

Arab Third Culture Kids

DUAL IDENTITY & IDENTITY CRISIS
In ARAB THIRD CULTURE KIDS

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Abstract

In this paper my aim is to study *Third Culture Kids* (TCK) of Arab background living in the United States and how they form their identity. My study will focus on Arab-born secondary school students, usually the children of diplomats and businessmen, who are temporarily spending a significant part of the developmental years in the United States simultaneously immersed both in an American and Arab environments, and who, as a result, have developed an identity crisis and a dual identity.

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Introduction

Raised internationally because of a parent's occupation, *Third Culture Kids* (TCK) are influenced during their formative years by multiple cultural traditions. Their identity development experiences are necessarily rendered complex. Third Culture Kids (TCK). According to Pollock & Van Reken (2001), TCKs are "A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the culture, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCKs life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background" (p.19).

Much of the past studies on Arab international students in U.S. institutions have focused on issues of adjustment or acculturation. These studies have contributed significantly in understanding factors that account for their adjustment to a new culture. However, past studies have focused on these issues with little consideration for the variability within Arab international students. The current study focused on one of the factors that contribute to such variability.

This qualitative study asks "What is the process by which Third Culture Kids of Arab background transact the developmental tasks necessary for an achieved identity?" It is intellectually contextualized first within the racial, biracial, and multicultural identity literatures generally, and then within the global nomad identity literature more specifically. Participants included male and female international students born in Saudi Arabia and enrolled in Northern Virginia's Saudi Academy.

I will begin the paper by defining Third Culture Kids. I will then move to identity, how it is developed, and the many critical aspects that constitute and influence

its development including language, socioeconomic statuses, gender, age, group membership, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. The focus will then turn to identity crisis, a term coined by Erik Erikson in 1970 which differs from dual identity, the final focus of this paper. A dual identity maybe formed by many as a means of survival; it is used as a coping skill to manage the home life and the mainstream of the new culture. I will explore how these concepts help us understand the experiences of Saudi students, children of Foreign Service officers, temporarily studying and living in the United States in a Saudi-sponsored American school.

Statement of Problem

Central to this inquiry and the main motivating factor of my research topic was my own personal experience as a TCK who never quite fit in either culture yet managed to work both. I am very interested in learning more about how Arab TCK cope with the two very different and conflicting cultures at a critical age of self formation.

Existing Literature and Subsequent Research Gaps

Although there is plenty of research on identity, identity crisis, dual identity and TCKs there is very little data exploring these topics as they associate with international students of Arab decent who are spending a short yet significant time of their developmental years in a host culture. There is a lack of research in the processes and strategies used by these TCKs.

Identification of Relevant Need for Inquiry

The relevance of this pilot study inquiry is directly related to the discrimination many Arab- Americans and Arab immigrants face in the USA after 9/11. It is quiet hard for children who do not understand why there might be hatred or anger towards them, and with the outburst of families sent to the US for educational, economical or political reasons there is a need to fill the gap mentioned above as more teachers will find students of Arabic origins in their classes. Also how do these children find a comfortable place within themselves when they are faced with two completely opposite cultures?

Personal Interest and Researcher Background

As the principal investigator, I am temporarily living in the USA to obtain my PhD and return to my home country of Saudi Arabia. I am working on a Ph.D. in

Multilingual/ Multicultural Education. Being a TCK myself I realize the great struggles I made to find who I am, I also see it in my son who can switch between two worlds effortlessly, and yet both are a big part of who he is.

My interest in dual identity in Arab TCK streams from the fact that I have met so many, there is a growing number of TCKs in Saudi who struggle and feel alone. There is a lack of research and understanding on this topic as it deals with Arab TCKs in the educational field.

Purpose and Research Questions

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to delve deeper into a question that has pondered me for many years as a child, “what/ who am I?” Being a TCK I have wondered which culture to call home, always feeling guilt for not being ‘complete’. In this paper I plan to understand what is meant by having a dual identity and question whether that leads to an identity crisis, which is a normal outcome for any adolescent development, but I wonder if having this dual identity can intensify the crisis and not lead to a resolution. In addition to being TCKs Arab children raised in the United States also have to deal with growing up between two different and sometimes conflicting cultures and traditions. Having gone through that myself and seeing many friends drift away due to the extreme differences, I wonder how that may affect identity development.

