

Chameleons Among Us: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry About  
Adults and Belonging After a Globally Nomadic Childhood

by

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## ABSTRACT

This action research-based dissertation aims to explain how belonging is understood of a group of adults who spent a significant portion of their childhood in globally nomadic families. A hermeneutic phenomenological lens was used throughout the inquiry. The research process revealed that belonging and identity are deeply intertwined and that for these adults, belonging is defined by relationship rather than physical proximity; their sense of belonging was varied and defined by multiple dimensions which is consistent with the multi-layered cultural identities of the participants; and that belonging can be experienced imperfectly due to issues of permanence and socio-cultural perceptions of not fitting in. The second aim of this dissertation was to examine how a temporary, online community built participants' understanding of their lived experiences, particularly among the axes of belonging and identity. The analysis indicated that a meaningful depth of understanding can be created among relative strangers, given the design of the online community and willingness among the participants to meet each other with intention and generosity within that design. This study adds to an under-researched area within existing literature by offering an authentic description of the lifeworld of adults beyond their globally nomadic childhood and makes actionable suggestions for current ex-patriate families and the sponsoring organizations who send them.

## DEDICATION

The work that these pages represent are lovingly dedicated to my family.

First, to **my husband**, the stabilizing moon to my planet and continues to provide life-giving love and light each and every day. You have been an unexpected augmentation to my life for which I will be eternally grateful.

Secondly, to **our beloved daughter**, our gift. You have been a delight to get to know. I hope you have seen me grow beyond my doubts and fears and have learned that you can persevere and push beyond your own doubts and fears and accomplish whatever you set your mind to do. I am so proud of the person you are and are becoming.

Next to **my graduating niece**. It is rare that a person who was present at the miracle of your birth will have that baby be present with her when we graduate together on the same day. I am proud of the person you are and are becoming too.

Equally, to **my other niece and nephew** - you have been a joy to get to know and watch grow up, albeit from a distance. I am eager to see how the rest of your lives unfold with all the gifts and brains you possess. To their parents and grandparents, Fifi has learned a lot about belonging through knowing you - thank you.

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To my strong and courageous **sister** - my intellectual superior as well as patient thought partner about many of the ideas on these pages. Stimasjon.

To my late maternal **grandparents** who mourned their lack of education and opportunities in life - this is for you and for what you could have been, if you had lived in a time of more opportunities and less prejudice against women and physical disabilities. Despite your social disadvantages, you lived impressive lives that have been role models for your grandchildren.

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I acknowledge that the Tempe campus sits on the ancestral homelands of those American Indian tribes that have inhabited this place for centuries, including the Akimel O'odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) peoples.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Digital nomads** – a recent global nomad phenomena, popularized by the internet and ability of tech-savvy entrepreneurs to live around the world and earn a living within digital professions (Hannonen, 2020; Richter & Richter, 2019). Typically, single or partnered without children.

**Expatriate, “expat”** – those who are living in a different culture other than their passported one but who intend to return to their passported country at some future point. In many contexts, this term is both “politicized and racialized” (Farah, 2020) but for the context of this paper, it will be used to distinguish people who return to a “home country” after a period abroad, which is different from people who move permanently away from a home country.

**Global nomads, global sojourners** - those who move away from their home culture to a different culture, i.e. internationally mobile (McLachlan, 2007). Typically associated with frequent moving between countries or residing elsewhere for a long period of time. In contrast to migrants, the term is understood to have a temporary quality about it.

**Host culture** – the culture where the global nomads and their family reside. The choice of “culture” rather than “country” is deliberate because it evokes the idea that a country is not a monolith but rather encompasses a wide variety of different cultures, languages and people.



**Migrants** – No less an esteemed organization such as the World Health Organization (WHO) noted that there is no universal definition for “migrants” (Polushkin, 2018) because the term has varied political, racial, economic and social nuances, depending on the context in which it is used. Thus, for the purposes of this paper the term “migrants” and related terms of movement direction, “emigrants” and “immigrants,” will be used in the sense of their most fundamental meaning, i.e. people who move from one culture or country to another. An added nuance I will give the word in this paper is that a migrant’s move is permanent, in order to distinguish people whose move ends in a permanent geographical place of residence from people who continue to move geographically, as is the focus of this inquiry.

**Refugees** – those who are separated from their homeland by some sort of calamity, such as a civil war or starvation, as defined by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR, 2021)

**Repatriation** – the event of returning to the country of one’s citizenship. Usually implies an extended stay, not a temporary visit like a vacation.

**Third Culture Kid (TCK)/Adult Third Culture Kid (Adult TCK)** – As defined in this proposal, a child who has spent a significant portion of time in a host country (or countries) other than that of his/her country of citizenship due to parental career choices, usually within a sponsoring organization that sends the family abroad. The parental culture at home is different than the surrounding host culture, resulting in a cultural hybridity, i.e. a “third culture” that is unique to each TCK. “Adult TCK” are adults who

come from this cross-cultural background. My choice to use the term “Adult TCK” rather than “A-TCK” is deliberate, if contradictory, because I wish to emphasize the profound impact this kind of childhood has on the rest of the adult’s life. Also, as a researcher-practitioner who seeks to build bridges of understanding and disseminate information to those who would benefit most from it, I abhor the overuse of acronyms in written and spoken language, a practice which is not exclusive to educational research but is exclusionary nonetheless.

## PREFACE

“And, now that life had so much human promise in it, they resolved to go back to their own land; because the years after all, have a kind of emptiness, when we spend too many of them on a foreign shore.

“We defer the reality of life, in such cases, until a future moment, when we shall again breathe our native air; but by-and-by, there are no future moments; or, if we do return, we find that the native air has lost its invigorating quality, and that life has shifted its reality to the spot where we have deemed ourselves only temporary residents.

“Thus, between two countries, we have none at all, or only that little space of either, in which we finally lay down our discontented bones. It is wise, therefore, to come back betimes, or never.”

-Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, (1860/1990). Chapter 50

## 1 – INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

### **Introduction**

This inquiry looked at a fascinating but under-researched group of adults who had internationally mobile childhoods, known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Although superficially these adults appear to fit in with their present contexts, a deeper acquaintance with these individuals often reveals a pervasive feeling of chronic cultural liminality which they describe as being a “chameleon”. Being a chameleon is a metaphor for the feeling of simultaneously belonging everywhere and nowhere simultaneously that adult TCKs share, as a result of their internationally mobile childhoods. This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the effects of a global childhood on perceptions and structures of belonging as adults. In addition, this study occurred via an online support group and a secondary goal was to explore the mode and medium of facilitation. The findings of this study augment the relatively miniscule body of knowledge about these adults, how they view and interact with the world as well as how their unique viewpoints and backgrounds can be used to build bridges and extend understanding of the fundamental elements that bind all humans together in a time when ostensibly, humanity seems less interested in accepting those who seem different.

In order to provide context for those unfamiliar with the phenomenon of adults raised in a cross-cultural context, in this chapter, I will describe the diaspora of global sojourners and their family, Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs), defining characteristics of children raised globally, as well as the benefits and challenges of an internationally

mobile background. I will conclude the chapter by explaining the purpose of action research, and the research questions which guided this inquiry.

### **The Diaspora of Global Sojourners**

Since time immemorial, humans have continually explored, occupied, settled and moved around the globe. With the advent of modern transportation, formerly disparate parts of our world have increasingly become more interconnected historically, economically and socially.

The numbers of global sojourners today demonstrate this truth. For the purposes of brevity and context-setting for the participants in this study, I will cite statistics from only Canada and the United States, which comprise my target population for this study. The Department of State in the United States does not publish official figures and thus advocacy groups such as American Citizens Abroad (ACA) and the Association of American Residents Overseas (AARO) are left to calculate numbers from a variety of sources such as overseas consular registrations and residence-based taxation figures. The ACA and AARO both estimated 8.7 million Americans lived overseas in 2015, excluding military personnel (American Citizens Abroad, n.d.; Association of American Residents Overseas, 2018). The Canadian government estimated that approximately four million Canadians lived abroad in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Internationally mobile families do not only come from the United States and Canada. Globally nomadic families from Mexico, China, India, Australia and many other countries live in Canada and the United States.

There are many reasons people leave their birth places to live in another country. Some people leave by choice; others have the choice forced upon them. Sojourners with a choice may be missionaries, diplomats, multi-national executives (Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017; McCaig, 2011) or more recently, young adults working in some aspect of the digital economy, i.e. “digital nomads” (Hannonen, 2020; Richter & Richter, 2019). In contrast, refugees are understood to be people who are forced to leave their country because of war, genocide or starvation (UNHCR, 2021). In many instances, however, whether there is actually a choice presented to the sojourner is not so clear. For example, undocumented Mexican sojourners living in the United States frequently relay stories of extreme economic hardship or drug-gang violence threatening their lives in Mexico (Gonzales & Vargas, 2016).

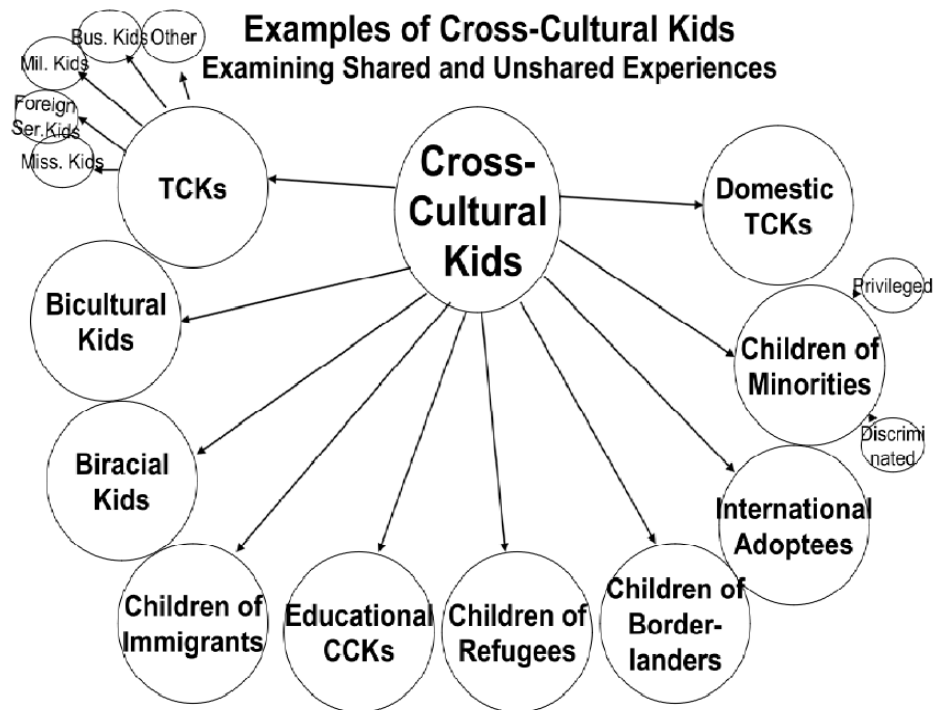
Although the reasons and motivation for living abroad may differ widely, this great global diaspora shares many common characteristics. One characteristic is cross-cultural experiences, which bring an added depth of experiential understanding of different parts of the world (Cottrell, 1999; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017; Bushong, 2013). Another shared characteristic is the ability to interact in more than one language (Cottrell, 1999; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017; McCaig, 2011). A third element is a loss of home; whether by choice or not, the life of a global sojourner necessarily involves leaving what is familiar for what is not (Cottrell, 1999; Crossman, 2016; de Waal & Born, 2021).

## Cross Cultural Kids

Many global sojourners have families. Children who live in or meaningfully interact with two or more cultures for a significant period of time during their developmental years are known as Cross-Cultural kids (CCKs) (Van Reken, 2011). There are many types of CCKs in the world and not all of them are globally mobile. International adoptees and bi-racial kids are two such examples but CCKs include many more kinds of cross-cultural interactions, as evidenced in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Examples of Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs)*



*Van Reken, R.E. (2011) p. 34*

This research study focuses on a particular subset of CCKs, known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). The experiences of expats' children are vastly different than those of

their parents and result in a different kind of adult identity being constructed. The complexity of the TCK's cultural and personal identity is created through the intersection of varied experiences of the home culture with the host culture (Bushong, 2013; Pollock, Van Reken, & Pollock, 2017). The culture created at home, i.e. the "first culture" is informed by the parents' passported culture or culture of origin. However, the expat children also interact with the host culture, i.e. the "second culture". Interactions with the dominant cultural force of the host country also exerts influence over a child's forming identity. For example, a Canadian family living in Brazil may celebrate both Canadian Thanksgiving and Brazilian Carnival each year. This family's children typically grow up perceiving these two culturally embedded celebrations as routine and expected parts of their lives. Although this example of the Canadian family living in Brazil is a simple one, it serves to illustrate the way in which the influences of the first culture (Canadian) and second culture (Brazilian) merge into a place of in-between-ness, where both cultures are constantly and unknowingly traversed; in other words, a third culture (Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017).

### **Defining Characteristics of TCKs**

While many CCKs may share the formation of a liminal identity between two or more cultures, there are three other elements that set TCKs apart from other groups of CCKs: social status and system hierarchy identification, the family's high mobility lifestyle and the expectation of future repatriation.



TCKs' parents are sent overseas by a sponsoring organization, whether it be religious, in the case of missionary kids; a government, as in the case of foreign service or military kids; or a multi-national company, as in the case of business kids (McCaig, 2011; Bushong, 2013; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017). All of these categories have tacit social structures within them as well as social expectations, determined by their parents' profession (Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017). Military kids may be aware that unwise behavioral choices on their part may influence their military parent's promotion whereas missionary kids may be told to not do anything to harm "the ministry". The one unifying element of all these categories is that an outside organization heavily influences the decisions of the family's location, time spent in a location and reasons to move to a different location (de Waal & Born, 2021; McCaig, 2011). Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock (2017) called this "system hierarchy".

The second characteristic that defines TCKs is their high mobility lifestyle during their formative years. In the only published study available on the lasting effects of a TCK background on adulthood, Cottrell (2011) distinguished between two kinds of mobility – mobile, long-term versus settled, long-term. An example of a mobile, long term TCK is one who was born in one country, moved to another at an early age, left their parents and family for boarding school in another location while the family may have moved to other countries or two or three, before the child graduated from high school. In this case, the TCK is highly mobile during the formative years of his life. Alternatively, a TCK may stay in one country but have successive friends that move away over time, which Cottrell (2011) used as an

example of settled, long term. In both instances, TCKs experience loss – either of friends, familiarity or of a country and a way of life for which they had an affinity. Typically, this loss is unacknowledged by both the TCK and the surrounding social norms; cultural mobility is a fact of life in the world of global nomads. The loss of a friend who has moved away or a psychological homeland where one no longer resides are examples of ambiguous loss for a TCK. The term “ambiguous loss” is typically used in the context of a military service person who is missing in action, or alternatively, it can be used for the psychological loss that is experienced by the friends and family of a loved one who suffers from Alzheimer’s. Although the loved one is still physically present, the whole of the person is only remembered and no longer experienced. Ambiguous loss also describes what a TCK loses in the span of a few hours on a plane or when their friend moves away (Bushong, 2013; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017). The places and people that were once familiar and perhaps loved by the TCK still exist, and grieving such a loss may not occur to either the TCK or their family (Bushong, 2013; Crossman, 2016; Gardner, 2014).

Because the loss is indeterminate, it is generally unprocessed by the TCK and often unaddressed within the larger social norms. If it is a TCK that moved away, i.e. a mobile, long-term familial situation (Cottrell, 2011), the child is soon occupied with adapting and making friends in the new host culture. If the TCK’s friends’ move away, as in a settled, long-term familial context (Cottrell, 2011), more friends inevitably come for a time and there are new friendships that can be made.

The final characteristic that sets TCKs apart from other types of CCKs is the expectation of repatriation and the subsequent psychological process of repatriation (McCaig, 2011; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017). Unlike migrants who move to one country and then stay there, TCKs grow up with the understanding that their host country is not their own and sooner or later, they will move from there, back to the country of at least one of their parent's birth and where they hold citizenship. This may be a country with which the TCK has only a passing acquaintance, through vacations or furloughs which are short bursts of interaction with their passported culture. Although much of the literature refers to this country as a TCK's "home country", in fact, a better description would be the TCK's "passport country" which many grown TCKs prefer instead (McCaig, 2011; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017). Although elements of the passported culture were recreated within the domestic life of the TCK's family, a complete recreation of the passported country is impossible to achieve. Structural elements of the parental culture may be present, for example ritual celebrations, parenting techniques, or familial norms, but with each passing year that the parents of the TCK spend abroad, they too become out of phase with their home culture. The "home culture" that TCKs learn about and believe is an authentic representation of their passported culture is merely an echo from years past or as one TCK described it, "the mythology of our parents" (McCaig, 2011, p. 49). How intense the cultural adjustment to their passported country is during the repatriation process depends on several factors, including how long the TCK lived outside the passport culture, how immersed in the host culture a TCK may have been,

the perceived distance between the host and passport cultures and the personality of the TCK (McCaig, 2011; Paige, 1993; Pollock, Van Reken, & Pollock, 2017). The longer a TCK lived in the host country, the more immersed a TCK was within the ambient culture and the more affinity a TCK felt with the host culture, the greater the psychological wrenching will be at the point of repatriation (McCaig, 2011; Paige, 1993; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017).

### **Benefits and Challenges of a TCK Background**

Although much has been made in international business and intercultural communication spheres about the benefits of living internationally, it is difficult to find what specifically is such a benefit. As Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock (2017) noted, it is rare to find a TCK who does not treasure their globally nomadic background but what they specifically treasure was not defined. Children, especially, find it much easier to pick up another language and achieve true bi-or multilingual proficiency. Living and growing up in another culture also gives sojourners and their families the ability to see the world through many dimensions and appreciate different ways of living and interacting with the world. Being immersed in another culture builds adaptability and flexibility, skills that are continually in demand throughout life. In one of the few published, wide-ranging studies on the effects of a TCK childhood on adulthood, Useem and Cottrell (1993/1999) found TCKs remain “internationally aware” and tend to possess “more cross-cultural skills than opportunities to use them” in adulthood. They also found that adult TCKs tend to be adaptable and find it easy to relate to a wide range of people (Useem & Cottrell,

1993/1999). Finally, adult TCKs tend to play the role of mediator or helper and are good at problem solving in unexpected or difficult situations (Useem & Cottrell, 1993/1999). Growing up as a TCK gives one a unique identity and a particular skill set, in a way that few other formative experiences do.

In the last two decades, the price that sojourners, and particularly their children may pay for the high mobility, system hierarchy identification, and continuous ambiguous loss during their developmental years, has finally started to be recognized. Although a life abroad may have fulfilled their parents' dream profession, it is the children who pay for this dream, sometimes through an adulthood of cultural and identity liminality. Although TCKs may be able to make friends quickly, they may not have well-developed skills with which to sustain friendships in-person over a period of time (Bushong, 2013; Useem & Cottrell 1993/1999). While adult TCKs may be able to relate to a diversity of people, their identity may be more of a chameleon; while TCKs may appear to blend into a group, in reality, they do not feel like as though they belong (Crossman, 2016; Gardner, 2014; Morales, 2015; Schaetti, 1996). This feeling is so prevalent that some TCKs claim the chameleon as their mascot (TCKI.com) and, as evidenced in my initial reconnaissance, may use the word as a verb, "chameleon-ing" to describe their feelings of uncertainty when they are trying to fit into a new social setting.

Feelings of not belonging anywhere can be expressed as not feeling "normal" (Bushong, 2013; McCaig, 2011; Pollock, Van Reken, Pollock, 2017). In addition, the years of unacknowledged loss undoubtedly have resulted in unresolved grief that can

manifest itself in a variety of ways (Pollock, Van Reken, Pollock, 2017). An adult TCK may wonder why he always chokes up in movies where a loss occurs or feels waves of inexplicable sadness at a certain smell. The link between unresolved grief and mental health issues, such as depression, is well established. Often ambiguous loss is not recognized by the TCK for the trauma that it is, and thus the grief is not processed or even salient (Bushong, 2013; Pollock, Van Reken, & Pollock, 2017). Every TCK struggles with the cultural and identity liminality and how to represent themselves to the world (de Waal & Born, 2021; Miller, Wiggins & Feather, 2020; Poonoosamy, 2018; Useem & Cottrell, 1993/1999). Questions like “Where are you from” and “Where’s home” are very closely connected to self-reflective and existential questions such as, “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” Some adult TCKs emerge from this liminality with a rewrite of their past; outside of old friends from past circles, these TCKs may never reveal that they once lived abroad and thought of themselves differently than how they are currently (de Waal & Born, 2021; Schaetti, 1996; Sussman, 2000). Other TCKs may appear on the surface to have adapted and moved through liminality, but live within the constant shadow of unresolved longing for their past, in other lands. Their past cultural experiences and the period of time associated with these experiences may become mythologized, almost fetishized (Bushong, 2013; Jones, 2018; Pollock, Van Reken, Pollock, 2017; Sussman, 2000). This group may avoid returning to the country or countries of their childhood, for fear that the experience will not be as they remembered it. The psychological labor of reconciling their childhood memories of that time with the

pluralistic and nuanced reality of their adult retrospective may be too daunting to contemplate (Bushong, 2013; Schaetti, 1996; Sussman, 2000). A third group, similarly, also mythologizes their time in other host countries and embarks on a never-ending quest to recreate that world in some fashion. Inevitably and invariably, this quest is futile. This group is forever disappointed and unsatisfied, always yearning for something they cannot have (Pollock, Van Reken, Pollock, 2017; Sussman, 2000.) Some adult TCKs move through this liminality, given time, with a constructive sense of identity and self as well as multiple, useful lenses through which to understand the world and bridge cultural divides for others. How an adult TCK copes with cultural and identity liminality depends on various factors, including internal ones such as personality as well as external, such as the host country context (Bushong, 2013; Morales, 2015; Paige, 1993; Sussman, 2000).

### **My Role as Researcher**

I bring to this inquiry both the lens of my past experiences as a TCK and global nomad as well as the lens of a scholar. My parents are American and I was born and grew up in the Dutch Caribbean islands before my family moved to Eswatini in southern Africa when I was an older teenager. As an adult, I have lived and worked around the world, primarily in Japan, Australia and the United States. My lived experiences lend validity to this study, a quality that has frequently been absent from previous research on the topic of TCKs, in my estimation. The absence of the scholarly perspective of someone who is a TCK has generated many misconceptions about the context and inner worlds of a TCK, so much so, that TCKs are viewed both

by themselves and those that know them as “weird” or “misfits”. These two terms were used most frequently by the participants of this study to describe themselves, during their initial interview. The terms are reflective of the puzzle of belonging and cultural liminality that frequently defines many aspects of an adult TCK’s life trajectory, including my own.

As a researcher, I position myself in an interpretive stance and seek to describe how different people understand “being in the world with others” (Scott-Villiers, 2014, p. 304). For example, although I know many adult TCKs who, like me, pursued the life of a global nomad, I know equally as many adult TCKs who choose to stay in one place as adults. It has only been because of this inquiry that I have understood and been able to describe what motivates these two radically different lifestyle choices and recognize that both are valid responses to a globally mobile childhood. Being able to embed interpretations and descriptions of a TCK’s inner world within the discipline of established research as well as the wisdom gained from lived experiences can give an added validity and depth of perspective to studies about TCKs.

### **Action Research and Change**

Action research occupies a unique space in social science research, both in terms of positionality of the researcher and the purpose of the study. In terms of positionality, the action researcher is typically working or interacting with the context being researched. The action researcher is not outside, looking into a situation but both within and without a situation, making observations, testing out theories and actions and cyclically readjusting one’s theories in response to a reaction or result



(Herr & Anderson, 2005). The iterative process of action research and my positionality inside and outside the context of this inquiry has informed this study's overarching ontological description of how a TCK's identity and sense of belonging is both created and enacted.

The purpose of action research is also different. Much of social science research seeks to answer *why* an observed phenomenon exists. Action research asks the "why" but then uses that answer to effect change (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Change, although it may be localized to a few dozen or hundred people within many action research efforts, is still significant to those involved (Henriksen & Mishra, 2019). A by-product of change in one area often is a causal sequence where more awareness of other problems and subsequent efforts to make changes elsewhere occurs. There are three areas where this research study is intended to effect incremental change; 1) to add another brick of knowledge about a sparsely researched topic to the ongoing social discussion about different kinds of cultural diversity and identity; 2) to help the adult TCK participants better understand themselves and the unique ways in which their background influences their lives and; 3) to describe the TCK experience to those who interact with TCKs.

Finally, this study will inform the current population of global nomads as they raise families or consider the possibility of offspring. Although there are many conspicuous benefits to being raised as a global nomad, the difficulties and drawbacks have not been as widely discussed. While very few adult TCKs regret their global upbringing, they collectively wish they had been better informed and prepared for its

impact on their adult lives (Bushong, 2013; Cottrell, 2011; Crossman, 2016). Because of the absence of explanation and supporting resources for adult TCKs, many of them have not satisfactorily resolved the contractions and complexities of their background, i.e. their “chameleon-ness”. During my initial reconnaissance, it was clear that many adult TCKs did not know how to talk about their background and did not know the considerable benefits such a background provided them. Very few adult TCKs seemed to be using their unique abilities to positively impact their lives or their social context. Instead, their TCKness was hidden away, its innate power untapped.

Part of the reason for this is that the struggle for finding belonging has been undoubtedly profound and enduring for the adult TCK. The depth and impact of the psychological wrenching that occurs with a sustained mobile childhood cannot be overstated (Bushong, 2013; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017; Tanu, 2020). It is hard to pull others up when one is still endeavoring to find one’s own place to belong, particularly if this striving is ignored or unnoticed.

As a consequence, there is a need to create a space for adult TCKs to learn about and reflect on their background, and specifically how it has impacted their quest for belonging as adults. Additionally, this space needs to be accessible for adult TCKs, who live all over the globe. Finally, this space needs to be effectively created and facilitated in order to both engage the participants and maximize the desired impact.

## Research Questions and Problem of Practice

To achieve the goal of creating an accessible, engaging, virtual space for adult TCKs to learn about and reflect on their experiences, I created a series of online support groups entitled “Empowering Your Inner Chameleon.” Through participation in the online support groups, the following questions were explored:

How do adult TCKs participants describe the concept of *belonging*, with a particular focus on families, friends, and communities?

How does an online community build adult TCK participants’ understanding of their lived experiences, e.g. belonging and identity?

The change being enacted through this research study is primarily one of interpretation and raising awareness among the participants but patterns and theories that emerge from this study are directly applicable to the TCKs who will someday repatriate and live as adults for the rest of their lives. Additionally, knowledge gained from this study is transferable to contexts where facilitation of online groups and interactive digital learning spaces for globally diffuse populations occurs, an area of learning which has grown exponentially in the last few years and will likely continue to do so. Establishing considered practices for humane and effective facilitation of liminal groups online, i.e. situations where the participants do not share many traditional nodes of connection but have been asked to focus on emotionally resonant topics, such as belonging, was of primary importance to the success of this study.

## 2 - THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH GUIDING THE INQUIRY

### **Introduction**

As mentioned previously, there is a growing body of research around the childhood and repatriation experiences of TCKs (Crossman, 2016; Jones, 2018; Morales, 2015) but very little research exists around the remainder of a TCK's life, as an adult (Bushong, 2013; Tan, Wang & Cottrell, 2021). Part of this is due to the history of TCK research which is a small and siloed body of knowledge.

David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken's (1999) book, *Third Culture Kids*, defined and explained the phenomenon of TCKs, popularizing the term within the global sojourner community. In response, many organizations who sent employees on extended overseas assignments took notice of the problems outlined by Pollock and Van Reken and started a variety of services for these families, including repatriation seminars for both families and their children. It has been notably the generation of adult TCKs who grew up or repatriated after the Pollock and Van Reken book was first published, that has been the most vocal about their globally nomadic experiences and how these have shaped their adult lives.

However, much of the TCK-authored publications focus on autobiographical accounts; the joys and pain of a mobile childhood are the most prevalent themes in such accounts (Crossman, 2016; Jones, 2018; Morales, 2015). How, where and with whom these authors create a sense of belonging as adults are largely unaddressed questions. A similar vacancy of direction can be found in the expansive online TCK communities where the focus remains on autobiographical accounts of past

experiences and dialogic encouragement during members' periodic struggles. These online TCK communities are characterized by their ephemeral nature; they tend to pop up for a few years to provide a virtual space for a group of TCK friends to continue their previous connection and support each other as members pass through the inevitable transitions to adulthood. Once this purpose is complete, the members drift away from the online community. Another commonly found online space for transitioning TCKs is the autobiographical blog where authors narrate their past intercultural experiences, and often is a place to contact other people (Third culture mama, n.d.; Ballard, 2019). However, many of these also do not seem to remain active beyond a few years. Additionally, many of the online gathering spaces are targeted at specific groups, for example missionary kids (Third culture mama, n.d.; Phoenix, 2017; Gardner, n.d.) which unintentionally separates the members from connection to the rest of the larger, global community of TCKs.

There is a growing body of published research focused on young TCKs, particularly those at international schools (Miller, Wiggins & Feather, 2020; Tanu, 2020) and the repatriation experience (Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017; Swanston-Kelly, 2018). However, as Tan, Wang and Cottrell (2021) affirmed, most authors publish one article on the topic and then move on to other non-related topics. There seems to only be one published, wide-ranging study on adult TCKs, done by Useem and another sociologist, Cottrell (1993/1999). The findings of that study were addressed in chapter 1 and echo much of what is still true about the effects of a TCK childhood on adulthood, at least for the participants in this study. Although there are

references to a few other studies done in the 1970's and 80's (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004), these studies have not made the transition from print publications to a digital medium and have proven to be difficult to source. Moreover, these studies seem to have focused on a narrow section of the global TCK community, namely white, Protestant, repatriated missionary kids (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004). While many of their experiences may be transferable to other contexts, such a homogenous population would not present good opportunities to explore the intersections of race and ethnic identity on a cross-cultural background (Tanu, 2020).

The scant literature around the topic of adult TCKs and belonging necessitates a search elsewhere to unpack the themes and theories salient to the significance of this study about TCKs and belonging. This chapter will first sketch a framework for understanding the creation of identity in an intercultural context, in which belonging structures are rooted. Secondly, the process of repatriation and its effects on identity and belonging will be detailed. Next, a definition of belonging and how one acquires a sense of belonging will be offered. Then, theoretical frameworks that were used for creating participatory learning spaces online will be detailed. Finally, prior cycles of action research informing the study will be briefly explained. These first two areas guided the lens through which the content of the intervention was designed for data collection while the latter area informed the execution of the intervention.

## Identity Formation in an Intercultural Context

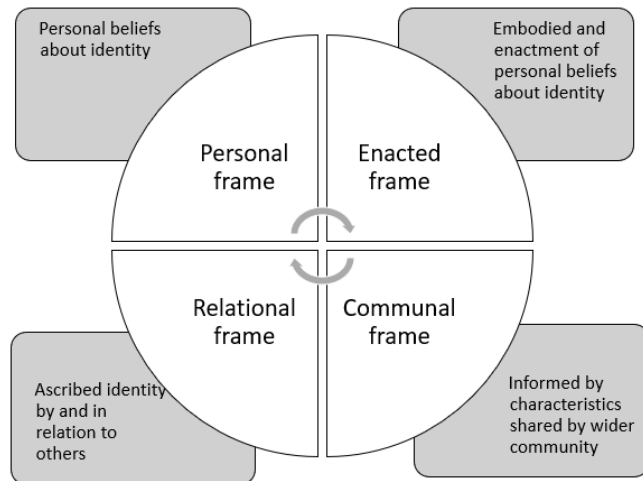
### *Background & Definition*

Although many theories exist about identity formation, the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) is particularly useful to describe the dissonance in identity formation and the subsequent quest for belonging that can occur for TCKs. First developed by psychologist, Hecht (1993), CTI posits that identity is experienced within four, interconnected layers, “reflecting the person (self), communication (enactment), relationship, and community.” (Thompson, 2014, p. 226). The four layers or frames are categorized as personal, which is how one thinks oneself; enacted, which is how one expresses oneself to others; relational, which is the bi-directional enactment and ascribing of identity by and in relation to others; and communal, which is informed by characteristics shared by the wider community (Thompson, 2014).

Figure 2 demonstrates this information graphically.

**Figure 2**

### *Four Interacting Frames of Identity*



An example of the dissonance that can occur between these interconnected layers would be an American TCK who was born and raised in Venezuela. While she may think of herself as Venezuelan, speak Spanish fluently and dress like her social peers (personal and enacted frames), her native Venezuelan peers may reject her for not looking or behaving sufficiently “Venezuelan” (enacted, relational and communal frames). Viewing identity from the CTI framework helps explain the identity dissonance that so many adult TCKs feel internally even years later.

Much of the literature about TCKs focuses on the intercultural experiences and the high mobility lifestyle of the family (Useem & Cottrell, 1993; Pollack, Van Reken & Pollack, 2017; Bushong, 2013). CTI also explains how these experiences shape a TCK’s identity and sense of belonging. During their formative years, all children start out with nascent frames of identity that are largely informed by their familial and social settings, through which specific cultural norms are implicitly taught (Rochat, 2003; Ross, et al., 2016). For TCKs, there is one set of cultural norms that inform the familial life which may be entirely different from the social sphere, which is necessarily informed by the host culture. To create a sense of belonging, children learn to unconsciously navigate both contexts effectively. Just as children do not have a sense of their incipient identity until they have an interaction with someone else and are older (Rochat, 2003; Ross et al., 2016), so one is not aware of one’s cultural identity until there is a cultural transition (Bennet, 1993; Sussman, 2000). Then the norms and behaviors of the new culture stand in contrast to what one thought were the



norms, resulting in a re-evaluation of all the layers of identity in order to find belonging again (Bushong, 2013; Crossman, 2016; Pollack, Van Reken, & Pollack, 2017).

Cultural transition necessarily brings a time of adjustment and a degree of liminality within one's identity frames and one's sense of belonging as TCKs adjust to a new cultural context. The intensity and length of adjustment depends on many personal factors such as personality and coping skills as well as contextual factors, such as perceived distance between cultures, language proficiency and quality of available social and emotional support system (Bennet, 1993; Paige, 1993; Sussman, 2000).

### **Repatriation**

Regardless of how many times in their childhood a TCK changes location or not, most TCKs experience the transition of repatriation to their passported country, often for educational reasons. The literature consistently demonstrates that repatriation is among the most challenging of transitions for TCKs (Bushong, 2013; Crossman, 2016; Gardner, 2014; Pollack, Van Reken, & Pollack, 2017; Sussman, 2000). There are many reasons for this. One reason is that the passported country may have been a source of stable identity reference for TCKs while they lived in the host country. This identity reference may have been encouraged within the family. Having spent several years, perhaps decades overseas, what the parents think they know about their home country may be quite different in reality (Bushong, 2013; Crossman, 2016; Pollack, Van Reken, & Pollack, 2017). The parental home culture has inevitably changed from

the time when the parents moved overseas. Upon repatriation, TCKs realize that what they assumed they knew about their passport culture was to a degree, mythological, and thus what had been a stable source of identity no longer is available to them (McCaig, 2011). Repatriated TCK may feel like hidden migrants within their own passported country. “Hidden migrants” was a term developed by Pollack and Van Reken in the first edition of their seminal book on TCKs, published in 1999. In contrast to migrants whose appearance is often the first indication of “otherness”, hidden migrants may appear superficially to belong but think differently than the dominant social group (Pollock, Van Reken, & Pollock, 2017). An explanation for why many TCKs feel like hidden migrants can also be found in the cultural iceberg model, which was first conceptualized in 1976 by American anthropologist Edward Hall to describe the invisible and visible elements of how culture influences people (Hall, 1989). Hall (1989) posited that the visible or external elements such as behaviors, rituals or ways of presenting oneself are only a small part of the entirety of a culture. Like an iceberg, much of culture is invisible, such as values or ways of thinking. Although these elements may be invisible or internal, they are the primary forces that shape those who live in the culture and thus can only be known by an outsider through immersive exposure within the culture (Hall, 1989). Although the degree of host cultural immersion varies for TCKs, the more a TCK is immersed in the host culture(s), the more influence the invisible elements of the host culture exert on the TCK’s developing worldview, particularly in constructing meaning and a sense of belonging.

Another reason why repatriation can be so psychologically arduous is because it is often a solo experience for the TCK. TCKs who move to their passported country to complete high school or start college often do so by themselves because their families, for various reasons, stay in the host country. Starting college is already a time of transition for young adults and for TCKs, this experience is further complicated by the cultural transition of repatriation. Bereft of familial, social and other familiar identity and belonging referents at the point of repatriation, most TCKs enter a time of cultural and identity liminality which can vary in its length and impact on adulthood (Bushong, 2013; Crossman, 2016; Pollock, Van Reken, & Pollock, 2017).

Cultural and identity liminality, particularly during repatriation, are the topics found in the majority of the autobiographical texts authored by adult TCKs (Crossman, 2016; de Waal & Born, 2021; Gardner, 2014; Jones, 2018;). Among the literature I have reviewed, there is a distinct silence on the process of moving through identity and cultural liminality into a coherent understanding of oneself, i.e. how one arrives on the other side. Only a few authors (Bushong, 2013; Gardner, 2014; Pollock, Van Reken, & Pollock, 2017) touch on the adult TCK experiences after the repatriation experience. Other authors (Crossman, 2016; Jones, 2018), allude to the temporal nature of cultural and identity liminality, a tacit indication that this transition time passes eventually. What the impact of this liminal time is on the individual, however, is largely absent in the literature.

### ***Direct Application to the Study***

As stated previously, intercultural moves and particularly the repatriation experience are hugely important in the ongoing formation of identity for TCKs, particularly for the dissonance that often occurs between the individual's identity frames during such moves. In the intervention, it is this legacy of international moves that the repatriation survey explored for a connection between how psychologically intense the repatriation was perceived to be with how strong the identity and cultural liminality was felt. My working theory that informed this inquiry was to hypothesize that there is a relationship between the repatriation experience and the evolution of subsequent adult identity support structures, meaning the psychological, emotional and physical frameworks that help adults navigate their lives. The area of inquiry is particularly significant because it is largely unexplored but impacts all TCKs. Permanent liminality, the quality of "being lost", was not directly explored, as it was outside the scope of this study. However, it represents an interesting future avenue of investigation, if one could gather sufficient participants.

### **Belonging**

#### ***Background and Definition***

As Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) noted in their overview of how the topic of belonging is treated in recent scholarship, although there is a deep connection in the existing literature between belonging and identity, the concept of belonging is "vaguely defined and ill-theorized" (p. 235) and often perceived as self-explanatory. Many discussions of belonging in literature center around a public-personal axis or

link such axes to the intersection of place, i.e. spatiality, and politics, for example, considerations of social or economic power and their effects (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Nikielska-Sekula, 2016).

For the purposes of this study, the interpersonal significance of the concept of belonging will be used and explored. The interpersonal aspect, i.e. psychological concept of belonging is important because of previous TCK research that demonstrates that belonging is understood by most TCKs to be based on close relationships and not on geography or spatiality (Bushong, 2013; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017; Useem & Cottrell, 1993/1999). This is evidenced in TCKs' reluctance and discomfort with answering the question "Where are you from?" (Bushong, 2013; Crossman, 2016; de Waal & Born, 2021), a question that assumes a geographical place as the primary impetus for belonging and categorization; in other words, a largely autochthonic assumption of belonging (Nikielska-Sekula, 2016). Autochthonic assumptions of belonging are based on the historical presence of a group of people connected to a particular area of geography for generations (Geschiere, 2009). The question "Where are you from?" also may assume a cultural congruence between appearance and geographical categorization. A well-publicized example of this was how the former American president Barack Obama was criticized alternatively for "not being black enough" or being "too black", depending on the critic's social and political positioning (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012). In President Obama's case, not only was he a TCK, but he was also bi-racial and bi-cultural (Obama, 2004); in other words, representative of many CCK nodes. Cultural and

geographical coherence is tenuous for a TCK, which is another reason that any answer to this question of origin feels inauthentic or far too complex.

