (in italics and in their own words) illustrating how these themes emerged from their autobiographical remembering.

Table 1:
Analysing the CLET Protocol and Descriptive Categories

Category	Description	Analytic action and coding
Proximity	The relationship between self and others in the collage and narratives	Overall sense of self-to-other closeness, where 1 represented great distances, 2 represented some distances, and 3 represented closeness.
Construction	The structure of the collage and micro-narratives depicting the underlying cognitive organization of memories related to the topic.	Overall sense of structure as (1) sequential (i.e., ordered clockwise or row-by-row), or (2) random (i.e., events as triggered by memories & not sequential)
Congruence	Indicates the use of images to scaffold the narrative process.	Overall (1) related to the topic or (2) unrelated to the topic
Positioning of self	The underlying positioning of self-in-the-world as authentic author of the memories (dimension A) and in self-to-others relationship (dimension B)	The representation of self on two dimensions: A – player-spectator B – distance-closeness to others (people)
Silent Voice	The recognition and nature of the silent voice	Analysing the voice(s) that was absent from the collage and narratives.
Dynamic conflict	The conflict or problematic relevant to the topic and below the level of awareness	Emerging themes of potential concerns that could serve as hypotheses for intervention planning

In addressing subjectivity, all analyses were first conducted separately by each author and then jointly discussed to reach an agreement. We also conducted a cross-case analysis in search of themes that emerged with regard to how TCKs experienced growing up in multiple cultures and how their high mobility lifestyles related to their relationship patterns and friendships. Throughout the analysis and interpretation, we attempted to maximise the voices of the TCK participants while minimising the potential biases of our own insider-outsider perspective. In this regard, we employed a rigorous triangulation process integrating existing

literature on TCKs, critically analysing and interpreting all materials collected through the CLET, and utilising third party analysis to ensure trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005).

Findings

Overall, the CLET protocols were completed in full, and participants were able to share their stories according to CLET procedures. The ten participants offered rich and vivid autobiographical memories in both the collage and storytelling for further in-depth thematic analysis. For the most part, the collages seemed like a storyboard for a film script (Figure 1) with snapshots of many life events in the TCKs 18 or more years of moving from one country to another, and their perceptions of the relationships they encountered. As a storyboard, the collages revealed a rational and sequential storyline (construction) as well as align with the storytelling phase (CLET Step 2). There was thus congruence between the collage and stories confirming the content reliability of CLET to scaffold autobiographical remembering and to elicit rich narratives relevant to the topic under investigation (Van Schalkwyk, 2013b).

	
<p>Margot, female, aged 18, Bi-racial, moves: 9, languages: 4, study overseas</p>	<p>Karolina, female, aged 18, Bi-racial, moves: 5, languages: 4, Repatriate for study</p>
	
<p>Micha, female, aged 18, Bi-racial, moves: 4, languages: 3, study overseas</p>	<p>Erin, female, aged 22, Bi-racial, moves: 3, languages: 4, Repatriate for study</p>



Figure 1. Collages from participants

Note: The red X indicates participants' self-positioning (CLET Step 3) on the collage. See also discussion of this aspect below.

Images for the collage making were chosen only from magazines and newspapers provided by the interviewer and that TCKs could read and understand. Despite being provided with a range of magazines in different languages, TCKs only used magazines for selecting images if they understood the language. It seemed that, despite having lived in many different contexts (countries or cultures) and speaking different languages, the TCKs preferred to use magazines in the language that they were familiar with and used in their everyday lives within the family. This contradicted, to a certain extent, the notion that TCKs

were tolerant of diversity, sensitive and could serve as a model of multicultural education principles because of their expanded worldview and exposure to cultural differences (Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell, 2011). When it came to remembering intimate life stories about relationship patterns, they preferred the home language and showed little tolerance for diversity. They found comfort in the familiar, the language of their first socialisation and interaction within the home.