Research Questions

Although there are many beneficial factors to being ‘international’, the affect on the identity formation on Arab TCKs has never really been explored. There are many unanswered questions, for example, how do children who were in situations were they

live in two conflicting worlds come to terms with who they are? How do they learn to mix two cultures and how do they know when to use which? Is it like coed switching except with culture, 'culture switching'? All this takes place at a critical age of self formation in the teenage years when it is normal to suffer an identity crisis.

Who is an Arab?

It is not easy to define what makes an 'Arab' as the term covers more than a hundred million people. It is not simply a race as there are white and black Arabs; it is not language, as there are Arabic speaking Jews who are not considered Arabs; and it is not a religion as Arabs can be a part of any religion from Islam to Christianity or even atheism. The term 'Arab' is a linguistic and cultural term representing those who share a common first language, a culture and a history. The most common ways to define what makes an Arab is through identity, how the person views himself regardless of his decent. The Arab world is made up of about twenty two countries in the Middle East and North Africa, therefore it is easy to see why defining what makes an Arab is not an easy task.

Literature Review

Third Culture Kids:

“When two lines or colors cross in art, a new image is created that is greater than its parts. But when two cultures cross, the nexus is often a homeless land with its children felling less than whole” (Shannon, 1988, p.14).

A *Third Culture Kid*, *Trans-Cultural Kid* (TCK), *Cross-Culture Kid* (CCK) or sometimes called a *Global Nomad* is a child who grew up in a culture other than his or his parents’ passport cultures. This child grows up in a place that integrates the norms of both cultures, from his country of origin and the host country, into a new different ‘third’ culture and thus becomes a blend of cultures (Useem, 1976; Pollock, 1985). They may feel that they share membership with all the cultures they were immersed in, yet they may also feel that they lack any true membership to one culture. These children may feel culturally separated from their parents and other non-TCK and find comfort in others like themselves, that is because for these children “roots are not embedded in a place, but in people” (Gordon, 1993, p.8) who share similar experiences. “Third culture kids feel most at home when they are with others from similarly mobile backgrounds.” (Gillies, 1998, p.37), “where they feel most like themselves is in that interstitial culture, the third culture, which is created, shared, and carried by persons who are relating societies, or sections thereof, to each other.” (Useem, 1976, p. 103). It is particularly difficult for adolescents who are still developing their sense of identity

One may think that living in a different culture may be rewarding as it helps its participants gain a wealth of insight and international experiences, help them become

tolerant of diversity, and they may also become models of multicultural education due to exposure to cultural differences. However, it is difficult particularly among children who may not feel they have a home “they will never be monocultural” (McCuskey, 1994, p.25) and thus they may struggle with identification. Gleason defines identification as “the process by which a person comes to realize what groups are significant for him, what attitudes concerning them he should form, and what kind of behavior is appropriate” (1983, p.916). Allport believes that identification may easily take place in defining social values and attitudes “... Sometimes a child who confronts a social issue for the first time will ask his parent what attitude he should hold. Thus he may say, “Daddy, what are we? Are we Jews or gentiles; Protestants or Catholics; Republicans or Democrats?” When told what “we” are, the child is fully satisfied. From then on, he will accept his membership and the ready- made attitudes that go with it” (1954, p. 293-94). However, for TCKs, asking parents ‘what are we’ might not be as helpful as they may receive conflicting answers because the parent may not understand the difficulty the child is facing in trying to infuse two different cultural social values and attitudes. Parents may not see this struggle because as adults they have formed their identity and are strong, whereas the child is in a critical age.

Although TCK can belong to two or more cultures, and their reasons for living abroad can vary, there are many commonalities shared by all TCK. “Each of these subcultures [community of expatriates] generated by colonial administrators, missionaries, businessmen, and military personnel—had its own peculiarities, slightly different origins, distinctive styles, and stratification systems, but all were closely interlocked (Useem, 1973, p.122). Some common personal characteristics of TCKs

include a large world view, language acquisition, becoming a cultural bridge, having a feeling of rootlessness, feeling restless, and sensing a connection with others who share similar backgrounds.