A sense of belonging underpinned through relationships is not only a phenomenon experienced by TCKs, but also recorded among migrants. Research on migrants demonstrates a sense of belonging characterized by intersectionality, i.e. the intertwining of complex and interdependent social categories (Ferree, 2011; McCall, 2005) and multi-layered hybrid identities (Staynaes, 2003; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Benson (2014), writing about cross-cultural people in London and describing their sense of belonging within middle-class neighborhoods, observed that often “belonging is a messy and uncertain process” for migrants and their sense of belonging may be “fractured along a range of axes” (p. 3110).

Digging more deeply into the interpersonal, psychological understanding of belonging, Hagerty et al. (1993) defined a sense of belonging as the perception of two interrelated elements: feeling valued or important by others and “being congruent” (p. 293), i.e. fitting in with others. Belonging is inherently a bidirectional, social act as well as a perception of one’s relationship to others. Where, to whom and how we belong are parts of our identity and make up “belonging structures”, which Maslow (1998), the American psychologist, ranked as vital to a person’s wellbeing, immediately after physiological and security needs. For the purposes of this study, I focused mostly on belonging structures in the psychological definition of the word, i.e. the micro level of the individual and the mezzo-level of families, friends and communities, which make up the interconnected CIT frames, rather than physical

places of belonging. Families, encompassing all the varied definitions of the term, are the first structure where we find belonging as infants. Subsequently, as we grow older, our world expands to include friends and communities as psychological places to belong. Belonging structures greatly form children's identity creation, and because TCKs tend to either move or have their friends move frequently, the friend and community structural elements are often temporary. For many TCKs, even the familial belonging structure can be unfixed in some regards, if the children are sent away at a young age to boarding school because there are no other educational opportunities available to the family. Disruptions to nascent belonging structures can have a long-lasting and often troublesome impact on TCK adults (Bushong, 2013; Miller, Wiggins & Feather, 2020).

### ***Direct Application to the Study***

One element of this inquiry examined how participants view and value common belonging structures such as family, friends and community. Additionally, how one thinks about belonging as a TCK was a focus of several artifact-generating activities during the intervention, which provided color and depth to the survey answers. It is important for the participants to understand how their identity and belonging structures were formed and what influenced their formation because this is connected to the types of supports that are meaningful to their lives.

### **Online Group Facilitation**

The intervention for this inquiry occurred online. Although online learning and virtual communities existed before 2020, since the COVID-19 pandemic, connecting

with others online has been an experience shared by most of the globe. However, the quality of the involvement has been varied and another universally shared experience has been enduring terrible online gatherings. Lack of engagement is one of the most recognized signs of a meeting heading in the wrong direction (Boudett & City, 2014), whether it is in person or online.

Online groups should be designed to be participatory where learning and discovery emerges collectively. Pacansky-Brock's website and book (2013) presented a practical framework for participatory learning where participants "elicit, discover and construct knowledge" and where the learning environment is designed to "achieve learning for diverse groups" (p.4). Similarly, the Association for Learning Technology's Framework for Ethical Learning Technology (FELT) (2021) expanded these considerations for digital learning tools and resources outside the traditional realm of education and training. In addition to participatory learning, FELT encourages awareness, professionalism as well as care of the community (Association for Learning Technology, 2021).

As another CCK, Parker (2018) noted, there is an art to gathering, as well as an art to facilitating a gathering. It is important to design online experiences to be inclusive yet allow for curiosity and connection, particularly for emotionally charged discussions.

Another challenge for humane online community facilitation was the emotional content of this topic. As Maslow and other psychologists have demonstrated, belonging is an essential need of all humans. During facilitation of the



group discussions, it was important to create a framework that allowed for safe vulnerability and generous responses (Brown, 2013) for all the participants. Optimizing the process through which the participants “elicit, discover and construct knowledge” (Pacansky-Brock, 2013, p.4), in a virtual space requires similar skills to optimizing a physical experience. Parker (2018) wrote about ways to facilitate gathering to make the experience more meaningful and much of the structure in which one creates a meaningful and memorable physical space to gather can be transferred to an online modality. According to Parker (2018), the opening of the gathering is especially important, because it sets the tone for the entire event. The opening includes welcoming the gatherers and helping them mentally and psychologically cross the threshold from where they are to where the host would like them to be (Parker, 2018). This can be done by stating the purpose of the event and focusing the participants on the topic or reason for the gathering. Parker (2018) also wrote about how important pacing during a gathering is – not to rush the events nor let them lag - and for this, the host needs to be able to “read the room”, something which seem to me to be more difficult to do when mediated by small boxes in a computer screen. Finally, Parker (2018) wrote that a good gathering is finite and, like the opening, the ending should have structure as well. At the close of a gathering, the participants should be thanked for their presence and a short summary of the events or final thought based on the theme should be offered so the participants can depart with a feeling of completeness in the event.

Although both Pacansky-Brock's and the Association for Learning Technology's respective frameworks are comprehensive, how to apply these ideas within an online community while navigating the unique context described above was critical for this proposed study. Although I had extensive experience with meetings, gatherings and interviews mediated by video conferencing software, I was a novice in creating a website, as well as designing an online learning experience and gathering space.

## 3 – METHODS

### **Introduction**

This chapter starts with a definition, explanation and justification for the methods I used in this inquiry. Subsequently, I will give an overview of the intervention, including its connection to action research before describing the process I used to design and construct the intervention as well as recruit the participants. The chapter will finish with an overview of the data collected and how it was analyzed. The overarching goal of this chapter is to give the reader deep insight into the action research process to increase the possibility of transferability to other contexts.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

This inquiry employed hermeneutic phenomenology in order to understand and interpret how participants understood and constructed belonging. Phenomenology originates in the work of the philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger viewed people as actors within the world and focused on the relationship between individuals and their “lifeworld” (1927/1996, p. 46). The concept of a “lifeworld” encompasses the notion that “individuals’ realities are invariably influenced by the world in which they live” (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019, p. 94), which means that people already and consistently have “an understanding of themselves within the world” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p.729) even if they are not aware of this understanding.

## **Justification for Hermeneutic Phenomenological Methods**

The relationship between identity and belonging for adult TCKs has not been explored deeply in the literature and as a result, a systemic exploration of the lifeworld of adult TCKs is virtually nonexistent. How their background continues to influence who they are as adults is not well understood, even by the adult TCKs themselves as reading the many autobiographical accounts by adult TCKs reveals. As other hermeneutic phenomenologists have found, interpreting the lifeworld of others is an interplay of multiple analytical activities (Bynum & Varpio, 2018), and thus multiple angles and strands of synthesis of analysis of the data are often employed to arrive at an authentic interpretation of the findings. My position as a researcher/practitioner with a similar lifeworld of experiences myself is, in my opinion, important to faithfully interpreting the lifeworld of the participants, as they shared it with me. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to go beyond mere description of experience, by interpreting “experiences and phenomenon via the individual’s lifeworld” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p.730), rather than making objective statements of another’s experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009.) In empirical and experimental scientific research, methods are typically thought of as a technique with which to undertake an inquiry, but as Smith and Heshusius (1986) pointed out, method can also provide the “logic of justification involving as it does basic philosophical assumptions, informs method as technique” (p. 8, as cited in Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 342). There were three basic philosophical assumptions that shaped the logic of justification I used for this inquiry.

In keeping with the underlying premise of hermeneutics, people self-interpret and construct their own realities by making sense of what is important and real to them (Koch, 1996, as cited in Zweck, Paterson and Pentland, 2008).

Hermeneutics assumes that a group of people already share a certain amount of understanding and thus can be brought together to co-construct a more complete understanding (Scott-Villiers, 2014).

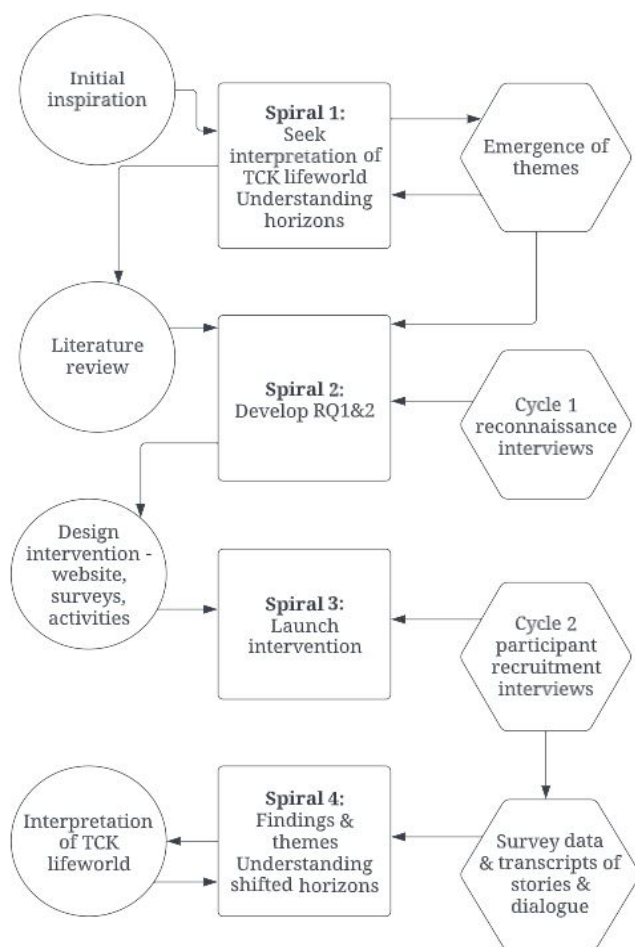
Hermeneutics is openly dialogic and it “invites its participants into an ongoing conversation” (Koch, 1995, p. 835, as cited in Lauterbach, 2018, p. 2883). Through dialogue, the fusion of the participants’ horizons of understanding (Scott-Villiers, 2014) occurs, both about their own reality as well as the object of inquiry, thus expanding the inter-actors’ boundaries of understanding.

These three philosophical assumptions underpinned the methods I used for this inquiry, which, in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, could be represented as a hermeneutic circle, which is another concept borrowed from Heidegger. Crotty (1998) defined a hermeneutic circle as a researcher trying to discern “the whole through grasping its parts, and comprehending the meaning of the parts, divining the whole” (p.92 as cited in Paterson & Higgs, 2005, p. 345). The goal of this hermeneutic inquiry was to fuse the horizons of multiple people’s past and present through a hermeneutic circle, in an iterative process, that appears as an open-ended spiral of inquiry rather than a closed circle, as seen in Figure 1. This graphic representation of my inquiry was inspired by an inquiry by Paterson and Higgs (2005) who also used multiple strands of data and cyclical methods that built upon each other

to arrive at a new understanding of fused phenomenological horizons. The diagram below illustrates the flow of data and outcomes during the cumulative design process of this hermeneutic inquiry and later in this chapter, Figure 3 will detail the analytical treatment of the methods used.

**Figure 3**

*Development of Inquiry Through a Hermeneutic Spiral*



For the rest of the chapter, I will detail and explain the various strands of focus that made up this hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry about TCKs as adults. First, I will give an overview of the intervention and the timeline I followed to implement

the study. Next, I will explain in detail the topics of the intervention, sampling and recruiting participants, as well as provide a summary of the data collection and analysis strategies I used.

### **Overview of the Intervention**

The goal of an intervention in action research is to affect an improvement of some degree in a specific context. During the reconnaissance phase of my study, prior to the intervention, it was clear that the basic knowledge about identity and belonging creation within an intercultural context both started and ended with the participants' own childhood experiences. It was also clear that most adult TCKs have not reflected meaningfully on how their background has created themselves today, due to the paucity of information available to them. Therefore, the intervention I designed consisted of two elements – growing a foundational understanding about the phenomenon of TCKs and providing a supportive, reflective space for the adult TCK participants to make sense of their reality (Koch, 1996, as cited in Zweck, Paterson and Pentland, 2008) and co-construct knowledge together, fusing horizons of understanding (Scott-Villiers, 2014). The foundational understanding was provided by an informational website and the supportive, reflective space was provided in online small groups, facilitated by Zoom.

### **Timeline of Intervention**

The intervention took place in Fall 2022 with the recruitment of participants occurring during two cycles prior to the launch of the intervention. Below is a timeline

of the intervention and actions taken in planning, developing and executing the intervention.

**Figure 4**

*Timeline and Actions for Intervention*

<p><b>Sep 21 – Feb 22</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconnaissance phase</li> <li>• Cycle 1 participant recruiting</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mar – Apr 22</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalized dissertation proposal</li> <li>• Defended proposal</li> </ul>	<p><b>May – Jul 22</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Built website, finalized surveys and activities</li> <li>• Received IRB approval</li> </ul>	<p><b>Aug 22</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cycle 2 participant recruiting</li> <li>• Enrollment of participants in study</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sep - Oct 22</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Execution of four-week intervention</li> </ul>	<p><b>Nov 22 – Mar 23</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post-intervention, analysis of data</li> <li>• Writing dissertation</li> </ul>
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### **Intervention Platform**

Action research is a useful tool to continue studying adult TCKs for its iterative, cyclical nature (Mertler, 2020) which is ideal for the wide, open spaces in which to de-center knowledge and create new, intercultural frameworks (Chen, 2010) through interpreting and describing the phenomenon of adult TCKs. The wide, open space I used to disseminate the foundational information was a website, TCK Watering Hole, which I created through WordPress. This was my first time building a website and I taught myself the essential skills through tutorial videos. Because I was a beginner, creating the website proved to be the most frustrating and time-consuming element of the entire intervention. I could visualize how I wanted the experience on the website to be for the participants but in the end, my nascent skills did not allow me to fully realize my vision. I decided to err on the side of simplicity and ease of organization of the information rather than delay the timeline of my intervention in the hopes that I could design a more beautiful website. In keeping with this spirit of action research being cyclical, I plan to redesign and actively maintain the website for the

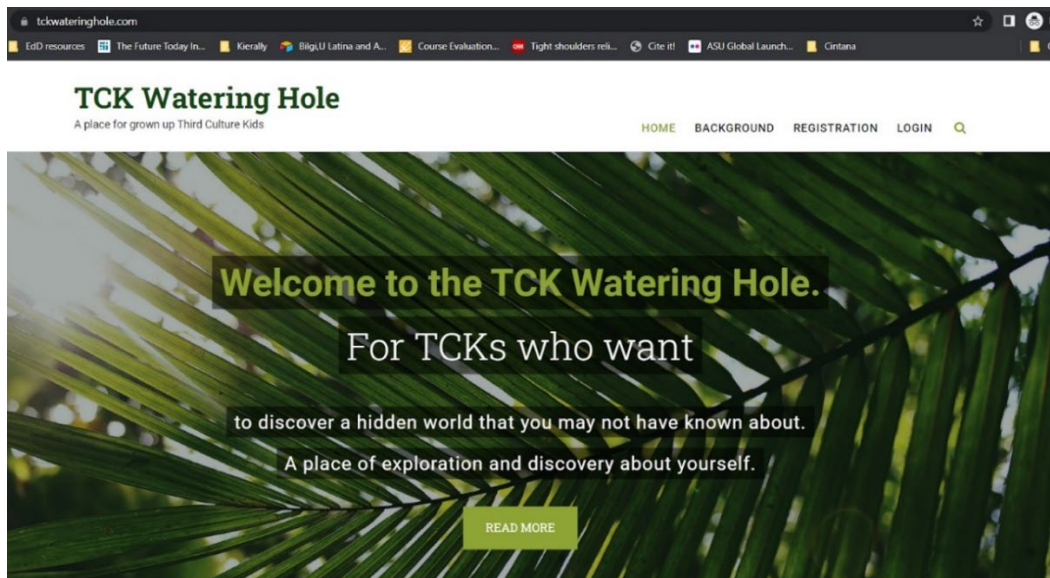


next few years as an informational magazine as well as a platform for future research on adult TCKs.

The name of the website, the “TCK Watering Hole” ([www.tckwateringhole.com](http://www.tckwateringhole.com)) was intended to evoke an informality of gathering, patterned like a water-cooler conversation at work. The name is also meant to demonstrate both a commonality of purpose but a diversity in how one engages with this purpose. Watering holes found in nature have a common purpose in that they provide water to the animals, yet the way the animals may engage with the watering hole is unique to their species. Some animals, like giraffes, may only drink; some animals, like elephants, may want to have a shower with the water; other animals, such as hippos prefer to take complete baths, if the watering hole is sufficiently big. This diversity of engagement was reflected in the type of articles, as it were, on the website. Although there were two or three assigned readings each week for the participants to consume, other articles on various topics were hyperlinked within the texts, if participants wanted to delve more deeply into a specific area. Figure 5 shows a screenshot of the TCK Watering Hole website.

**Figure 5**

*Screenshot of TCK Watering Hole Website Landing Page*



I wrote the articles myself, synthesizing information from the literature on TCKs and global nomads into a more accessible and easily understood format. In keeping with Pacansky-Brock's (2013) framework for making an accessible learning space, the tone of the website content was friendly and informal, rather than academic. However, I included a long list of helpful resources as well as the scant research I had found particularly useful in interpreting and describing the experiences of adult TCKs. I viewed collating and curating academic research references into one place as another brick I could contribute to the basic knowledge (Lewis, 2015) foundation.

Another area that was important to me was the security of the website and the information on it. I did not want unauthorized users hacking into the website and

ruining my study elements. Therefore, users were required to make a name and password for themselves before I, as the administrator of the website, approved their access. This proved to be a valuable step because there were three unauthorized users with unrecognizable email addresses who attempted to gain access to the website during the four weeks of the intervention.

Having been through other smaller action research cycles, I knew that the time I expected the busy participants to engage with the informational website needed to be achievable. If demands on the participants' time were too high and if the material was not interesting or relevant, my intervention would be undermined. Therefore, I needed to balance my expectations and desire to impart knowledge with reasonable expectations about the time I could ask the participants to generously give.

The website provided the central location that organized the participants' activities. The weeks were organized according to number and each week, participants would log in to the specific week on the website, as instructed verbally and in weekly emails. On each of the four weeks' landing pages, the participants could read the week's theme and topics, find the hyperlinked articles to read, complete the week's survey, reflect and prepare for the group discussion topic or activity as well as look at a glossary of terms and find references that I used in creating the week's articles. For the readings, I gave estimated times of completion so that participants could plan their preparation for the weekly meetings effectively.

Below is an outline of each week's themes, readings, survey and discussion topics or activities, connected by the idea of a chameleon.

## Figure 6

*Grid of Intervention's Weekly Topics, Themes, Focus Readings and Activities*

### Week 1

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<b>Title</b>	Meet the chameleon
<b>Theme</b>	Learning who TCKs are and familiarizing ourselves with the context TCKs live in
<b>Focus</b>	Orienting yourself to the terminology and experiences of TCKs; introductions of participants
<b>Readings</b>	Defining TCKs  Overview of experiences and thinking paradigms unique to TCKs
<b>Survey</b>	Demographic survey
<b>Activity</b>	Self-introductions by showing an artifact that represents something from your past and another artifact that shows something about your present self

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### Week 2

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<b>Title</b>	The chameleon and its colors
<b>Theme</b>	Commonalities and differences between adult TCKs

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<b>Focus</b>	How a TCK background shaped one as an adult
<b>Readings</b>	What previous research says about adult TCKs Three continuums unique to TCKs
<b>Survey</b>	TCK Indicators survey
<b>Activity</b>	Comparison of this study's TCK Indicators survey to previous research on adult TCKs Group completion of "You might be a TCK if..." list

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### Week 3

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<b>Title</b>	How the chameleon noticed its colors
<b>Theme</b>	Intercultural transitions and identity
<b>Focus</b>	Explored how identity is created and how intercultural transitions shape one's identity creation, particularly repatriation
<b>Readings</b>	Communication Identity Theory and TCKs Why repatriation is so hard
<b>Survey</b>	Repatriation survey
<b>Activity</b>	Choice of discussion prompts - Share a story about your repatriation

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Share advice you would give another TCK about repatriation

Share how you answer “The Unanswerable Question” (Where are you from?)

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#### **Week 4**

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**Title** Empowering the chameleon

**Theme** Belonging, belonging structures and making friends as an adult TCK

**Focus** How one thinks about belonging and finds belonging as adult TCKs

**Readings** Three definitions of belonging

Belonging structures and the TCK

Issues adult TCKs may have with making friends

**Survey** Belonging Structures survey

**Activity** Choice of discussion prompts:

Share a story about how someone made you feel a sense of belonging after an intercultural transition.

Share a story about how you extended belonging to someone else who was different

Share what kind of people you seek out as friends

Share how you would define belonging

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Share how your concept of belonging has evolved as you've moved through your life and experienced intercultural moves

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### **Synchronous Zoom Discussion Groups**

The “profound knowledge” Lewis (2015) wrote about consisted of exploring concepts and building collective understanding through a series of four small group supportive meetings, held weekly for one month. There are few established theoretical frameworks available for understanding the complexity of intercultural identity and the creation of belonging so the work of developing nascent structures was done collectively, through the interactions, reflections and narratives of the participants, consistent with the nature of a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. The weekly activities provided the structure and topics for the participants to collectively build their understanding, facilitated by me as the host of the meeting.

The synchronous Zoom discussion groups met weekly for about an hour, although this varied, depending on the size of the group and how much I perceived they wanted to talk. Figure 6 shows the duration of each group discussion by week and the times are taken from the original Zoom recordings of the meetings.

**Table 1**

*Duration of Group Meetings in Minutes with Weekly Total*

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	<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Week 3</b>	<b>Week 4</b>
<b>Group A</b>	50	50	60	65
<b>Group B</b>	50	56	55	60
<b>Group C</b>	35	65	45	60

<b>Group D (only Week 2)</b>	NA	65	NA	NA
<b>Total for week</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>185</b>

The group discussions were recorded in Zoom, to which the participants had agreed in their consent to participate in the intervention. The imminent recording was announced to the participants prior to clicking the “record” button. For all of the group discussions, the format was the same. I signed on at least five minutes before the start time of the group discussion, we waited for the others to arrive, chit-chatting with each other as we did so, then once most of the confirmed attendees were present, I started recording. I then invited the participants to mentally move from whatever they had been thinking about or doing to be present in the moment and focus on themselves and the conversation that was about to unfold.

The closing of the virtual group discussion ended in a particular format as well. I verbally previewed the topic and activities for the following week, and then followed up the verbal instructions with the same information in an email. I asked if there were any questions, thanked the participants for their time and then everyone said goodbye. At times, I would stop the recording before we said good-bye, other times, I forgot to stop the recording until I was the only person left on the Zoom screen. However, this difference was only a matter of seconds, not minutes.

## Surveys

There were five surveys that provided the quantitative data which created the framework for the qualitative data analysis and coding. Four surveys were



administered weekly, as part of the activities for the week, in addition to the readings and the discussion questions. The fifth survey was a post-intervention survey and completed anonymously. The titles and purpose of the surveys as well as completions are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Survey Title, Purpose and Number of Completions*

	<b>Survey Title</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Completions</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	Demographics (Appendix B)	Gathered standard demographic information such as age, gender, cultures of residence	N=16
<b>Week 2</b>	TCK Indicators (Appendix C)	Based on the one 1993 study (Useem and Cottrell) of the effects of a TCK childhood on adulthood	N=16
<b>Week 3</b>	Repatriation (Appendix D)	Examined memories of discrete events and feelings during repatriation	N=15
<b>Week 4</b>	Belonging (Appendix E)	Examined how common belonging structures, such as family, friends and community are perceived	N=16

<b>Post-intervention</b>	Post-Intervention (Appendix F)	Evaluated the effectiveness of various elements of intervention	N=15
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The surveys were built using the Qualtrics platform. For simplicity, the surveys were designed with three kinds of questions. The bulk of the surveys contained Likert-scale items with five being “strongly agree” and one being “strongly disagree”. There were some open-ended questions, such as name, age and gender, and a few survey items had multiple choice answers. Copies of the surveys are in the appendices, as indicated above.

I designed and wrote all the survey items myself. The intervention was the first time the tools were piloted. Therefore, the validity and reliability of the surveys cannot be determined in this study

***Demographic Survey***

The Demographic Survey, found in Appendix B, collected standard background information, such as gender, marital status, parental status and age, as well as information related to the context of a globally nomadic background, such as passport culture and host cultures. It served as context for understanding responses from the other three surveys in the intervention.

***TCK Indicators Survey***

The TCK Indicators Survey, found in Appendix C, was based off the only large-scale study conducted on adult TCKs by Useem and Cottrell in 1993. Although I

could not find a copy of the original survey which had been done on paper and mailed to potential participants (Useem & Cottrell, 1993), I recreated many of the questions and topic areas from the findings Cottrell had written about in an international school newsletter and were available on her website. The old website (<http://www.tckworld.com/useem/home.html>) is the only original source material I could find on the sole study that exists about the effects of a TCK childhood on adulthood and no other publications from this study seem to have survived the transition from print to digital. The purpose of including this survey was to see how consistent the findings of the original study were with this groups' perspectives on the legacy of their TCK childhood. The original study had looked at the effects of a TCK background on adult life and had asked questions about educational attainment, preferences in professional fields, marital status, functional language skills in other languages, and more nebulous areas such as what respondents perceived the influence of their TCK background was on their adult lives. As the only information available was the series of four articles in the international schools' newsletter, I made judgments on the relevance of the topic areas on the research questions guiding this inquiry before including the topics from the original survey in the TCK Indicators survey.

Because I only had the findings of the study, I had to retro-design the items for the TCK Indicators Survey in order to be able to compare my small group of participants' responses with the larger study's findings. Some of the items in the original study did not seem to be relevant to my study and thus left out. For example,

Useem and Cottrell's (1993) study had asked what age their married participants had gotten married and this question did not seem relevant to my study.

### ***Repatriation Survey***

The Repatriation Survey, found in Appendix D, was another pioneering challenge as I could not find a survey written specifically about repatriation and TCKs. I knew from the reconnaissance interviews that repatriation was a process and often experienced as a challenging one. I wanted to better understand the reasons why repatriation was more difficult for some because there seemed to be a connection between the level of the rockiness of repatriation and the ability to find belonging. Since the relationship between belonging and identity is strong (Hall, 2000; Woodward, 1997) and Communication Identity Theory demonstrated that identity is continually constructed and enacted through various frames of reference, I theorized that there might be a connection between one's sense of self and the perceived difficulty of the repatriation process.

To this end, for the Repatriation Survey, I synthesized research from multiple fields of studies related to the TCK experience, such as intercultural communication and the acculturation process of global nomads as well as salient psychological topics, such as mental health. During the reconnaissance interviews, the intersection of mental health and the mobility of TCKs had come up in my conversations with three participants and thus I wanted to see what the research said about this intersection. I could find very little research on this topic as it related to TCKs so I relied on the

Center for Disease Control’s definition of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and included two general questions about ACEs on the Repatriation Survey.

### ***Belonging Survey***

The Belonging Survey, found in Appendix E, looked at how the participants thought of belonging as established adults, long after the challenges of repatriation. As Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) noted, belonging is a subject that researchers have long treated as self-explanatory and thus, vaguely defined. Although I found some useful definitions of belonging, as discussed in Chapter 2, I could not find any research that defined and discussed specific belonging structures, so I theorized that family, friends and community were the most universally found belonging structures and thus chose these structures to investigate. These structures were also tied in well with the interacting frames of Communication Theory of Identity. The survey asked both about the interest and self-described depth of psychological belonging participants felt within these three structures, i.e. family, friends and community. As I knew many of the participants were parents, the concept of “family” was divided into “childhood family”, i.e. the original family unit that had moved overseas, and “parental family”, i.e. where the TCK participant was a parent.

### ***Post-Intervention Survey***

The Post-Intervention Survey measured the effectiveness of the discrete elements of the intervention, for example, the website, the topics of the intervention, and the facilitation of the small groups. The Post-Intervention survey also measured

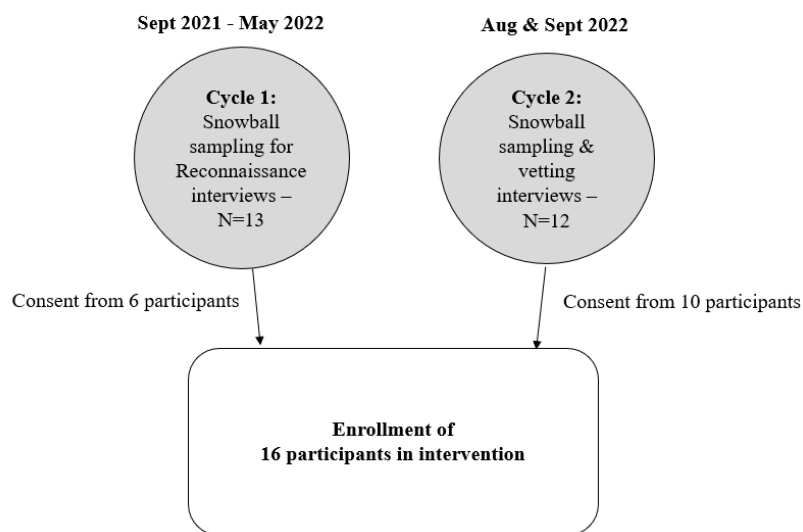
how much knowledge the participants felt they had gained as a result of involvement in the intervention.

## Recruiting and Interviewing Participants

Recruiting participants occurred in two phases as seen in Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

*Two Cycles of Participant recruitment*



Initially, in Fall 2021, I conducted a round of reconnaissance interviews in order to talk to more adult TCKs and hone in specifically on my research inquiry. I used personal contacts and word of mouth by other adult TCKs and some personal friends to recruit participants. This Cycle 1 research, which was IRB approved, consisted of setting up semi-structured interviews with adult TCKs through email. These interviews were not recorded; however, I took notes during our conversation, which occurred on Zoom. The participants were asked if they preferred to have the video cameras on or off and all of them elected to use their cameras. The interviews lasted

about an hour. During the reconnaissance Cycle 1 of recruiting participants, I interviewed 13 participants. Ten of them asked to stay connected with me as I continued my research project and eventually six of the participants from Cycle 1 agreed to participate in the intervention.

Cycle 2 of participant recruiting occurred prior to the start of the intervention in August and early September 2022. Using my personal contacts once more, including the ten from Cycle 1 who had shown interest in my research study, I used snowball sampling to recruit 12 more participants. Snowball sampling is when the researcher asks known acquaintances to suggest other individuals “who share a particular characteristic of research interest” (Frey, 2018, p. 1531), to whom the researcher is unacquainted. This was an appropriate method to use for two reasons; 1) the target population lives around the world, and thus were not locally available and 2) because the nature of this inquiry demanded a degree of rapport to be built between the researcher and the participants, building this relationship proved to be far easier with a recommendation or endorsement from a mutual friend (Frey, 2018). Although I had many personal connections to potential participants, my contacts did not represent the full range of TCK backgrounds which I want to include, such as those with military or diplomatic backgrounds. Therefore, I relied on my circle of known associates to connect me to other adult TCKs, as well as social media invitations on platforms such as Facebook.

Once I had been connected with a “friend of a friend”, I scheduled an interview to both vet the potential participant for the second phase of my research as well as to

establish credibility and rapport with the individual. The parameters for this study were:

- At least 18 years of age
- Not currently studying in an undergraduate educational context (i.e. adults who are working and/or parenting)
- At least five years from time of repatriation (to allow the psychological intensity of the process of repatriation to lessen)
- From a variety of sponsoring organizational backgrounds (i.e. missionary, diplomat, business and military backgrounds)
- From a variety of cultural backgrounds (i.e. host or passport cultures)

By Fall 2022, most people seemed to be proficient with video conferencing and being able to see each other on Zoom went a long way to establishing mutual good will. Of the 12 vetting interviews I conducted in Cycle 2, 10 people agreed to participate in the intervention, bringing the total number of participants for this intervention to 16.

Unfortunately, the backgrounds represented were not as diverse as I had hoped; the one diplomatic background participant I interviewed during Cycle 1 did not agree to participate and missionary-background participants were over-represented, nearly two to one, as seen in Table 3. However, one participant, Okinawa Girl, was an outlier in that her parents had had no sponsoring organization and this brought in an added dimension to the group discussions and ultimately, the study.



**Table 3***Participants, Countries of Significance and Sponsoring Background*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Passport country</b>	<b>Host countries</b>	<b>Sponsoring back-ground</b>	<b>Current residing country</b>
Alica	US	Bonaire, Slovakia	Missionary	US
Ann	Canada	Bonaire, US	Missionary	Belgium
Biker	US	Bonaire, Venezuela	Missionary	US
DL	US	Bonaire	Missionary	US
Ginger Mom	US	Germany	Military	US
Hope	Canada	Bonaire, Eswatini, South Africa	Missionary	Canada
Jamie	US	Germany, Japan	Business	US
Lancaster	US	South Africa	Missionary	US
LC	Canada	Eswatini, South Africa	Missionary	Canada
Lynda	US	France, Germany, Japan, Hong Kong	Business	US
Mae	Canada	Bonaire, Eswatini, South Africa, Kenya	Missionary	Canada
Mama Timo	Canada	Kenya	Missionary	Canada

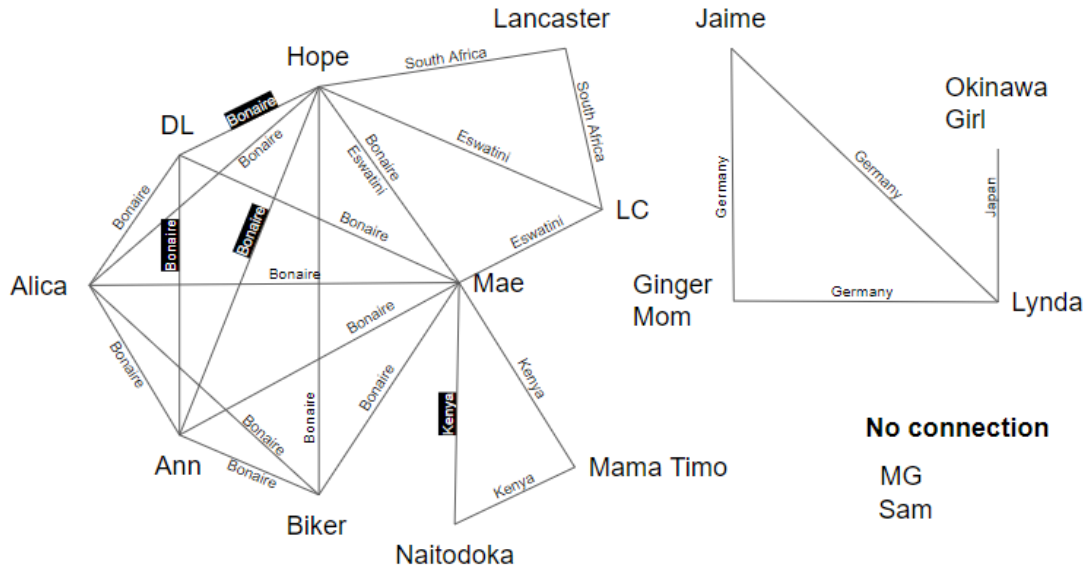
MG	US	Thailand, Israel	Military	US
Naitodoka	US	Kenya	Missionary	US
Okinawa Girl	US	Japan	None	Japan

Many of the participants shared common host countries. Shared geography can often serve as a doorway to discover further commonalities among people and establish the beginnings of a relationship, a concept that was related to the second research question of this study. Although there were six countries where participants had shared cultural connections, there was wide variability in ages and thus time spent in these six countries as well as the specific parts within the countries where the participants' families lived. For example, Okinawa Girl and Lynda both lived in Japan albeit at different times and in different locations (Okinawa in the south of Japan and Tokyo in the north, respectively).

However, some participants had become friends in one of their host countries and as adults, had remained close. This applied to five of the participants. Figure 8 shows a visual representation of the host countries that participants had in common, but only the country names highlighted in black show a prior childhood friendship that has continued into adulthood.

**Figure 8**

*Host Country Connections and Friendships*



Only Sam and MG did not share any common host countries with any of the other participants.

**Scheduling Synchronous Group Meetings**

Scheduling 16 people across six time zones in a way that allowed most of them to participate at convenient times proved to be tricky. Before the intervention started, I sent a Doodle poll to the participants so they could pick what times and days worked for them. Doodle polls adjust the time zone automatically to the location of the user so this meant I could designate the times and days I was available and not worry about converting the times to five other time zones.

Once I had everyone's Doodle poll results, I arranged various configurations of people across various times and days until I could accommodate as many

participants as possible in three or four meetings. Although the participants lived in six different time zones, there were only two very different outliers - the participant who lived in Belgium and the one who lived in Japan. It worked well to schedule the Belgium resident with the North American East Coast time zones and the Japanese resident with the North American West Coast time zones, I learned. Ultimately, the groups met on the weekends - either Saturday or Sunday as well as one weeknight - either Thursday or in the final week, Wednesday. Except for Week 2, there were three group meetings scheduled for each of the four weeks. In Week 2, I scheduled four meetings in order to accommodate the largest number of participants.

The group size varied from three participants with me to six participants with me. The scheduling was based entirely on their availability, instead of other factors that could have been used such as shared host countries, similar ages or personal connections. Because personal availability changed somewhat during the weeks, participants did not necessarily see each other consistently and for many of them, each group discussion meant they got to meet new people.

The Doodle poll worked well for scheduling participants for the first three weeks but in Week 3, several participants told me there had been an unexpected change to their personal schedules for Week 4 that would prevent them from being present in meetings. I also had an unanticipated schedule change which affected the week night meeting in Week 4. We agreed that I would send a new Doodle poll out for Week 4 in order to accommodate as many people as possible. This proved to be

successful and only two people missed the last week's meetings; one because of travel and one because an unexpected situation occurred.

Table 4 shows the attendance in the group discussions. One participant, Number 10, voluntarily came to two meetings in Week 3 because they said they had enjoyed the first meeting so much.

**Table 4**

*Anonymized Table of Frequency of Participation in Group Discussions*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Week 1 discussion 11 to 15 September</b>	<b>Week 2 discussion 18 to 22 September</b>	<b>Week 3 discussion 25 to 29 September</b>	<b>Week 4 discussion 1 to 6 October</b>
<b>1</b>		X	X	X
<b>2</b>				X
<b>3</b>		X	X	
<b>4</b>				X
<b>5</b>	X		X	X
<b>6</b>		X	X	X
<b>7</b>	X	X		X
<b>8</b>	X	X		
<b>9</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>10</b>	X	X	XX	X
<b>11</b>	X	X	X	
<b>12</b>	X	X	X	X
<b>13</b>		X	X	X
<b>14</b>		X	X	X
<b>15</b>	X	X	X	X

Although five of the participants were friends with at least one other person within the recruited people, scheduling of the small groups was done entirely based on personal availability as relayed in the Doodle polls. Because of the complexity of accommodating personal schedules across six time zones, I could not schedule around prior relationships, host countries or personalities. Thus, only five out of the 13 group discussions had two people who knew each other from their childhoods. The thought occurred to me while I scheduled the participants, that in-group dynamics between people who were good friends, might detract from the other participants' overall experience. For example, if there were three people who shared Bonaire as a host country and another person who did not on a group discussion, the discussion might be too "Bonaire-centric" and reference personal experiences and knowledge shared by the Bonaire group that left out the person who had never been to Bonaire. However, subconscious, exclusionary, "in-group" behavior was entirely absent and the participants who shared a host country explained the cultural context of their stories well enough that participants who had never been to a particular country could follow along with the stories.

### **Enrollment of Participants in Study**

Prior to scheduling the background interview, I emailed potential participants an introductory letter containing the IRB consent for the study and explained who I

was, why I was interested in talking to them, and the conditions for participation. I took notes on the background interview and gained their verbal consent to do so.

During the semi-structured background interviews, I asked the participants if they would consider taking part in the subsequent intervention. If their answer was affirmative, I sent them the IRB information about the intervention and asked them to confirm their participation in writing. All formal agreements were gained prior to the first week of the intervention.

Additionally, participants were continually reminded in the surveys and meetings, both in writing and verbally, that their participation was entirely voluntary and they could choose to answer questions and give responses or not. Although participation was good, there were some weeks where some participants could not join the scheduled meetings and not all participants completed every survey, as will be reported in Chapter 4.

Once the participants had submitted their formal consent via email to me, the intervention started.