The participants' perceptions of their social relationships were reflected in the proximity of images on the collage, ranging from distanced (20%) to close (30%) relationships. It seemed that as high mobility resulted in frequent change of schools this might have prevented TCKs from connecting to peers and investing in relationships. Rather, there is a sense of regular loss of relationships and keeping distance between self and others.

This distancing was further evident in the self-positioning of TCKs on the collage (CLET step 3) representing their underlying positioning of self-in-the-world as authentic authors of their memories (Dimension A) and self-to-other relationships (Dimension B). From the positioning of the self in the collage (see X markings in Figure 1) and the participants' reflections during the interview (CLET Step 3), the TCKs seemingly stayed on the periphery, maintaining a kind spectator view or as an outsider of their social relationships (Dimension A). Four participants (Margot, Karolina, Sandra and Ben) placed themselves on the edge of the collage, as they preferred to close this chapter of their lives and move on to the next chapter. With this self-positioning they also distanced themselves from others (Dimension B) portraying in their stories a sense of difficulty to feel connected and related to their peers, and being accepted and understood.

On the other hand, Hiroko and Erin positioned themselves close to images that reminded them of their vulnerability and powerlessness over the past events that still lingered in their mind. Although they maintained a kind of spectator or outsider perspective on their past experiences (Dimension A), they felt a certain kind of connectedness to lost relationships: Erin with her grandfather who died while the family was living overseas, and Hiroko with lost friendships (Dimension B) (see also discussion below). Lua positioned herself close to an image of a group she thought represented the TCKs and their unique struggle with the high-mobility lifestyle.

Three participants (i.e., Glenn, Micha, and Niamh) positioned themselves within particular images that represented a means of escaping the challenges of their high-mobility lifestyle and supposedly in an attempt to find a voice. Although not on the periphery of their stories, these participants chose their self-positioning in terms of the metaphor represented by the images. For Micha it was an escape to the memories of her life in the passport country, and for Niamh it was in a window looking out towards the next move. Glenn chose a camera as metaphor for his capturing of only snapshots of many relationships as he moved from one place to the next and remembering friendships as a kind of static two-dimensional picture, with hardly any possibility of committing to intimacy and companionship. Although the TCKs recalled in their narratives that they were able to quickly make friends, they also commented on being drained from continuously having to start over as they moved from one country to another, and from one school to another.

Discussion

In this project, completing the five steps of the CLET formed the basis for eliciting memories about social relationships in the developmental years of TCKs. This implied that participants could create a collage and tell stories about their commitment and reticence in friendships formations they thought and perceived as being part of their social relationships over time. In their stories, both on the collage and in the verbal narrating, they represented

their views of self in relation to others, and their socialisation processes given the transient nature of their life style. One could not consider these representations as true or false; they were not truth-evaluable. Rather, their representations in the collage and stories were the subjective meaning-making actions of a group of young TCKs as they expressed their experiences of intimacy and companionship, and their efforts to maintain relationships across borders.

The TCKs in this project presented CLET protocols in which they co-constructed a sense of *commitment* and *reticence* in self-other relationships. Commitment to and in relationship refers to the nature and content of friendships, and that allows for intimacy and companionship to develop over time. Without commitment, individuals tend to be reticent in what and how they self-disclose, rather developing protective measures against the fear of loss and abandonment.

The themes of commitment and reticence unfolded in participants representations on the CLET and provided an understanding of the ways in which TCKs perceived their social self and formed relationships with others. Interwoven with these themes was the continuous life disruption due to high mobility, and the notion that the relational being of TCKs was continuously challenged. They seemingly adapted to the new host culture (second culture) when they moved and were able to alternate between and incorporate different cultures into the third culture (Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell, 2011). However, as the second culture continuously changed and they had to engage with new sets of people, the commitment to establishing social relationships becomes an imperative of merely accepting differences and learning to live with it. Karolina (aged 18) having relocated five times, used an image of a multi-ethnic pop group (Figure 1) to represent her acceptance of differences and described how she has learned to engage with new sets of people, saying, "I cannot refuse them ... simply because we are not the same."