Identity

It had “come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of verbal sign” (A.O. Lovejoy).

“Identity was not the same as role playing, it was not just self-conception or self image, and it was not simply an answer to the faddish question, “who am I?” (Erikson, p.314)

Before diving into my research question I wanted to try and understand what is meant by identity. Some of the general terms that came to mind included physical aspects that are visible to others including race, gender, ethnicity and physical characteristics (height, weight). It also includes non-visible aspects like nationality, sexual orientation and socio- economics/class. Erikson was a key figure in popularizing the term and admits that it is a concept which is hard to grasp as it concerns “a process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities”(1968, p.22). Identity was used to discuss the intercorrelation between the individual and society and simplified the intangible link between the two since it dealt with and referred to the relationship between the individual and the social and cultural features that distinguish different groups.

Identity involves a continuing interaction between the individual’s personal development and his participation in society, this involves internalizing its culture, understanding the different statuses, and playing the different roles prescribed to him by

that society. Its formation means an engagement to a way of being, and trying to find a place for oneself. Because it is social, identity is dynamic. It is also described as dynamic because a community's social values and attitudes may change over time, and individuals can belong to a variety of different communities throughout their life. Although Erikson believes that identity is shaped and modified by social values and attitudes it is, however, in the end one's own increase of confidence in his "sameness and continuity" through time and space.

When asked 'what is identity?' one may believe it to be the characteristics that define a person, but how these characteristics are defined is socially constructed. First, it is constructed by the interpretations provided by society as to what is ideal and significant. Only when one develops a self that encompasses these ideals can one have an intelligible identity (Taylor, 1992). Parsons (1964) believed that all the components of a culture must be internalized as part of an identifiable personality structure; however, he goes on to say that '... while the main content of the structure of personality is derived from social systems and culture through socialization, the personality becomes an independent system through relations to its own organism and through the uniqueness of its own life experience...' (p.82). Secondly, Identity may be developed through the interaction with others. There is a social base to the development of a child's identity; it is in the relationship formed with parents and teachers. These figures influence the child's perception of himself and they also offer the child the social values and attitudes with which the child can develop his identity.

From my understanding of identity from the summary above, identity development consists of largely a social element. I can't help but wonder how TCKs are

able to form a socially constructed identity if they live in many social worlds. If one of the levels of identity as described by Taylor (1992) encompasses what is ideal and significant by a society, then how can a TCK encompass ideals of two or more societies? Here lies their 'crisis' which I believe to be greater than the normal identity crisis described by Erikson. For this reason I wanted to study the identity of TCKs from Arab backgrounds, specifically Saudi, who are temporarily living in the United States. I can not help but wonder that the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA) can combine their two social worlds to make a new society where these children can be accepted and benefit from such an environment. Will a 'safe' environment like ISA help TCKs overcome their identity crisis and create an acceptable livable dual identity?

Ethnic identity

An ethnic identity implies a "consciousness of self within a particular group" (Spencer and Markstrom- Adams, 1990, p.292). To Phinney (2003) "ethnic identity is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group" (p. 63). She defined an 'ethnic group' as one that an individual claims heritage in. It may influence ones thinking, behavior, feelings and even perceptions. She goes on to add that, "Ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but rather is a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and ethnic background. Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity, with in the large (sociocultural) setting" (p. 63). It should be made clear that ones ethnic identity is separate from his personal identity, although they may continually influence each other. For Arab TCKs creating an ethnic identity maybe the goal, I believe it can also be a saviour. From personal experience I find that I work harder on being an Arab when I am

away from my home country, as if it is necessary for me to represent and to cling to my roots. Ethnic identity gives Arab TCKs an identity of their own, I believe it can help ease the conflict between the social identity and the personal identity, all of which interact and play a major role in forming identity.