### **Communication with Participants during Intervention**

As the intervention was conducted entirely virtually, I knew that clarity and regularity of communication with the participants was vital to promoting engagement throughout the four weeks. It was easy to lose track of time when one is busy. Therefore, I sent a regular cadence of communications via email throughout the four weeks. At the start of each week, I sent an email describing the topic and activities of the week. The recipients' emails were hidden but the names of the participants were

referred to in the opening, so that participants could know who they would see in the group discussions. Each email had links to the readings on the website, the link to the week's survey and the activity that would occur during the meetings. If the activity was discussion prompts, I sent those along as well so that participants could reflect on their answers and choose one prior to the meeting. The day before the small group was to meet, I emailed the participants of that small group reminding them of the meeting the next day as well as the readings, survey and activities. Both emails included the Zoom link for the meetings. As participants were in six different time zones, I also put in the specific times and time zones in the small group emails, so that people did not have to convert the Arizona time to their local time.

In addition to the regular cadence of emails, there was also an email at the start of the intervention that explained how to register on the TCK Watering Hole website, which was password protected. Registration was a simple process and proved to be a much smaller barrier for the participants than I had anticipated initially.

The other kind of email I sent was if a participant had missed a group meeting. I assured them in the email that it was fine to miss a meeting but offered them alternative meeting times later in the week that were already scheduled, if there were any available. Two people missed the final week and unfortunately, there were no more meetings scheduled after that.

At the end of the intervention, I sent a final email thanking the participants for their time and thoughts. In this final email, I sent the anonymous post-intervention feedback survey link. As the survey's responses were anonymous, I could not tell who



had completed the survey and so I emailed reminders twice more in the subsequent ten days to remind everyone to complete the survey. Ultimately, 15 of the 16 participants responded to the final survey evaluating their overall experience with the intervention.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Overview**

By the end of the intervention, I had collected field notes on 25 background or vetting interviews during Cycle 1 and 2. I had also recorded the 13 synchronous group discussions on Zoom and had data in Qualtrics from the five surveys. There were also self-reflective memos after each group discussion and artifacts from the activities conducted in Week 1 and 2. Table 5 gives an overview of the specific kinds of data I collected and how they were analyzed and connected to answering the two research questions.

Research Question (RQ)1: How do adult TCK participants describe their concept of belonging?

#### **Table 5**

*Grid of Data Collection and Analysis Overview for RQ 1*

<b>Data Collected</b>	<b>Analytical Treatment</b>
Repatriation survey (Appendix C)	Descriptive Statistics

Belonging survey (Appendix D)	Descriptive statistics First and Second cycle coding for open-ended questions (Saldaña, 2021)
Transcripts of recorded group meetings	Transcription & first and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021)

---

Research Question (RQ) 2: How does an online community build adult TCK participants' understanding of their lived experiences, e.g. belonging and identity?

**Table 6**

*Grid of Data Collection and Analysis Overview for RQ 2*

<b>Data Collected</b>	<b>Analytical Treatment</b>
Transcripts of recorded group meetings	First and Second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021)
Reflective memos after each group discussion	Used to triangulate data and process coding (Charmaz, 2014, p. 181)
Post-intervention survey about website, topics and facilitation of groups	Descriptive statistics First and Second cycle coding for open-ended questions (Saldaña, 2021)

---

In addition to the above data collected, the following data was collected for vetting participants and providing context during analysis of the data:

Semi-structured vetting interviews (Appendix A)

Demographic survey (Appendix B)

The responses of the participants for the semi-structured vetting interview were used only as secondary data, for example, if clarification about ages or dates was needed to understand a statement within a transcript. The data from the demographic survey also provided context and clarity for the other kinds of data, which were topically of primary importance.

In keeping with the ethical standards of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), data collected was kept securely on password protected, cloud-based storage, to which only I had direct access. Participants were asked to provide their own pseudonyms which have been used in the reporting of this inquiry, in order to maintain confidentiality.

### **Transcripts of Group Discussions**

As noted above, the group discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis. I used a professional transcription service, Rev, to transcribe 10 of the 13 group discussions and transcribed three discussions myself. After I received the completed transcription from Rev, I conducted my own quality review on all 10 transcripts and their original video recordings to ensure that the spelling of unique or foreign words was accurate. I checked with participants on three different occasions via email to clarify the spelling of certain foreign words that were used in discussions.

There were other errors in the professional transcripts, mostly to do with the spelling of the participants' names, garbled sentences when a participants' audio quality was problematic as well as who was talking when several people accidentally started to speak on top of one another. Since Rev was so prompt in their transcription services, I found I could rely on my memory of the group discussion and reflective memos, if needed, to correct the errors I found as I listened to the videos.

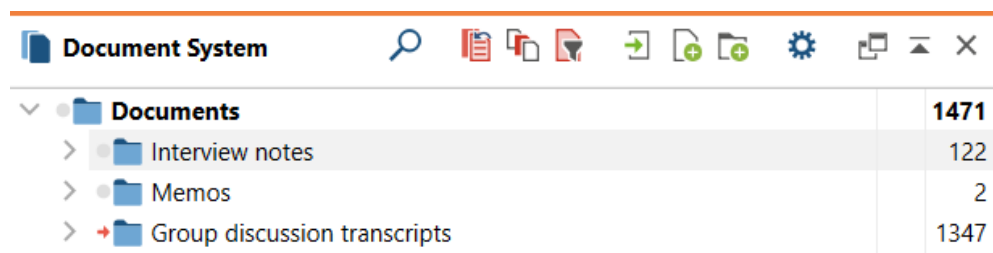
### **Analysis Methods of Qualitative Data**

The Cycle 1 and 2 interview notes and group discussions transcripts were uploaded to MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software platform and subsequently coded in First and Second Cycles (Saldaña, 2021). The reflective memos I wrote after each group discussion were also uploaded into MAXQDA for analysis but in the end, proved to be more useful as a tool to triangulate the quantitative survey data with the qualitative data as well as provide a framework for process coding (Charmaz, 2014, p. 181).

Ultimately, I had nearly 1500 codes in my qualitative data, the majority of which were in the group discussion transcripts.

**Figure 9**

*Screenshot of Types of Qualitative Data and Total Number of Codes*



The screenshot shows a document system interface with a toolbar at the top containing icons for search, copy, paste, delete, move, add, settings, and window management. Below the toolbar is a folder tree view with a table on the right showing the total number of codes for each folder.

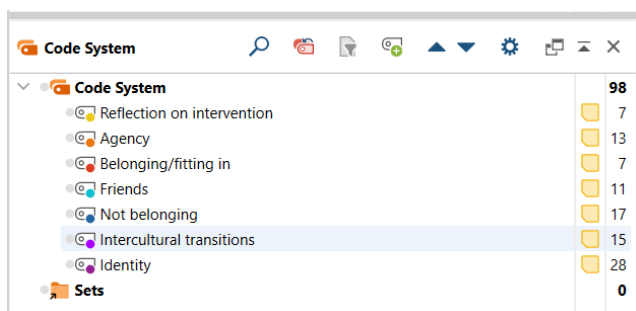
Folder	Total Number of Codes
Documents	1471
Interview notes	122
Memos	2
Group discussion transcripts	1347

To illustrate the method I used for first and second cycle coding, I will use one week's group discussions as an example. In Week 3, the topic was identity creation and intercultural transitions. As stated above, for my first cycle of coding, I tied the categories to the topic of the week, the survey items and the themes in the literature on TCKs and identity creation.

Figure 10 shows a screenshot from the first cycle coding of one group discussion in Week 3:

**Figure 10**

*First Cycle Coding of Week 3 - Group B Discussion*



The one code that did not fit into the established themes of the literature and intervention was "Reflection on intervention". This code came as a result of what was uncovered in the group discussion transcript and eventually answered part of my second research question which is how an online community builds adult TCK participants' understanding of their lived experiences, e.g. belonging and identity. When I had completed the first cycle of coding, I used the Code Cloud function in MAXQDA to count the frequency of codes in order to see which ones occurred most often, as indicated by the size of the words.

**Figure 11**

*Screenshot of Frequency of Codes*



I could see from this analysis that three codes occurred more frequently than the others. These codes were *identity*, *not belonging* and *intercultural transitions*. For my second cycle of coding in the first approach, I decided to dig more deeply into these three codes particularly. *Not belonging* stayed as a category and two other codes, *lack of supports* and *unawareness of identity* were added. In re-reading the transcripts as I re-coded the first cycle of codes, I realized that what I had broadly termed *intercultural transitions* was actually descriptions of the participants' varied reactions to intercultural moves and their awareness of their changing identity. As seen in Figure 12, once I had re-coded and dug deeper into the themes for Week 3, some of the codes changed from the initial transcript I coded. This is reflective of the cyclical nature of process coding (Charmaz, 2014) and characteristic of the epistemological element of qualitative data as revealed in First and Second Cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021).

## Figure 12

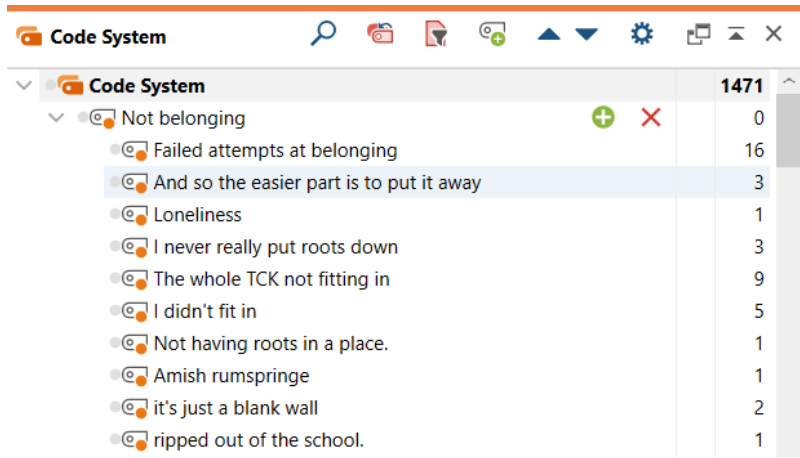
*Screenshot of First Cycle Coding - Second Review - Week 3, Group B*



For my second cycle of coding, I used in-vivo coding, in order to capture the unique phrases and rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions of the world. In-vivo coding was particularly useful in the category of "not belonging" which had 42 coded items, the majority of which were in-vivo codes, as seen in Figure 13.

**Figure 13**

*Screenshot of In-Vivo Codes for “Not Belonging”*

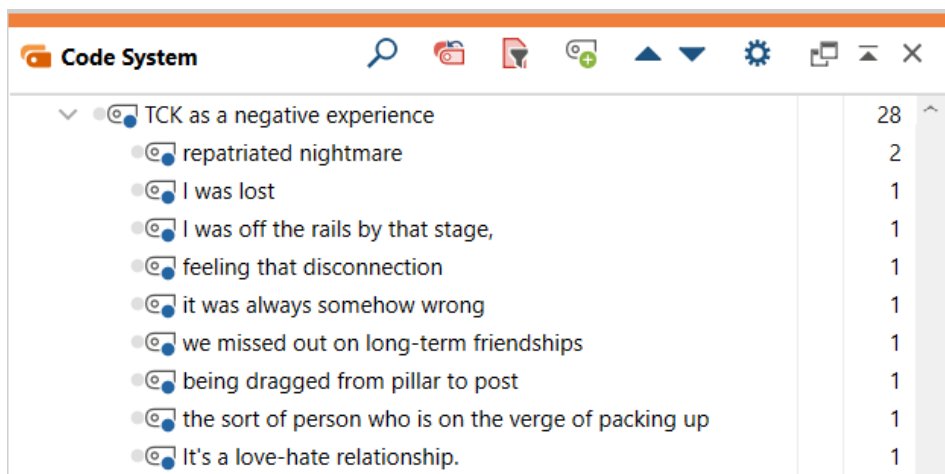


Code System	Count
Code System	1471
Not belonging	0
Failed attempts at belonging	16
And so the easier part is to put it away	3
Loneliness	1
I never really put roots down	3
The whole TCK not fitting in	9
I didn't fit in	5
Not having roots in a place.	1
Amish rumspringe	1
it's just a blank wall	2
ripped out of the school.	1

Another category where a lot of in-vivo coding emerged was under the category of “TCK as a negative experience” seen in Figure 14.

**Figure 14**

*Screenshot of In-Vivo Codes for Code Category - “TCK as a Negative Experience”*



Code System	Count
TCK as a negative experience	28
repatriated nightmare	2
I was lost	1
I was off the rails by that stage,	1
feeling that disconnection	1
it was always somehow wrong	1
we missed out on long-term friendships	1
being dragged from pillar to post	1
the sort of person who is on the verge of packing up	1
It's a love-hate relationship.	1



Since hermeneutic phenomenology is the lens through which I approached this study, it was appropriate to use an abundance of in-vivo codes in order to remain faithful to the descriptions that participants used when talking about their lifeworld.

In the transcripts of the group discussions, a smaller set of codes were used to answer the second research question, about how an online community builds adult TCK participants' understanding of their lived experiences. In my early attempts to keep pace with transcribing the group discussions myself, I noticed a phenomenon that I found unusual for its frequency. The participants often extended the ideas of the other participants, as a way of agreeing and empathizing. I coded these segments as "extension of another person's idea" and ended up with 94 coded segments.

Similarly, as I watched the videos, I noticed that often there were occasions when a kind of affinity occurred, but an idea was not necessarily extended or expanded upon by someone else. At times, this kind of affinity was demonstrated through verbal or non-verbal agreement, such as nods, smiles and thumbs up to the camera. The affinity also presented itself in some exchanges as a verbal recognition of a flash of insight a participant might have gleaned from another participant, often in the form of appreciation of the insight or acknowledgement that they had experienced similar to what had been described. Fifty segments were coded as "Affinity with other TCKs". The relative importance of these codes is shown in the aggregate code cloud for coded segments in all 13 transcripts, seen in Figure 15.

**Figure 15**

*Screenshot of Coding Analysis - Codes with 35 Uses or More Across all Transcripts*



Figure 15, which is a code cloud ordering codes with 35 uses or more, shows that belonging, identity and extension of another person’s idea occurred with almost the same frequency.

One other code which I thought would be important to answer the second research question was “*external distraction to participant.*” I reasoned that external disruptions could be detrimental to establishing trust and affinity, a precursor to belonging, within the group. I used this code when a participant was speaking and a disruption or distraction to the participant’s attention occurred so that I could mark how many times a distraction occurred and analyze how I returned the focus of the group and the speaker to the subject at hand. Ultimately, there were 11 coded segments under this category, which is not a significant number, considering how

many hours of interaction occurred in the small groups. The distractions fell into distinct categories, for example small children visiting a parent on screen, pets walking across the camera and technical difficulties of the participant, usually when using a phone to participate. Thus, this code proved to be negligible in its importance to the overall execution of the group discussions. The external distractions served as a humanizing element, showing the participants' real lives, despite the medium of video conferencing which can be distancing.

### **Summary**

In this chapter on methods, I have described hermeneutical phenomenology and how I used it within my action research inquiry. In addition, I have detailed the cadence and topics of the intervention and as well as what data was collected and my methods of analysis in order to reflect the participants' lifeworlds, as they were described during the intervention. In the next chapter, I will relay the findings of the intervention, which will reveal multiple angles and interrelated strands of analysis, in keeping with the complexity of a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry (Bynum & Varpio, 2018).

## 4 – FINDINGS

This chapter is dedicated to discussing the findings from my study. Since the intervention took place over four weeks with themes and topics that often interconnected with each other, I will group the report of my findings organized by week. As each week is explained to the reader, first the story of each week’s activities and the Zoom groups will be presented in a section titled “Overview of Activities” to provide contextual details for understanding what happened that week. This section is followed by a section titled “Findings” will immerse the reader in findings specific to that week. In keeping with a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, this pattern repeats for all four weeks and then a summary of findings will conclude the chapter. In the presentation and discussion of the findings, I also will make references to findings that were previously detailed in order to show points of connection or effect between related areas. Since this inquiry involves “the art of understanding and the theory of interpretation,” (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021), at times, I will provide brief contextualization of the findings, as appropriate, in order to set up the interpretive conclusions which will be presented later in Chapter 5.

### **Week 1**

#### **Overview of Activities**

Week 1, which occurred the week of 10 September 2022, had three small groups; two met on a Sunday, at 9 AM in the morning and 2 PM in the afternoon, respectively, and the third group met on Thursday evening at 5 PM. The focus of the week, “Meet the Chameleon,” was to orient the participants to the terminology and

context of TCKs as well as introducing the participants to each other. I felt nervous and uncertain before the first group signed on, fearing the dialogue might be stilted and stalled. However, a few minutes after I began the recording of the meeting, I relaxed, sensing that although the participants were curious about being part of a research study and discussion group with strangers, they were being generous in sharing their thoughts, and had relaxed as well.

The specific topics, surveys, and activities covered in Week 1 are outlined below.

**Table 7**

*Intervention Week 1 Readings, Surveys and Activities*

---

<b>Self-authored</b>	Defining TCKs
<b>informational readings provided on the website</b>	Overview of experiences and thinking paradigms unique to TCKs
<b>Survey</b>	Demographic Survey
<b>Activity</b>	Self-introductions by showing an artifact that represents something from your past and another artifact that shows something about your present self

---

Via Week 1’s introductory email, the participants had been instructed to complete the readings prior to their scheduled group meeting for the week in question. The email also instructed the participants on the activity and provided the link to the Demographic Survey.

The readings and survey could be done whenever the participants preferred. Assuming that perhaps the participants had not had time to complete the readings or might have forgotten some of the points in the texts, I provided a short overview of the main points in the texts during the first ten minutes of the group discussion, via a PowerPoint presentation. After the overview, the self-introduction activity started where participants showed artifacts of something from their past and something from their present. I invited participants to volunteer to be first, but in two out of the three groups, the participants declined to be first so I was the first person to introduce myself.

## **Findings**

### ***Background Information***

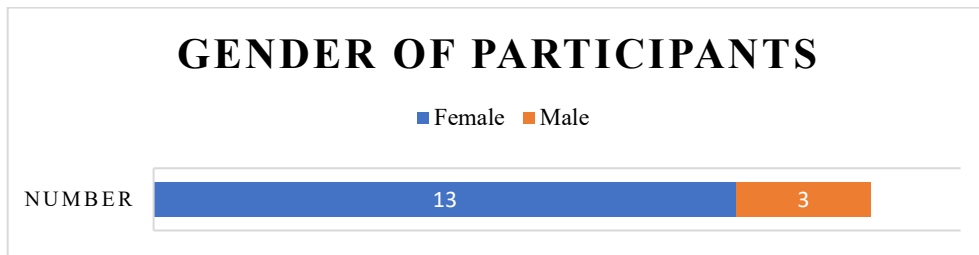
The Demographic Survey (Appendix B) provided context and background on the participants, which was used to clarify results of other weeks. The participants' host countries have already been reported in the explanation of the participants and scheduling the group discussions. However, there are some other findings, such as gender, ages, memories of parental encouragement of immersion within the host culture, parental sponsoring organization, memories of parental encouragement of immersion within the host culture, marital status, and parental status from the Demographic Survey that are salient to understanding the findings of subsequent weeks.

**Gender of Participants.** Participants who identified as male were in a minority (Figure 16). This was partly due to the small pool of participants who were willing to

initially meet virtually and subsequently agreed to participate in the study. Most of the participants were recruited through word of mouth and social media connections initiated by friends and family and in this instance, women were more responsive and willing to participate than men.

**Figure 16**

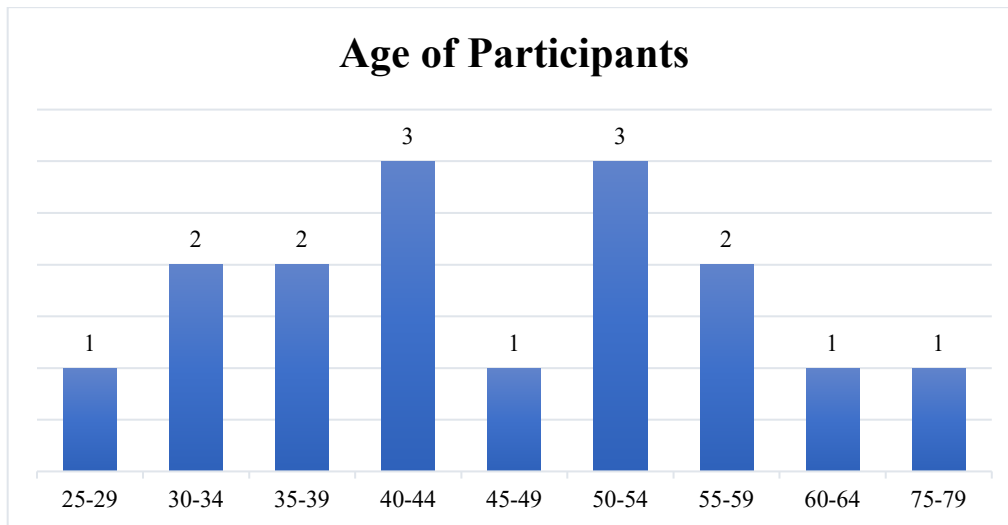
*Count of Gender of Participants (N=16)*



**Ages of Participants.** This study was designed to look at the effects of a TCK childhood on adults and for this purpose, I recruited TCK participants who were at least five years beyond repatriation and who were established as adults, with a job, career, family or other commonly accepted indicators of adult responsibility. In contrast to the gender breakdown, there was diversity of ages represented by the 16 participants (Figure 17).

**Figure 17**

*Count of Current Ages of Participants*



The majority of participants were in the 30 to 59 age range. The majority of participants lived abroad before the experiences and challenges of globally nomadic families were understood or widely acknowledged. Some of the participants were unfamiliar with the term “TCK” prior to being recruited for the intervention, thus establishing a common understanding of terminology and experiences was important to laying the groundwork for the other topics explored during the intervention.

**Intercultural Moves during Childhood.** The length of time and number of cultures a TCK resided in are significant to the shaping of an adult TCKs’ identity and perspective on the world (Table 7). The aggregate results of the participants’ responses and the ages when the participants moved abroad are shown in Figure 18.



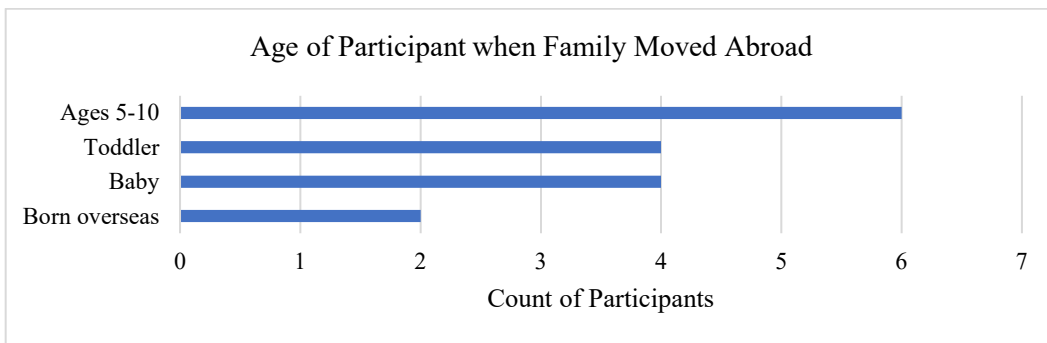
**Table 8**

*Number of Cultures and Length of Time Spent Abroad*

Category	Number
Average number of cultures lived in by age 18	3
Average amount of time spent abroad	10 years

**Figure 18**

*Count of Ages of Participants when Family Moved Abroad*



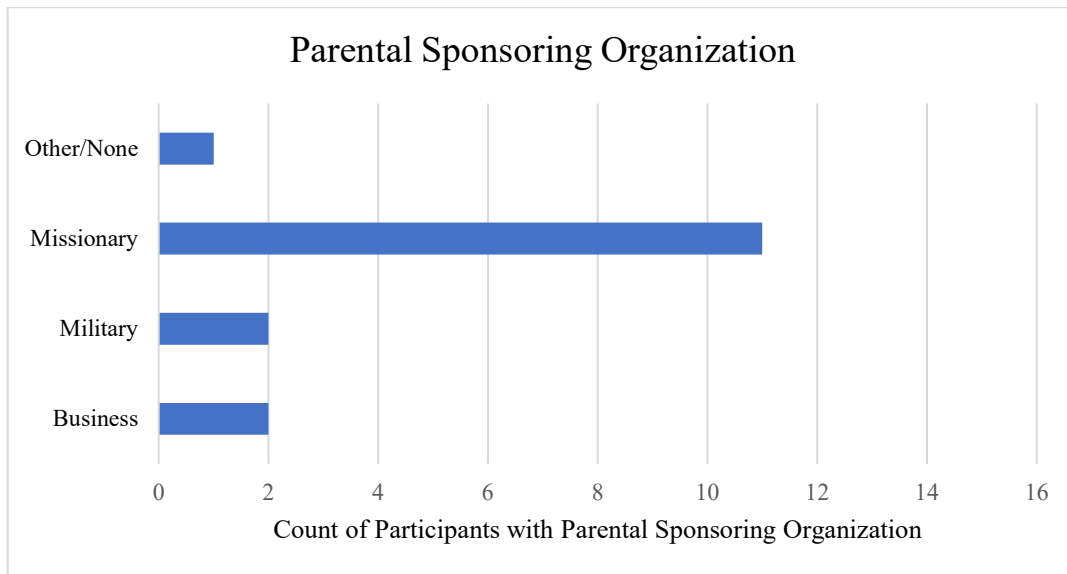
An average of three moves is relatively dynamic, considering that these moves would have been to completely new cultures, as indicated by the variety of host countries where some participants resided. All of the participants' families moved overseas by the time the participants were ten years old. The average amount of time spent outside of the passport country was a decade for these participants, which is a critical amount of time for a child as well as a time of rapid physical and psychological growth. One can conclude from these descriptive statistics that for the majority of these participants, the time spent abroad and the international moves of the family

significantly shaped the participants' identity, primarily because of their relatively young ages.

**Parental Sponsoring Organizations.** The type of parental sponsoring organization determines many aspects of the home culture and context in which the participants were raised (Figure 19). Life on an American military base can be quite different from life outside a military base, even though the host country may be shared. Both Lynda and Okinawa Girl, for example, shared a host country of Japan but their experiences were quite different. Okinawa Girl's mother worked for the US military base on the island of Okinawa but since both Okinawa Girl's parents were civilians, the family lived in the town near the base and thus were much deeper immersed in the surrounding culture of Japan than their compatriots who lived on the American base. It was through sustained immersion in the local community that Okinawa Girl grew proficient in the Japanese language. In contrast, Lynda, whose father was an international business executive, went to an international school in Tokyo where the primary language of instruction was English. She associated primarily with other expat friends, who also used English. As Lynda indicated during the group discussions, she never got proficient in Japanese because there was little opportunity to do so.

**Figure 19**

*Participants' Parental Sponsoring Organization*



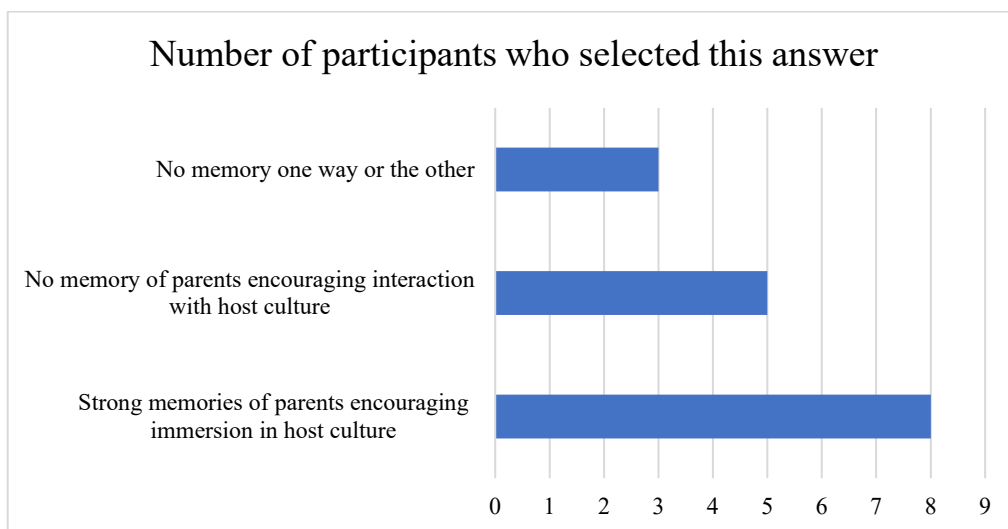
As noted earlier, participants from a missionary background outnumbered the other backgrounds almost two to one and no people from a diplomatic background agreed to participate in the intervention. The missionary backgrounds represented by the participants were specifically Protestant or evangelical Christian from American or Canadian churches.

**Parental Encouragement of Immersion in Host Culture.** In addition to the moves and length of time spent abroad as shaping forces of one's identity, how the globally nomadic family teaches a child to think about living abroad and the people within a host culture can also be an important factor during childhood. As was evidenced in the two rounds of initial interviews of potential participants, the relative openness of the family, in how the parents perceived and personally related to the host culture, seemed to play a role in encouraging or discouraging open-mindedness in approaching

other cultures. I included one item on the Demographic Survey which asked how the TCK remembered being encouraged by their parents to interact with the host culture. Initially, I thought this could prove to be an important avenue of inquiry to the first research question about how participants described belonging (Figure 20).

**Figure 20**

*How Participants Remembered Parental Encouragement*



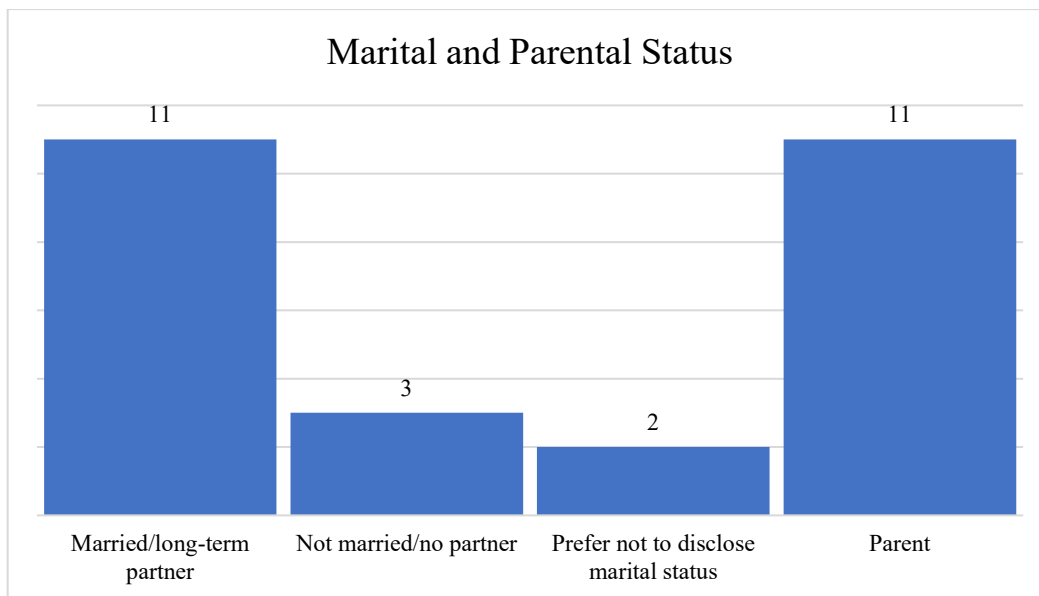
Due to the mixed results of the responses and because parental influence proved to be too far outside the scope of this inquiry, this item was not explored directly during the rest of the intervention. However, it is interesting that the four of the five participants who could not remember their parents encouraging them to interact with the host culture came from missionary backgrounds and described their parents as very conservative. As social psychologist Haidt (2008) noted in his research, adults with conservative outlooks on life are, by nature, not as open to new experiences. The fifth participant whose parents did not encourage interaction with the host culture came

from a military background and found out many years later that their father was affiliated with the CIA. Undoubtedly, a parent secretly employed by the CIA would not encourage his family to interact with the host culture, for obvious security reasons. This participant's family was eventually evacuated due to political tensions in the host country, caused by the Vietnam War.

**Marital and Parental Status.** A final item on the demographic survey asked about the participants' current marital status and if they were parents. These two questions were salient to the second research question, which asked about belonging structures. Families were further explored in Week 4 but the broad descriptive statistics are below.

**Figure 21**

*Current Marital and Parental Status of Participants*



**Artifacts Representing Past Experiences and Present Identities.** In the activity during Week 1's group discussions, participants were asked to show an artifact that

represented something about their past and an artifact that showed something about their present. Although five people were not able to participate in Week 1’s group discussions, Table 8 shows the participants’ artifacts and what they symbolized to the participant.

**Table 9**

*Participants and Artifacts from the Past and Present*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Past Artifact</b>	<b>Present Artifact</b>
DL	Her great-great grandmother's rolling pin. Serves as a connection to the past, her family roots and family traditions, no matter how much she has moved and changed.	An oyster shell that she has painted gold. Whenever she has a personal or career success, she treats herself to champagne and oysters. She saves an oyster shell each time to remind her of the success.
Ginger Mom	Her passport picture when she was 4 years old. She looks very serious because her father told her she couldn't smile for a passport picture. She needed a passport because the family was traveling between the US and Germany.	A picture of her family, i.e. husband and four children at the Harry Potter theme park in Universal Studios. The family are big Harry Potter fans and the family read the books together as the kids were growing up.
Lynda	A picture of a pink French car and the Eiffel Tower. Eiffel Tower reminds her of her first experience abroad and thus is a kind of self-styled “home” for her.	A picture of her dog that she got during the pandemic. She had never had a pet growing up and it's a symbol of being at home and rooted.
Mama Timo	A painting that her grandfather had of Mt Kilimanjaro. It evokes the memory of the last camping trip they took as a family before returning to Canada for what was supposed to be a short time and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was extended. At this time, when	Two paintings - the first of water jars pouring into each other. The top one with no water being poured out symbolized how she currently feels, empty from pouring into others. Another painting on her wall (shown via phone camera), which a colleague painted for her. It features an African-looking woman with

the family would return to Kenya was unknown.

abstract halos around her head and is entitled "Peace" in the local language. Both paintings evoke memories of adopting her son from Kenya, which was a long, arduous legal and emotional process.

Lancaster  
Showed a map of where he grew up in South Africa and a picture of him as a prefect in his British boarding school. Although he was a prefect for being an excellent student, he felt inadequate for the role.

A picture of his car parked in a tidy garage. Symbolizes a lot about him - the car doesn't draw attention to himself, is functional and useful as he volunteers to drive cancer patients to their appointments, is "tasteful and classic." He admired car racers in S. Africa as a child, for their driving ability and enjoys having the ability to use different functions on his car, like a race car. The garage also symbolizes things about his current life - there is not a lot on the walls because he knows the house is impermanent and he doesn't want to have to patch up holes when he moves.

Naitodoka  
Soapstone carved elephant from Kenya, where she grew up. Also showed jewelry from her past. Felt guilty about leaving Africa and struggled to find an identity that encompassed both. She got a tattoo of the continent of Africa in a Roman god Janus-esque picture (Africa facing the right way and wrong way, geographically) which symbolized her dual identities. Also has a globe tattoo as a reminder that she does not have one home but the world is her home.

Her cat, which walked across the camera, which she got after she realized that she could not return to China, where she had been living and working, because of the ongoing pandemic. The cat helps her with her quest for permanence and belonging.

LC	Her CareBear stuffed animal from her childhood. Has been everywhere with her and serves as a symbol of comfort and family connection because she and her twin sisters have the same bear.	Her self-sewn wizard cloak. Symbolizes her ability to be herself and not be put in the box of her parents and childhood.
MG	Wood carving wall art of a Thai woman fishing using the traditional method of a basket. It symbolizes to her that there are so many different kinds of people in the world, from all kinds of different cultures, who have different ways of doing things.	A large paper study guide for a virtual, global Bible-study group she leads. She has led several tour groups to Israel, where she used to live, as part of the global Bible-study group. Also mentioned her family, i.e. husband, children and grandchildren but did not show a picture of them.
Sam	A picture of his childhood family in the mid-70s in Singapore with a white, carved elephant next to the picture. The elephant came from a very dangerous trip his father had taken to Myanmar and his mother had been very worried about his safety, back in Singapore. When the picture was taken, he had not lived in the US yet, but when he moved to America at age 6, his father made him feel “very proud to be an American because it is a land of possibility and choice.”	A picture of his current family, i.e. his wife and daughter taken in an airport on a recent trip. Told a little bit about his family’s accomplishments and it was evident that he loves his family very much.
Biker Man	A framed, blown-up picture of him as a teenager windsurfing in the Dutch Caribbean. Windsurfing was one of the many activities he loved doing as a teenager in the Dutch Caribbean.	A coffee cup from his bicycle thrift shop which is a non-profit he started to provide cycling opportunities and community to underserved youth. Also showed the house he and his wife just moved into the previous week, which symbolizes a change



after many decades of stability of living in the same former house.

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Although the stories, backgrounds, host cultures and artifacts were different for the 11 participants in Week 1, there were points of connection in how they revealed a piece of their childhood identity. Unsurprisingly, all except DL had something from their international childhoods as their artifact representing the past. DL's artifact was a symbol of familial connection despite the great distance between her and her extended childhood family. So even DL's artifact showed how other cultures influenced her as a child, namely her feeling of connection to her great-great grandmother who had been an immigrant to the United States. Another point of connection between the participants was how things from their childhood still served as comforts for many of them. The exceptions were Ginger Mom and Lancaster's past artifacts which showed more about their identities as children growing up internationally than symbols of continuity and comfort across the years and distance.

The choice of the second artifact which was a symbol of something about themselves in the present reflects the diversity that is characteristic of adult TCKs and how they experience the world. All the participants showed something of importance to their present identities but the reasons why these things were important were different. Ginger Mom, Mama Timo and Sam all showed pictures of their current family, i.e. spouses and children. Biker and MG mentioned their families after showing artifacts that represented something about themselves. Naitodoka and Lynda both shared how their pets were objects of permanence in their otherwise

impermanent lives which was in contrast to Lancaster's garage, which was a symbol of intentional impermanence to him. Three participants, one in each discussion group, had stories and artifacts to do with their identity. LC's wizard cloak that she had sewn herself was a symbol of her identity which she perceived as quite different from how she had been as a child, as she explained in subsequent group discussions. MG's faith was an important part of her identity, as also was emphasized in later small groups. DL's oyster shell artifact could be construed as a reification of success, which would also be an important part of her current sense of self.

The participants' introductions and stories laid an important foundation of trust and affinity for the rest of the group discussions.

## **Week 2**

### **Overview of Activities**

There were four group discussions scheduled for Week 2, which occurred during the week of 17 September 2022, in order to accommodate most people's schedules. Two groups met in the morning and afternoon of a Sunday, at the same times as the previous week, 9 AM and 2 PM. One group met on a Thursday evening at 5 PM and the fourth group gathered on a Saturday morning at 8 AM. In each of the groups, there were four to six people, including me as the facilitator. The small groups made for a vibrant discussion of the findings in the presentation and dynamic collaboration on the subsequent activity. This week was remembered both by me and the participants, evidenced in the feedback after the intervention had ended, as the week where we had the most fun.

The theme of this week, “The Chameleon and its Colors”, looked at the sole, large-scale study that was conducted on the effects of a TCK childhood on adulthood, by TCK and global nomad researchers Useem and Cottrell in 1993. The readings, surveys and activities are outlined below.

**Table 10**

*Intervention Week 2 Readings, Surveys and Activities*

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<b>Self-authored informational readings provided on the website</b>	What previous research says about adult TCKs  Three continuums unique to TCKs
<b>Survey</b>	TCK Indicators survey
<b>Activity</b>	Comparison of this study’s TCK Indicators survey to previous research on adult TCKs  Group completion of “You might be a TCK if…” list

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In Week 2’s introductory email, participants were asked to complete the TCK Indicators Survey two days before the first group was scheduled to meet. This allowed me time to collate the participants’ responses into a presentation that compared the aggregate and anonymized responses of my small research study to the findings of Useem and Cottrell’s larger study (N=700) in 1993. The presentation showing our group’s results against the findings of Useem and Cottrell’s (1993) took up the bulk of

the group discussion time and participants were invited to comment on the findings during the presentation. After the presentation, the planned activity was to complete a list of sentences that showed the unique experiences of a TCK. This activity was modeled on comedian Jeff Foxworthy's "You might be a redneck if..." monologues which were familiar to many of the participants, some of whom explained the concept to the participants who were unfamiliar with Foxworthy's comedy.