Every time I move, I meet people who share the same [third culture] experiences, and we learn from each other. Sometimes, I don't agree with people and their beliefs, but I have to understand that they have different culture, that they were raised differently ... I understand that was their beliefs... I understand and accept that. (Karolina, aged 18, relocated 5 times)

Karolina, as other participants in this study, emphasised the challenges of a continuously changing second culture and having to accept difference as a feature of their third culture lifestyle. The themes of commitment and reticence in the TCKs' social relationships are discussed further below. Whom do they commit to and what deters them from forming close friendships while being exposed to a high mobility lifestyle?

Commitment in the TCKs' Social Relationships

Before the first move, the relationships of some of the participants were similar to that of other children in mono-cultural settings. That is, familiar faces of school friends, children in the neighbourhood, and friends in clubs or social activities surrounded them, and they spoke the same language. Erin described this as "*being in the same boat.*" They did everything together; they were connected because they shared the same lifestyle, the same patterns and routines. They met regularly, sometimes unplanned, because they knew everyone would be there at a certain time of the day. The familiarity, similarity and proximity allowed them to commit to relationships and friendships to develop.

However, after the first move and the number of subsequent moves, the only stable relationship for TCKs was within their own family. Family thus provided the most important

relationship for the TCKs, representing the only stable context for socialisation and helping them to hold it all together (Gilbert, 2008; Huff, 2001). Margot has moved nine times and lived in six different countries from the age of three until 16 years following her parents who worked in international schools in six countries. Her mother is more than a parent providing the emotional support and stability amidst a series of goodbyes and having to start anew.

Family has played a huge role in my life. My mom and I are very close. I consider her my big sister. She was there through a really hard time when we moved. She always listens to me. I feel like she is the only person who knows me better than anyone in the world, as opposed to friends and stuff like that. (Margot, 18 aged, moved 9 times)

Margot saw her mother as the only one who could really understand the challenges of having to continuously move, something that no other friends or acquaintances could comprehend. Glenn reiterated Margot's sentiments saying that his parents were "all I got." Glenn started his TCK status at the age of 10 years, living in four different countries, and moving almost every year until the age of 16 years. The family experienced a serious trauma with the death of the younger child and despite now living away from his parents and studying in Holland, Glenn still sees the family as his only security base in times of need, and together they "can face anything", even the countless farewells and disruptions of their high mobility lifestyle.

After my sister's death, my family becomes very close...just the three of us as no one else understands how we feel. This is the first relationship for me that will never cease. When we are together, we are fine...we can face anything. My family is not perfect; we always feel there is something missing. But they are all I got (Glenn, 22 aged, moved 5 times)

Pahl (2000) argued that the quality of the relationships one formed in early childhood provided the basis for relationships in adult life (see also Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007; Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek, & Vermulst, 2010). TCKs and their parents who had formed close and secure attachments in early life, had the advantage of finding solace in each other's company and in the relationship, allowing them to adapt to new situations (also new cultures) with greater ease. Peterson and Plamondon (2009) claimed that regardless of whether the family perceived the relocation as positive or negative, together they experienced complex emotional and social disturbances in relationships with their extended family and peers. However, early socialisation in the family and establishing a secure attachment bond and commitment were important processes enabling the TCKs to participate in the patterns of culture or sub-culture unfolding in their high mobility lifestyle.

For some of the TCKs, siblings provided a tangible relationship during childhood. Whereas friends were left behind when the family moved on, siblings remained and provided much needed support, both emotionally and physically. "I am very close to my siblings as we grew up and experienced this life style together" said Micha, aged 18 and the fourth of five children. However, siblings also grew up and often left the home, leaving the TCKs with a relationship loss to deal with. This was often a hidden loss and little attention was paid to the stress incurred by the TCKs who were "left behind." Although the loss was predictable due to the developmental pathways of each sibling, for the TCKs it posed another change amidst a host of changes. "I am going to miss my brother when I go to university," said Hiroko, aged 20 and studying in the USA, the country where she was born although her parents are Japanese.