In addition to the complicated issues related to the development of an identity, minority/ immigrant children must also face new challenges. For instance, they must deal with ethnic and racial identification. Rotheram and Phinney (1987) define ethnic self-identification as “the accurate and consistent use of an ethnic label, based on the perception and conception of themselves as belonging to an ethnic group” (p.17). Clark and Clark (1939) defined racial identification as “inductive of a particularized self-consciousness” (Spencer and Markstrom- Adams, 1990, p.292). Another issue is ethnic and racial preferences and attitudes. Preferences are defined as the manner in which a group views itself, while attitudes refer to the view of minorities reflected in society (p. 292). Thus for Arab TCKs how they see themselves and how they are viewed can be completely different views (in light of recent events) which can further complicate identity formation for these children. It must be noted that ethnicity and race may overlap but they are not identical. Phinney concludes that an ethnic identity provides the individual with a framework by which to view and interpret the self, the world and different situations and opportunities. One question comes to mind here: what ethnicity do Arab TCKs place themselves in? I am asking this question because I can’t place myself in only one framework.

Atkinson et al (1979) proposed a model of identity development for ethnic minorities which places the process of identity formation in developmental stages.

- Conformity which is characterized by a preference for the dominant culture over ones own.
- Dissonance is characterized by conflict and confusion between the dominant culture and ones own.
- Resistance and immersion involve active rejection of the dominant culture and the acceptance of ones own.
- Introspection, which is an intensification of resistance and immersion.
- Finally, synergistic articulation and awareness which is characterized by a sense of self-fulfillment and integration.

(Berger, 1997)

For Arab TCK in a 'safe' environment such as ISA where they are not the ethnic minority, and in fact may never have to feel like they are the minority during their stay in the United States, I wonder if they too go through the developmental stages of identity development?

Identity Crisis

Erikson coined the term identity crisis in the 1970s, he says "it may be a good thing that the word crisis no longer connoted impending catastrophe, which at one time seemed to be an obstacle to the understanding of the term. It is now being accepted as designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (1968, p. 16). To form an identity is a developmental task which becomes prominent during the adolescent years. Erikson describes eight developmental stages from infancy to adulthood through which a healthy developing human should pass. He

found that it is in the adolescence age, from 11 to 18 years, where the psychological crisis faced is identity vs. identity confusion. An identity crisis is the normal occurrence of adolescence, but it can also be precipitated by unusual difficulties further along in the life cycle. He believes that identity crisis is the most important conflict human beings encounter when they go through the eight developmental stages in life, and those who face the challenges of the crisis and overcome them will be ready to face future challenges. My question for Arab TCKs is, is it only in the adolescent years when they face an identity crisis or could it occur earlier and in addition to normal development? And do Arab TCKs overcome identity crisis if the social view of Arabs, especially Saudis, in the United States is unstable?

Dual Identity

“Identity is not a single image but rather an ever-growing collage- a personalized patterning of multiple cultures.” (Shannon, 1988, p.17)

While forming an identity is a difficult task for all adolescence, it is particularly hard for those who are labeled as a ‘minority’ due to their belonging to a different ethnic or racial group. “The complexity of identity formation may increase as a function of color, behavioral distinctions, language differences, physical features, and long-standing, although frequently unaddressed, social stereotypes” (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990, p.290).

This is especially difficult for TCKs who are not only struggling with the developmental stages but also the cultural transitions. “Identity issues are at the core of adolescence, and of immigration, as both are unstable and stormy transitions involving multiple losses and intensive external and internal changes. These processes cause

immense physical, cognitive, psychological and social stress on the individual” (Berger, 1997, p.264). These children must learn to combine their old identities with new ones in the face of new physical, social and cultural environments, language and socioeconomic status in order to adjust to the new situation.

Shannon (1988) identified four stages of minority/ cross-cultural children self definition. The first is dual rejection where the child rejects both cultures and finds comforts in outcasts like himself because they may share an identity. Selective rejection is when the child is able to choose one culture over the other, usually one that is placed upon him by society, and thus they don't feel complete. Attempted dual identities occurs when the child attempts to be both cultures at once, however he may not be successful in society's eyes. And finally self created inclusive identity occurs when a child selects his own identity instead of allowing others to do so. From personal experience as a TCK and from teaching and working with many TCKs, I can see an example of one of the four stages in different people. However, I can not say who is successful or not, in other words what is correct and which stage truly affects identity crisis/ formation.