In three of the four meetings, there was sufficient time to complete both the presentation and accompanying discussion, as well as the "You might be a TCK if..." activity. However, in the first meeting of the week, the participants spent a long time discussing the findings shown in the presentation with each other and the topics of the conversation were deep, personal and serious. The participants seemed so interested in the conversation they were having among themselves and the psychological connections they were making with each other, that it did not seem appropriate for me, as the facilitator and host of the meeting, to end the discussion and turn to what was a light-hearted activity. Therefore, the first group did not work on compiling items for the "You might be a TCK if..." list but had access to read what other groups had written when I posted the completed list on the TCK Watering Hole website in Week 3.

Although I had designed Week 2's theme and activities with an interactive, heuristic approach, it was interesting to see how consistently the findings of the smaller sample in 2022 tracked with the findings in Useem and Cottrell's study in 1993, as the subsequent section will demonstrate. In reflecting on my notes that I

wrote after leading each of the four groups, I could see the participants begin to recognize themselves in the findings, which provided a degree of rare validation that adult TCKs share many commonalities among themselves, although they may come from different backgrounds and be of different ages.

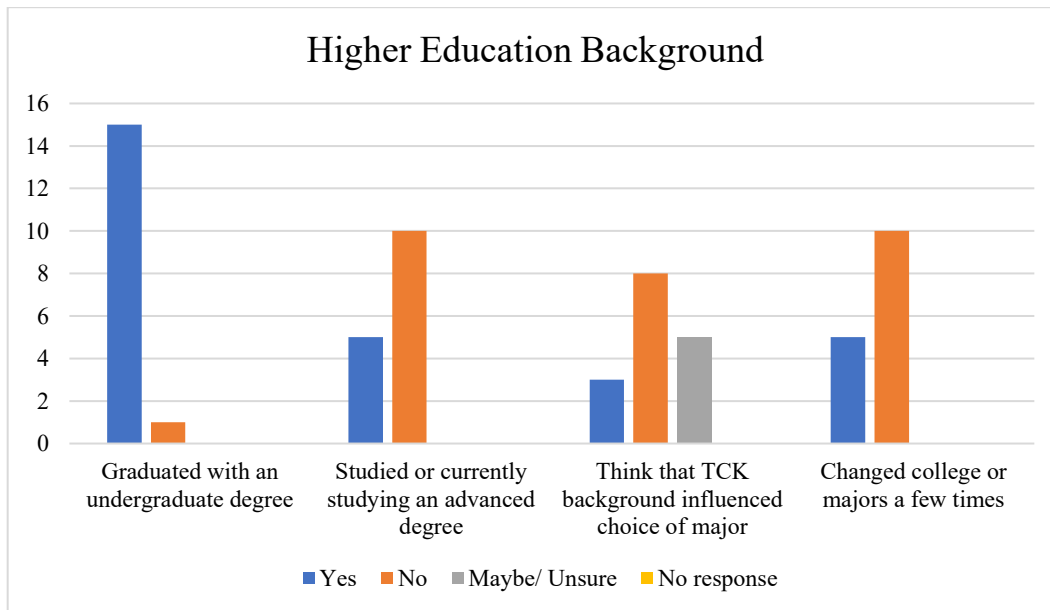
## **Findings**

All participants completed the TCK Indicators survey (N=16), but only 15 of them completed the survey in time for me to collate the results into a presentation for Week 2. Since this was a small group of respondents, I will report the findings as descriptive statistics. My report will start with the participants' educational background and then move into a discussion of their professional life, interaction with the world, and international connections in daily life. At the conclusion of this section, I will discuss the affinity that was beginning to emerge among the participants during the interaction of Week 2.

**Educational Background.** This group of participants was very well educated (Figure 22), compared to the median for both the United States and Canada. According to the United States Census Bureau, less than 40% of American adults have completed an undergraduate degree (2022) and 54% of Canadians had a university qualification (Statistics Canada, 2017).

**Figure 22**

*Participants' Higher Educational Background*



This finding was consistent with Useem and Cottrell's 1993 study. In each of the discussion groups, participants found this statistic interesting and offered various reasons for the high educational attainment of TCKs. For some participants, going to college was a clear parental expectation and several of the participants said the thought of not going to college never occurred to them. Another explanation that was offered was the emphasis each family placed on education and the efforts and resources the family committed to their children's education. Several participants attended boarding schools, far from their families. A final explanation offered was that the quality of education the participants felt they received as children was superior than their passport country peers. This allowed many of them who repatriated for college to concentrate on aspects other than academics as they adjusted to life in a new country and in college. Of the participants who changed majors or colleges, most

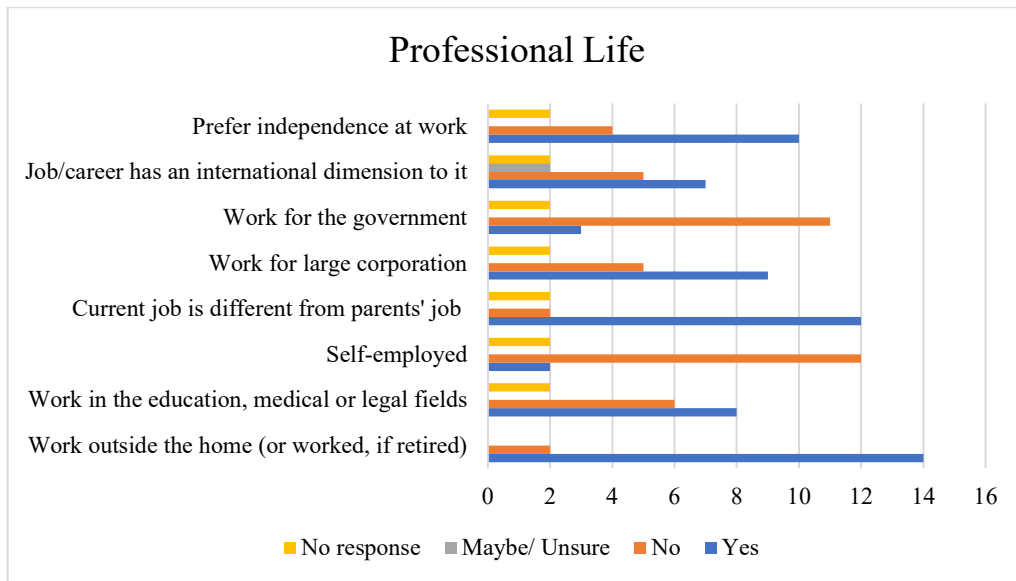
of them felt that the original major or college had not been a good fit for them, during the repatriation process. Most of the participants repatriated before the age of the internet when research on various colleges could easily be done and all the participants initially attended a college that their parents or close family members had recommended or knew about.

Unlike Useem and Cottrell's (1993) participants, very few of the participants in my study felt that their TCK background had influenced their choice of major. Although this was how the majority of survey respondents answered, during the background interviews, some of the participants had talked about a direct connection between their TCK experiences and their choice of majors. For example, one participant talked about watching their parents mediate between warring factions within the sub-Saharan African village where the family lived and how this experience had made the TCK appreciate the role of law and order. This participant had subsequently joined the US military and become a Judge Advocate General (JAG).

**Professional Life.** The influence of a TCK childhood on the participants' professional life was more direct and again, paralleled closely with the 1993 findings of Useem and Cottrell, as shown in Figure 23.

**Figure 23**

*Participants' Professional Life*



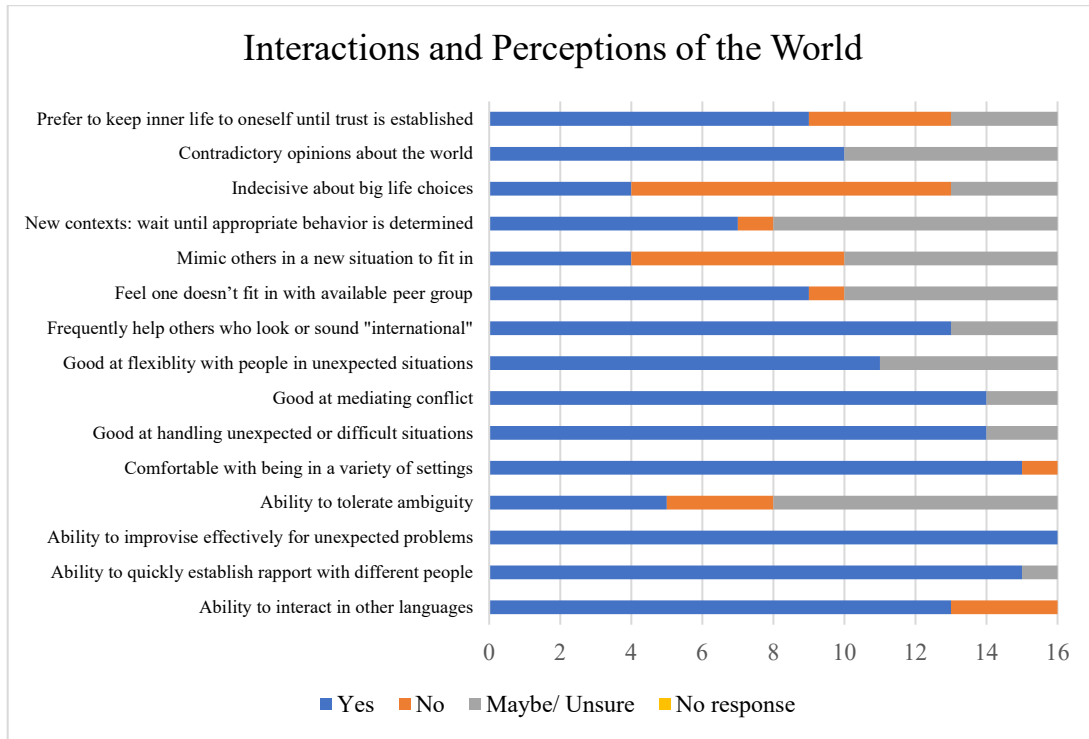
In Useem and Cottrell's (1993) original study, the largest percentage (42%) of their respondents worked in the education, medical or legal fields. This group of participants, although much smaller, paralleled that finding. Another finding that paralleled the original 1993 study was that TCKs tend not to follow in their parents' career footsteps. This will be explored further in Chapter 5 as I interpret this as an important finding about the evolution of identity and its effect on belonging.

**Interaction with the World.** Fifteen items on the TCK Indicators Survey looked at how a TCK background impacts one's interaction and perception of the world, as an adult. There was significant agreement between the participants in 11 of the 15 items as seen in Figure 24.



**Figure 24**

*Participants' Interaction with the World*



These findings demonstrated the legacy of a TCK background. Most of the participants were at least functional in one other language and, as several participants noted in the subsequent group discussions, their cross-linguistic experiences also made them feel at ease with English being spoken with a variety of world accents. This confidence in knowing that they can communicate with almost anyone in almost any context could be a motivating factor in their willingness to help others that may appear to be cultural or linguistic outsiders.

Many of the items on this portion of the survey, however, speak to the “chameleon-ness” of TCKs; in other words, both their desire to fit in and their careful efforts to fit into situations. The highest amount of agreement between the

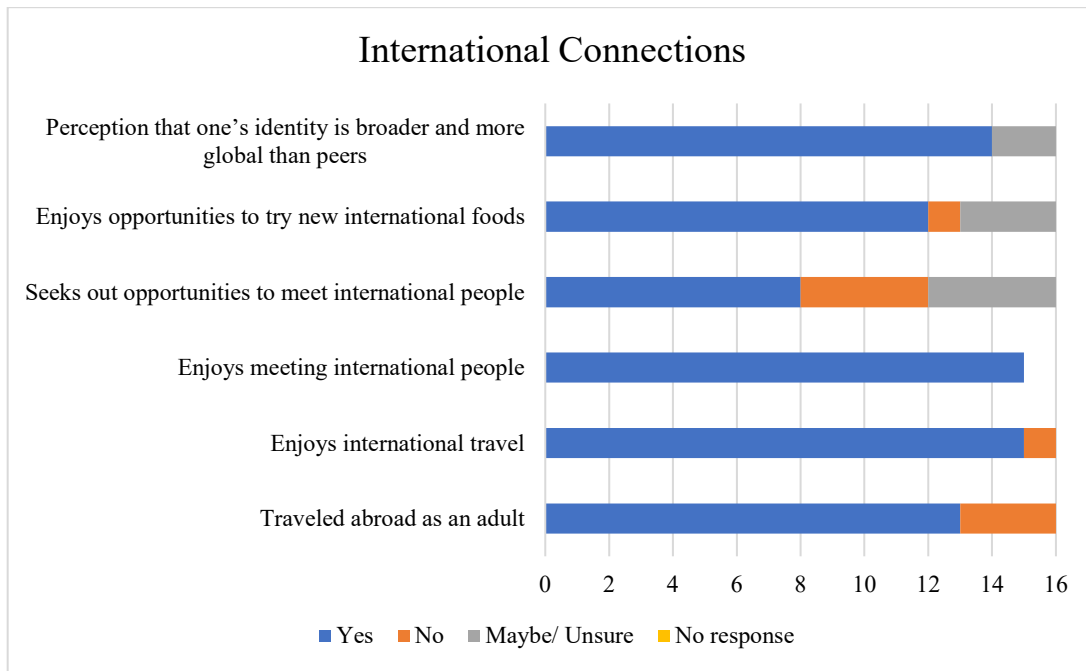
participants on the survey point directly to the well-honed skills of adaptability, improvisation, problem-solving and flexibility that they have all cultivated as children who found themselves in unique and unfamiliar situations constantly.

A final response of note is the high agreement about the participants' perception that they have contradictory opinions about the world. During the group discussions, some of the participants offered further explanations about this, which described a more nuanced understanding about complex problems, based on their inter-cultural lived experiences. The contradiction, the participants felt, was comparing their world views with the world views held by the majority of their non-TCK peers. However, the participants could explain the nuances they saw in a problem and felt their multi-layered perspectives were entirely congruent, rather than contradictory. This complex and nuanced layers of perspectives and opinions is explored further in Chapter 5 through examples of interactions in the group discussions.

**International Connections in Daily Life.** The most direct connection between a TCK background and its legacy on adulthood could be found in the final section of the TCK indicators survey about international connections.

**Figure 25**

*Participants' International Connections*



Like the findings reported in “Participants Interaction with the World”, there was a high level of agreement among most of the participants about their perspectives and motivations for maintaining international connections. The two respondents that were unsure if their perception is broader and more global than their peers already work in contexts that are very international and so there may not have been much difference between the respondents and their professional peers who are largely from international backgrounds themselves.

During the group discussions, examples or references of cross-cultural exchanges or relationships came up 51 times, the majority of which were positive in nature. For example, Hope offered a story about her TCK brother and non-TCK niece

and nephew who ran into a soccer team that was visiting Canada from a Spanish-speaking South American country. Hope's brother, the children's father, interacted with the team mates in their native language, which impressed the children because they had not had the opportunity to observe the multi-lingual skills of their father before. "They have [cross-cultural] experiences because of who their dad is, that other kids just wouldn't experience in the same way." Hope said.

This example is emblematic of the stories of cross-cultural interactions or relationships that occurred during the discussions in Week 2, and showed that the opportunity to use their cross-cultural communication and relational skills is a source of satisfaction to many of the participants.

**Similarities Creating the Start of Affinity.** During the small group discussions, as the results were presented, the participants were invited to comment on the findings. As stated previously, the people in the groups varied from week to week and so most of the participants were with different group members in Week 2 than they had been introduced to in Week 1. Despite these changes, as the facilitator, I could see the affinity start to grow between the participants in Week 2. This is evidenced by a Code Cloud screenshot (Figure 26) of the most frequent codes that were present in the four transcripts from Week 2.

**Figure 26**

*Code Cloud for Week 2's Group Discussion Transcripts*



“Extension of another person’s idea” was the most frequently occurring code during Week 2 and could be found in participants’ statements such as “I can definitely relate to that and ....” (Ann) and “I’m laughing because I know exactly what that means!” (Naitodoka) and “To add to that...” (DL). Although the participants had many differences between their past and present stories, there was evidence of similar values, descriptions of cross-cultural relationships or interactions - in short, an affinity within topics of languages and cultural comparisons. Two other areas where many similar experiences were shared were the difficulty in explaining the complexity of TCKs to others and cultural comparisons.

The parallels and parity between this small group of participants’ results and the larger 1993 study by Useem and Cottrell was repeatedly commented on by the participants. Findings that had particularly resonated with the participants were also

referred back to in subsequent weeks as the topics turned more inward, with the exploration of identity and belonging.

The collaboration in compiling the list under the prompt “You might be a TCK if...” was where the other two frequent codes “Difficulty explaining the complexity of TCKs” to others and “Cultural comparisons” occurred. Collaborating on this activity produced a fun bonding experience for the participants, as they laughingly offered their ideas and laughed even harder at the ideas from others.

The complete list of “You might be a TCK if...” was posted at the end of Week 2 on the TCK Watering Hole website for all the participants to enjoy and can be seen in Appendix G. I did not include a qualitative analysis of the “You might be a TCK if...” activity due to its deeply contextual nature that would have required very lengthy explanations for each item and is not germane to answering the research questions of this inquiry.

The Code Cloud in Figure 26 was based on 15 or more occurrences of the codes in the four transcripts for Week 2. Although “Affinity with other TCKs” had only 13 occurrences of the code, and thus does not appear in this cloud code, affinity, meaning inherent likeness or agreement, affinity was definitely starting to emerge among the participants. In Week 2, the participants realized that there was a community of TCKs just like themselves and that there was continuity between the TCKs of three decades ago and the current smaller group. This sense of shared belonging was commented on in the final reflective survey in some of the open-ended responses and detailed more later in this chapter, under “Post-intervention survey findings”.

While Week 1 had been important in terms of allowing the participants to share something of value about themselves with the group, Week 2 was important for the education of the participants about themselves as adult TCKs. As many of the participants had indicated during their background interview, they may have known the term “TCK” or a related term such as “missionary kid”, but most did not fully appreciate how much of an influence their inter-cultural childhood had exerted on them until this week, due to the paucity of information available to them about TCKs as adults.

The affinity created during Week 1 and particularly Week 2 among the participants was useful as some of the participants found the content of Week 3 and 4 emotionally challenging, as indicated in the final post-intervention survey.

### **Week 3**

#### **Overview of Activities**

There were three discussion groups for Week 3, which occurred the week of 24 September 2022. Two groups gathered on Sunday at 9 AM in the morning and 2 PM in the afternoon as well as one on Thursday evening at 5 PM. By Week 3, the participants were familiar with the structure and flow of the group meetings and the discussion prompts were treated by many participants as conversation starters, as if they had known each other for some time. Participants commented on other people’s stories and often extended another person’s story into a similar personal experience they had, thus extending affinity through shared experiences. Although the

participants seemed familiar with the expectations and flow of the group discussions, some of the stories that participants shared about the repatriation process revealed painful memories which brought a lot of emotion to the surface of the speaker. The listeners in the group treated the story-teller with respect and compassion, which speaks to the trust and kindness that was strongly evident among the groups by Week 3.

Week 3 explored the complexity of intercultural transitions and their effect on identity creation, as referred to in the title of the week, “How the Chameleon Noticed its Colors”. The informational texts, survey and activity are below.

**Table 11**

*Intervention Week 3 Readings, Surveys and Activities*

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<b>Self-authored informational readings provided on the website</b>	Communication Identity Theory and TCKs Why repatriation is so hard
<b>Survey</b>	Repatriation survey
<b>Activity</b>	Choice of discussion prompts - Share a story about your repatriation Share advice you would give another TCK about repatriation Share how you answer “The Unanswerable Question” (Where are you from?)

---



The first reading for the week introduced Communication Identity Theory and related the theory to the context of a TCK and the second reading focused on repatriation, which based on the background interviews of the participants had been acknowledged as the most difficult of all intercultural transitions. The survey, which I created, examined what specifically about repatriation was so hard and was based on research by Bennett (1993) and Paige (1993) about the repatriation process for global nomads. The results of the survey were not discussed during the group meetings, unlike the TCK Indicators Survey from the previous week.

During the presentation on the topics and readings for the week, I summarized Communication Identity Theory and ways in which intercultural moves can impact identity creation. After the presentation, the participants were invited to share their thoughts on the discussion prompt they had selected. Recognizing that not everyone was fascinated with the topic of their identity, I had included choices in the discussion prompts that did not directly touch on identity, such as how they answered “The Unanswerable Question” (“Where are you from?”) or telling about a friend they made who helped them during repatriation. Moreover, I knew from the background interviews, that repatriation had been rocky for many of the participants, albeit for different reasons. I prefaced the discussion portion of the meeting by verbally acknowledging this fact and reminding the participants that they could choose to talk about whatever prompt they were comfortable with.

## **Findings**

The findings for Week 3 are complex and interlinked for several categories. I will first describe the difficulty one participant had with completing the survey. Next, I will share the descriptive statistics for the background information (N=15) that will frame the ensuing findings. The background information includes the age of repatriation and reasons for repatriation. I will then explain the more complex, intertwined findings of the survey and what the participants relayed in the group discussions. I will first discuss the discrete survey items that I grouped as negative experiences, then compare this group of items to the overall remembered repatriation experience of the participants. I will then discuss the differences found between those participants from a missionary and non-missionary background and offer reasons for these differences.

### ***Repatriation Survey Items and an Unanticipated Complication***

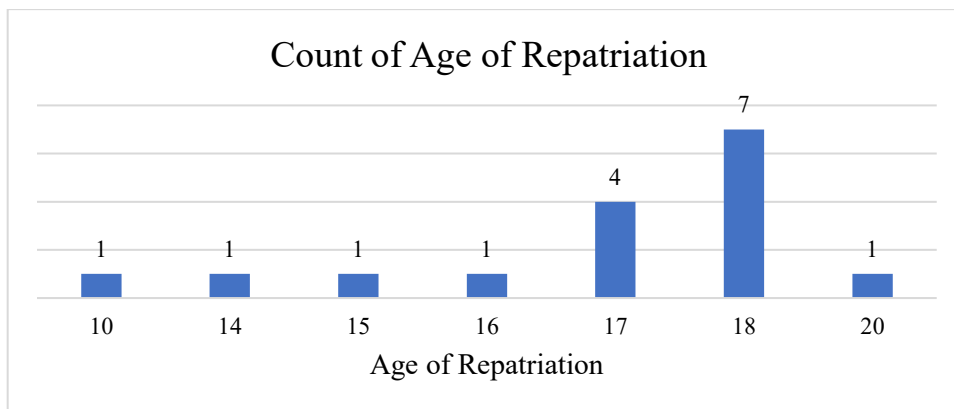
The repatriation survey had 33 items about memories of discrete events, perceptions or feelings about situations during the repatriation process. The survey also asked a final question about how the overall experience was remembered. In order to lead the participants into their memories of the topic, background information was also asked, although much of this information had been gathered in the Demographic Survey. It is worth noting that one of the respondents, Ann, has never repatriated in the traditional understanding of the word, which means to return to one's passport country to live. Ann's parents are from Canada and she had moved to Bonaire as a small child. When Ann was 17 years old, her family moved to the United

States where she finished high school and university and subsequently moved to northern Europe where she has lived since she graduated from college. Ann and I had discussed her unique context prior to Week 3 and had agreed it was appropriate to use the move to the United States when she was seventeen in order to answer the Repatriation Survey questions.

**Age of Repatriation.** The age at which a TCK repatriates can vary and is dependent on the reasons for repatriation, which are largely driven by parental choice.

**Figure 27**

*Participants' Ages of Repatriation*



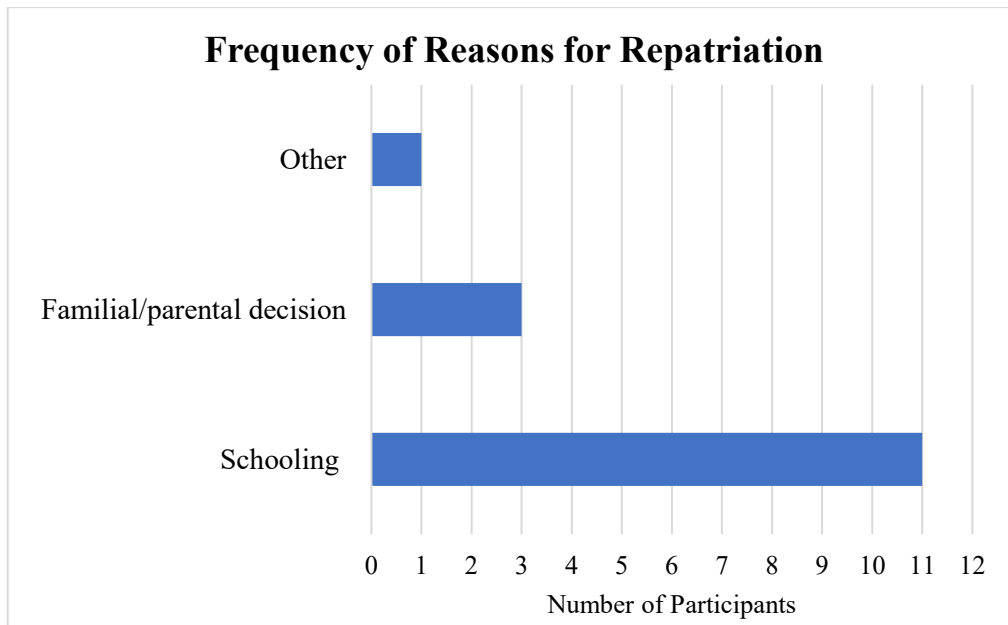
Ages seventeen and eighteen were the most frequently reported ages for repatriation, which parallels the majority reason for repatriation, i.e. that the participants were ready to start college, as shown below. This finding is foundational to understanding other findings of the repatriation survey because this age is the threshold of adulthood in the culture of the United States and Canada. Although all of childhood is lived with the purpose of growing into an adult, around ages 17 to 20, this transformation is often accelerated and experienced as a time of rapid change and new experiences. For

TCKs, the expected transformation into an adult is often compounded with an unexpected cultural adjustment prompted by repatriation of the TCK.

**Reasons for Repatriation.** Figure 26 and Figure 27 show complementary data, in that the primary motivation behind repatriation was for schooling, either finishing high school or starting college. Respondents were not asked to specify the familial or parental decision, if this answer had been selected. However, common motivations for parental decisions to repatriate, found in the literature, can be voluntary decisions for example, seeking a career change, or involuntary, for example, a family member's deteriorating health. The participant who selected "other" relayed the story in their background interview that the family had been evacuated by the US military due to a deteriorating security situation within the host country.

**Figure 28**

*Number of Participants and Reasons for Repatriation*



The reasons for repatriation are in keeping with another finding of the survey, that none of the participants felt they had much choice in the matter of repatriation, which is characteristic of the TCK experience. As explained in previous chapters, eventual repatriation is an expectation that all globally nomadic families and TCKs have, even if this knowledge is only tacitly acknowledged. Finding satisfactory education solutions overseas that will set TCKs up for adulthood is a continual challenge for globally nomadic families and often becomes increasingly urgent as the children get closer to the threshold of adulthood.

**Negativity Scores.** The TCK Indicators survey also explored the phenomenon of repatriation as remembered by the participants. Knowledge of their passport culture came primarily from their parents and short trips to the passport country. Also, all of

the participants, regardless of host culture, perceived significant differences between their host and passport cultures when they repatriated.

The Repatriation Survey proved to be the most puzzling of all the surveys in terms of analyzing the results. I took 21 of the remaining survey items as measures of discrete negative events, which was consistent with the literature on the acculturation process experienced by global nomads (Paige, 1993). Weighing each response equally as I could not find literature on the degree of negativity for the 21 items, I gave the responses a negativity score. In other words, the more agreement the respondent had with each of the 21 items, i.e. a four or five on the Likert Scale, the more negative experiences the respondent remembered from their repatriation time.

One of the themes found in the literature on intercultural transitions was the idea that the farther apart two cultures were in terms of values, customs, traditions, language and history, the more challenging a transition would feel (Bennet, 1993; Paige, 1993). Using this notion, I theorized that many TCKs with a missionary background would come from host cultures with very different values, customs, traditions, languages and history compared to the non-missionary background TCKs, who were either military background and familiar with American military bases or were from relatively well-off international business executive families. Okinawa Girl was the one exception since her parents had no sponsoring organization. However, since Okinawa Girl did not have a missionary background, I put this individual in the non-missionary background category for the purposes of this analysis.

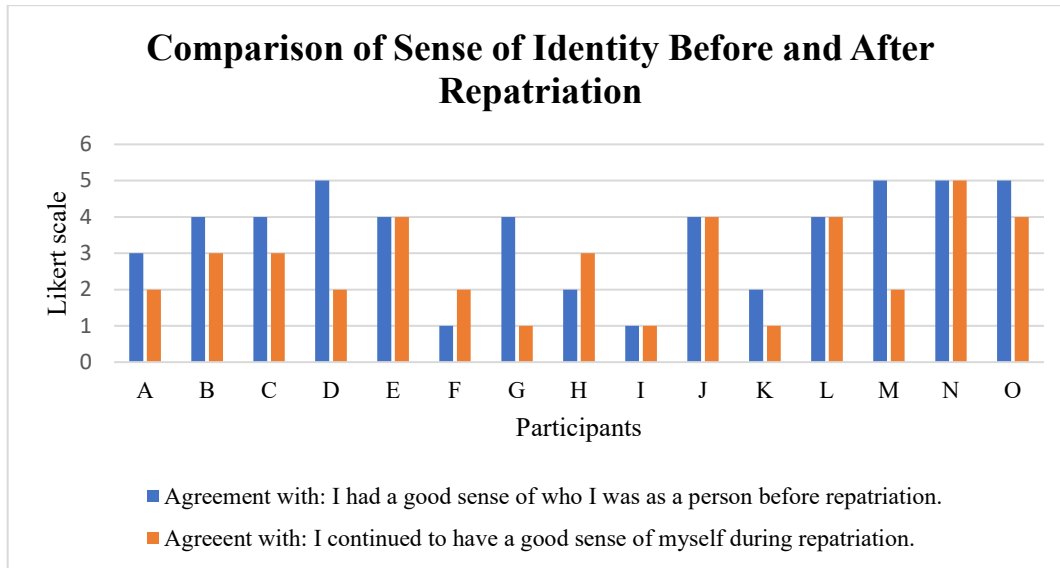
To test this theory, I separated the TCKs with a missionary background from the non-missionary background TCKs and compared their negativity scores. Both groups averaged a negativity score of 3.5 for the 21 items, using a Likert scale where 1 was a positive answer and 5 was a negative answer. The differences between the two groups were found in what items they had rated negatively. Thus, I could conclude that perceived cultural differences between host culture and passport cultures did not seem to make a difference, and neither did the kind of sponsoring organization for these participants.

The average negativity score was a 62%. Three people scored in the high 73-75% range, which were the highest scores and two people scored in the 44-47% range, which were the lowest scores.

**Changes in Reported Identity.** Another interesting finding in the survey was what people reported happening to their identity during repatriation. Many of the participants reported a change in their sense of self, nine of which reported a negative change in their sense of self. The figure below demonstrates this with the Likert scale response of five being strong agreement (positive) and one being strong disagreement (negative). Due to the personal nature of these replies, I have anonymized the responses in Figure 29.

**Figure 29**

*Comparison of Responses about Sense of Identity Before and After Repatriation*



The diversity of findings reported above is unsurprising as each of these participants described unique circumstances both prior, during and after repatriation.

**Negativity Score Compared to Overall Memory of Repatriation.** What I found the most puzzling was comparing the score of the 21 negative events to the participants' overall memory of the repatriation process. For the remembered experience in its totality, participants could choose from five responses, which had been inspired by in-vivo descriptions from the background interviews of the participants:

A relief

Not bad

It had its ups and downs

Mostly bad

Literally the worst time ever of my life



Table 12 below shows that there was no correlation between the negativity score and the remembered overall experience. Due to the private nature of these results, the data in the table below has been sorted according to negativity score, anonymized and thus is not connected to the participant order any previous table.

**Table 12**

*Comparison of Negativity Score to Overall Remembered Experience*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Negativity Score</b>	<b>Overall Remembered Experience</b>
A	44%	Not bad
B	47%	Not bad
C	58%	It had its ups and downs.
D	58%	It had its ups and downs.
E	58%	It had its ups and downs.
F	62%	It had its ups and downs.
G	62%	Mostly bad
H	62%	It had its ups and downs.
I	63%	It had its ups and downs.
J	64%	It had its ups and downs.
K	64%	A relief
L	66%	Literally the worst time ever of my life.

M	73%	It had its ups and downs.
N	74%	Mostly bad
O	75%	Mostly bad

---

It is curious that the sole participant who rated their overall experience as “literally the worst time ever in my life” only scored a 66% on the 21-item discrete negative experiences whereas the person who scored a 73% remembered their repatriation experience as having “ups and downs”.

These findings demonstrate the extent to which this measurement tool is untested and unvalidated and thus unsuitable to extrapolate significant findings. The findings point to a phenomenon first described by psychologist Kahneman about how the mind perceives experiences and subsequently, memories differently (Kahneman, 2010). Kahneman’s observation of the dichotomy between the perception of an experience and people’s later memories of the experience explains how people attending the same event, for example, a birthday party, may remember the event very differently from each other. Another explanation may be that the survey imperfectly captures the elements of repatriation that are most challenging, because the literature on the topic of intercultural transitions and TCKs during repatriation is small. The survey also does not include the influence of personality on the repatriation experience. It may be that people more inclined to extraversion and openness to new experiences may transition with less difficulty than their counterparts, a reason which was noted by the self-identified extroverts in the group discussion on this topic.

### ***Remembered Barriers to Belonging during Repatriation***

A final finding of this survey was participants' perceptions of belonging during repatriation, particularly finding belonging and feelings of non-belonging. Language was one of these barriers which will be discussed below. Also, I will describe findings that differed between the participants from a missionary sponsoring organizational background and those from other backgrounds.

**Language.** Language was one of the areas where 12 participants reported feeling as though they were outsiders after repatriation. Although all the participants had grown up using English in the home and all of the participants had received at least some education in English as elementary and secondary students, the social use of English in terms of nuance and hidden meaning often mystified the participants. All the participants reported feeling largely invisible to their peers and felt they had to hide important parts of their identity in order to fit in with their available peers after repatriation.

**Missionary versus Non-Missionary TCKs.** When the findings were separated into the missionary and non-missionary backgrounds, there were a few findings about efforts to belong that were unique to the missionary group. Participants from a missionary background reported feeling put on a pedestal by many of their peers, which initially interfered with their attempts to create belonging. Faith-based communities are primarily structured around well-defined moral structures which have specific, expected behaviors. Choosing a career of service in faith-based communities is generally perceived to be a sign of excellent moral character by

community members and for many faith-based communities, choosing a career of service overseas is unparalleled in its sterling moral standards. Non-faith-based sponsoring organizations generally do not have this implied moral structure and thus repatriating families from diplomatic, business or military sectors do not tend to experience an elevated status during the repatriation process, as missionary families may.

Another area where the missionary and non-missionary participants differed was in their responses to perceived loss of social status during repatriation. More missionary participants felt a loss of social status when they repatriated. Part of this finding may be due to the time of life the participants repatriated; many first-year college students find the move from a family home to college housing, perhaps a shared dorm room, to be quite a transition. However, the prevalence of missionary-background participants feeling the loss of social status points to an entirely different phenomenon. The parental choice of a missionary career is one not driven by a desire for economic gain. However, given the strong economies of the United States and Canada, relative to the host countries where the families were working, the missionary families' salaries stretched much further than they would in the U.S. or Canada. In fact, missionaries are usually in the upper income levels for many of the host countries represented in this study. In other words, what is considered the poverty line in the United States provides a comfortable life in southern Africa, for example. Most of the participants whose host countries were in the African continent reported having house cleaners and gardeners in their families when they were children because such labor

was cheap and plentiful. Upon repatriation, having an abundance of service personnel proved to be unaffordable and the comparative drop in socio-economic status for the family or TCK is significant. In contrast, the salaries of military, diplomatic and business-background families tend to remain steady, regardless of where the family is living, as long as the family continues to work for the same organization. Although the purchasing power of a salary depends on the location of the employee, the decrease in living standards between the host and passport cultures is generally not as significant for non-missionary families.

**In Vivo Descriptions of Identity during Repatriation.** Perceiving and subsequently navigating an identity shift, due to the intercultural move, were two other barriers on which many participants had a lot to say. As indicated in the negativity score and overall memory of repatriation, some participants struggled more than others during repatriation. Struggles were described with the following in-vivo codes, which are included here as rich descriptions of the phenomenon:

- I didn't fit in.
- The whole TCK not fitting in
- Like Amish rumspringa
- Ripped out of school
- Really dark time
- Repatriation nightmare
- I was lost
- I was off the rails by that stage

- It was somehow always wrong
- Hot mess of a time of life

Apart from the collectively negative descriptions of how they felt about repatriation, it was difficult to find commonalities between the experiences of the participants. Every repatriation story was unique, just as every individual in the study was. However, analysis of the coded segments under the categories of “repatriation supports” and “identity” point to several themes in the participants’ stories about repatriation that are salient to understanding the rockiness of the repatriation experience.

**Age of Repatriation as a Barrier.** The age when most of the participants repatriated is already a time of life where one is “fragile” or a “hot mess” (the participants’ choice of language), as several participants independently noted. This is consistent with the findings in the age of repatriation bubble chart, where seventeen or eighteen years of age were the most common ages of repatriation for this group and the most common reason for repatriation was to finish high school or start university. The acculturation process within one’s passport country where one expected to feel a deeper sense of familiarity than exists may introduce an extra layer of complexity to navigate during what is already a “hot mess” of a time of life.

**Preparedness for Repatriation.** While 12 of the participants said they knew repatriation would be a time of change in the survey responses, and ten of the participants said they looked forward to repatriation, seven of the participants reported feeling unprepared for the extent of change and thus were caught off guard. Four

participants said in the survey responses that they had attended a repatriation or re-entry workshop but only one of those participants felt the workshop had been helpful during their repatriation, as evidenced by a story about reconnecting with an old friend during a repatriation seminar that was shared in Week 3.

**Parental Support and Expectations.** Many parents also seemed to be unprepared for the extent of change their repatriating children underwent as well as the resulting distress felt by their children. Even families with parents who were themselves TCKs seemed to be caught off guard by the intensity of the change the children might have endured. During the group discussions, it was notable when participants described instances where a parent or significant relative had been helpful, supportive and wise during an intercultural transition, because the instances of such anecdotes were very few. Many of the participants who struggled with their identity during repatriation felt their struggles were compounded by familial, particularly parental, expectations, as analysis of the coded segments under “Family expectations” revealed. One participant told about their mother commenting, “I never realized when I left the States that I would be raising kids who weren’t American.” The old saying, “That apple didn’t fall far from the tree” is an expectation every parent has at some level about their offspring and inevitably, as the children grow, parental expectations conflict to some degree with the reality of who their children grow up to be. In the case of TCKs, there are additional layers of tacit expectations, rooted in the cultures in which the TCKs’ parents were raised, that add further complexity to these unfulfilled

assumptions. Further findings about the effect of family on identity and belonging are discussed in Week 4's findings.

**Presence of ACEs.** The presence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as trauma, abuse, mental health issues, learning difficulties or chronic medical conditions (Center for Disease Control, 2022) in the family had a negative influence on repatriation. While only two of these factors were items included in the repatriation survey, the background interviews and group discussions revealed a noticeable connection between stories that revealed the presence of ACEs and the depth of struggles the participant experienced during repatriation. The statistical significance of this correlation is untested.