Nonetheless, family was not the only context of socialisation and committing to social

relationships during the developmental years. For the TCKs who participated in this study, international schools provided an important context for socialisation when arriving in a new country. Micha, aged 18 and having moved four times, commented: “*I met friends through (international) school or children from my parent’s friends.*” There is a growing sensitivity in international schools around the world to provide support for the unique needs of TCKs (Heyward, 2002; Pearce, 2011; Sears, 2011), and the participants in this study reflected upon their positive experiences of being able to speak the same language as others in the international school. Both parents and schools played an important part immersing TCKs in the new second culture, screening the new community and selecting supposedly appropriate social interactions for the TCKs.

Although this screening by parents is common for most children, even non-TCKs, for the TCKs the international schools also posed a limitation on their ability to engage in and commit to social relationships with peers in the long term. By establishing their own unique community with other TCKs and never really fully integrating with the host (second) culture, the TCKs we interviewed felt excluded from establishing regular and long-term face-to-face friendships. TCKs socialised and made friends fast and with lots of people. They had no biases or stereotypes (see excerpt from Karolina above); they simply trusted everyone and became friends in a short time. However, TCKs might not be able to penetrate deeper into friendships due to cultural and language distances and the high mobility of their peers and themselves. According to Vernberg et al. (2006) intimacy and companionship evolved when deep friendships have formed through long-term proximity and frequency of close interaction. Therefore, most of their relationships were rather superficial. Befriending other TCKs was common as they had the same lifestyle and understood the experience of saying goodbye repeatedly.

The TCKs we interviewed could not reach a deep level of friendship as they were constantly on the move. Rather, as explicated in exploring the dynamic conflict (CLET step 4), the participants expressed their struggles with establishing deep friendships in their constantly changing lifestyles. Karolina, who has attended four different schools, chose two pictures of groups on her collage as similar, and an image of footsteps as the opposite. It represented for her the struggle of never being in charge of her life and an underlying conflict that she could not commit to a meaningful friendship because they were always on the move. Although she has learned to accept difference, she felt that she barely gained a grip on the culture and the language in every country before having to be ready to move on, saying: “*I am so accustomed to moving, that I am unable to cry or feel sad.*” Hiroko (aged 18, moved 5 times) is fluent in three languages, but still felt unable to establish deep friendships saying that she was exhausted always having to act differently with different people. “*I feel like I have to wear a mask wherever I go, and a different mask with different people. It is very exhausting*” (Hiroko). For her, there was no time to establish authentic closeness with others and she rather felt that the high mobility lifestyle was a masked performance on the stage of life.

When reflecting upon their social relationships, the TCKs in this study recalled shared histories, language, and communities that helped them accept the fact that they were all migrants in a foreign land. They mostly socialized with those who had something in common namely the experience of dislocation from a home country. Throughout their childhood, they were always in transit between their parents’ dreams and career goals and a home that was constantly being revamped. This led to a lack of proximity and long-term social interactions did not bode well for committing to social relationships and TCKs had few close friends knowing that friendships could not last and they would be on the move again soon. Rather, the lifestyle of constantly being on the move had become a way of life suited the profile of the global nomad (McCaig, 1994).

Reticence in TCKs Social Relationships

A major challenge for TCKs was the constant demand to adjust in order to fit in with a new group. The participants reported that in order to be accepted in the new place, they needed to gain a broad cultural understanding and social skills (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). For the most part, they struggled to comply with the local norms, to be accepted as fast as possible, and not to behave too differently from the host culture. For some, learning about the host culture was challenging as Ben (aged 20, moved 5 times) experienced:

During Chinese New Year, I casually asked my local Chinese friends why they don't wear red underwear. They just laughed, and said I am silly, and that only foreigner will do that, wear red for luck. So I asked one girl [also a TCK] ... she said I was insensitive; I should respect the local custom and wear red as the sign of adjusting.

He felt ridiculed and struggled to make sense of the different perspectives of locals and other TCKs and finding the appropriate behaviour in order to fit in with the host culture, and concluded: “Isn’t it confusing?”