Immigrant/ TCKs adolescents are especially affected because they are in the middle of two or more transitional processes. All adolescents desire to fit in; however, it is especially complicated for immigrants/ TCKs because they are bombarded with messages from two or more different cultures. “While non-immigrant adolescents have stability of environment and older immigrants have past identity to lean on in the process of adapting to the new society, adolescent immigrants swim in extremely stormy waters. They have to make decisions as to which culture they wish to use for an anchor in the process of developing an inner image and social presentation of themselves” (Berger,

1997, p. 265) and I believe this is true for TCKs who are similar to immigrant kids in that they too are faced with a new culture, but they must also go back home which can become a new culture they must face and learn to adapt in.

In the study by Berger (1997) on Russian adolescent immigrants, the author identified four patterns for dealing with their unique double identity crisis which I think can be shared with Arab TCKs.

- Clingers are those adolescents who ‘cling’ their culture of origin and refuse to acculturate with the new culture.
- Eradicators are those individuals reject their culture of origin and adopt the new cultural norms.
- A vacillator is an individual who swings back and forth between both cultures because of a hard time committing to either one.
- Integrators are those who are able to incorporate the norms of both cultures. These individuals are truly bi-cultural.

Two groups of factors that influence adolescent immigrants’ identity formation have been identified by psychosocialists; individual and social factors. Several individual factors were acknowledged as impacting the process of identity formation. One factor is how the individual’s culture is viewed within the new culture, and for Arab TCK this can be a conflicting given today’s circumstances. This view could affect how they view their heritage and the intensity of their ethnic identification. Also the individual’s level of anxiety and risk taking can have an affect on identity formation. Many Arab TCKs have been told to be careful because of their background (personally I have been told by many not to reveal or act like an Arab/ Muslim because it can bring unwanted attention).

Finally, the ways in which the individual handles loss and mourning can have a true affect on identity, how an Arab TCK deal with the fact that he/she may have lost some aspects of his culture or things that make him an Arab can hinder or develop identity formation. The social factors identified include: family dynamics and features of the general culture, parents' attitudes towards recognizing and fostering differences among family members, the relationship between the adolescent and the parent has a great impact on identity selection, and finally, the culture restrictiveness (Berger, 1997).

Research Site

Islamic Saudi Academy

The Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA), located in Alexandria, Virginia, was founded in 1984 for Saudi, Arab and Muslim children residing in the United States. It is a bilingual school offering both English and Arabic integrating both an US and Middle Eastern curriculum. The goal of the Academy is to provide its students with a thorough education in English and Arabic and to building, in the process, Muslim character. The bilingual curriculum provided enables students to enter universities and colleges within the United States as well as international ones. The mission statement provides a concise summary: "The mission of the Islamic Saudi Academy is to enable our students to excel academically while maintaining the values of Islam and proficiency with the Arabic language. The Academy endeavors to provide a caring, challenging and supportive learning environment where students can achieve their highest potential while exhibiting civic responsibility and multicultural appreciation."

I choose ISA as an ideal research site because I feel it is a great environment for TCKs to combine both worlds to their own needs and desires easily and without too

much outside influence. Speaking from personal experience I found that environment a place where both worlds were welcomed and unquestioned. It was normal, in fact encouraged, to switch between cultures in different classes. We used, celebrated, ate, lived...etc both worlds under one roof. I believe that such an environment is a great place to help TCKs' identity flourish and grow without too many conflicts or clashes. Actually I believe creating 'safe' environments for TCK is very important for their development. I also believe that such a 'safe' environment can help TCKs slowly develop their identity as TCK, where they have the opportunity to understand the different environments that makeup their world. Now looking back at my experience as a TCK who went to school at ISA, I feel that I am comfortable switching between both worlds because I was never discouraged to explore the different cultures and find my place within them.

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