**Lack of External Support.** There was a lack of timely, meaningful, valued and relevant resources and support for most TCKs, although the negative impact of the lack was not felt equally among the participants. The presence of this kind of support, particularly a helpful relationship rather than books or seminars about repatriation, made the most conspicuous difference in the stories of the participants. The participants who reported the most harrowing experiences with repatriation could all point to specific people whose encounter and influence started to turn the tide of negativity for them. Participants encountered different kinds of people - some found individuals and some found small groups of friends - who were helpful and there was no connection found between type of friendship and helpfulness during a difficult time. The length of interaction also seemed to not make a difference, as long as the interaction was meaningful, relevant and timely. Four participants described one-off



encounters with someone who made a radically positive difference and four other participants described long-term relationships with people of significance. Some of these participants ended up marrying their long-term person of significance.

## **Week 4**

### **Overview of Activities**

There were three groups of participants for the Zoom discussions in Week 4 which occurred the week of 1 October 2023. Two on Sunday, at 9 AM in the morning and 3 PM in afternoon and the third group met on a Wednesday night at 5 PM. Compared to the hilarity that imbued the group discussions in Week 2, the emotionalism in Week 3, the participants seemed collectively in a reflective mood during Week 4. At the end of the sessions, several participants in each group spoke about what their participation in the inquiry had meant to them and how much they enjoyed meeting everyone. I felt a pang of sadness too, knowing that the data gathering phase of my study had ended and I would no longer have an excuse to meet with these 16 interesting and delightful people each week.

During my presentation summarizing the main points of the reading, which was the longest summary due to the quantity of readings, it seemed as though I was speaking for a long time by myself, in the first group of Week 4. Therefore, in the subsequent two groups, I invited interaction during the presentation. The interaction of the participants with the topic throughout the two other meetings was more engaging than listening to my monologue. This meant that for the last two meetings of Week 4,

there was no formal activity time but the discussion prompts were woven in throughout the summary and presentation. A review of my reflections on the group discussions and the transcripts reveal that substantial participant interaction may have interrupted the smooth flow of topic to topic during my summary, which felt disjointed to me as the facilitator of the meeting, but did not seem to detract from the overall engagement of the participants with the topics as evidenced by the transcripts. The topics and themes of Week 4, entitled “Empowering the Chameleon”, explored the nature and mechanics of psychological belonging, three common social structures where people find belonging, i.e family, friends and community, and potential issues TCKs may experience with finding belonging. The topics of the previous three weeks had built up to this final week’s topic, which I knew could be emotionally charged for some of the participants. I acknowledged this possibility both in the Week 4 introductory email as well as in my verbal preview of Week 4, when I closed Week 3’s group discussions.

Although I had decided the theme and topics of the week while planning the intervention, I did not decide on what kind of informational readings or activities to do until after the first group discussion met in Week 3, although I had authored multiple texts, due to my indecision. “Empowering the Chameleon” could have taken a variety of directions; a motivational self-help direction was one I contemplated. However, in the end, I decided to remain consistent with my factual approach, using definitions from literature and connecting them to the experiences of TCKs. This proved to be a good direction, as it was less emotionally charged for me to talk about, as the

facilitator, and because of the factual, academic approach of the readings, my feeling may have been shared by the participants. The informational texts and activities I decided on for Week 4 are listed below.

**Table 13**

*Intervention Week 4 Readings, Surveys and Activities*

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<b>Self-authored informational readings provided on the website</b>	Three definitions of belonging Belonging structures and the TCK Issues adult TCKs may have with making friends
<b>Survey</b>	Belonging Structures survey
<b>Activity</b>	Choice of discussion prompts:  Share a story about how someone made you feel a sense of belonging after an intercultural transition.  Share a story about how you extended belonging to someone else who was different  Share what kind of people you seek out as friends  Share how you would define belonging  Share how your concept of belonging has evolved as you've moved through your life and experienced intercultural moves

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The readings required the longest amount of time from the participants, a fact which I warned them about in the week's introductory email. I also noted the sensitive nature of the topic and reminded the participants that they could engage with the topics in the discussion prompts on whatever level felt comfortable to them. The survey further divided the categories of belonging structures. *Family* was divided into childhood families, i.e. the members of their family with whom they had grown up or had as parents, and parental families, for the 11 participants who were parents. Spouses were not directly explored as part of parental families, because not all participants who were parents had a committed partner or spouse. The category of *friends* was separated as close friends and general friends, i.e. friends who are liked but one does not feel as emotionally intimate with. The *communities* explored in the survey were political, religious or interest based but there were more communities the survey could have explored, if I had included open ended questions. I did not include open-ended questions because this survey too was new and untested and I wanted the items to be easy to answer.

## **Findings**

The findings for Week 4 shared a similar complexity to the findings for Week 3, which is characteristic of a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. All 16 participants responded to the Likert-response survey which asked the participants how much they agreed (5) or disagreed (1) with statements about their sense of belonging in terms of family, friends and communities. However, some participants

occasionally chose not to respond to a question and this absence of response is reflected in the tables below. There was a section of the Belonging Survey that only became visible if participants indicated that they were parents (N=11). Although definitions were given for the types of people and relationships at the beginning of the survey, it should be noted that some of the statements about family did not distinguish between parental, in other words where the TCK was a parent, or childhood family. Several items about the family allowed the participants to interpret the word “family” as they wished.

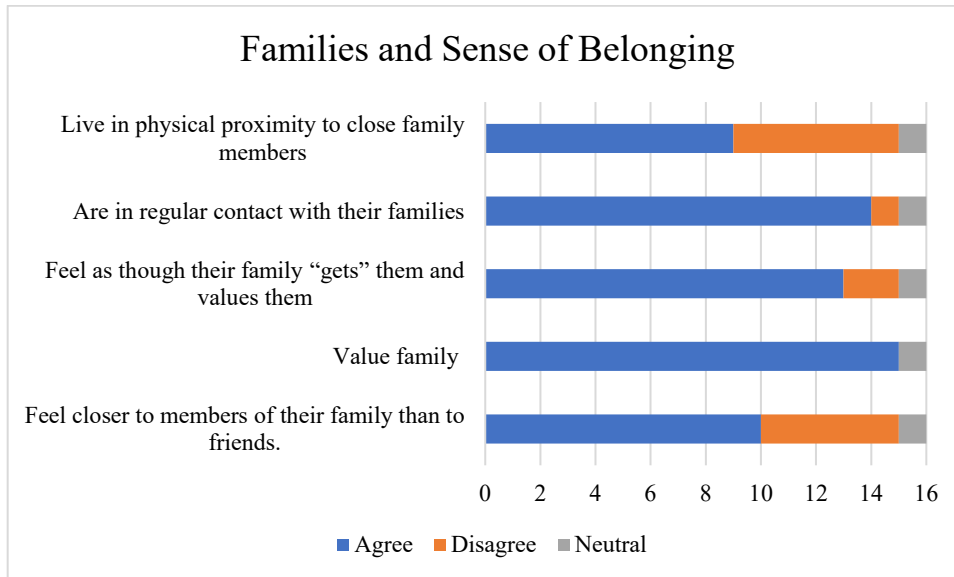
In the group discussions, the topic of family and friends were the two most frequently discussed topics in Week 4. Using the “Analyze Word Frequencies” function in MAXQDA for the three Week 4 transcripts, and eliminating my references to the words when I summarized the readings’ key points, “family” was referred to 33 times and “friend” was referred to 22 times whereas “community” was only mentioned six times.

The findings and contextualizing commentary about participants’ sense of belonging in relation to their families are reported first, followed by general friends, close friends and community as it relates to the participants’ sense of belonging.

## *Families and Sense of Belonging*

**Figure 30**

*Findings for Families and Sense of Belonging*



The results in Figure 30 show that although most participants value and are in regular contact with their childhood families, this feeling is not shared entirely and as the group discussions revealed, not shared about every member of the participants’ childhood family. As will be seen in the friends’ findings, close physical proximity is not a requirement for most TCKs to continue meaningful relationships with loved ones.

In the coding of Week 4’s group transcripts, “family” intersected most frequently with “identity” but how these two codes were related varied significantly. For some, their childhood families remained sources of significant identity reference. For example, DL talked about the positive change in life trajectories as a direct result of the choice her parents had made to move overseas, compared to DL’s cousins.

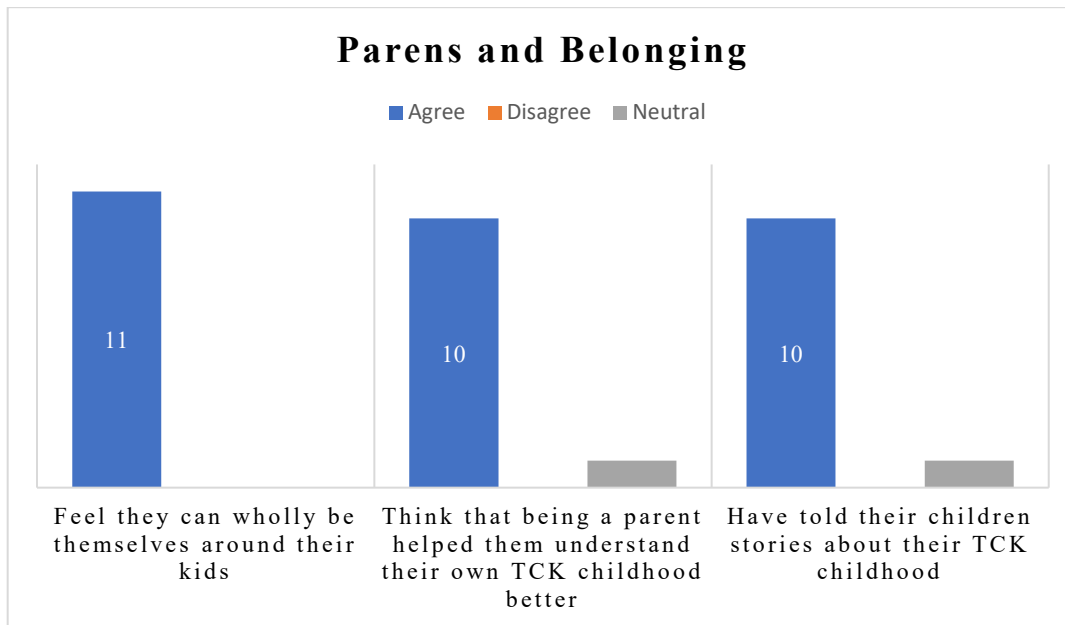
However, for other participants who had experienced a rupture of varying degree in relationships with some members of their childhood families, family served as an contrasting identity referent point between how the unhappiness they may have felt as teenagers in their sense of self versus their satisfaction in their current lives they had built subsequent to repatriation and becoming an adult. As one participant explained, “But I don’t want to go back to being that person. I like my life now; I like me.”

### ***Parental Families and Sense of Belonging***

There was more agreement in how the TCKs who were parents viewed their identities in relationship to their children, as seen below. It must be noted that the age of the participants’ children was not specifically asked on any survey. However, this information was inferred by the background interviews when parents had made direct references to their children as well as during Week 1’s introductions, many of the TCKs who were parents had either shown pictures of their children or made references to them. There was little consistency in the ages of the participants’ children, ranging from babies to grown adults with children of their own, and thus the TCK parental relationship was not deeply explored in this inquiry.

**Figure 31**

*Findings for Families as Parents and Sense of Belonging*



There was a higher and consistent reported sense of belonging among the TCK participants who are parents, despite the wide ranges of their children’s ages, compared to the participants’ sense of belonging to their childhood families. The one neutral respondent on the second and third items was a first-time parent whose baby was only a few months old at the time of the intervention, which lends color to the choice of response. From these responses, one can surmise that the participants who are parents feel a deep sense of belonging and acceptance from their children despite their multi-cultural complexity.

A final finding in relationship to family was the topic of physical proximity, which also was discussed later by some participants in relationship to their friends. For these participants, physical proximity was not viewed as an important requisite for a meaningful and close relationship with either family or close friends. As MG said,



“I’m comfortable with physical distance. And I see that with family as well, not just with friends. I don’t love them any less; I just don’t have to see them every day because I used to go years without talking to anybody [in my extended family], like my grandparents.” Biker talked about his initial reaction to their son moving away to start college, “My first inclination was, ‘I’ll see you in a couple of weeks!’ But I realized that he needs, [and] it’s important to have that every day text, phone call or contact. So it takes extra effort for me to do that.”

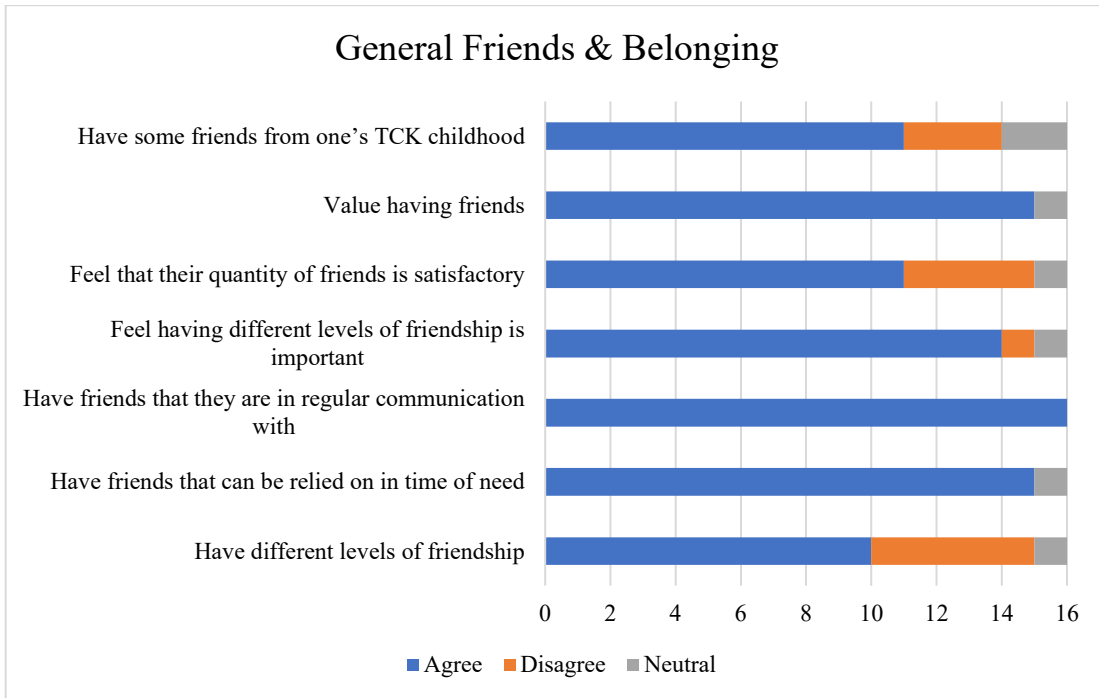
A related topic that received sustained focus among members of group B for Week 4 was several participants’ discomfort with having in-laws in close physical proximity. “My in-laws and all their family live within a two-and-a-half hour radius and it’s taken me 11 years to be okay with it,” one participant said in this group, to which another participant agreed, “I’ve struggled with exactly what you were saying. And it’s almost, sometimes, feeling claustrophobic.” The perceived abnormality of being in close physical proximity to family, particularly in-laws, was referred to by other married participants in previous weeks and in some of the background interviews.

### ***General Friends and Sense of Belonging***

The survey also asked about friends, dividing them into two categories, general friends and close friends. The findings for general friends will be reported first.

**Figure 32**

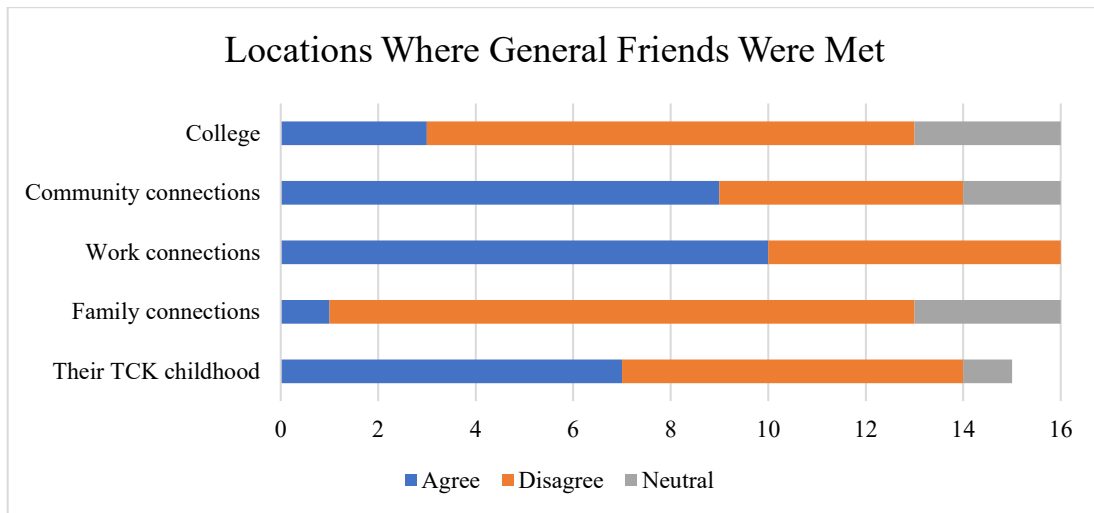
*Findings for General Friends and a Sense of Belonging*



The results of this section of the Belonging Structures Survey (Figure 32) show that participants generally feel positive about their general friend group. Exploring the nuance of some of the participants' answers is beyond the scope of this study - for example the respondent who was neutral on valuing friendship. Another part of the survey asked where or through what kind of connections the participants had met their circle of friends.

**Figure 33**

*Findings for Where Participants Met their General Friends*



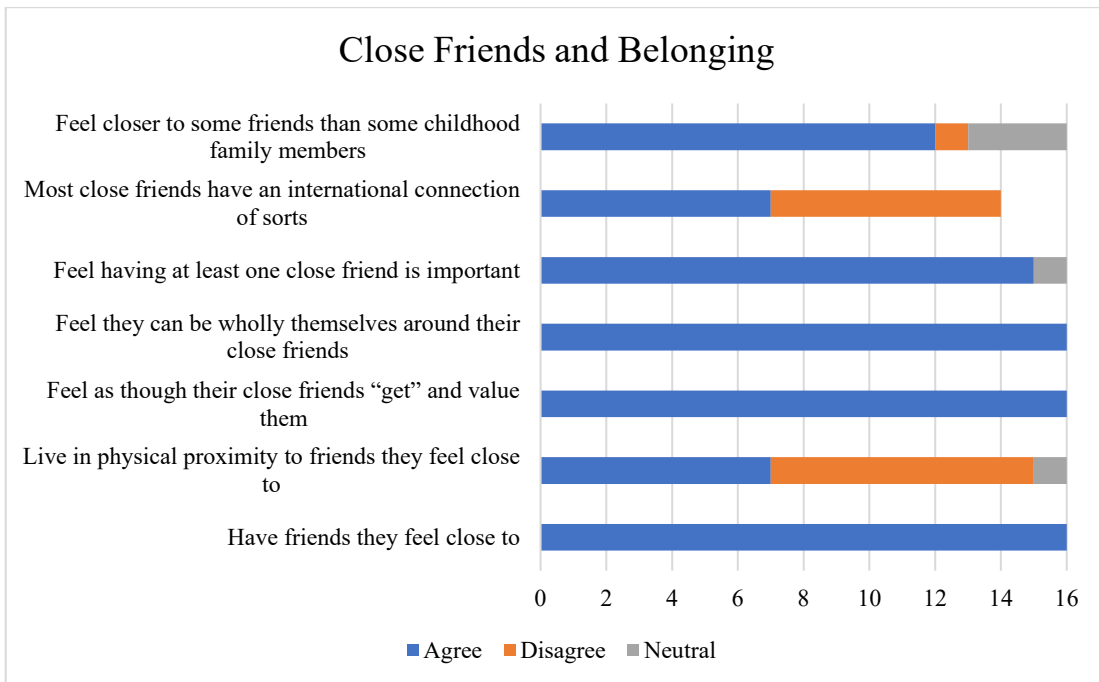
As these findings reveal, meeting general friends through family connections was the least common way the participants had made their general friendships. Later in this chapter, I will present findings that indicated that the participants who worked reported feeling positive about their work places and their work mates, so it is unsurprising that many of the participants' general friends come from work connections. Equal numbers of respondents keep in contact with friends from their TCK childhood as do not. The seven who have kept in touch reported that this connection to their past was both meaningful and valued.

### ***Close Friends and Sense of Belonging***

In a section separate from general friends, the survey explored close friends as seen in Figure 34.

**Figure 34**

*Findings for Close Friends and a Sense of Belonging*



This section of the survey explored how the participants felt about their close friends as well as motivation for having close friends and what kind of people they tended to be friends with. All the participants have close friends that they feel valued by and can be authentically themselves, in other words, “safe”, as was discussed subsequently during the group discussions.

Similar to the findings about family, lack of physical proximity is not a barrier to a meaningful relationship for adult TCKs although as will be reported in the qualitative findings, the participants know that non-TCKs can see this as an impediment within a relationship.

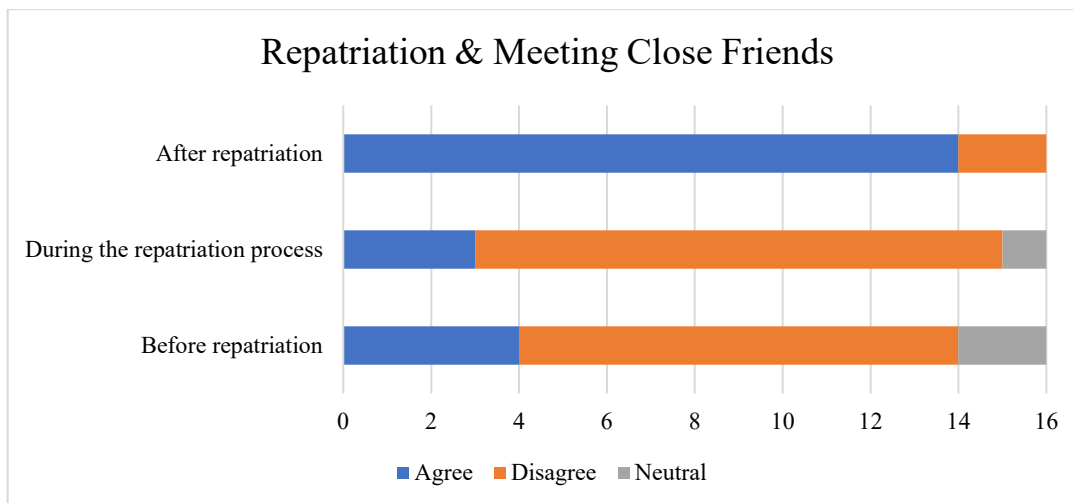
Having an international connection of some kind was a characteristic that only half the participants reported their close friends had. Although as the TCK Indicators

Survey found, TCKs tend to notice and be attracted to people that may sound or appear to be “foreign”, being friendly to such people is not the same as being close friends with people with an international or cross-cultural connection. As was discussed in the qualitative findings for Week 2, the participants valued people who were interested in their complex past histories and current identities and saw this interest as a threshold to friendship. Being cross-cultural oneself does not necessarily mean one is interested in another cross-cultural person, such as one with a TCK background.

Connected to the findings about close friends is where the participants met their friends, as reported below.

**Figure 35**

*Findings for Repatriation and When Close Friends Were Met*



As context to interpret these findings, participants might have been thinking about more than one close friend, since the number of close friends was not asked. The findings indicate that while half the participants keep in contact with people from their

TCK childhood as general friends, these people may not be close friends. As the data indicates, most participants met their close friends after repatriation. Since repatriation was a time of change to most of the participants' sense of self and who one wants to belong to is tied to one's sense of self, this result is unsurprising.

Although the current significance of familial belonging structures varied among the participants, all the participants derived a great sense of belonging from their friends, particularly their close friends. However, it was clear that attaining friends was something that most of the participants struggled with. The struggles could be categorized into a few groupings. Several participants identified the TCK tendency to go deep and fast into a relationship as being a stumbling block to forming new friendships, a finding that other researchers and TCK autobiographical accounts have noted (Bushong, 2013; Crossman & Wells, 2016; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017). How they coped with this tendency varied. A few participants said they had learned to take social cues from the potential friend, however this did not always lead to a desired friendship. The participants offered two explanations for personal failure in developing a friendship. One was that they misread culturally embedded social cues, such as "We'll have to get together sometime" as being a genuine invitation to spend time together. The second related explanation was uncertainty on how to extend the correct social signals to a new friend that demonstrated the adult TCK's interest in pursuing a deeper relationship. "After I've met them a couple of times, I don't know what to do next," one participant said in Week 4, a statement which received vigorous agreement from the other participants.

A smaller set of participants identified boredom with the perceived slowness of non-TCKs to signal readiness for a new depth of relationship. As one participant said in Week 4, “I’d like to know what your favorite color is, but I’m sorry, taking five months over what your favorite color is, and who your favorite sports team is, is just too much.”

Another impediment in the process of converting acquaintances or new friends into established friends was the participants’ hard-won knowledge that their complex identities were a deterrent to friendship for many people. A TCK’s inner complexity - their many cross-culturally embedded stories, values and worldviews - is an integral part of their identity and in time, this complexity is rejected, mishandled and even scorned by others. For most participants, this continual rejection of their complexity is perceived to be a rejection of themselves. In response, most participants learned to be careful with whom they trusted with their most precious parts of themselves. Although most of the participants agreed with the need to feel another person was trustworthy before they revealed their complex identities, three of the more (self-identified) extroverted participants said that they didn’t have issues with trust, although their friends and family often cautioned them not to be such an “open book”.

For some of the participants, time of life seemed to be a deterrent to meeting potential friends or converting friendly people into actual friends. As noted earlier, when I started the Cycle 1 recruitment phase, three of the participants had recently repatriated, either immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic or got stuck in their

passport country because of the pandemic. Two of these participants were middle-aged and as one of them noted, middle-age is a time of being established and thus not actively searching for new friends, as compared to one's youth when there is generally more openness to making friends.

Time of life also seemed to be a hindrance in maintaining interest in established friendships. One of the older participants talked about how communities of friends that had been important to them in previous decades had not kept pace with the participant's rate of evolution of worldviews. Thus, this participant had eventually drifted apart from these communities, no longer feeling an affinity with them.

### ***Community and Sense of Belonging***

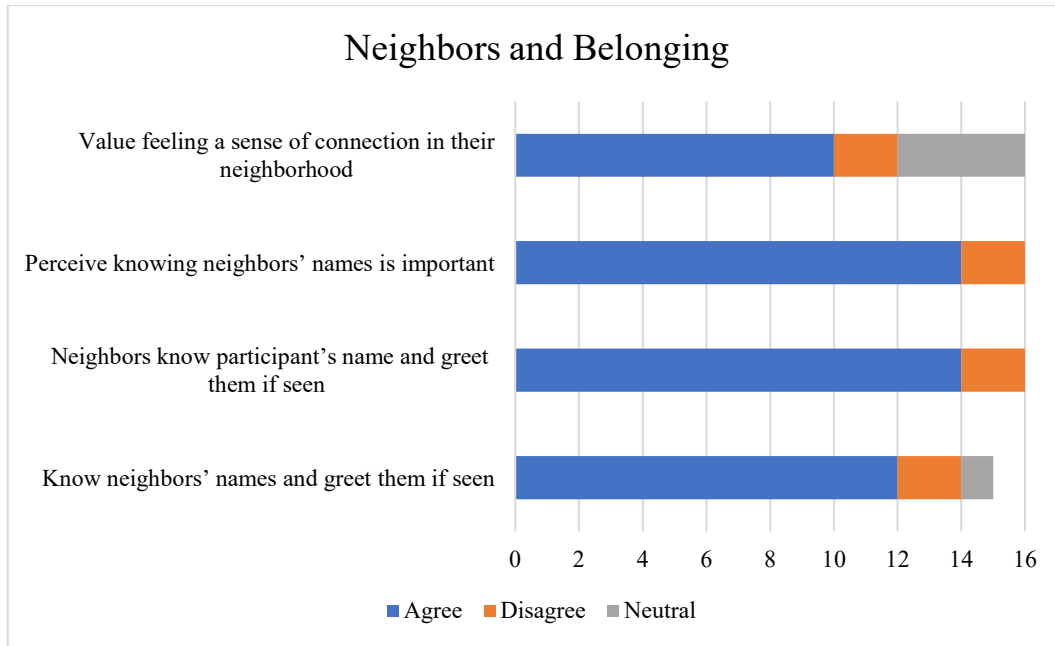
Community is where potential friends can be found and made. The Belonging Survey asked about how participants viewed different circles of community - neighbors, the workplace and other circles outside these two, such as religious, political or similar groups of people.

**Neighbors and Sense of Belonging.** In the residence section, participants were asked how long they had lived in their current residence. As mentioned earlier, three people had moved very recently prior to the intervention and three other people had moved shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lock downs in the United States and Canada. One person had moved the week prior to the intervention starting but since it was not that far from their original home, it may have been that this respondent considered this not to be a move out of their original community. This move was not reflected in the findings of the survey (Figure 36).



**Figure 36**

*Findings for Neighbors and a Sense of Belonging*

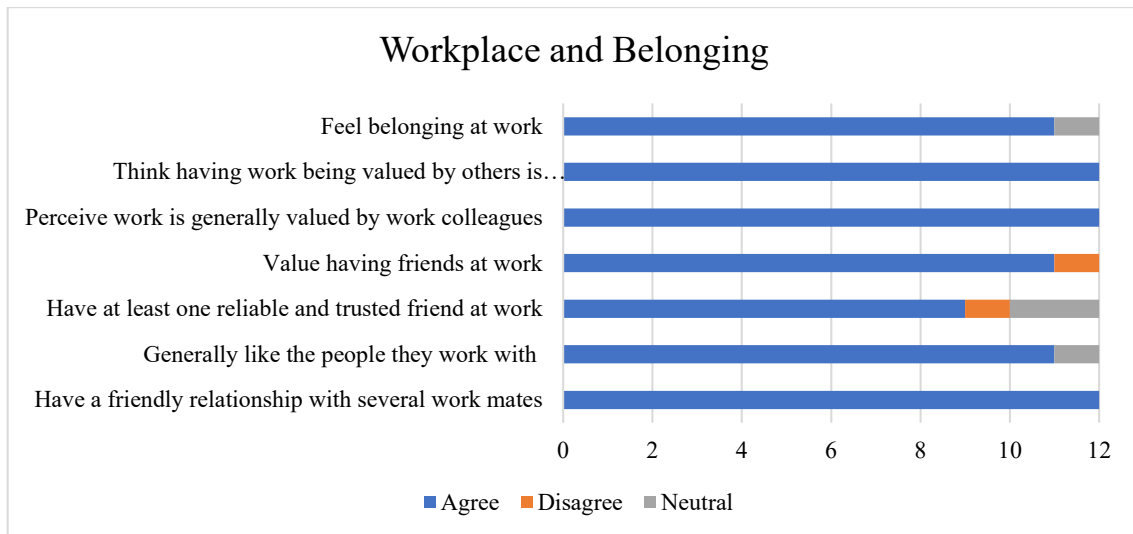


Although no baseline was taken with non-TCKs, the results in this section of the survey seem generally in line with what many people in similar communities in the US and Canada would respond. In this regard, the findings of this section on neighbors were unremarkable.

**Workplace and Sense of Belonging.** Another kind of community where adults can find belonging is the workplace. The survey asked about perceptions of belonging and value in the workplace and the findings for the 12 participants who currently worked or had worked and were currently retired are in Figure 37.

**Figure 37**

*Findings for the Workplace and a Sense of Belonging*



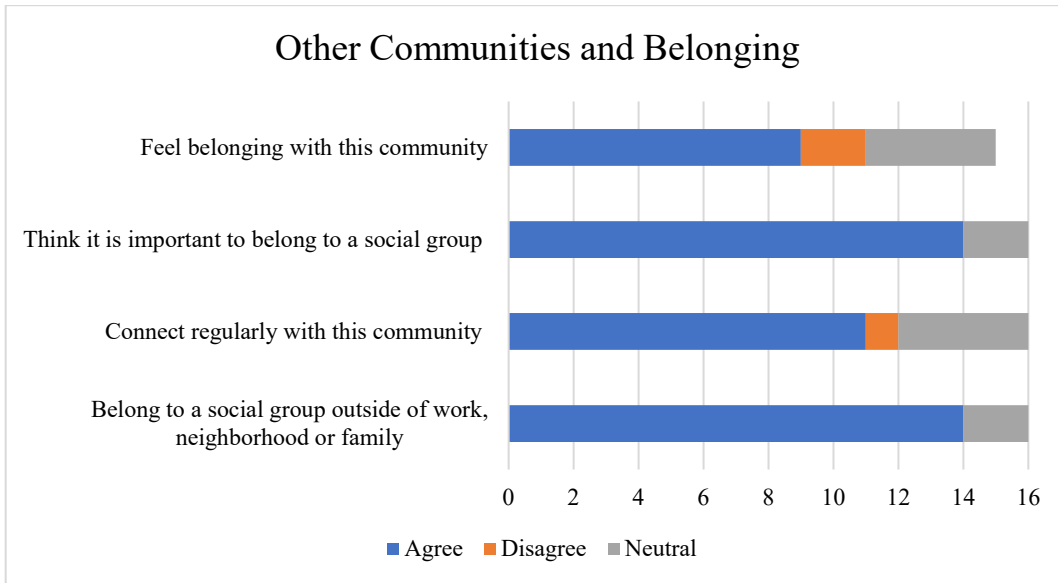
The data indicates that the participants generally had a positive perception of both where they lived and where they worked, if they worked. Having a positive experience in communities where one expects regular interaction is conducive for feeling as though one belonged, although it is only the beginning of a complex process.

As will be demonstrated in the two subsequent tables about other groups of community, the workplace is the most meaningful community where participants felt a sense of belonging that was reciprocated.

**Other Communities and Sense of Belonging.** The survey asked about other communities, outside of work and neighborhood, where the participants found belonging. N=16 for the findings in this section of the survey (Figure 38).

**Figure 38**

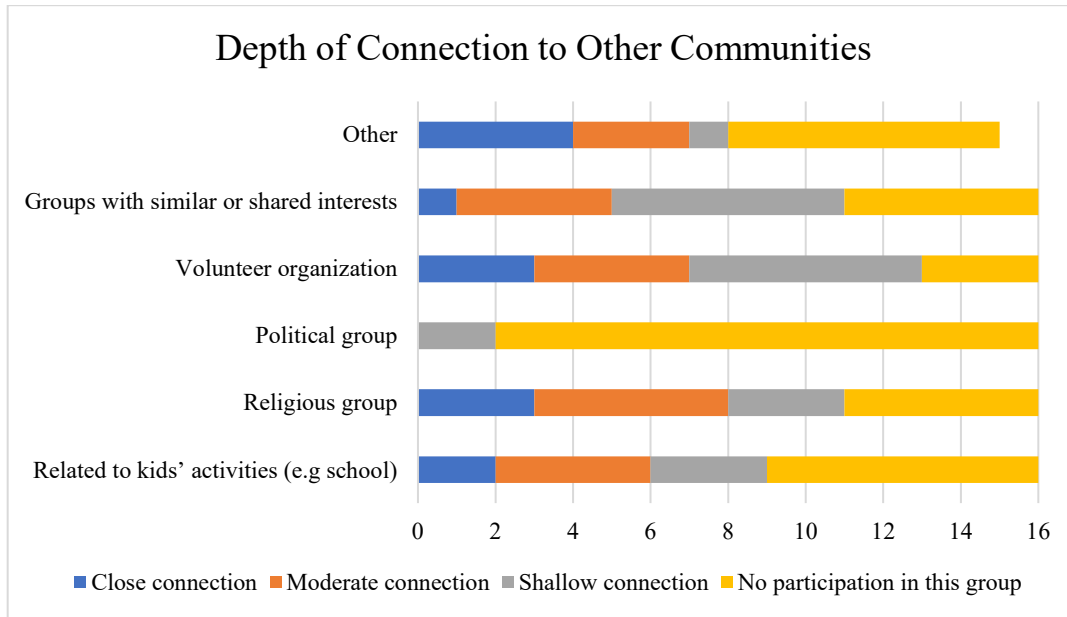
*Findings for Belonging in Other Communities (i.e. non-neighborhoods, non-work)*



Not all participants responded to all the items, which is why not N=16 is not the case in the first item above. The findings about other kinds of communities are connected to the findings about how close they felt to other specific communities. From the responses (Figure 39), it is clear that most of the participants have connections to other non-neighborhood, non-work communities but as evidence below shows, the quality of this connection varies considerably.

**Figure 39**

*Findings for Depth of Connection to Other Communities*



The results show that although participants may be willing to engage in different communities, depending on their interests and time of life, a feeling of connection is at best moderate for most of the participants. A social connection based on shared political viewpoints was the least interesting to participants, which is in line with the characteristic broader world view that TCKs share as reported in Week 2 in the findings of the TCK Indicators survey.

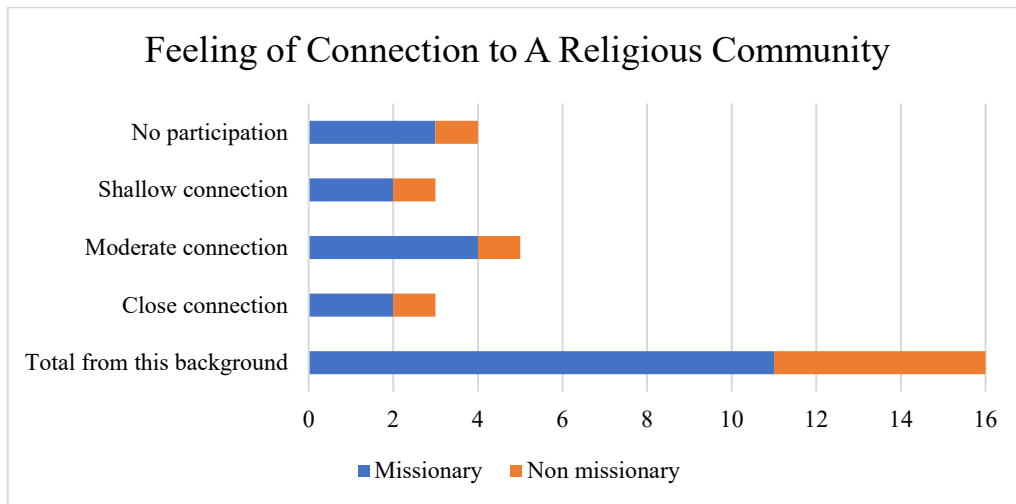
**Reasons for Findings about Community and Sense of Belonging.** There were 70 segments from the interviews and transcripts of group discussions that I coded as examples or statements of “misalignment with social expectations”. I used this code because a misalignment is a way of not feeling belonging, in other words, of unexpected social rejection. In the analysis of these 70 segments, several themes

became apparent. First of all, many of the participants' stories of social misalignment related to the acculturation process during repatriation. These stories were often about unfulfilled expectations. It is unsurprising for people new to a culture, such as migrants, to have a flawed set of expectations during the acculturation process. A migrant's unfulfilled expectations differs from a TCK's because the TCK does not expect to experience the frequency and amount of differences that occur. Because of TCKs' past exposure to their passport culture through familial knowledge and short visits or time living as young children, they assume their expectations about their passport culture are adequate and generally correct. Repatriating TCKs do not realize that their understanding of their passport culture is incomplete and largely based on a cultural mythology that no longer accurately portrays their passport culture.

**Missionary Background and Connection to Religious Communities.** An interesting finding that relates to how elements of a TCK's background impact their adult lives is found in the responses of the people from a missionary background to the question of connection to a religious group as seen in Figure 40.

**Figure 40**

*Participants' Feeling of Connection to a Religious Community*



The graph above shows that only two out of the 11 participants with a missionary background feel a close connection with a religious community and four people feel only a moderate connection, which means that just under half of the participants whose parents were sponsored by religious organizations do not feel connected to a religious group at all. This is an interesting finding because faith-based structures and participation within those structures underpins a great deal of a missionary family's life, regardless of religious affiliation of the sponsoring missionary organization, which were all Protestant or Evangelical American or Canadian in this sample. This finding ties into the results of the TCK Indicators Survey reported previously that only two people worked in jobs similar to what their parents did. These two participants were both from a business background. For those from a missionary background, becoming a missionary or working in another faith-based role was not something they have pursued. Moreover, almost half of these participants no longer felt more than a

shallow connection or none at all to a faith-based community. Reasons for these feelings emerged in the qualitative findings. Under the code of “misalignment with social expectations”, half of the coded segments had to do with the acculturation process during repatriation and most of the missionary-background stories had to do with specifically being misaligned with social and cultural expectations in a church. In summary, Week 4’s findings indicated that all the participants have a variety of belonging structures within their lives. While all of the parents feel close to their children, their relationships with their childhood families are not always close, as is evidenced by 12 participants reporting feeling closer to their friends than some family members. Participants also have a variety of friends, from different times in their lives and who live in various places. While all of the participants have a few close friends, it is significant that most participants reported making these close friends after repatriation. Since repatriation is a time of identity reorientation, this finding is unsurprising.