For most of the TCKs, adjustment is achieved by learning the language and respecting the local customs of the host culture. Lua (aged 18, moved 4 times) commented, “As we move, we need to learn new languages, new curriculum, new culture, and we need to do it fast. But we manage. We are resistant fighters, we are not afraid of challenges.” TCKs learn early in life to be resilient and adapt to new circumstances because of attending multiple schools and “some of my friends change school every year” (Lua). Gergen (2009) and Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven (2009) claimed that language was an important social process through which we co-constructed our thoughts, intentions, experiences, memories, and creativity. Thus, as relational beings and with the social action of a shared language we fashioned our actions and co-actions within relationships. However, language barriers posed challenges to TCKs socialisation processes as they continuously had to learn a new language in order to communicate and befriend others. To learn a different language was like “stepping into a new shoe”; one needed to be comfortable with it, learned to walk with it, and find a matching outfit before one could truly share thoughts, intentions and feelings.

The participants’ narratives all reflected, to some extent, the effect of language on the development of friendships. Erin and Niamh, who spoke the local language found it easier to engage with local residents and attended school with other local children. Despite their initial shyness to speak with classmates, they could easily converse with their peers and thus had a greater chance of developing deeper friendships. On the other hand, the TCKs who struggled to learn new languages and attended international schools, ended up staying within the third culture, where English was the common language even though it was not the language spoken at home. For them, reticence was evident as they had little chance of socialising and establishing deeper friendships whether with local peers or other TCKs.

Befriending other TCKs brought about another dilemma. TCKs were often exposed to vulnerabilities because of the transient nature of a high mobility lifestyle, and forming close relationships was a challenge. With every move, the TCKs had to start new relationships, and they rarely constructed sufficient trust to overcome the distance between self and others. Micha (aged 18, relocated 5 times) expressed that the constant moving made it difficult to stay connected: “only a few that actually stay true to you and will try to reach and connect to you. But ... it is hard to stay connected. We all go different universities. I guess soon we will cut off.” Maintaining friendships were not easy. Although TCKs nowadays were familiar with the digital technology that gave them access to unlimited means

of affordable communication with those far away (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008), Sandra and Lua added that the Internet and social networking were ways to stay connected.

People move more often now, but there is no distance with Internet. It is good enough to know that we can reach each other anytime. (Sandra, aged 22, relocated 4 times)

I don't have very close friends, but I have many friends, they are all over the world. If I posted photos in Facebook, within a minute, I receive so many thumbs up and comments. It feels good. (Lua, aged 18, moved 4 times)

On the other hand, the TCKs also met with challenges when trying to stay connected. As TCK or their friends moved, they grew apart; they were tied up with their own tasks and activities, it was a challenge to track or stay up to date with one other. Ben mentioned geographical distance and difference in time zones as a limitation to connectivity.

I guess, relationships are very much depending on whether the people put effort and time in it ... but it is hard. Everyone has their own schedule [time zone], I can't keep up with changing schedules, time differences, keep tracking everyone. So, in the end, I gave up. (Ben, aged 20, relocated 5 times)

Margot, aged 18 and having relocated 9 times stated her frustration that her friends continued with their own lives when she moved to a new place and they ended up having little in common once apart. Even minor conflicts between friends escalate into a major trauma when living in different countries.

I had a best friend and then I moved. It got very hard to maintain a relationship ... people keep living when you are not there anymore, and it is very hard to imagine that they go on, and she and I no longer have anything to talk about ... and I don't know, I just miss her a lot of the time. We fell out, it was too hard... it was too exhausting emotionally ... it was too hard to cope with the time, and the travel. We just kept being angry at each other... eventually it got too hard and we just could not be friends anymore.

Thus, for TCKs maintaining friendships across great geographical distances became challenging and often not worth the effort.