However, as the discussions about community and making friends revealed, many TCKs continue to feel as though there is a great deal about their passport culture that is tacitly understood by those who grew up immersed in a particular culture and is an enigma to the adult TCKs, even after many years of living in their passport countries. This was true for a wide range of topics that the participants discussed, ranging from the racial and political tensions in the United States, why missionary kids struggle to belong in churches, and how to deepen an acquaintance into a

friendship. These findings reveal the complex, fluid and often imperfect nature of belonging for adult TCKs.

### Post-Intervention Data and Findings

The intervention ended after Week 4 and the next section reports reflectively on how the participants perceived the experience of being part of my inquiry. A link to an anonymous post-intervention survey was sent via email after the final Week 4 group meeting with two reminder emails over the next week. Below, I will first provide details on how the survey was designed and how many responses there were, before moving into the findings from each category. The survey asked for feedback on how effective the overall experience had been, and the survey items looked at the following categories: the TCK Watering Hole website, the group discussions, the topics and activities, the online modality of the intervention, the facilitation of group discussions and an evaluation of personal change as a result of participation in the intervention. The findings will be presented following the aforementioned categories.

### **Findings**

While the Post-Intervention Survey followed the same Likert-scale responses for many items, the survey allowed for more open-ended responses than the other surveys had, in order to capture the feedback of the participants in their own words. There were 15 individuals who responded to the survey (N=15) but not all respondents chose to complete every question on the survey and this is reflected in the summary of the findings.



### *Feedback on the Website*

Comments on the website were positive, and there were open-ended responses for what the participants liked about the website. Five people commented that it was easy to use and navigate, with content “broken into very easy-to-read segments”. They found it convenient to find what was needed to complete the surveys and read articles, although one person did not like the hyperlinked words in the website that would lead them to another article because it was “easy to get lost”. Four people commented that the material was relatable and thought-provoking. Two other participants commented that the website “felt like it was written by someone who truly understands TCKs.”

In terms of time spent engaging with the website, 11 people reported spending 30 minutes or less on the website each week and two people spent an hour on the website each week. The website was designed with the intention of balancing the need to impart knowledge yet not require too much time of the participants.

Suggestions for improvement were minor and mostly around formatting. Five people had no suggestions for improvement and one person wished for a larger font in the articles. As mentioned above, one person said they got lost in the hyper-linked words in the articles that led to other articles and would have preferred to have a list of additional readings at the bottom. This participant also wrote later that they had dyslexia so this was a good recommendation to take on board to accommodate different learning and reading preferences. One person suggested not having a login feature, which had been a part of the security features built into the website. One

participant would have preferred all the definitions to be on one page in an article instead of how it was set up with definitions on a separate page with the defined words hyperlinked from the reading. Four participants suggested ways they would like to see the website expanded, to provide a more expansive place of connection and resources for TCKs. One participant suggested a forum for asking questions of TCKs and another participant offered an idea for a monthly email message for TCKs with advice or a funny story. The participants were also asked for other topics they would like to see on a future website which included:

- Resources for adult TCKs
- Mental health and TCKs
- Relationships with family members, particularly parents
- Fostering meaningful, long-term friendships with non-TCKs

These topics were consistent with some of the desires and wishes expressed in the group discussions.

Twelve respondents said they would recommend the website to others, one said they would not and one did not respond.

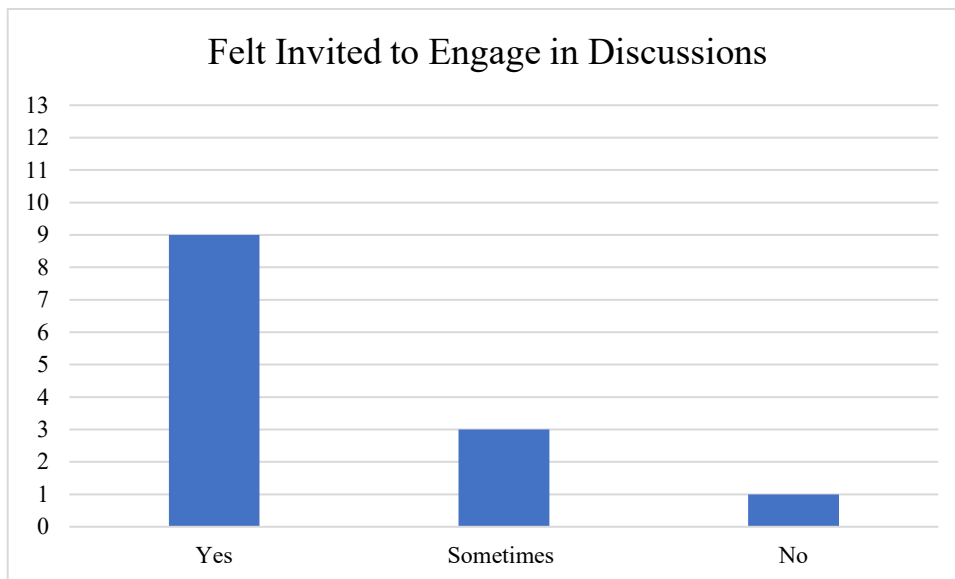
### ***Feedback on Group Discussions***

The intervention was intentionally designed around the assumption that it would be difficult to have consistent attendance by all participants in the group discussions during the week, due to their busy personal schedules and the six time zones that were part of the scheduling logistics. Attendance in the weekly discussion

groups has already been reported in Chapter 3 under the discussion of scheduling the participants. In one item I asked for feedback on how much participants felt space to engage with the discussions and the results are reported in Figure 41 (N=13).

**Figure 41**

*How Participants Perceived Invitations to Engage in Discussions*



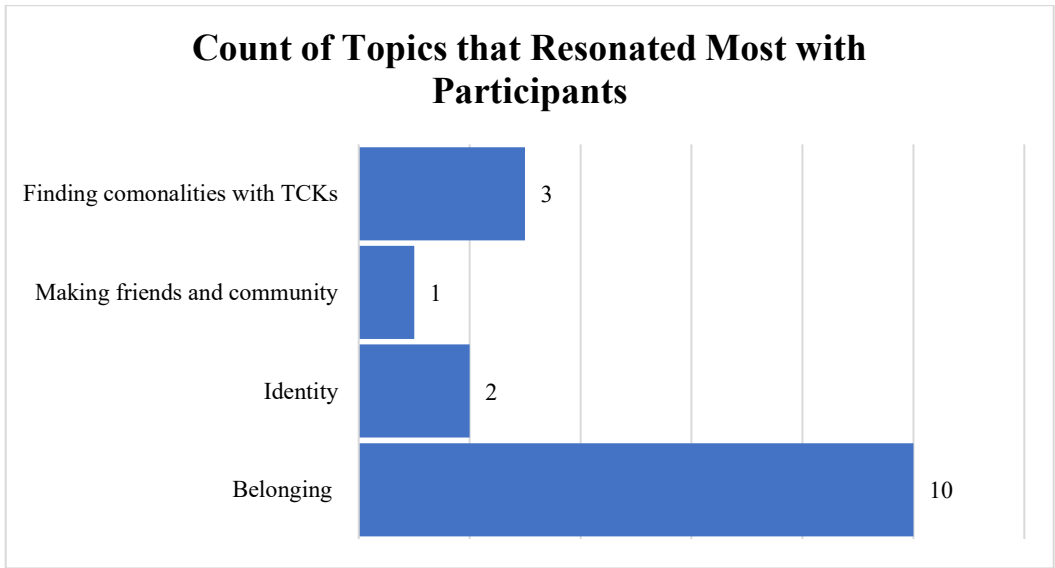
As the survey was anonymous, it is impossible to understand what about my facilitation detracted from one participant feeling as though they were not given a chance to have a voice in the discussion.

***Feedback on Topics and Activities***

Participants were asked what topics resonated most with them and their answers, which are given in Figure 42, had a lot of consistency. Some people gave more than one answer in the open-ended responses.

**Figure 42**

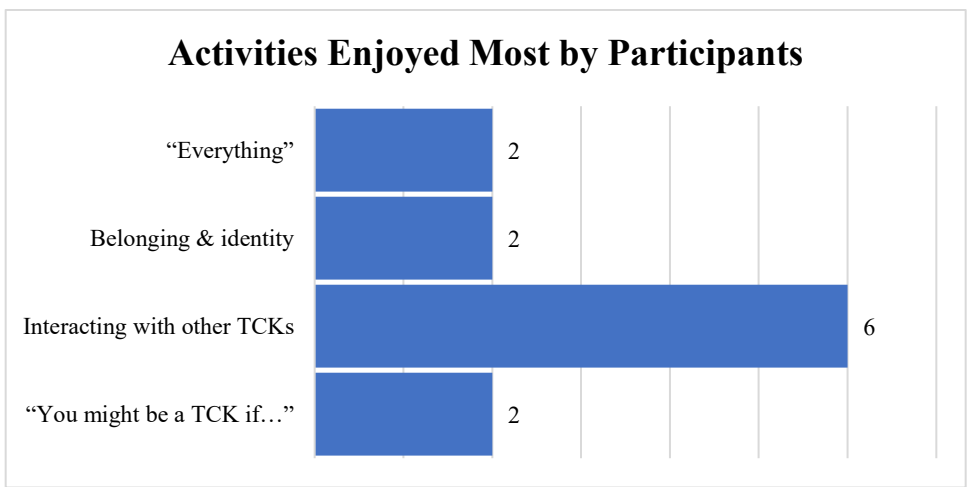
*Topics that Resonated Most with Participants*



Participants were also asked which activities during the intervention they enjoyed most and the open-ended answers are summarized below. Some participants gave more than one answer which is reflected in the graph.

**Figure 43**

*Intervention Activities Enjoyed Most by Participants*



The participants were then asked what topic they had not enjoyed during the intervention and to give reasons why the topic was not enjoyable. In the responses to the open-ended question, the respondents could not identify a topic they had disliked during the intervention. Four people had found the discussion of repatriation emotionally difficult and one of these people wrote that the topic “brought back some strong emotions of difficult times.” Although these four acknowledged it was a difficult topic, they all wrote that they felt it was an important one that should not be avoided in a TCK community. One person found the discussion of identity the hardest because they felt they were still struggling to find their identity.

Activities not enjoyed also received very few responses. One of the participants wrote that they were dyslexic and had thus found the readings taxing and wished for some kind of audio-reader functionality on the website.

The respondents were asked what other topics they would like to know about and gave a lengthy and interesting list in response:

- How to find a good counselor that doesn't see you like another person your age from the country of your passport
- Impact of TCK history on career choices
- Do TCKs marry other TCKs?
- Are TCKs more likely to live abroad?
- Identity and belonging with theoretical framework
- Training teachers to address trauma and grief in TCKs, particularly around repatriation time

- How TCKs deal with stress differently
- “Everything TCK!”

Participants were asked for suggestions for improvement on the group discussions. Although five participants had no suggestions for improvement, the top open-ended answer was for the discussions to last longer. “I felt that right as things were getting good, the hour ended,” one person wrote. Two people would have liked to meet in person but wrote that they recognize the impossibility of this wish. One person commented on how convenient the virtual aspect of the discussions were for their schedule and allowed them to participate whereas an in-person meeting would have made their schedule more complicated. One participant wished there had been more diversity and more participants.

### **Feedback on Online Modality of Intervention**

Participants were asked about how they had liked the modality of the online experience. There were 13 responses for this and all were positive about the online modality of the experience, although three stated that they would love to meet the people in person but knew this had been impossible for the intervention. Eleven people said they would participate in an online group discussion again and recommend the experience to others. One person said they would not participate in an online group discussion again.

### ***Feedback on Facilitation of Group Discussions***

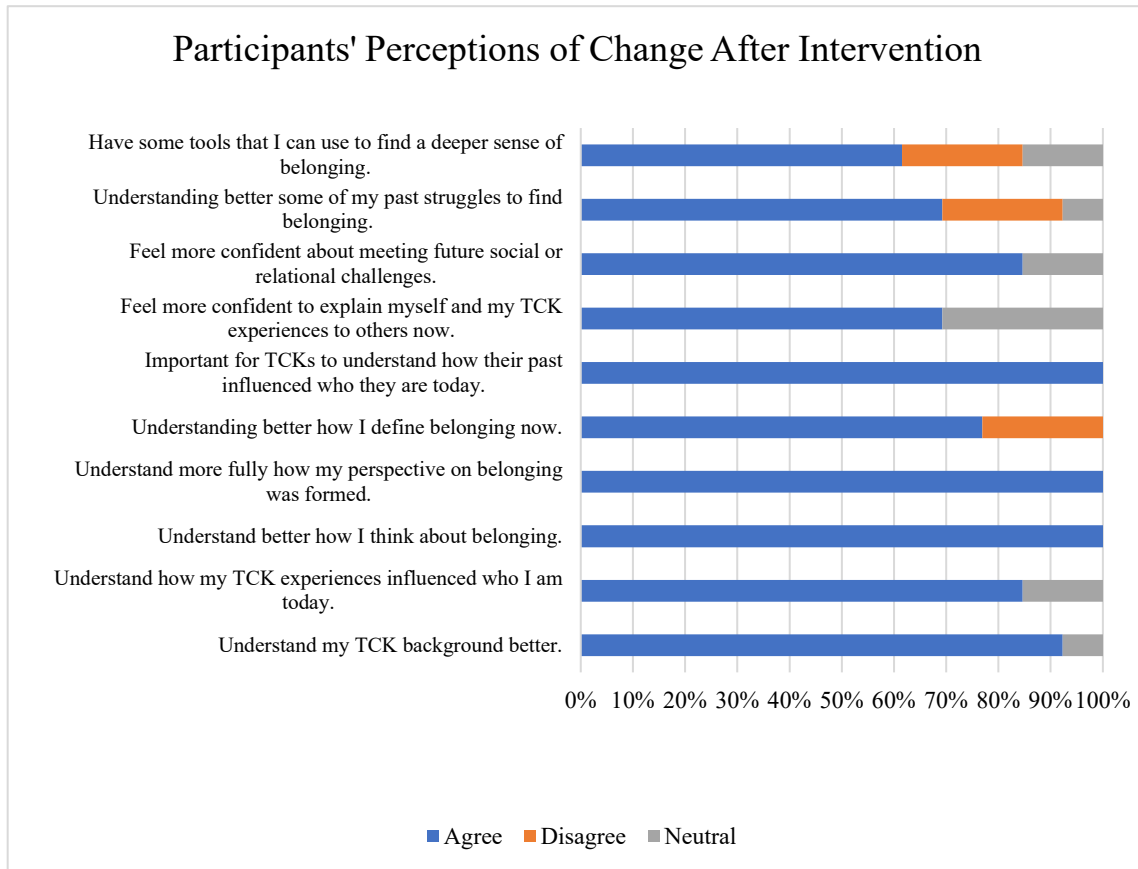
There were 13 responses evaluating the pacing of the facilitation: 12 found the pacing good and one said it was sometimes good. Eleven had no recommendations for improvement in the facilitation of the group discussions except to lament at the short length of time of what they felt was an enjoyable experience. One person wrote that they found it difficult at times to focus on the discussion group and felt a little lost at times. Because the responses were anonymous, it is hard to analyze what could have been improved in this regard.

### ***Evaluation of Change as a Result of Participation***

Participants responded to 10 items about how much change in knowledge they felt they had experienced as a result of participating in the intervention. For this part of the survey, seen in Figure 43, two people did not submit answers and thus N=13.

**Figure 44**

*Participants' Perception of Change of Understanding about Themselves*



These findings indicate that for the most part, the intended purpose of the intervention in terms of education, self-reflection and connection with other like-minded people was fulfilled. Also, the intervention’s design and execution were largely successful although I regret that I did not give alternatives to reading for the three participants who were dyslexic. The primary reason I did not include reading alternatives was due to my inexperience with building websites and my frustration with so much of the process.



Overall, the feedback from the participants about their experience with various aspects of the intervention was generally positive although there were areas that could have been improved. Lessons learned from my experiences facilitating the group discussions and creating all the tools of the intervention are invaluable to future cycles of action research in which I hope to engage.

## **Conclusion**

Interpreting someone else's lifeworld and experiences is complicated and layered with multiple dimensions of meaning. This chapter has presented many graphs, tables and statistics with explanatory color and context as a foundation for the discussion of the findings in the next chapter, which will interpret the findings and connect the four weeks of data into distinct themes that will expand our horizons of understanding about adults with a TCK background.

## 5 – DISCUSSION

### **Introduction**

While Chapter 4 was presented to the reader in a weekly format, Chapter 5 will synthesize these results into two sections by returning to the research questions that guided this inquiry. For the first research question (RQ1) which looks at belonging, I will present my conclusions in this order:

- Families (childhood and parental)
- Friends
- Communities
- Geographical location

Next, I will offer my conclusions about the second research question (RQ2), examining how an online community built the participants' understanding of their lived experiences. I will discuss three key areas in answering this question in the following order:

- Selection and organization of topics of the intervention
- The importance of trust and how affinity was built with me as the researcher/practitioner as well as between participants
- The sharing and construction of knowledge and lived experiences

Since my inquiry is rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology, to illustrate my conclusions and interpretations of what I discovered during this intervention, I will offer vignettes of conversations and specific contextual details at various points throughout the chapter. In addition, I will point out where my findings are supported or diverged from existing literature.

## Discussion of Research Question 1

The first research question was understanding how adult TCK participants describe their concept of belonging. To answer this question briefly, the data indicated that concepts of belonging are defined by relationship rather than physical proximity; one's sense of belonging can be varied and as multi-dimensional as the cultural identities of the participants; and that belonging can be felt imperfectly, which seems to be a chronic feeling for some adult TCKs. My use of the term "imperfect belonging" does not assume that there is such a thing as a "perfect belonging" like a goal to be attained. Rather I use the term "imperfect belonging" to imply that there are ways a sense of belonging can be cultivated or improved, thus raising the overall psychological well-being and contentment with life that every human being strives for.

My exploration of belonging below examines three common structures in which people find belonging. The first structure I will examine is *belonging in families*, both as children and as parents which I will treat as separate discussions. I will also discuss barriers to belonging that participants reported in their families. Next, I will discuss *belonging and friends*, first describing what participants saw as their *strengths as friends* and subsequently, examining *the impediments* which can prevent the creation or development of belonging. The third category explored is *communities* and within this structure, I will specifically examine the participants' reported sense of belonging within *neighborhoods*, *the workplace* and other communities, focusing particularly on *religious communities*. I will also examine

*barriers to belonging* that the adult TCKs described in each category and illustrate how these impediments interfere with their quest for consequential belonging and can conflict with their identities. I will end this chapter with a discussion of how adult TCKs perceive belonging as *a geographical location* and how spatiality can serve as a proxy for struggles with permanence and stability. I will include in vivo quotes and examples from the participants throughout the discussion in order to illustrate personal perspectives and connecting themes.

### ***Belonging and Families***

For the discussion on families, first, I will define why childhood families are an important belonging structure and explain factors that can cause variability within this structure for a TCK. I will also discuss the role of identity within the family structure and its effect on the participants' pursuit of belonging.

**Definition and Importance of Families.** Both childhood families, i.e. the family in which the participant had been raised as a child, and parental families, i.e. where the research participant was a parent, were discussed in the group discussions and explored in the surveys. Childhood families for TCKs proved to be as varied as childhood families for non-TCKs, with a variety of personalities, number of siblings, and parental philosophies in evidence. Childhood families are the first belonging structure that an individual experiences and it is within the childhood family structure that an individual receives one's first sense of identity, for example, "I am so-and-so's little sister; we are Americans." For most people, this earliest sense of identity

continues in some form and is inescapable to a degree, as one often finds out during family reunions.

**Factors that Created Variability in Families and Belonging.** As indicated in the literature on TCKs (Bushong, 2013; Cottrell, 2011; Pollock, Van Reken & Pollock, 2017), birth order and age of TCK siblings make the experiences in the host country, as well as repatriation unique. One example of this can be seen in educational choices that were made for the research participants by their parents, whether it be boarding or an international school, local school, or homeschooling, to name the three kinds of educational backgrounds of this group of research participants. Some siblings may have attended boarding school, typically for high school; other siblings may not have because of another familial global move. One participant spoke of attending boarding school as a child and only seeing their parents on school holidays. When this participant became a parent, they realized how much of the important daily interactions with their parents had not occurred. The example this participant gave was of a child coming home from school after having a bad day and talking it over with a parent, who could give both comfort and perspective on the day. Although this adult TCK had had a good adult relationship with their parents subsequently, there was a degree of regret over the missed time and opportunities due to the separation of the family.

**Belonging Defined by Relationships, not Proximity.** The participants who continued to feel belonging within their childhood family as adults, described the closeness as relationship-based, rather than defined by physical proximity. The

childhood family, particularly the siblings, continued to be the only people in the world who had shared the most amount of experiences and latent cultural knowledge with the TCK participants. An example of this can be found in item 4 in the “You might be a TCK if” activity (Appendix G), “If you and your siblings keep secrets from your spouses, in plain earshot, by using another language.” The laughing reactions and knowing nods from the participants indicated that this was a familiar occurrence for those who spoke a language different from their parents or spouses. For many research participants who remain close to their families, this understanding is rare to find outside the family and thus valued greatly by TCKs.

Childhood families also served as a place for spouses who married into a globally nomadic family, to better understand their TCK spouse and thus strengthen marital relationships. In time, a globally nomadic family may incorporate customs, language and practices from all the host countries they have lived in, a unique amalgamation which can be initially puzzling for the in-laws. As an in-law said to one TCK participant, “I don’t understand how your brother can be so negative about you guys’ childhood and still insist that he loved it.” This statement is another example of the multi-dimensional and often paradoxical perspective that TCKs are comfortable with but is inexplicable to non-TCKs because the TCK participant merely shrugged in reply and said, “That’s how we all [i.e. the siblings] feel.”

**Childhood Families and Perceived Barriers to Belonging.** Some participants spoke of barriers to feeling belonging with some members of their family, as adults. The most common barrier that appeared in discussions was a perceived rejection of who

they have become as adults, i.e. their identities post-repatriation, compared to who they were as children. For those who had the rockiest of repatriation experiences, the latent influence of their childhood family often proved to be more of a hindrance than a help during their struggles with repatriation. Although what kind of hindrances the family represented varied, the way in which the participants dealt with the perceived impediments was usually the same. The participants with the most significant repatriation struggles reported having to make a “break” from the influence of their family in order to reconstruct their sense of self. The break was psychological rather than physical in nature since many of the participants’ families continued to live outside the passport country when the participant repatriated. “Influence” in this sense was not only parental expectations of behavior and career outcomes but also the friends and family who had been part of the physically distant support structure for the family overseas. Although the participants continued to love their families, they sought to establish their own identity, a cultural hybrid of all their experiences, apart from their families. One participant summed up this sentiment during their background interview when they said, “I didn’t rebel until I was away from my family [i.e. in my passport country after repatriation] because I didn’t want to hurt their ministry.” (This participant was from a missionary background and so “ministry” could also be subbed for “career opportunities” in a non-faith-based organization.) This statement shows the care and concern this participant had for both the career goals and feelings of their parents, in other words, an act motivated by love, but also a

recognition that some of the new experiences they had after repatriation would not have been approved of by their parents (or the missionary organization).

Although in time, the psychological break between some participants and their childhood families closed and the relationships have been restored, some of the participants no longer felt close to members of their childhood family, i.e. an example of imperfect belonging. During the background interviews, some participants revealed that their post-repatriation identity was not accepted by members of their family and was a primary reason they are not close to their childhood family. In this way, some TCKs share experiences of familial rejection of their identity with other individuals with marginalized identities. Although the ongoing familial rejection was acknowledged as painful, as one participant put it, “But I don’t want to go back to being that person. I like my life now; I like me.”

**Parental Families and Belonging.** Parental families, i.e. where the TCK was a parent, was not a topic that was explored deeply, since only eleven participants were parents. Participants referred to their children for illustrative purposes and when talking about things that were important to them. For those that had families, the children ranged widely in ages, from a baby to grown adults with children of their own. Below, I will examine perceptions of belonging as parents, describe a curious finding about the participants’ spouses or life partners before ending with a note about barriers to belonging as parents.

**Perceptions of Belonging in Relation to their Children.** It was clear that the participants felt close to their children and their relationships seemed to be less



complicated than some people's relationships with their childhood families. Evidence for this could be found in how many participants who shared pictures of their children or referred to their children using consistently positive terms and smiles during introductions in Week 1, as well as the responses to the family section of the belonging survey. The eleven parents collectively agreed that they could wholly be themselves around their children. How a TCK background influences how an adult TCK parent was only briefly touched on in the group discussions in Week 2, when the TCK indicators were the topic. Two items reference TCK parenting in the "You might be a TCK if" activity, "Your kids' mouths drop open the first time they see you (their TCK parent) speaking another language to someone from that culture." and "Your kids know world geography really well because you (their TCK parent) made sure of it." (items 14 and 15 from Appendix G). Although parental families were not explored in depth, it was clear from the ease, comfort and positivity with which the research participants described their children, that this belonging structure was of great importance and brought substantial happiness to them.

**Life Partners and Belonging.** The relationship between spouses and TCKs was not explored, although eleven participants were in a marriage or long-term partnership. Who the eleven partnered research participants committed to is worthy of comment because of the contrast. For this group of eleven participants, the life partners/spouses were either from an intercultural background themselves, for example, a first-generation migrant, or were entirely unpracticed in multicultural behaviors prior to meeting their TCK loved one. An extreme example of this latter

side of the continuum was the participant whose husband had never eaten rice prior to meeting her as an adult. For those who were in a committed relationship, their spouse/life partner seemed to have played an important role in bringing stability to the inner life of the TCK, as frequently alluded to during the group discussions by several of the married participants.

**Parental Families and Barriers to Belonging.** Since not all participants were either parents or in a committed relationship, barriers to belonging within this structure were not discussed, nor were they obliquely referred to.

### ***Friends and Belonging***

Friends were the most deeply explored belonging structure of the three structures in this study. From the data, it was clear that friends were universally important to and valued by the participants. Moreover, all the participants reported having various levels of friendship, including close friends. There was a lot of consistency among the participants in what they regarded as their strengths in establishing friendships as well as barriers that prevented them from moving forward within a friendship. I will explore the strengths first and subsequently, the hindrances.

**Strengths of TCKs in Making Friends.** The participants spoke about three stages of friendship - finding friends, i.e. making the initial connection with a new person; making friends, i.e. moving into a closer relationship and getting to know the other person more fully; and maintaining a friendship, i.e. remaining close over time.

Making the initial connection was something all the participants felt at ease with and they attributed this to the many times during their childhood when friendships were

disrupted by an intercultural move and the subsequent need to find new friends. As a result, meeting people and making a good first impression on them were well-honed skills, the participants felt.

Another area where most of the participants agreed, found under the code “extension of another person’s idea” was with whom they enjoyed making the first contact. Most of the participants enjoyed meeting people who were “different”, for example, people who appeared to be multicultural, i.e. “an outsider”, or in need of help or a friendly face. As one participant explained, “That’s why I think I am so welcoming to people. If I see somebody standing at a corner in a reception, I go over and welcome them because I did feel really weird coming back from Germany as a kid.” Another participant extended this idea in the context of a party or gathering, “Sometimes it’s actually easier probably to talk to someone that is sort of a bit different or alone or something like that because if there’s someone that’s the center of everything, they’re super popular, I’m kind of like, ‘Well, okay they don’t need me,’ but somebody else that maybe could use a friend, well I think, ‘Okay, I’ll go talk to them and see how they are and maybe if I can help them out in some way’.” More evidence for this is found in Week 2’s survey on TCK indicators, particularly the section about international connections. Nearly all the participants (15) replied that they enjoyed meeting “international people” and half of them actively sought out opportunities to meet “international people”. This speaks to the latent influence a cross-cultural childhood had on shaping the participants’ adult interests.

**Friends and Barriers to Belonging.** Although all of the participants identified meeting new people as one of their strengths, moving into closer relationships and sustaining friendships over time was a mystery to many participants and impacted their ability to belong more fully in a relationship. It also left many participants with a wish to make more friends, i.e. belong more perfectly. Four themes emerged that described barriers to making or sustaining friendships. The themes are lack of sufficient shared areas of interest, divulging too much too fast, finding appropriate cadences within a relationship and finally, establishing boundaries and leaving harmful relationships.

**Lack of Sufficient Shared Areas of Interest.** Where the struggles started was taking the next step into the establishment of a new friendship which requires a two-way level of interest and commitment between the two people. For most relationships, interest in each other is predicated on a shared affinity in some area. The more areas of shared affinity are revealed, the better the chance that the spark of friendship will be encouraged into a sustainable fire. As chameleons, there is a limit to the socially predictable and expected similarities a TCK may share with non-TCKs, such as shared childhood geography or childhood interests. Very quickly, an interest from the new acquaintance in the unusual and the unexpected becomes a more important prerequisite to establishing a relationship than the usual shared affinity. People often make assumptions about others based on their appearance and the context in which the encounter occurs. Since the multicultural complexity of a TCK's past usually does not match at TCK's appearance, the most common reaction the participants reported

experiencing was the acquaintance's loss of interest in furthering the relationship. As one participant opined, people's reactions to a TCK's background could be divided into three groups, "Ten percent of people are hostile. 'Why would you do that? Why would you grow up there?' Like you had a choice and you were making this choice yourself. And 80% just really don't care one way or the other. And then another ten percent find it fascinating."

**Divulging Too Much and Too Fast.** Revealing too much of themselves too quickly was also seen as a barrier, in developing nascent friendships. Participants spoke of struggling to define what was "too much" and what was "too quickly" in given situations. This struggle typically commenced early within a first encounter, when the adult TCK is asked, "Where are you from?", which is "the Unanswerable Question" for many TCKs. How participants answered this question revealed that most participants engaged in complicated mental calculus, triangulating the context of where the conversation was taking place with the perceived risk versus reward of a variety of answers. The mental exercise to divine a stranger's potential reaction was based on the participants' desire to avoid what was called, "the glazed over look". This look is the most common response to an adult TCK's giving the unfiltered facts of where they are actually from and is often experienced as a micro-rejection. While one can recover from a one-off rejection of an essential part of who one is, the consistency and pervasiveness of this response quickly teaches the TCKs to give a more conventional answer to "The Unanswerable Question" even if the answer is not wholly authentic or accurate. However, avoidance of the rejection through a curated

answer comes with its own tradeoffs. Several participants reported feeling uncomfortable with the inherent inaccuracies and inauthenticity in giving a conventional answer, although they had given this answer for years. Another trade off with using a conventional answer is triangulating when and to what extent one reveals the truth about one's past as a friendship develops. The "glazed over look" can occur at many points in a new friendship and typically signals the extinguishment of the other person's interest in developing the relationship further. However, some participants also shared stories about waiting too long to give details about their past and being accused of hiding the truth by the new friend, which often extinguished the budding friendship.

Although many participants expressed their continued sense of discomfort with "The Unanswerable Question", three of the self-described extroverted participants had a different perspective. These three did not care about "glazed-over looks" and described their method of dealing with questions about their past like "an open book". The participants who adopted the "open book" approach to new acquaintances admitted that they were sometimes criticized for this method by their family or close friends, i.e. "Everyone doesn't need to know your life story, Mom!"

**Finding Appropriate Cadences in Relationships.** Another perceived barrier was the expected cadence of deepening a new relationship. As has been noted previously in Chapter 1, the TCK experience is characterized by people passing in and out of their lives with either the TCK moving or their friends moving away, i.e. mobile, long-term versus settled, long-term. As a result, TCKs learn to go quickly and deeply into a new

relationship, because one never knows when someone will move on. Some participants addressed the problem by allowing the pacing of the relationship to be set by the new friend as felt comfortable. “I let them [the new acquaintance] set the pace,” one participant stated, receiving nods of agreement from the other participants. However, some participants found this slower approach unsatisfying and frustrating, as one participant noted in Week 4’s discussion group, “I’d like to know what your favorite color is, but I’m sorry, taking five months over what your favorite color is, and who your favorite sports team is, is just too much.”

**Establishing Boundaries and Leaving Toxic Friendships.** Two other barriers that were identified with the discussion of friends were establishing boundaries and related to this, walking away from soured relationships. Neither of these were areas where participants felt they were skilled, due to the unique context of their childhood. As one participant noted in a group discussion in Week 4, “I think, when you’re ... living overseas, you only had a few people to choose from [as friends]. So you were friends with everybody. You couldn’t really be choosy about being friends. So it feels really icky to end any kind of connection with people.” Subsequently, the two other participants in this group agreed to this statement and extended the concept by offering personal anecdotes of where they had struggled with this situation as adults.

### ***Community and Belonging***

As reported in Chapter 4, communities are places from where friends can potentially be made and are social places in which individuals regularly interact. Although most people interact with a wide variety of communities every day, for the sake of

simplicity, my inquiry only investigated three of these communities - neighbors, work communities and other commonly found communities such as religious communities. I will focus on each one of these communities in turn, with a specific discussion on findings of the participants from a missionary background and how they regard faith communities. I will conclude the discussion on communities by offering explanations for why TCKs do not view communities as a significant place of belonging.

**Neighbors and Belonging.** As stated in Chapter 4, the findings of the belonging survey about neighbors and one's neighborhood community were unremarkable. An interaction with a neighbor was only mentioned by one participant as part of an anecdote about differences in political perspectives and was used to contrast the TCK's expansive worldview against what the participant viewed as the narrower worldview of a neighbor.

**Work Communities and Belonging.** Out of the 16 participants, 14 identified as professionals with jobs, careers and/or businesses but only 12 completed the work section of the belonging survey. A comparison of the survey items about community shows that the workplace community seemed to be the biggest source of identity creation and most significant community belonging structure for those who worked. All 12 participants reported positive and friendly experiences at work, although the level of depth and value differed somewhat, as described in the report of these findings in Chapter 4.



**Influence of a TCK Background on Belonging in Work Communities.** More detail about how TCKs view belonging in professional contexts can be found by examining the findings for this topic reported in Chapter 4. Most (12 out of 14) of the respondents who work are in jobs that are very different from their parents. This was a trend first identified in Cottrell and Useem's 1993 study of adult TCKs. At that time, the highest percentage of respondents who followed in their parents' career paths or had very similar careers were from a military sponsoring organization background (6%), (Cottrell & Useem, 1993). Cottrell and Useem (1993) also found that participants from a missionary background had the lowest percentage (2%) of following in their parents' footsteps in any sort of faith-based profession. These findings were paralleled in my study, although the sample size was much smaller. Two people reported that their professional lives and career choices were similar to their parents in many ways. Both were from business backgrounds. In contrast, although participants from missionary backgrounds were the majority of the participants in this study (1 out of 16), none of them work currently in faith-based organizations.

**Missionary-background TCK and Belonging within Religious Communities.** One of the most curious findings about belonging within communities is the shift experienced by participants from a missionary background in regards to a church community. Within missionary organizations, faith-based culture and structures are not only what motivated the parents to move abroad in the first place, but remain of primary importance to the globally nomadic family as the children grow up. The

centrality and pervasiveness of faith-based culture within a missionary family cannot be overstated and so it is surprising that something that was so dominant for a child growing up seemed to be of such little prominence to the participants as adults as reported in Chapter 4.

An explanation for this can be found in the stories that participants shared about their experiences with faith-based organizations, which in this study, were all Christian churches in the United States or Canada. A dominant sponsoring church - perhaps one that the parents attended prior to their overseas mission work or one with which extended family members are associated - is often a community to which repatriating missionary kids initially come, seeking belonging. Moreover, almost all of the participants from a missionary background had attended faith-based institutions of higher education. However, more than half of the participants from a missionary background told stories of negative experiences they had had with faith-based communities after repatriation. There are deep cultural underpinnings for how religion is understood and practiced and so the way in which missionary kids understood religious doctrine and displayed appropriate behaviors in a host country inevitably is different from the way a familiar religious community in their passport country understood religious doctrine and enacted behaviors. Although the topic of religion was handled carefully by the participants in the group discussions, stories of disagreement with a familiar faith-based community centered around the role of genders, boundaries and responses to authority and perceptions of overly narrow interpretations of doctrine within a religious community. All three of these topics are

heavily imbued with tacit cultural elements so the mismatch of cultural expectations may have been unavoidable. Though the mismatch between the TCKs and the sponsoring churches may have been inevitable, it was clear that the consistency and depth of the clash were surprising to the TCK relaying the story. Their expectation was that a church, particularly one that was familiar to them from childhood, would be a guaranteed place to find psychological and spatial belonging. Although for some participants, this expectation was fulfilled, for others, the disappointed expectation proved to be yet another way to be unmoored from something that had once been of paramount value to the TCK's identity.

For many missionary-background participants, this cultural misalignment with churches and faith-based organizations has continued well past repatriation, as reported in Chapter 4. For many of the missionary-background participants, their faith is still important to them, as evidenced by the respectful and positive way they spoke about their personal understanding of faith in the group discussions. However, faith as practiced in a larger community is not a psychological belonging structure of significance to almost half of the participants from this background reporting a shallow or no connection to a religious group as adults.

**Reasons why Communities are not Significant Belonging Structures.** Apart from those who worked, communities were not places where most participants reported finding significant belonging as adults. As the findings demonstrated, the participants report belonging to a social group outside of family, work or their neighborhood in high numbers but the depth of this connection is at best moderate. The findings point

to three interrelated reasons that may explain this phenomenon. One reason may be due to most TCK's preference for operating independently that many TCKs reported feeling in the TCK Indicators Survey. Another aspect that may be mediating a closer sense of belonging is TCKs' discomfort with stereotypes and narrowly defined social roles within a larger community (i.e. the communal frame of Communication Identity Theory). As one participant complained, using Starbucks' seasonal flavor of pumpkin spice as an example, "It's like you have to follow the stereotype. If you like pumpkin spice lattes, then you have to like everything about Fall and then you have to love Starbucks."

A final, related reason may be the paradoxical comfort that many adult TCKs feel being connected to multiple different contexts, cultures and people, as a way to fulfill their multiple facets of identity as colorful chameleons, with the degree of connection varying widely. As one participant said during the conversation about pumpkin spice lattes, "I don't sit on one side of the fence or the other, because I think our worldview is so big." This is in keeping with findings of other researchers who study cross-cultural people, particularly migrants, that psychological belonging is a complex, situational and multi-layered state (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016) that is often experienced as "a messy and uncertain process, fractured along a range of axes and social fields". (Benson, 2014, p. 3110).

### **Geographical Location and Belonging**

Geography and a physical place of origin, i.e. spatial belonging, are regarded as fundamental elements of belonging by most people. Although physical geography

was not directly explored in this study, this topic proved to be one that participants discussed at length and frequently. Since the topic is so salient to most non-cross-cultural people's way of understanding belonging, it is worth exploring as part of Research Question 1. I will first describe the complexity and multiple perspectives TCKs have when thinking about belonging in geographical terms. Then I will describe how geography can be understood as a proxy for struggles with permanence or stability. I will also describe how the COVID pandemic shaped some participants' understanding of the relationship between belonging and geography before closing with a discussion about geography and authentic representations of self.

### ***Geography and Belonging***

All participants agreed that one of the starkest differences between them and non-TCKs is possessing a geographical reference point for belonging and using this reference point to indicate authentic belonging. "Geographical reference point" can include a country, region, province, state or town and was not specifically defined during the intervention. A geographical reference point indicates to others where one can be "placed" culturally, socially and often economically. Someone who resides in Beverly Hills, California is assumed to be very different from someone who resides in Compton, California, although both are close to Los Angeles and less than 25 miles apart.

Perspectives on these differences in how geographical reference points were used for placement varied among the participants. At the start of each group discussion, participants were asked to introduce themselves briefly by sharing their

names and what I called “your countries”, meaning the countries or cultures with which the participants had experience and connection of some sort, be it host or passport countries. Some participants were comfortable using their passport country as a geographical reference point to indicate belonging. These participants spent a shorter time abroad or perhaps had been less immersed in the host culture (several participants talked about life in “the military base bubble” or “the compound bubble”) than the others who did not readily use their passport country as an indication of placement or belonging. Other participants who currently live in their passport country, perceived this country as merely the issuers of documents (i.e. a passport) that privileged them with being able to travel most of the world. Many participants reported that they used a town, i.e. where they currently resided, to indicate a geographical reference point for placement when talking to others. Three of the participants lived in countries other than their passport countries. Two of these three people's appearance indicated that they were obvious immigrants to their host country which made using their passport country as a placement location the easy choice, if not a completely accurate choice, as they both acknowledged during their respective introductions. The third person was very much a hidden migrant, a TCK with an American passport living in Canada, whose appearance was similar to the majority of people in the community where they resided.

For some TCKs who were immersed in a host culture, being an obvious immigrant in a host culture can feel more comfortable and familiar than feeling like a hidden migrant in a passport culture. Such a TCK may find it easier to say one is

“from Canada” when the inquirer has only a vague awareness of what this means, than using the same answer when an inquirer is familiar with the country and may ask further probing and uncomfortable questions (“Which part of Canada did you grow up in?”).

**Geography as a Proxy for Struggles with Permanence and Stability.** For some of the participants, their current geography served as a proxy for struggles with permanence and stability that they might have experienced in the past. Because all the participants had grown up being globally mobile, continuing to be mobile as adults was something several participants acknowledged was comfortable to them. However, as these adult TCKs have gotten older, life circumstances such as career goals, relationships or familial responsibilities, have made peripatetic preferences less feasible for the former globe-trotters. How the TCKs have responded to this has varied. One participant said, “I get proud of myself when I’ve lived somewhere long enough that I no longer have to use GPS to get to the grocery store.” Another participant had an opposite perspective, “I get really antsy if I’m in the same bed too long. And so after a couple months, I have to actually leave, go to a hotel, go somewhere else, go to a friend's house or whatever, sleep or else I’ll go weeks being antsy, not being able to sleep.”

“Antsy-ness”, in other words a restlessness in being settled too long in one place, is another characteristic that many TCKs share and complicates their sense of belonging. Admittedly there are some adult TCKs who do not share these feelings; they seem to have found a physical, geographic place to settle and have little desire to

ever move from their nest again. This variability can be found among adult TCK siblings and most of the participants could identify themselves and various siblings on one end or the other of the mobility continuum in the group discussions.

Restlessness also figured into this study in an unexpected manner, because it was conducted during the course of the COVID pandemic. How participants had dealt with lock downs and the general social disruption were topics that were raised in some of the groups. As stated earlier, three participants had moved during the pandemic and three others had moved immediately before the pandemic and then become stuck geographically by various pandemic restrictions. At the time of the intervention, five of these six participants were working on establishing a social network and community where they had moved or been forced to stay. (One participant had not moved far away from their previous neighborhood and thus did not feel as though a rupture in their social network had occurred.) Some other participants dealt with the severance of one's social life by getting pets. Two participants got their first pets during the pandemic and credited them with providing significant companionship as well as being personal symbols of a new-found permanence. Both participants introduced their pets during the first week to their respective groups. One participant explained, "If you have a dog, it's a lot of work. You have to be on a certain schedule [and] be home. [You] can't leave them alone for too long. These are all things that I never experienced, [because I] never had pets growing up. And so with the pandemic and working from home and being at home because we can't travel, it sort of represents a new phase that I've never experienced before - being home and



having pets.” This was similar to the other participant in a later group during the first week, who had also never had a pet and introduced their cat. “Because in order for me to start actually feeling belonging, I had to find things that were permanent, and animals need you to be alive. And so that’s where my cat came in. ... I got her [indicates cat] and she's a ham. I love her. And so just helping me with, like, permanence and belonging if that makes sense. And she doesn't care what I say or how I think. She just wants to eat, and she's very cuddly.”

**Representations of Authenticity, Belonging, Location and Time of Life.** A final note about belonging and geography deals with authentic locations, and thus representations, of oneself. Locating oneself geographically at different times of life was something that some participants reported struggling with specifically in the interventions’ surveys. Surveys, by nature, ask contextually bounded questions that limit, even for open ended questions, the details of the responses. Two participants in two separate groups reported struggling with feeling authentic in the answers they gave about their geographical locations in two of the surveys - the demographic survey and the repatriation survey. Both participants followed up after the group discussion with a detailed email to me, chronicling their geographical placement and periods of time in these places in order to give a more accurate representation of their life history.

## **Discussion of Research Question 2**

The second research question (RQ 2) examined how an online community built adult TCK participants’ understanding of their lived experiences, e.g. belonging and

identity. To answer this question, data from the post-intervention survey, colored by the group discussion data will be used. I will first set the context for answering RQ 2 and explain how I defined and answered this question. Subsequently, I describe the three elements that answer RQ 2 in terms of affinity creation:

- Topics
- Building trust
- Constructing knowledge and shared experiences

### ***Context for Answering Research Question 2***

As this is a dissertation for an educational doctorate, it is relevant to bring in a reference from the field of education, which I have occupied for nearly three decades. As a former educator, hearing the statement “I learn so much from my students” from teachers is something that resonates with me. I interpret this statement as an indication of the instructor’s ontological assumptions about learning. An instructor who would say this and live this saying, knows that students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled but come with their own wisdom about and experiences in the world. This statement also shows an expectation that what the students have to offer is both valued and sought after by the instructor. Over the last 25 years of teaching, it has been my observation that teachers who operate with these assumptions and expectations tend to create conditions for learning beyond the curriculum parameters within their classrooms and their students often learn more about the larger world than can be measured on a standardized test.

I used this assumption and expectation as I designed this intervention, keeping in mind the iterative and cyclical nature of action research (Mertler, 2020). Although my reconnaissance interviews had indicated that there was a lack of self-knowledge and understanding about the TCK background among the participants, there was also the problem with the lack of research and knowledge available about the TCK phenomenon itself. There was only so much factual information I had to offer on the TCK Watering Hole website so I needed the participants to share their wisdom, born of experiences with me, in order to lay another brick of knowledge in the small edifice that is research about TCKs. While I had some knowledge to disseminate, I fully expected to gain more knowledge from the participants and thus intentionally designed the intervention to maximize this potential.

Although in the research question, I wrote “build understanding”, what was surprising to me was the depth of understanding that was created among the participants during the relatively short time they interacted. There are different levels of understanding. There is a superficial level of understanding, for example a dog who knows its owner is upset and as a result, looks guilty without an awareness of why the owner is upset. On the other hand, there is a deep level of understanding, often referred to as a “flash of insight”. Although it may present as a sudden burst, heuristic understanding calls forth an entire universe of knowing. Although the second kind of understanding cannot be measured, I had hoped that whatever understanding was created during the intervention would be more than superficial.

The Post-Intervention Survey measured the superficial understanding gained during participation in the online community and intervention. As reported in Chapter 4, responses were largely positive and most people reported having a better understanding of belonging, identity and who they are as adult TCKs. What was surprising to me, as I prepared the transcripts for coding, however, was something that cannot be well measured - reaching deeper understanding through affinity creation. As reported in Chapter 4, tendrils of affinity creation were coded as “extension of another person’s idea” and more robust indications, e.g. agreement and application of what a person said to one’s own experiences, were coded as “affinity with other TCKs.” Below, I describe three areas that created not only understanding but often, affinity within the online community that sprang up for four weeks – topics, building trust and constructing knowledge and shared experiences.

### ***Topics as an Element of Affinity Creation***

As stated previously, there were so many subjects and topics I wanted to explore during this intervention, while I had a group of committed and interested research subjects, that it was difficult to narrow the list down to what could be covered during one hour of discussion for four weeks. Since a foundation for trust and a shared vocabulary and precepts needed to be built first, this determined the first week’s topic. During the background interviews, so many similarities had appeared between the participants and the now-forgotten 1993 study on adult TCKs, this was also an obvious choice for the second week because I knew that the other participants would also find the amount of similarities striking. Selecting the topics for the third

and fourth weeks, however, presented difficulties for me. Not only were identity, its creation, culture and belonging very complex topics that required more than 15 minutes of reading and an hour of discussion, but I also saw them as deeply interconnected. Moreover, there were plenty of theories and ways to discuss identity and identity creation, yet there seemed a paucity of material on belonging and particularly on how identity and belonging are connected. In other words, there was too much on the topic of identity and too little on the topic of belonging.

The topic of belonging, which the overarching topic of this research study, had another problem; belonging is the soft underbelly of vulnerability of the human experience and discussions about it often leave one feeling exposed and susceptible. As chameleons, one thing TCKs are good at is avoiding situations that risk vulnerability. If I have learned anything about myself during this doctoral journey, it is that I am the most chameleon of chameleons in many aspects, but particularly at avoiding unsafe subjects. In order to effectively answer my research questions, not only did I have to figure out a way to write what I thought about belonging, but I also had to determine a way to invite other potentially vulnerability-adverse chameleons to tell me what they thought about belonging.

The depth of vulnerability as demonstrated in very emotionally complex discussions that occurred in Week 3, when the participants discussed identity was astounding. It was this willingness to be vulnerable in a group of people who had been strangers to each other two weeks prior that gave my inner chameleon the validation it needed to forge ahead with the topic of belonging which was the focus of the final

week of the intervention. Although tendrils of affinity with other TCKs may have started to emerge as early as the first group discussion of Week 1, by Week 3, affinity was in full bloom between many of the participants in the groups. One of the most vulnerable things a person can do with a group of strangers is talk about past trauma, be it Adverse Childhood Experiences, grief, loss, or regrets and subsequently, discuss the healing, reconciliation or growth that has taken place since that time. Yet these topics resurfaced again and again in Week 3 and 4. The affinity between the participants was seen when a difficult story was respectfully received and the storyteller was given empathy, care and affirmation by the other participants. This affinity occurred despite differences in age, gender, or cultural backgrounds.

In the Post-Intervention Survey, nearly all the participants referred to the topics of Week 3 and 4 as resonating the most with them and the one participant who had a different answer, wrote expansively that interacting with other TCKs and discussing life was their favorite part, which certainly would include identity and belonging. At times, affinity with another person can feel existentially transformational, when one recognizes one's own humanity in another being. However, affinity does not necessarily require a permanent or long-lasting relationship for it to be real. We all have stories of experiences or one-off encounters that have fundamentally changed who we are as people. So although none of the participants who were strangers to each other have subsequently asked me to exchange contact details with other participants with whom they felt a striking similarity, this does not detract from the

moments of deep connection within the universe of shared understanding that occurred during the four weeks.

### ***Building Trust as an Element of Affinity Creation***

Trust that another person will both understand and respect one's complexity is something that many adult TCKs have learned not to quickly extend because of their experiences with micro-rejections, as stated in my discussion about "The Unanswerable Question". Initially, the idea of building a research project that was largely dependent on trust which 16 participants needed to have in me and in each other seemed risky. I knew that I would have to carefully design the elements of the research, particularly building rapport with and between the participants.

I built rapport initially by humanizing my participant recruitment methods and the "first contact" with potential participants. First, I used friends' word of mouth to recruit the participants so another trusted person was vouching for me, the stranger. Secondly, I set up a virtual introductory interview conducted via a video conferencing software as seeing another person humanizes them more than a disembodied voice on the phone does. As I recruited participants during the COVID pandemic, all the participants seemed both willing and comfortable with this method of interviewing. I also ensured that my tone, both in my introductory email to set up an interview and in the subsequent interview was approachable. None of the participants had ever been part of a research study, particularly one about people like them. While the participants evidently all felt intrigued enough to agree to be part of the intervention, undoubtedly some may have felt a little anxious about what a stranger was going to

ask. Another way I built rapport was by initially establishing my own TCK credibility as “one of us” in the introductory email where I gave a short biography of my own background.

Being “one of us”, i.e. my positionality as a TCK and researcher, was an important element of establishing rapport and trust with the eventual participants, as was explicitly stated in the last week’s group discussions and in the post-intervention survey by the participants. As one participant said in the final group meeting, when I thanked the participants for the difficult topics and stories they had shared with me, “I think that trust was a lot easier because you are one of us. I think a lot of times when people try to look at people like us, it’s people who are on the outside trying to figure us out, versus being on the inside and trying to open us up. ... So I greatly appreciate that, because again, I’ve had opinions from people who’ve never experienced what I’ve experienced, trying to tell me and help me through stuff. But having people who have been there, I think that makes a huge difference.”

### ***Constructing Knowledge and Shared Experiences as an Element of Affinity***

#### ***Creation***

As evidenced in the background interviews and subsequent anonymous post-intervention survey, the participants’ knowledge of the TCK context varied greatly, prior to the intervention. Part of this variability was due to age and part of it was due to accessibility of information about TCKs for the participants at various stages of life.



As stated previously, the first edition of the Pollock and Van Reken's book about TCKs was published in 1999 and subsequently spawned a variety of writings and support services for TCKs and their families. Although there had been some research and writings about TCKs and globally nomadic families prior to this, the information was not widely dispersed and as far as I can tell, remained largely in the domain of internal international school publications, such as newsletters, and some diplomatic circles. One adult TCK from a diplomatic background, who I interviewed but did not participate further in the subsequent intervention, remembered being interviewed by United States Department of State researchers, as a child of eight or nine years of age, about how they felt about growing up overseas. Another TCK from a missionary background remembered finding a photocopied copy of Van Reken's first book about her experiences growing up as a TCK (*Letters Never Sent*, originally published in 1995) in their international school library, which was widely read by the TCK school children until a parent found the papers and inexplicably confiscated them.

Many of the participants in this research study repatriated well before the publication of the Pollock and Van Reken book and since many of the participants also did not attend international schools, they came lately to the terminology and information about TCKs. The earliest repatriation year for these participants was the mid-1960s with many of them repatriating in the 1980s and 1990s. Only three people attended a repatriation workshop or conference prior to repatriating, probably some of

the younger participants as these were unavailable to most TCKs prior to 2000, and of these three, only one felt that it had been a useful exercise.

From the background interviews, it was clear that prior to the intervention many of participants had thought deeply about the topic of their TCK background and discussed it with trusted loved ones. One participant's family had been friends with David Pollock, one of the authors of the first book about TCKs, and this participant had extensive prior knowledge of vocabulary and concepts related to TCKs. However, others had not thought about their TCK past since they repatriated and still others were unfamiliar with the term TCK until they volunteered to talk to me. Thus, for everyone, there was a need to develop and disseminate a shared body of knowledge and vocabulary so everyone could approach the group discussion topics from a shared understanding. This was the purpose of the TCK Watering Hole website. As I built the website, I realized that I had far too much information to reasonably expect participants to engage with. I had to whittle down the information to just two or three readings a week and hyperlinked other readings within the main texts, if people were interested in exploring specific topics more fully. One participant reported getting lost in this website organization which is a factor to reconsider for future websites.

The participants gave positive feedback about the knowledge on the website, finding it relevant, relatable and thought-provoking. During the group discussions, they shared areas that resonated with them as well as the occasional different

perspective. Two of the participants said that they had started reading some of the books I listed on the reference page of the website.

Gaining knowledge about themselves as TCKs provided validation for many of the participants and this was particularly evident in Week 2 when the topic was comparing the findings of the 1993 survey on adult TCKs with our smaller research group's findings. There were frequent and striking similarities that had consistently remained in the nearly three decades from the 1993 study of over 700 participants living in one country and my 2022 study of 16 participants living in four countries. During Week 2, as participants offered stories of their own experiences within the various TCK indicators, other participants picked up on the unspoken emotional and contextual structures around these stories and offered their own stories that paralleled the original speaker's. For example, very quickly during Week 2, the thorny topic of how people responded to "The Unanswerable Question" came up. Although the participants shared their answers and what mental geometry they used in calculating their answers in various situations, why the question is so uncomfortable to answer was tacitly understood by the participants and thus was not explored.

In addition to the knowledge gained from the website, a lot of knowledge was gained from each other, as is consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, and in many instances, the fusion of horizons turned into a deeper element, that of affinity. As discussed above, evidence for this was in the tacit context and emotional structures around a participant's story and how the other participants picked up on the

meta-message of a story. In the second discussion group in Week 1, after introductions had been made, one participant shared a story about a friend who is the mother of TCKs and refused to allow her children to refer to themselves as “TCKs” or “missionary kids”. “She said she wanted them to be American, and she didn't ever want them to ever feel labeled or different,” the participant said.

The reaction of the other four participants was to smile knowingly and three laughed outright.

“I’m like, good luck with that!” another participant responded.

This brief exchange is an example of tacit contexts and situational layers that TCKs are simply aware of, a “universe of knowledge”. However, these layers may be difficult for non-TCKs and non-cross-cultural people to discern or understand. In this example, the love that this mother has for her children is clear and this was not lost on the participants even though some of them laughed. Undoubtedly the mother had seen or heard other TCKs talk about how “weird” or like “misfits” they feel, which are the most common terms my participants used to describe themselves during their background interviews. However, the participants also understood that merely by refusing to acknowledge the existence of something, i.e. “labeling” does not preclude it from existing. Some of the participants in this group had struggled with finding identity and belonging themselves and may have projected the same potential struggles, compounded by a parent’s “head in the sand” philosophy, for the children in question, as they grew up. The participants’ laughter was evidence that they both

understood and may have had some familiarity with the paradox of love sometimes being a hindrance to self-knowledge.

More evidence for this tacit “universe of knowledge” occurred in the Week 2 activity when the “You might be a TCK if...” list was produced, found in Appendix G. The list was created across three different groups at three different times in Week 2 and subsequent groups could read what previous groups had written. What was interesting was how items written by previous groups resonated across the groups, although there was no prior knowledge of these items between the participants. An example of this was number 7 on the list - “You can tell what country you are in by the air that comes in when the airplane door opens.” The participant who offered this thought was pressed to explain it more fully before it could be shaped into a sentence for the list.

“I lived in Singapore when I was six and then we visited [Singapore again] when I was 16. And I could swear to you, that getting off the airplane and smelling the air, I could tell you we were in Singapore.” Participant 1 said.

“What was it about Singapore that you could tell? Was it food smells or what kind of smells?” Participant 2 asked.

“No, I mean literally when the door of the airplane opened and it was a combination of the temperature, the humidity and the smell of the air. I mean, it was different than Manila. It was hot, but it was Singapore. And I could have just told you that. And it was 10 years later. But smell is something connected to memory

somehow. And I could tell you that... I would swear to it on my life that we were in Singapore.” Participant 1 said.

In the subsequent two groups, this item was called out, e.g. “I love this one!” or “Yes!” by other participants who had not lived in Singapore or Manila themselves but recognized the truth of this statement within their own contexts. In this way, although the groups were small and many of the participants did not meet each other during the four weeks, knowledge could be co-constructed across the groups as a way to create affinity with each other.

While the website’s weekly readings provided the informational cohesion and topical organization, it was also important to let the participants speak about themselves using their own words. Participants first met and spoke to each other about their experiences and perspectives during the introductions of Week 1. During the self-introductions, the participants who had been strangers, started immediately finding points of connection with each other, which rapidly developed into an affinity with each other by the second week. For example, in the first group discussion, two participants found that they currently live very close to each other. In the second group discussion, two participants both showed elephants as part of their self-introductions. And in the third group, two participants discovered they had both married people who had never traveled internationally prior to meeting their future TCK spouses.

The format of the group discussions also provided opportunities for the participants to find shared experiences with each other. The format of the group

discussions followed a predictable flow each week. Although longer self-introductions were given in the first week, for the subsequent three weeks, the participants were asked at the top of the hour to give their names and countries in which they had lived. After the introductions, I gave an overview, guided by PowerPoint slides of the main points of the readings and invited participants to comment during the overview. The final portion was opening up the time to the participants to talk about one of the prompts that they had reflected on that week. All three of these organizational elements proved to be opportunities for the participants to discover shared perspectives, both through the topics I was reminding them of, as well as the new topics the participants introduced, as evidenced by the codes, “extension of another person’s idea” and “affinity with other TCKs”.

As indicated in the Post-Intervention Survey, the affinity with other TCKs and having a space to talk about topics and experiences unique to TCKs was important to many of the participants. Six respondents in the post-intervention survey mentioned this specifically as being the part of the intervention they enjoyed the most and several from this group wrote how they had found it empowering to realize that they were not alone in their feelings and experiences. As stated in Chapter 4, several participants wished the discussions could have lasted longer and some of them would like to participate in future discussions with other TCKs.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated and discussed the horizons of belonging as understood by a group of adults who had a globally nomadic childhood. Due to the

mobility of their childhood, physical proximity is less valued than relationship in feeling closeness; and their sense of belonging is connected to their complex and layered identity, which is informed by and distributed along what Benson (2014) called “a range of axes and social fields” (p. 3110).

This chapter also demonstrated that consistent with the research on TCKs, affinity between participants was rapidly created, allowing the group discussions to delve into topics that had been infrequently discussed by most of the participants as well as showing a surprising degree of vulnerability in their willingness to share and listen to the stories of the participants.

The next chapter is the conclusion of the report on my inquiry and in it, I will offer practical applications of my findings, as well as propose future avenues of inquiry opened up by my study.



## 6 - SCOPE OF INQUIRY AND FUTURE HORIZONS

### **Introduction**

In the closing chapter, I will take the lens of a practitioner-scholar, stepping back to view my inquiry in the broader context of the field of social sciences as well as reflect on the scope of this inquiry. I will briefly relate how my findings affirm and challenge the small body of existing literature on the influence of a TCK's background on adulthood and belonging. Subsequently, I will discuss the limitations and boundaries of this study as well as how my findings can be applied by others in the field and suggestions for future research. Finally, I will reflect on my own personal growth as a practitioner-scholar.

### **The Role of Action Research in Understanding Conclusions**

The nature of action research is cyclical and iterative (Mertler, 2020) and often undertaken as a way to improve an area of practice. Although traditionally, action research has been a useful way to examine problems particularly within education (Mertler, 2020; Herr & Anderson, 2005), this inquiry was somewhat different in its motivation. This inquiry looked at an under-researched area of the social sciences, i.e. how belonging is understood, with an under-noticed population of participants, i.e. adults with a globally nomadic background. While I hoped for heuristic outcomes for the participants, my second purpose for undertaking this research study was to add another insight, with discipline and credibility, to the very small body of knowledge that exists. As noted previously, my positionality as an action researcher with a

globally nomadic background not only built trust among the participants but also meant I could explain tacit, non-textual knowledge that may have eluded a non-TCK researcher and meaningfully interconnect the literature with the lived experiences of the participants as they were relayed to me in the data. Although I have tried to faithfully reflect all the complexity of the data as it relates to the research questions, due to the cyclical nature of action research, the conclusion of this project has opened up many other areas that could be explored.

### **Application of Findings to Global Nomads and/or Sponsoring Organizations**

If the purpose of action research is to affect an improvement in some area, my findings can be practically applied to two distinct areas where globally nomadic families continue to struggle. However, to discuss the practical applications, I must first engage in some myth debunking.

### ***The Romance vs. Downside of a Globally Nomadic Life***

For many people, there is romance to the idea of living abroad and no doubt, this romance feeds into the initial interest when parents decide to be global nomads. Experience with living in another country often appears as a social accomplishment and seems to provide the global nomad with a veneer of worldly-wise sophistication that is not afforded to most migrants with the same generosity, unless they are from high value, well-liked countries such as France, the UK or Australia. Indeed, for many global nomads, there is a distinct honeymoon period in a host country; everything about the new place is enchantingly new and interesting, similar to a new romantic relationship.

However, after any honeymoon comes the daily work of a marriage; there is the other side of the international experience for globally nomadic families. For their children, often the host country is regarded as their home and the full depth of this concept of “home”, with all the notions of familiarity and belonging that it connotes is often a surprise for the globally nomadic parents whose own reference points for the notion of “home” are in a different country. For parents already abroad, more emphasis and awareness need to be placed on the practical elements of what their choices of career mean for their children, as well as themselves. All globally nomadic families will struggle with the questions such as how to educate their children adequately, when they should return to their passport country, how to balance their personal career desires against what is best for the family or what kind of environment would be best suited for their kids when their teenagers encounter the inevitably rocky transition of repatriation.

### *Application 1*

After decades of sending people abroad, these are known areas of tension and challenges yet to this day, many globally nomadic families and particularly their repatriating children struggle with these issues by themselves, thinking they are the only ones, as a glance at the numerous chat boards and blogs authored and populated by TCKs demonstrates. There are a handful of supportive organizations that work with globally nomadic families and their children, such as TCK Training and Families in Global Transitions. The reach of these organizations can be expanded through online modalities, such as webinars. Of course, people often do not know what their

needs are and therefore may not think to reach out for support. It is one thing to intellectually know that one's children will grow up vastly different from their parents; it is quite another to see this occur and know how to handle it. Fulfilling this need represents a future intention of mine, to develop a consultancy business targeted primarily at globally nomadic families as well as repatriated adult TCKs.

One idea to disseminate awareness of support would be for the sending organizations to automatically provide their employees with access to a supportive organization and their online resources, along with the family's visas and airline tickets. Although I have mentioned two organizations above, this is also a space I envision my future consultancy occupying. These supportive organizations are often well connected with international schools, whose student body is largely composed of expat children, but there are plenty of families who choose to homeschool or locally school their children instead. However, any family with a sponsoring organization is in communication with their specific organization, which makes it the best point for connecting the families to the supportive resources. Therefore, it is sponsoring organizations that my future consultancy will collaborate with, as a conduit to reach the families who need the information.

### ***Application 2***

Additionally, since TCKs are highly likely to go on to college, awareness that this group exists in the student body would go far for inclusion in orientation activities for incoming first-year students. Arizona State University, for example, both identifies and includes TCKs in their international student orientations, according to

the International Student and Scholars Center. Although not all TCKs would necessarily join an international student orientation, being invited and recognized would be meaningful for many as being surrounded by international-looking faces is a comfort zone for most TCKs. Arizona State University's model of inclusion should be replicated at other institutions universally.

### **Boundaries of this Inquiry**

Due to the paucity of literature on the topic of how belonging is created and the experiences of adult TCKs, much of this inquiry represents original theories and frameworks of understanding, informed by the existing literature and related areas of inquiry that I found. Much of my findings aligned with results reported in the study by Useem and Cottrell (1993), but this study went beyond describing patterns of behavior and trends in adult TCKs to explore the inner lives and meaning-making practices of adult TCKs.

All of the areas I examined did not have any pre-made, pre-tested and validated measurement tools, such as surveys, which meant I had to develop my own. Feedback from the participants has been enormously valuable and will be incorporated into future iterations of the surveys and supports created for this study. Although part of the reason these artifacts did not exist before now has to do with the current state of research in this topic, as described above, I discovered that TCKs are so varied, that developing a survey that is both clear in its questions yet captures the diversity of the participants is challenging. For example, it is evident that the kind of parental sponsoring organization or the lack of a parental sponsoring

organization, makes a difference in much of the childhood context of the participants. In the future, developing research tools for each context, i.e. different sponsoring organizational background or lack thereof, may be a better solution than trying to have one tool that encompasses a variety of backgrounds.

Another boundary of this study has to do with the lack of diversity of the willing participants that I recruited. Chameleons are notoriously difficult to find because they do not generally advertise their chameleon-ness to the world. To use a personal example, I worked with a colleague closely for five years before we stumbled on the fact that we were both adult TCKs and in fact, shared a host country's language abilities. Thus, for future studies, I hope to find more adult TCKs in order to increase the sample size. The adult TCK world is a diverse one, with representatives from many different passport countries, host countries, and cultural backgrounds, not to mention diversity in sponsoring organizations. Undoubtedly there are commonalities that adult TCKs all share, regardless of background, but to date, most TCK studies have been conducted on the same kind of participants - American or Canadian passport holders - and thus make the generalizability of findings into other cultural contexts an unknown quantity.

### **Areas for Future Research and Recommended Scholarly Actions**

Because there is such a limited body of prior research, the scope for future research studies is vast and thus makes it challenging to winnow recommendations down to a handful. I offer four recommendations for actions that scholars could take in this under-developed area of research.

***Recommendation 1: Update the Body of Knowledge about TCKs***

My first recommendation is to professionalize and update the small body of knowledge about TCKs already in existence. Many of the early researchers who published widely on the topics of cross-cultural identities, globally nomadic lifestyles and its effects on people in the 1980s and 1990s are either retired or dead. Much of the past writings have not made the digital transition; for example, I could not access most of the publications of the anthropologist who coined the term “third culture”, Ruth Hill Useem. While there is a finite shelf life to thought trends within the social sciences, having access to this body of knowledge would provide valuable historical context to current and future researchers in this area.

***Recommendation 2: Professionalize the Study of TCKs***

However, digitizing the past is not enough. The diaspora of global nomads and their children increases every year. While there is a growing number of much needed resources, repatriation workshops, support groups, and consultants to help these families, the topics of cross-cultural identities, globally nomadic lifestyles and its effects on people seem to have lost their importance as the researchers who used to write on these subjects prolifically, Lois Bushong, Ann Cottrell, Nan Sussman, have retired. While the voices of adult TCKs are prevalent, they are mostly on the internet, and mostly autobiographical, with little academic rigor and thus little validation by the wider community of researchers. Outside of Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock’s seminal book on TCKs, now in its third edition, there is very little shared understanding about the phenomenon of TCKs, particularly as adults, which is quite

literally, the rest of a TCK's life. There is a limit to what one book can cover and authors of related books, while helpful, tend not to come from an academic background where they have learned to conduct rigorous research. Thus the topic of TCKs continues to be peripheral in academia, which is ironic at this time when cultural hybridity and cultural marginalization are becoming increasingly important areas of research within the social sciences.

***Recommendation 3: More Cultural Diversity in Representation of TCKs in Research***

Related to this is the need for research and disseminated TCK voices to be more representative of the increasing diversity of the TCK diaspora. All of the participants in my study were from Canadian or American passport country contexts, even if they did not currently live in their passport country. Only one of them was not White. Although I tried to recruit more diverse participants, in the end, this study's participants mirrored the demographics of most of the other research that has been published. It would be interesting to hear the perspectives of TCKs from a Chinese passport country or TCKs whose parents were guest workers in the UAE, for example and see what are consistent themes among the diverse cultural backgrounds and what are differences. Some researchers (Tanu, 2020), who are attached to international schools that serve these non-northern American populations, are beginning to publish on this topic, but to date, there are only a handful of articles published within the last few years.



#### ***Recommendation 4: Develop Better Tools for Research of TCKs***

The tools and strategies I used for this inquiry were created by me and will require further refinement through iterative use in order to be more reliable and valid instruments. For example, I had hoped, through the Repatriation Survey items, to find out what the connection was between a harrowing repatriation experience and a less difficult experience. The items on the Repatriation Survey were informed by research on global nomads and their acculturation process. However, based on the variability of the results and no clear trends showing in the survey responses, it may be that the framework of the acculturation process as experienced by global nomads is less applicable to a person who has already grown up cross-culturally than I initially theorized. Refining these tools and strategies will also require a greater and more diverse number of participants but they are important to develop further in order to better understand the lifeworld of adult TCKs.

#### **Growth as a Practitioner-Scholar**

I began my doctoral program with a vastly different trajectory in mind for my research inquiry. My initial Problem of Practice was well defined in my mind and had a large body of research on which to build my own inquiry. However, as the COVID pandemic appeared and then settled in, changing so much of our lives, I realized that executing my Problem of Practice was virtually impossible and thus, searched for something else to research.

Landing on the topic of the influences of a TCK childhood on adulthood was not inevitable or obvious for me. When I first contemplated the idea, the topic seemed

too ill-defined and too ephemeral for an action research study. However, as I continued to read the literature about TCKs and related areas and embarked on my Cycle 1 reconnaissance interviews, I began to see the possibilities of inquiry and indeed, the need for such a study. As I learned about hermeneutics and phenomenology, I recognized the usefulness of this method for the kind of inquiry I was contemplating.

Producing thoughtful, skilled research-practitioners for the purpose of provoking change is the primary of the goals of an action research doctoral program (Butin, 2010; Mertler 2020). I have mentioned earlier that I am the most chameleon of chameleons. As has been demonstrated, chameleons tend to triangulate their behavior and responses based on their perceptions of the context and people around them in order to fit in. Professionally, I had learned to take the “safe” road of stepping in other people’s well-trodden paths so embarking on an ill-defined, under-studied area of inquiry represented a departure from the norm for me. In completing this doctoral program, I have grown and developed in many areas as a scholar and practitioner. Here are some of my horizons that expanded.

With no prior experience, I designed and launched a website that fulfilled its purpose in this research study. In the near future, I plan to reinvent the TCK Watering Hole website in order to attract more adult TCKs who are seeking answers about their complex identity and struggles to belong.

I synthesized multiple areas of research and sourced many forgotten texts by previous researchers into a unique study in an under-researched area of inquiry. From

the feedback of the participants, my instincts about what topics to include and what was not relevant have been insightful for them.

I designed and executed a complex and fully virtual phenomenological inquiry about an emotionally fraught topic (belonging) with people who were either strangers to me or with whom I had not been connected for a long time. For a risk-averse chameleon, this represents a significant trajectory of professional growth.

Although I can reflect on my professional gains and feel a moment of satisfaction, my work in this area will continue. My astute participants have suggested fascinating future areas of inquiry of which I have taken note and will be examining in the future. Since chameleons live all over the world, through my intervention, I have learned that digital forms of communication are the most effective ways of reaching a widely dispersed audience. In my own way, I intend to follow through on my own recommendations outlined above, continuing to attempt to organize, update and professionalize the area of adult TCK research, in addition to the consultancy I plan to launch. I have plans to revamp the TCK Watering Hole website into a magazine format and use this as a primary platform for raising awareness of the TCK lifeworld, disseminating helpful information and promoting my own research. Through these efforts, I hope that my network of potential research participants will grow as well as become more diverse.

In comparison to the rest of the world's population, those from a globally nomadic background are small. However, because of how intense one's inner anguish can be as a result of cultural liminality, which is echoed years later in self-descriptions

such as “weird” and “misfit”, particularly during repatriation, TCKs deserve to understand themselves better and have access to relevant and well-guided information.

## **Conclusion**

This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry looked at how adults with a globally nomadic childhood understood belonging and how a sense of at least temporary belonging was constructed during a four-week online intervention. From the findings detailed above, it is clear that there is a wide variety of experiences and resulting sense of belonging among adults who were raised cross-culturally in other countries. Moreover, it is clear that one’s sense of self is deeply connected to one’s sense of belonging. The effects of a globally nomadic childhood can be seen in many aspects of adulthood, particularly in the complex and variegated way in which an adult TCK both perceives and interacts with the world. Variability in these effects can be attributed to personality, familial background including the parental motivation for moving abroad, the presence of a sponsoring organization, length of time spent in host countries, age during cultural transitions, and the degree of immersion in a host culture.

Both identity and belonging can and do evolve over time, as evidenced by the stories shared by the participants. This makes the quest for a sense of belonging a lifelong pursuit which hopefully, the participants will navigate with a greater understanding of themselves and how they are chameleons living in the world.

This study also demonstrated that given willing participants, validated trust and intentionally designed virtual spaces, a deeper understanding of oneself can be co-created dialectically and at times, affinity can be reached.

In my closing thoughts about belonging, I return to the quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne that opened this dissertation.

“And, now that life had so much human promise in it, they resolved to go back to their own land; because the years after all, have a kind of emptiness, when we spend too many of them on a foreign shore. We defer the reality of life, in such cases, until a future moment, when we shall again breathe our native air; but by-and-by, there are no future moments; or, if we do return, we find that the native air has lost its invigorating quality, and that life has shifted its reality to the spot where we have deemed ourselves only temporary residents. Thus, between two countries, we have none at all, or only that little space of either, in which we finally lay down our discontented bones. It is wise, therefore, to come back betimes, or never.” (1860/1990, Chapter 50)

For many adult TCKs, belonging is felt as an imperfect condition which many would like to feel more fully. However, many adult TCKs would disagree with Hawthorne’s characterization that having “only that little space of either” country means they are discontent, even if rootlessness and impermanence are often present in their inner lives. There is an apocryphal story about George Harrison being asked how it felt to be a Beatle. Harrison was reported to have replied, “How does it feel not

to be a Beatle?" In other words, one cannot really know what it would be like *not* to be oneself, and live a different life.

This characterization of life attributed to a Beatle may be closer to the truth for adult TCKs. Although I have described adult TCKs' sense of belonging as often imperfect, use of this term implies that there is a more perfect way of belonging and others, i.e. non-TCKs, feel a sense of belonging more consummately. Since no one can truly know how another person feels, it may be that TCKs feel as much belonging as non-TCKs and that relative contentment or discontentment with life has less to do with one's background than what one does with the cards that life has dealt them.

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<sup>1</sup> There are three editions of this book. The first edition was published in 1999.

<sup>2</sup> D.C. Pollack passed away after the second edition was published, and his son, M.V. Pollock, with Van Reken, has continued his father's work, including expanding and revising the third edition.

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## APPENDIX A

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ITEMS FOR VETTING PARTICIPANTS

The Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 participants, gathered from snowball sampling, were interviewed via Zoom or a phone call in order to vet them as potential participants for the subsequent intervention.

Sample questions:

1. What is your name?
2. Can you tell me about your inter-cultural background growing up?
3. Did your parents have a sponsoring organization? What kind?
4. Are you currently in college?
5. When did you repatriate?

APPENDIX B  
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY



## Overview

### Demographic Survey for TCKs

This survey asks you for your demographic information such as name, age, places you have lived, etc. It should take less than 10 minutes to complete. At any point, you can choose not to respond to a question.

The questions in this survey are multiple choice and open ended.

Clicking "I agree to participate in this survey" means you understand and consent to participating in this survey.

I agree to participate in this survey.

### Your personal information

Your name

If you prefer I use a pseudonym if I refer to you in any research publication or presentation, what pseudonym would you like me to use?

Your gender

Your current country or state/province of residence.

Are you currently married/in a long-term partnership?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure/prefer not to say

Are you a parent?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

**Countries and education**

How many countries did you spend 6 months or longer in by age 18?

What country(s) did you spend the longest? How long?

What was the main reason that you repatriated most recently?

- Familial/parental decision, due to change of careers, residence or lifestyle
- School/education (e.g. starting college)
- Familial health
- Political instability in the host country
-

A different reason than those above

What was your childhood educational context? (Select all that apply.)

- Mostly homeschooled
- Mostly international school
- Mostly local school
- Mostly school in my passported country
- A combination of two of these (select the two)
- A combination of three of these (select the three)

Does your family (parents with or without siblings) live overseas currently?

- Yes
- No
- It's complicated.

**Parental sponsoring organization**

What type of sponsoring organization sent your family abroad?

- Business
- Diplomatic
- Educational
- Military
- Missionary
- None of the above/other

Which parent had the primary job with the sponsoring organization?

- My father
- My mother
- My parents both worked for the sponsoring organization.

**Childhood context**

How old were you when your family first went overseas?

- I was born overseas.
- A baby (up to age 2)
- A toddler (age 2-4)
- Young school aged (age 5-10)
- Middle school aged (age 11 to 13)
- High school aged (age 14 to 17)

Which statement is true about your parents and how they encouraged you to interact with the host culture?

- I remember my parents encouraging me to interact frequently with the host culture, for example, to make local friends and learn the local language.
- I remember my parents encouraging me to immerse myself in the host culture.
- I don't remember my parents encouraging me to interact with the host culture.
- I don't remember one way or the other.

APPENDIX C

TCK INDICATORS SURVEY

## **TCK Indicators Survey**

### **Introduction and Consent**

The purpose of this survey is to see how your TCK background has influenced your personal choices, interests and preferences as an adult. At any point, you can choose not to respond to a question.

This survey will take about five minutes or less to complete. By clicking "I agree" below, you consent to participate in this survey.

I agree to participate in this survey.