The inability to establish deep friendships also exposed the TCKs to other vulnerabilities such as reticence in social interactions, insecurities and a fear of abandonment. Margot further elaborated on her reticence in establishing long-term relationships mentioning that she had “a huge issue with abandonment with my boyfriend.” She felt that “the smallest thing can just make me feel completely insecure ... I find that I am much more insecure with myself when I am with someone.” Despite having become more confident with every move to a new country, she felt that “because I moved so often, I felt like if I don't hold on; the more if they don't hold on to me ... it is just going to be gone and be forgotten ... and it will just be lost.” For Margot establishing relationships has become a double-edged sword of simultaneously striving for independence and being dependent on the other.

For TCKs every farewell was difficult, as it entailed grieving the loss of friends, possessions and pets. The more difficult the farewells were the more distress was evident (Hervey, 2009). Niamh (aged 20 and having relocated 5 times) experienced anger and

depression when having to leave behind her friends; the familiarity and regular close interactions were lost when her parents uprooted her for the next move.

When I just arrived in [city's name], I was very depressed. I had two best friends in [previous city's name], we were really close, we swapped clothes, shoes, and we lived just few blocks apart. Then out of the blue, my parents said we have to move to [city's name] in one month. I was angry. Not fair. We had the best life. Why did we need to move?

The usual weekly gatherings with relatives and friends from the passport country or previous host country had to be forfeited for rare visits maybe once per year. The participants' collages and narratives spoke of a grief lurking below the surface, mostly because healthy closure through acknowledgement of the losses, appropriate partings, and preparation for the next destination had not been achieved (Gilbert, 2008). In Erin's collage (Figure 1 above), she positioned herself at the top left corner next to the image of her grandfather, reflecting her sense of unresolved grief for the loss of her grandfather to whom she was very close as a child. Glenn started his collage with an image of "my little sister and her dog" and his narrative with a reflection on the death of his sister and his mother's bereavement.

The TCKs also experienced a sense of grief when they visited the home country or previous country of residence feeling a lack of connectivity to former friends and relatives and reticence to re-engage. Connections did not come as quickly as before; people have grown apart. Every time they met (again), it was like meeting a new friend, having to get to know each other again. Ben (aged 20) returned to his country of origin to attend college and said: "Now, that I think back, I just hated it to leave the familiar places, the routine, the faces. I did not even feel I fit in when I moved back to the [country of origin]." When the social pressure became too much, TCKs opted to be alone or to simply have one or two friends. It seemed that the TCKs developed many protective mechanisms when having to say farewell again, such as not getting too close to anyone, keeping their distance and accepting their unique life style as a fact of life (Baringer, 2000), even the only way for the future.

Most TCKs would repatriate to the country of origin at some point of their lives. However, not all TCKs we interviewed were prepared for repatriation, even though they have had frequent visits to their home country during holidays. Hiroko, who returned to her home country at age 10, admitted her frustration when her sense of belonging was challenged and she was frequently misunderstood and misjudged by her teachers and peers in the school in her country of origin. "I was a volleyball captain in [previous host/second culture], however when I signed up for the captain position in my own country, all volleyball members avoided me, even my coach thought I was arrogant." After adjusting to the more assertive manners of a second culture, Hiroko was no longer familiar with her own culture's expected behaviour patterns, and she had to re-learn humbleness (a Japanese value) and "not to cross the line. I learned to be more observant." This so-called reverse culture shock (Huff, 2001; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009) caused Hiroko to redefine her social identity, as norms and value she learned previously were not applicable and she was continuously challenged to re-adjust in order to fit in.

Finally, the TCKs were reticent to establish close bonds with peers in the host culture. For them, it was challenging having to socialise with people who have lived all their lives in one country and who had not travelled outside its borders—they had. The TCKs we interviewed felt that they always stood out among locals, even in their country of origin, not only because of their physical appearance, but simply because they have had a wider experience of different places and different values, which they learned with their families and from the cultures where they have lived. Karolina reflected on having little to talk about with

her friends who *“have lived their whole life there ... they would not know what it was like living in other countries.”* In some cases, she felt judged and that this experience was emphasised when others had negative preconceptions of foreign cultures, *“just because they don't know what it is like.”* Karolina was not to only one expressing her anger and frustration when misunderstood by friends who have not travelled or experienced the third culture. The TCKs felt they often had little common grounds for establishing close relationships (*“what could they know”*), and this further emphasised their reticence in establishing close relationships.

Nonetheless, for many TCKs their international mobility has become almost like an addiction. They had no sense of belonging to one place in particular, no close friends to whom they felt committed, and considered home as where their family was. After the first move, TCKs seemingly anticipated the next move as a good beginning, a chance to have a better life, an exciting experience and an opportunity to get away from the frustrations of struggling fit in. Therefore, they became restless to move again. Ben captured this reticence to settling down and committing to one location and one set of social relationships saying that every move is a new beginning, and exciting *“feels like an amusement ride, they keep swinging you around. At first it is exciting, but after several round it feels the same, you become numb. But it is addictive; you want to do it again, to go for the ride to feel the excitement of the first round followed by swinging in the air.”* Glenn also expressed his *“envy [of] those who can travel”* saying *“I have been too long in Holland, I am itchy to leave ... as soon as I graduate, I want to have a job overseas.”* Rather than experiencing the boredom of sameness, TCKs come to thrive on their high mobility lifestyle and want to be on the move as evidenced by images on the collage (e.g., footsteps, windows, distant horizons) leading them away from the familiar and into the unknown (see Figure 1 above).

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the meaning-making of TCKs of their social relationships and the representations on the CLET focusing on two emerging themes of commitment and reticence. It seemed that their international mobility and multicultural lifestyle created a cumulative perplexity amongst young people constantly striving to establish and maintain social interactions in their ever-changing world. The TCKs acquired many skills and developed great cultural sensitivity as they continually adapted and changed in order to be accepted within a new context. They tried not to be different and made others feel the same way. Language played crucial role for TCKs, as a valuable skill to blend in, to communicate and to make friends. Family, siblings and the international school were stable contexts in which they could socialise and share their unique experiences and form friendships.

Nonetheless, although friendship formed fast, they remained superficial with the TCKs verging on the periphery and rarely fully committing to the social interactions, intimacy and companionship necessary for long-term and deep friendships. They understood that relationships were transient and short-lived, and that they might be separated at any time. Accumulated losses, particularly those that were not dealt with properly, made the TCKs fear commitment and rather emerge as reticent in forming close bonds. The TCKs also used avoidance to cope with multiple farewells, repressed anger, withdrawal, frustration and exhaustion (Hervey, 2009), and saw their high mobility lifestyles as way to escape the familiar and experience new opportunities albeit that these would be transient.

The study has implications for how parents, teachers and mental health service providers could assist the TCKs along the way. Since the family was seemingly the only constant relationship for TCKs and they were very much attached to their parents, the success of each transition to a new place was very much dependent on how parents' anticipated and

dealt with of possible challenges, particularly the challenges of social relationships. Parents need to be aware that loss of social relationships and friendships were as important as careful and timely planning for the next move, embracing farewells, and providing appropriate guidance and support adapting to the new environment. School counsellors and psychologists should also take note of the unique difficulties experienced by the TCKs and plan for interventions that could help them cope not only with adapting to the new culture, but particularly with their on-going struggle to build and maintain relationships.

There were some limitations in this study worth noting. The findings and discussion above portrayed a specific group of young people whose parents were employed in the private sector and enjoyed high economic status, were exposed to the crème the la crème of the society, and who sent their TCKs to high ranking international schools. They represented one type of TCKs. Yet, other young people could also fit the profile of TCKs such as being an immigrant family or experiencing domestic mobility even within the country of origin. Future research should include a broad range of TCKs coming from different backgrounds in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the meaning-making processes that emerge from a high mobility lifestyle. The CLET is also a work in progress and with every new application, it becomes clear that visual research methods are useful in a range of contexts and with different populations, both in clinical and non-clinical settings.

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