### **Personal information**

Your name

### **Education and Career**

In the next part of the survey, you will read a statement and have three options to choose from. "Yes" means that this statement is true for you. "No" means that this statement is not true for you. Many questions have a "maybe" choice which means sometimes this may be true and sometimes not.

There are four categories in this survey - education and career, likes and preferences, abilities and strengths, and thoughts and behaviors.

I graduated from college with an undergraduate degree.

- Yes  
 No

I studied/am studying an advanced or graduate degree.

- Yes  
 No

My TCK background influenced what I studied in college to a significant degree.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I changed colleges or majors a few times.

- Yes
- No

I currently have a job outside the home.

- Yes
- No

I work in the education, medical or legal field.

- Yes
- No

I am self-employed.

- Yes
- No

My job is very different from what my parents did when they lived overseas.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I work for a large corporation.

- Yes
- No

I work for the government.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

My job/career has an international dimension to it.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I like to be independent at work.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

### **Abilities and Strengths**

I am able to interact in other languages (even if I don't get a chance to use my other languages often).

- Yes
- No



I am comfortable in a variety of different settings.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I am comfortable relating to a wide variety of people.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I can establish friendly rapport with a wide variety of people quickly.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I often help people who look unsure of themselves, e.g. someone that looks like they might not speak the local language well and are struggling to communicate.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I am good at handling unexpected or difficult situations  
(even though they're not fun to handle).

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I am good at mediating conflict (even if I don't like to mediate conflict).

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

When faced with an unexpected problem, I am good at coming up with quick, improvised answers that work.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I am good at tolerating ambiguity.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I am good at being flexible with people and situations.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

### **Likes and Preferences**

I have traveled abroad as an adult.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I find international travel enjoyable.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I like meeting people from different countries.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I tend to look for opportunities to meet people from different countries.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I like opportunities to try new foods from other countries.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

**Thoughts and behavior**

I tend to feel like I don't fit in with my available peer group.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I feel like I am indecisive about big life choices, e.g. choosing a place to live, a career or a life partner.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

In a new situation, I tend to do what other people around me are doing so I don't draw attention to myself.,

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I have contradictory opinions about the world.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

In a new situation, I wait until I figure out how I'm supposed to act.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I prefer to keep my inner life (memories, stories, thoughts) to myself, unless I am confident someone will understand me.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

I feel like I have a broader, more global identity than most of my peers.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

APPENDIX D  
REPATRIATION SURVEY

## Repatriation Survey

### Introduction and Consent

This survey looks at how you remember your repatriation experience. The first part is a short demographic element and the second part asks you how much you agree or disagree with statements about your repatriation experience. At any point, you can choose not to respond to a question.

The survey should take you less than 10 minutes to complete.

Here are some definitions to guide you:

**Host country** - this is the country where you lived that is NOT your passported country. If you lived in multiple countries as a child, please choose the one where you felt the most affinity before you repatriated. For example, if you were born in Venezuela and then moved to Russia when you were four years old and stayed in Russia until you repatriated to Canada, where your parents are from, Russia would be your "host country".

**Passported country** - this is the country where you have citizenship, either from birth or from your parents' citizenship. This is assumed to be the country you repatriated to. Repatriated - this refers to both the moment of repatriation as well as the adjustment time (however long it was) after you started to live in your passported country for an extended period of time (i.e. for school or a job). If you are unsure of what part of the repatriation process to focus on, think about the time that was the most intense for you.

**Peers or social group** - this is the group of people in either country (passport or host) that were available to you as potential friends (whether or not they actually became your friends). Your social group can include people within a school, community, neighborhood or church.

By clicking "I agree" below, you are consenting to participate in this survey.

I agree to participate in this survey

### Your information

Your name

What country did you repatriate to (typically your passport country)?

By the time you were 18, how many countries and/or cultures did you live in (for 9 months or longer)?

How old were you when you repatriated the last time? (If there were several times you repatriated, pick the most recent one, when you stayed the longest).

What was the main reason you repatriated the last time?

Have you ever returned to your host country (or one of your host countries) as an adult?

- Yes, I have.
- No, and I have no desire to return.
- No, but I would love to go back for a visit.

Before I repatriated or shortly after, I attended a repatriation workshop or cultural orientation event.

- Yes
- To an extent
- No

Before I repatriated, I knew the experience would be a time of change and transition for me, even if I didn't know exactly what that would entail.

- Yes
- To an extent
- No



Before I repatriated, I looked forward to repatriation.

- Yes
- To an extent
- No

**Family context**

When I repatriated or shortly after, there was a significant life-changing event in my family (i.e. serious illness, divorce, death, etc.).

- Yes
- To an extent
- No

When I repatriated, or shortly after, there was a natural disaster or emergency (i.e. tornado, hurricane, flood, earthquake, fire) that significantly affected my or my family's lifestyle.

- Yes
- To an extent
- No
- 

Before I repatriated, there were some mental health issues (diagnosed or undiagnosed) with me or a member of my family.

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

## Identity

Before I repatriated, I had a good sense of who I was as a person.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Even though repatriation was a time of transition, I continued to have a good sense of who I am as a person through the process.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Overall, I remember my repatriation experience was

- Not bad
- A relief
- It had its ups and downs.
- Mostly bad
- Literally the worst time ever of my life.

APPENDIX E  
BELONGING SURVEY

## **Survey about TCKs and Belonging**

This survey looks at how adult TCKs perceive belonging in relation to family, friends and community. At any point, you can choose not to respond to a question.

The survey should take about five minutes to complete.

### **Definitions for this survey:**

**Family** - People related to you by blood (i.e. sibling) or law (i.e. mother-in-law). Can include immediate family (spouse/partner, children, siblings, parents), in-laws (or functioning like in-laws), or extended family (cousins, etc.).

**Friends** - a group of people you interact with, enjoy this interaction and feel some sort of reciprocated goodwill.

**Close friends** - People that you feel particularly close to, outside of your blood or in-law relatives. "Close" does not have to mean physical proximity although it does not exclude this definition.

**Acquaintances**- People that you are friendly with and may know their name, but you don't have much interaction with.

**Work**- This is non-parenting work that you get paid for.

**Repatriation** - For TCKs in this context, this is when you came to live in your passport country for an extended period of time, perhaps permanently, often for further education or a job.

By clicking "I agree" below, you consent to participating in this survey.

I agree to participate in this survey

**Your information**

What's your name?

Are you currently married/ in a long-term relationship?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Do you do non-parenting work and get paid for it?

- Yes
- No

Are you a parent?

- Yes
- No

**Family and belonging**

How much do you agree with these statements about your family?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel closer to members of my family, than to my friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Feeling close to my family is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My family "gets" me and values me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I live near my family or some family members that I feel close to.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am in regular contact with members of my family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer to spend time with my family more than my friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Parenting - how much do you agree with these statements about you as a parent?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I can be wholly myself around my kid(s).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being a parent helps me understand my childhood better.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have told my kid(s) stories about my TCK childhood.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Friends and belonging

How much do you agree with these statements about your friends?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I have different levels of friendship - close friends, more distant friends and some are only friendly acquaintances.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have friends that I could rely on in times of need.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have friends that I am in regular communication with.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having different levels of friendship is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I have a good amount of friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My friends are important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How did you meet your friends?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
My friends include many people from my TCK childhood.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I met most of my friends through my family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I met most of my friends through a work connection.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I met most of my friends through community connections (church, volunteer, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I met most of my friends when I was in college.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Close friends and belonging

How much do you agree with these statements about your close friends?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I have friends I feel close to.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I live near many friends I feel close to.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My close friends "get" and value me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like I can be wholly myself around my close friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having at least one close friend is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My close friends have an international connection of some sort.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel closer to some of my friends than I do to some of the family members I grew up with.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How did you meet your close friends?

	transition process.	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree
My close friends are people I met before I repatriated.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
My close friends are people I met during my repatriation and	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>		



Strongly  
disagree



	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
My close friends are people I met a while after I repatriated.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Community - neighbors and belonging

How long have you lived where you reside now?

How much do you agree with these statements about your neighbors?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I know some of my neighbors' names and usually greet them if I see them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My neighbors know who I am and what my name is.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think it is important to know your neighbors' names.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Feeling a sense of connection in my neighborhood or where I live now is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Community - other than work or neighbors

How much do you agree with these statements about other communities you may belong to, not including work or neighbors?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I belong to a social group (virtual or in- person) outside of family, work or my neighborhood.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I connect regularly with this community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think it is important to belong to a social group outside of family, work or my neighborhood.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like I belong in this community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What social groups do you participate in and what kind of connection do you feel with this group?

	I don't participate in this group	Shallow connection	Moderate connection	Close connection
Groups related to my kids' school or activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Religious group (i.e. church, synagogue, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Political group Volunteer organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Groups with similar interests (sports, book club, hobby, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

APPENDIX F  
POST-INTERVENTION SURVEY

## Post- Intervention Survey

Thank you for being part of my research project on adult TCKs. This is the final survey and asks you for your feedback about the website, the group discussions and what you may have learned from participating in this research project. Some of the questions are multiple choice answers and some questions are open ended. At any point, you can choose not to respond to a question and your responses will be anonymous. The survey should take about five minutes to complete.

- I agree to participate.

## Effectiveness of the TCK Watering Hole website

What did you like about the website?

What could be improved on the website?

What other topics about the TCK experience would you like to see included on the website in the future?

Would you recommend the TCK Watering Hole to other TCKs?

- Yes I would.
- No I would not recommend it.
- I don't know.

Approximately how much time each week did you spend engaging with the website?

- About 15 minutes a week or less
- About 30 minutes a week
- About an hour a week
- More than an hour a week

Was the content on the website presented or written in an engaging way?

- Mostly, yes
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- 

### **Effectiveness of the discussion group**

How many of the small discussion groups did you attend?

- I attended all 4.
- I attended 3 groups.
- I attended 2 groups.
- I attended 1 group.

What topic in the small discussion groups resonated with you most?

What activity in the discussion group resonated with you most?

What topic did not you enjoy discussing?

Why do you think this topic was not enjoyable?

What activity was your least favorite? Why?

What other TCK-related topics would you interested in learning about?

What could be improved next time during the group discussions?

### **Online modality for discussion groups and activities**

Did you like the online format for the discussion groups and activities? Why or why not?

Were you given chances to engage with other participants in the discussion groups if you wanted to?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

Would you participate in an online discussion group again if you had the opportunity?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Would you recommend online discussion groups like you participated in to other TCKs?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Was the facilitator's pacing of the discussion groups good?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

Was there something about the facilitation of the discussion groups that could be improved?

### What you knew about TCKs before you participated in this research study

How much did you know about TCKs before you participated in this research study?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I was familiar with the term "Third Culture Kid".	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I could define the term "Third Culture Kid".	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Terms like "missionary kid" or "diplomat brat" were more familiar to me than TCK.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I had attended a repatriation or cultural orientation event in the past.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I had already read David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken's book, Third Culture Kids.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I could explain to my friends why I felt "different" than people around me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Before you participated in this research study, how much would you have agreed with these statements?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly disagree
I am pretty satisfied with my sense of belonging now.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It has been hard to create a sense of belonging as an adult.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I wish I felt more like I belonged somewhere.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My family makes me feel most like I belong.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My friends make me feel most like I belong.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Before you participated in this research study, how much would you have agreed or disagreed with these statements?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I often reflected on my unique childhood and being raised internationally.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often spoke to my close non-TCK friends about my TCK background.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often talked about my TCK background with a variety of people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### **Feedback on what you learned from participating in this research study**

Because of my participation in this research study, I understand my TCK background better.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Because of my participation in this research study, I understanding how my TCK experiences influenced who I am today.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

I think it is important for TCKs to understand how their intercultural experiences influenced who they are today.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

I feel more confident in my ability to explain myself and my TCK experiences to others now.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

I feel more confident about meeting future social or relational challenges after participating in this research study.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Because of my participation in this research, I have a better understanding about how I think about belonging.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

I understand more fully how my perspective on belonging was formed.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Because of what you learned during this research study, how much do you agree or disagree with these statements?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I have a better understanding of some of my past struggles to find belonging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel like I have some tools that I can use to find a deeper sense of belonging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have a better understanding of how I define belonging now.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

APPENDIX G

COMPLETED ARTIFACT FROM ACTIVITY IN WEEK 2

**“You might be a TCK if...”**

1. If you can think of a word in another language but not in English.
2. If you can't pronounce common English words but can rattle them off in another language.
3. If your top ten comfort foods from your childhood “aren't from around here”.
4. If you and your siblings keep secrets from your spouses, in plain earshot, by using another language.
5. When you embed artifacts from your past to make a significant present occurrence more personally meaningful. (see #6 as an example)
6. You walk down the aisle during your wedding to your host country's national anthem, as an homage to your past.
7. You can tell what country you are in by the air that comes in when the airplane door opens.
8. You have lots of “missed the plane” stories from multiple global airports.
9. You have a collection of old passports that you don't want to throw away because of the memories they hold.
10. You know how to give a variety of hand signals/gestures (appropriate and inappropriate ones!) from multiple cultures.
11. You have a wanderlust to travel.
12. You know better than to take Chinese visitors out to an American Chinese restaurant (unless the visitors have asked for the cultural experience).

13. You have the language skills to eavesdrop and understand non-English conversations between strangers.
14. Your math skills are subpar but you can accurately convert currency in your head.
15. Your kids' mouths drop open the first time they see you (their TCK parent) speaking another language to someone from that culture.
16. Your kids know world geography really well because you (their TCK parent) made sure of it.
17. You get told you couldn't possibly have lived in Africa because you're "not tan enough".
18. You get told that your English is "really good" when people find out that you grew up overseas.
19. You can understand any kind of world English (i.e. English spoken with different accents).
20. If you see someone who looks like someone from where you grew up with but when you try to speak to them in "their" language, they don't understand you.
21. You ask for the wrong kind of currency denomination at the bank (i.e. US\$25 bills instead of US\$20 bills)
22. You don't complain about the accented English of the tech support person who is helping you from another country.
23. You automatically mirror ways of speaking or accents from your childhood when you hear the accent or speaking pattern on the phone.

24. When you are with your childhood TCK friends, you incorporate ways of behaving and talking from the host culture automatically (such as bowing to each other).
25. You're not old enough to drink a beer in your passport country, but remember having easy access to buying alcohol in your host country.
26. You run into "blasts from the pasts" (people you knew) in airports.
27. (older TCKs) You remember a time when the cheapest and quickest form of communication was a snail mail aerogramme.



APPENDIX H

WEEK 1 - READINGS

## **Intervention Readings and Summary Presentation – Week 1**

### **Self-Authored Readings on TCK Watering Hole Website:**

1. Defining Third Culture Kids (TCKs)
2. Overview of experiences and thinking paradigms unique to TCKs

### **Reading 1: Defining Third Culture Kids (TCKs)**

#### **Who coined the term “TCK”?**

The term “TCK” was first constructed by sociologist Ruth Hill Useem when she was living and working in India in the 1960’s. She observed how a group of young men who were studying at a British-based school far away from their homes did not seem to fit in once they went back home. These young men came from their homes which represented one culture, studied and lived in second culture and upon returning home, had amalgamated these two cultural influences into a unique, third culture.

The term was then picked up by two missionaries, David Pollack and another Ruth – Ruth Van Reken, herself a TCK, and the child of a TCK. David and Ruth published their seminal book on TCKs in the late 1990s, based on their observations and experiences living a globally nomadic life and raising their own brood of TCKs. For TCKs who read this book and other writings of Pollack and Van Reken, this book was transformational; finally, there was a name and an explanation for them and their “betwixt and between-ness”. Most TCKs will tell you that reading this book made them feel seen and named for the first time in their lives. (If you are a TCK and have never read this book, I highly recommend you do. The most recent edition is the third,

published in 2017, and is greatly expanded from the older editions still circulating in globally nomadic communities.)

### **Definitions of TCKs:**

This is Pollack's original definition, from a writing in 1988, "An individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents' culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience." (Pollock, 1988). Two other TCK researchers, de Waal and Born's (2021) defined third culture as not being a national culture but "an interaction between the community of...expats and the local community" (p. 68).

Some people use the term "global nomad" and others use "transcultural". To my mind, a global nomad is an adult, who chose an internationally mobile life, not their children who had no say in the matter. I know plenty of adult TCKs who had a globally nomadic childhood due to their parents' career choices but as adults, these TCKs choose to stay put in one place and not traverse the world. "Transcultural" to me speaks of how a TCK may view themselves or the world – it's a word that implies a way of seeing yourself (identity) in relation to the world. Having a "transcultural" view of the world is not something that is unique to TCKs; a lot people from cross-cultural backgrounds (migrants, refugees, bi-cultural, bi-racial) may have this ability to live within and live across national and cultural boundaries. Ruth Van Reken coined the term "Cross cultural

kids” (CCK) to describe this large umbrella of people who experience more than one culture in their lifetime. (To find out more about CCKs, [click here](#).)

This is the definition of TCK that I use. A TCK is someone who, due to their parents’ choice of career and sponsoring organization, spent significant time during their developmental years in a culture or cultures other than their parental home culture and subsequently repatriated to a parental home culture for a sustained period of time. On this website, I use the word “TCK” to describe both the child (the “K” in TCK) as well as the phenomenon. I use the term “adult TCK” to talk about adults with a TCK background. The “kid” aspect is important (the “K”) because childhood experiences shape so much of who we are and how we view the world today. Your childhood does not determine your destiny but it certainly influences adulthood greatly.

Here’s why I think this definition is useful.

1. The definition shows three cultures – a culture other than (first culture) the parental home culture (second culture) and then repatriation (third culture).
2. This definition assumes that there is a family structure – i.e. parent(s) and at least one child. As a globally nomadic person will tell you, living abroad as a single person (or even a couple) versus a family are two vastly different experiences. There is so much more to figure out and worry about with children (“What about their education? What about medical care? What if they learn a language I don’t know?”)
3. It shows the significance of the parental decisions on the TCK’s life. Within the TCK community, the parental choice to move abroad is typically an unacknowledged

factor in shaping the TCK's subsequent identity. I describe why this is important elsewhere.

4. "Significant time" is undefined because it depends on what "significant" is for the individual. If a toddler went overseas with her parents and then repatriated after two years, that time might not be so significant. However, a teenager going abroad with his parents for two years might feel very significant. The significance depends not just on length of time in the host country, but also at what age one lived there.

5. The definition emphasizes the experience of repatriation. Repatriation assumes that the TCK or the family will stay put in the passport culture for a significant length of time – long enough to need a job or source of income, enroll the kids in school, to put down roots in a community. For many TCKs, repatriation is an intense psychological experience and process. TCKs grow up knowing that someday they will be expected to repatriate; what they don't expect is how bumpy the repatriation process often is.

This definition emphasizes how the past influences the present adult and is useful in that way. Pollock's definition is useful because it emphasizes the perspective of the TCK on the world. The definition of de Waal and Born is useful because it also emphasizes the two-way street of the TCK interacting with the world.

### **Backgrounds of TCKs**

Traditionally, TCKs have come from four backgrounds:

1. Diplomatic – i.e. their parent(s) worked for an embassy or on behalf of the passport government in the host culture

2. Missionary – i.e. their parent(s) worked for a religious organization, often Western Protestant Christian in the host culture
3. Business – i.e. their parent(s) worked for a multi-national or international company, usually as a business executive
4. Military – i.e. their parent(s) was a member of the military and was stationed in various host cultures

Anecdotally, TCKs with a missionary background are the largest group of people. This is because there are far more mission organizations and thus employment opportunities, particularly in the Global North, than there are overseas employment opportunities at multi-national companies or diplomatic posts. Military TCKs tend to be connected to countries that have sufficient geo-political influence to warrant the expense and logistics of maintaining large forces on bases overseas.

Recently, two more globally nomadic backgrounds have started to emerge. One is educational – for example, teachers or administrators at an international school, which tends to educate the children of expats living in a host culture. In 2017, an article in *The Atlantic*, put the number of international schools globally at over 8000, serving 4.5 million students. Although a figure for the number of personnel who educate and support these 4.5 million students was not given, one can extrapolate that the number is in the hundreds of thousands. The other kind of expat is an even newer phenomenon – so called “digital nomads”. These are usually young professionals working in the digital space and moving around the world as they desire. Digital nomads do not fit the traditional definition of a global nomad, which historically has assumed a sending or sponsoring

organization. Rather, digital nomads tend to be self-employed and thus can make their own decisions about where to go, as well as when and why. This is such a recent phenomenon, due to the increasing reliable access to the internet globally, that children born to digital nomadic parents are still young. It will be interesting to see in the next decade or two, what elements of TCKness the children of digital nomads share with TCKs from traditional backgrounds.

## **Reading 2: Overview of Experiences and Thinking Paradigms Unique to TCKs**

“Cross-cultural people” is a term coined by Ruth Van Reken in 2011, as a way to include and connect everyone that has more than one cultural experience that has significantly shaped them. You can learn more about them here.

Although TCKs share many experiences with cross-cultural people, there are three characteristics that separate TCKs from other kinds of cross-cultural people. These are global mobility during childhood, expectation of future repatriation, and system hierarchy identification.

**Global mobility** – This means that during the childhood, the family of the TCK moved from culture to culture. I use the word “culture” here because one country can include vastly different cultures within its national borders. With each inter-cultural move, the family had to essentially start again with building many of their belonging structures, i.e. making new friends and interacting with the neighborhood or wider community. In some cases, the TCK’s family stayed while the friends around them moved. So, some belonging structures were stable for a long period of time (maybe the

house and neighborhood the family lived in) while other belonging structures, such as friends, would have had to be rebuilt, each time a friend moved away.

A globally nomadic family expects to be globally mobile. A desire to experience other cultures may have been one of the motivations for the parents moving overseas. What most families don't expect is the powerful downside of inter-cultural moves – ambiguous loss and grief. I write more about these elements here.

**Future repatriation expectation** – Families who were sent overseas by a sponsoring organization have an expectation of repatriation to the parents' passport country (or one of the parents' passport country at least), at some point in the future. The parents may call this “going home” but for their children, this may not be experienced as “going home” but rather one more intercultural transition. The “home culture” that the parents think they know has inevitably evolved beyond the point where the parents left. As a result, stories and memories of “home” that the parents relay to their children often describe a world which no longer exists. Upon repatriation, both the parents and their children may expect to find this remembered world but cannot. The children's reaction to this discovery is usually experienced differently than the parents. For the parents, they may describe the cultural transition to their home culture as “reverse culture shock”; for the children, it can be experienced as yet another belonging structure that has to be rethought and reformed.

An expectation of future repatriation also means that the TCK grows up knowing that they do not really belong in a host culture. For some TCKs, this is merely “head” (intellectual) knowledge and when the moment comes to repatriate and the head



knowledge connects with the heart knowledge, it can be searing. Often a refrain one finds in the writings of adult TCKs is, “I cried the whole plane ride from X city to Y city.” Moments of head knowledge becoming reality like this example also feed into building what TCK author Lauren Wells calls your “grief tower” (see my references page for how to source this book). Simply knowing that you can’t stay in a host culture, with familiar friends and community (sometimes family) does not inoculate you from the loss that you feel when leaving.

**System hierarchy identification** - For adults with a Third Culture kid background, system hierarchy identification means that some of their identity creation as a child was influenced by the type of organization that sent their parents abroad. For the last century, there have been four types of sponsoring organizations – the military, diplomatic corps, multi-national business or education companies and religious missions. Each one of these organizations has its own internal systems, culture and unwritten expectations. If you talk to a TCK from a missionary background versus one from a military background, there will be many nodes of connection these two individuals share, but also significant difference. Similarly, TCKs who share the same organizational background – for example, two TCKs from missionary backgrounds – also may have significant differences between them in how the internal systems and culture of the organization affected their identity creation. Some organizations may have stricter rules or a more forceful influence than other similar institutions. System hierarchy identification tends not be as obvious to TCKs as an influence on their identity as the

other two characteristics. However, its influence should not be overlooked simply because it is hidden.

**Application of these characteristics** - These three characteristics define the experience of a TCK and separates them as a sub-category of the larger category of “cross-cultural people”. To illustrate this: migrants, a category of cross-cultural people, may share an experience of global mobility with TCKs, having moved from one culture to at least one other culture, but generally expect to remain in the new host culture and not repatriate, for example. Also, migrants wouldn’t necessarily have system hierarchy identification, meaning that their hybrid identity would be more influenced by the community where they live – an assimilated community or a diaspora of fellow migrants – and less by their employment, generally.

APPENDIX I

WEEK 2 - READINGS

## **Intervention Readings and Summary Presentation – Week 2**

### **Self-Authored Readings on TCK Watering Hole Website:**

1. What previous research says about adult TCKs
2. Three continuums unique to TCKs

### **Reading 1: What Previous Research Says About Adult TCKs:**

In my research, I am most interested in how a TCK background influences the rest of one's adult life, after repatriation and the whole cultural adjustment piece.

Although our childhood does not determine our destiny, it does shape who we are and as adults, our experiences impact us for, quite literally, the rest of our lives. I'm interested in how we as adult TCKs live with the intercultural influence of our childhood experiences and how it continually creates who we are and who we are becoming each day.

To date, I have only been able to find two large scale studies on the effects of a TCK childhood on adult lives. By "large scale", I mean more than 15 or 20 participants (also called "research subjects" but I think this term can objectify people needlessly) in the research study. Large scale is important because that is the only way you can see true trends, commonalities and differences that are shared by many people. But "large scale" also means different things, depending on what you are researching. If you were trying to understand what flavor of ice cream was preferred, a poll of a 2000 people would answer your question more thoroughly than a poll of 20 people. For medical research, the gold standard is to recruit thousands of people from diverse backgrounds, genders and ages. In social sciences, for example the field of education, a researcher might only want to study

an issue located in a classroom or school and so the researcher wouldn't need thousands of participants.

The first large scale study was conducted by the “mother” of the term, “Third Culture”, Ruth Hill Useem (and her husband, John Useem), and another TCK researcher, Ann Baker Cottrell in the 1990's. Their findings were published in several international school articles and academic journals. You can locate a digitized version of five articles that were published from the study here.

Here are some of the findings from that time:

- TCKs tend to be better educated than their peers and completed bachelor degrees at four times the rate of the national average in the US at that time.
- TCKs tend to work in one of these four areas, and tend to be seek more independence in employment:
  - Education sector
  - Healthcare sector
  - Legal sector
  - Self-employed
- TCKs are internationally experienced and tend to carry that experience into many facets of their lives.
- TCKs adapt and relate easily to a diversity of people (even though they may not enjoy being adaptable).
- TCKs' national, ethnic (or racial) origins is not central to their identity. They feel they have a more global identity that transcends pre-determined categories.

- The kind of parental sponsorship that sent the family overseas greatly influences one's identity. Military-background TCKs tend to feel most comfortable repatriating of all the groups, because the strong national identity that is characteristic of the military bases.
- Although the majority of respondents remembered repatriation as being a difficult time, they reported feeling happy about the positive benefits their TCK background gave them as adults, subsequently.

**Gender differences were also noted in this study:**

- Women reported more concern with interpersonal relationships.
- Women reported more conflicting desires for both stability and mobility as adults.
- Men reported a greater satisfaction with how their adult lives have unfolded.

**The second study on adult TCKs:**

The only other study I could find on the impact of a TCK childhood on adult life was self-published by Tanya Crossman in 2022. Crossman looked at Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) which are traumatic incidents (physical and sexual abuse, alcoholic parents, etc.) experienced during childhood. ACEs are well-defined, well-established indicators that psychologists and sociologists use to determine the level of childhood trauma that an individual might have experienced. Unsurprisingly, a high ACE score has been shown to negatively impact adult life, including raising incidents of mental disorders, suicide attempts and other high-risk behaviors. In contrast to ACEs, there are PCEs, or Positive Childhood Experiences. PCEs can include things like feeling safe and protected by an adult in the home, a supportive family during difficult times and being

accepted and heard by loved ones. The higher the score on PCEs, the better it mitigates the negative impact of an ACE. In other words, generally speaking, if there have been a lot of positive things in your childhood, you tend to navigate a bad experience with more resilience and fewer psychological injuries than if you had a childhood that was full of negative experiences.

Here are those findings:

- The TCK population reported a higher incidence of ACEs than the regular population in the countries where this study occurred
- The more moves one had experienced, the higher their ACE score (i.e. 15 houses or more during childhood)

## **Reading 2: Three Continuums Unique to TCKS**

### **Introduction**

TCK experiences are as diverse and varied as the cultures and subcultures of the world. In addition to external cultural factors and individual events that shape a TCK during childhood, factors such as inherent personality traits, birth order in the family (which affects the length of time a TCK lives in a host culture), and the family culture itself, all play a part in who the TCK becomes as an adult. Like the proverbial story about the blind people each describing a different part of an elephant, the experience of living in the host culture is shared by the entire family — but how the experience is interpreted and understood differs for each member of the family.

TCKs have been described as a bundle of contradictions, or (my personal favorite eye-rolling term), “encapsulated marginals”. I don’t like either term because they call out TCKs as being uniquely contradictory and weird, compared to others, which is not true. One only needs to have a teenager in the family to realize how contradictory we all are in our lives. TCKs are not unique in this regard.

I prefer to think of the influences that have shaped our lives as TCKs as currents in a body of water, like a lake or ocean. In an ocean, as National Geographic’s definition says, currents are continuous, predictable and directional movements of water and are driven by gravity, wind and water density. I think of these currents in our lives like the big, important motivations – being loved, belonging, wanting to make a difference in the world in some way, to name a few. Lake currents are more unpredictable and smaller and are affected by the wind as well as other factors, such as shape of different lakes, according to the Britannica. I think of these types of currents as being the unique experiences that are individual to each TCK – i.e. different host cultures, personality, etc.

Because we are humans, not bodies of water, we all have these two kinds of currents in our lives, shaping how we think and act. These two kinds of life-currents help us understand the commonalities TCKs share as well as their differences. The influences of these life-currents can be seen in three continuums that are unique to TCKs. I’ll write more about what continuums are and describe each of them, but for now, the three continuums are:

1. Mobile versus stationary
2. Hidden versus revealed



### 3. Close versus far from the familial tree

#### **Defining a continuum:**

Think of a continuum like a ruler. A ruler simply tells you how long something is. There is no “right or wrong” measurement on the ruler. There is no “right or wrong” place to be on a TCK continuum; you simply are where you are.

Rulers also depend on context, meaning what you are measuring. Continuums also depend on context, for example, personality traits. An introverted sibling and an extroverted sibling might land on very different points on a TCK continuum. Another context for TCKs is the particular time of life one is thinking about. For example, TCK who is a young adult with few care-given obligations (i.e. not a parent or not taking care of an elderly family member, for example) will probably move to a different part of their continuum once they are older and are parents or taking care of someone else.

Continuums describe where one may land at different points in life (i.e. lake currents) and highlight the contrasting differences between TCKs. Let me describe each of the three continuums that are unique to TCKs in detail now.

#### **Mobile versus stationary continuum**

Some adult TCKs like to travel the world and may seek jobs and eventually create a lifestyle that allows them to do this. On the other end of the continuum are the adult TCKs who repatriated and stayed put in their passport country. They may be interested in traveling and may enjoy doing so, but they are not motivated by a need to travel, like those on the “mobile” end of the continuum may be.

Another place on this continuum are TCKs who may move occasionally between cultures. For example, these TCKs may have attended university in one culture, raised a family in a second culture and retired somewhere else.

### **Hidden versus revealed continuum**

This is about how TCKs portray their cross-cultural backgrounds in social contexts and use their unique worldviews in everyday interactions.

“Hidden” means that the TCK does not talk about their cross-cultural background much or at all. “Revealed” means that the TCK talks about their cross-cultural background in everyday interactions.

There can be many reasons for people who land on one end of the spectrum or another and this is a very context-dependent continuum. One reason may be that the TCK did not spend that much time in a host culture and therefore does not feel it has played a significant role in their life, compared to other events. Conversely, individual TCKs may feel that their experiences in host cultures were one of the most significant things that has occurred to them in their lives.

Both of these reasons are perfectly legitimate and healthy. However, there are other, less optimal reasons to fall on one side of the continuum or another. One reason can be that the TCK may still be processing a recent intercultural transition, such as repatriation. (I explore repatriation in another part of this website.) The TCK may not be sure of how to put all the pieces of their identity, i.e. who they thought they were and who they are becoming, into a coherent, understandable compilation in the new cultural context. This is a normal process and an important part of navigating an intercultural

transition; it only becomes a concern as there is consistent evidence of other unhealthy behaviors or cognitive patterns attached to the transition, such as addictive or self-harming behaviors.

Another unhealthy reason for landing on this spectrum is fear and this is usually fear of what others will think of you, i.e. fear of rejection (which is the opposite of belonging). The long-term effects of living within such fear can be depression. At worst, living with such persistent fear can result in suicidal thoughts and at best, a general discontent with life, because too many essential parts of who you are may be starving for air.

### **Close to the familial tree versus far from the familial tree continuum**

This continuum is a reference to the adage, “That apple (i.e. person) doesn’t fall far from the family tree.” One end of this continuum is adult TCKs who do something very similar to their globally nomadic families. Two common examples are missionary kids who become missionaries themselves or military kids who join the armed forces. Another example could be a generational “throw back.” For example, maybe the TCK’s grandparents’ generation were farmers, the parents were globally nomadic and the TCK grandchild returns to work the land again in some 21st century fashion.

The other end of the continuum are those TCKs who do not follow in their parents’ or familial footsteps in significant ways. This may be a deliberate choice for the TCK; because they have had such a different childhood context than their parents experienced, the direction of their life-journey also diverges. However, it may be that this location on the continuum is a matter of perception and the TCK may not share the same perception. In other words, the TCK may identify several ways in which their life and

their parents' life are similar and these ways, while not obvious to an outsider, are significant to the TCK. For example, missionary parents might have been motivated to join a mission organization in order to help people and their child may be motivated by the same altruistic impulse to pursue a law degree. Although on the surface, a missionary and a lawyer look to be vastly different professions, the underlying incentive is shared.

### **Concluding thoughts**

There are undoubtedly more continuums that relate to the TCK experience than the ones I have outlined above. Many TCKs, myself included, have looked at their siblings and friends with whom they grew up and wondered how we could all be so different. If one thinks of differences like points on a continuum, it is much easier to understand the nature of the differences. If one thinks of the two different kinds of life-currents, the oceanic continuous, predictable currents and the unpredictable, context-dependent lake currents, this can help us understand the reasons why a TCK we know, is positioned on a different part of the continuum than us.

APPENDIX J

WEEK 3 - READINGS

## Intervention Readings and Summary Presentation – Week 3

### Self-Authored Readings on TCK Watering Hole Website:

1. Communication Identity Theory and TCKs
2. Why repatriation is so hard

### Reading 1: Communication Identity Theory and TCKs

#### Introduction to identity:

Identity is a sense of who you are. There are different ways to interpret the phrase “who you are” – is it who you think you are? Who you actually are? Who others think you are? What about changes over time to your sense of self? Do you have the same identity at age 2 as you do at age 22 or 62?

As you are going to find out, the answers to those questions are complex. There are thousands of articles, studies and books written about the topic of identity. In my professional life, I have worked primarily with teens and young adults. One of the questions that has occupied me in my work with teens is the question of “Who decides your identity?” Is it you or is it other people? Or rather, how much of the process of defining or creating who you are is up to you and how much of the process is determined by those around you?

Before I delve into this question, we need to orient ourselves to thinking about identity in all its complexity. First of all, *identity is like light*. If you remember your high school science classes, light is both a particle and a wave. Identity is one of those

“both/and” things we talk about and sometimes these “both/and” elements can be contradictory.

*Identity is layered.* When we talk about identity, we’re talking about all the external parts – what we can see – as well as all of our inner lives – what is invisible. Identity is also intertwined with belonging. How you see yourself largely determines with whom and where you’re going to find a sense of belonging. Although there is only a little research on this, it seems as though TCKs have more layers to their identity than non-TCKs.

Another thing to know about identity is that *it is created as well as innate* (something you’re born with) – this is one of those both/and statements. This means that as a person goes through life, there are external forces (experiences and people) and internal forces (our responses to experiences and our personalities) that shape who a person becomes. For a TCK, these experiences are inevitably bound up in culture and cultural transitions, which adds a different layer of complexity to an understanding of identity.

### **Introduction to Communication Identity Theory:**

Because identity is so complex, there are a lot of theories out there about different aspects of identity and its creation. It’s hard to choose one that fits the particular complexity of a TCK’s experience and authentically represents how identity is created and why cultural transitions are hard. The theory that seems to fit the bill for me is Communication Identity Theory (CIT). This was developed by a psychologist, Hecht, in the 1980’s and divides identity into four interacting, interconnected layers, or “frames” as

Hecht called them – the personal frame, enacted frame, relational frame and communal frame. Let me define these frames and then I'll talk about why this is important to the TCK experience.

**Personal frame** - this is how individuals think about themselves, for example, a child thinking “I'm good at math”.

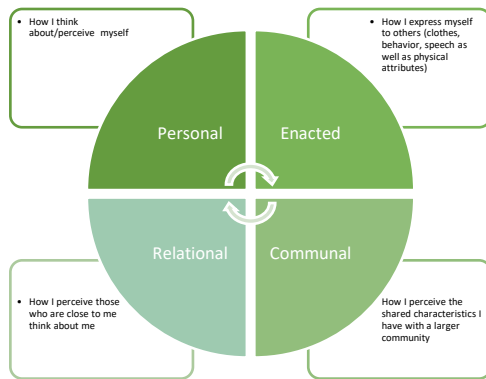
**Enacted frame** - this is how individuals express their identity to others, through their behavior, words, choice of clothes – the visible, external parts. A child who thinks “I'm good at math” may help a friend with math homework after school – this is an action that is born of the child's personal view of self.

**Relational frame** - this includes the messages that one gets from the close people around an individual. By “close”, I mean people you interact with regularly or whose opinion means a lot to you. For the example above, this may be a parent saying to the child as well as family friends, “My kid is smart and really good at math”.

**Communal frame** - this frame is defined by shared characteristics by the larger community. For example, a child who is good at math may be enrolled in a more challenging math class at school – “We're all good at math which is why we are in the 'smart' class”.

Here is a graphic representation of these four frames:





In the simple example above about the child who is good at math, you can see how there is agreement between the four frames. The child is getting a consistent message both from their internal opinion of self, their actions and both close relationships (close friends and family) and distant ones (i.e. classmates). The psychological term for this is “identity coherence” or “identity matching”. In other words, all four frames agree with each other and reflect the same idea back at the child – “You are/I am good at math.”

**Communication Identity Theory and a TCK Background:**

In order to show how Communication Identity Theory explains some of experiences and feelings a TCK might have, let’s imagine a hypothetical but typical TCK:

Mike is a white missionary kid who was born in the Midwest of the United States and moved to a small village in Sub-Saharan Africa at age 2. Because young kids have few requirements for making friends, Mike becomes good friends with the village children. When he is six, he goes to a small boarding school a few hours away from his family in a town, where there are kids from other expat, mostly missionary, American families. The curriculum and cultural underpinnings at the school are based on American

standards. When Mike is 12 years old, his family is transferred to Hong Kong where he attends an international high school and lives at home. Most of the students and staff at the international school were from some British Commonwealth country (the UK, Australia, New Zealand, etc.) and the curriculum and cultural underpinnings at this school are from Great Britain. At age 18, Mike repatriates to the United States, for college in one of the midwestern states that his parents are from. Up until he repatriates, he has only visited the United States on furloughs and family trips, for short times.

Let's consider these four frames of Communication Identity Theory for Mike. From age 2 to 6, he lives in the small village and learns to speak the local language from his village friends. Because small children are sponges, primed to learn, he also learns how to act appropriately within the local culture. Of course, these behaviors are probably different than how he acts at home – for example, he may eat cross-legged on the floor with his right hand at the home of one of his village friends, but is expected to sit at a dining table and use cutlery at home. You can see how Mike is already developing different enacted frames (how you behave around others) and relational frames for the two contexts he intersects – his village friends and his home life. Before age 6, he is undoubtedly quite skilled at traversing these two contexts easily and unconsciously and knows what is expected of him in each in order to act appropriately and belong.

A third layer of frames is introduced when he goes off to boarding school. Going off to a boarding school may put an unwanted psychological distance between him and his village friends. Although not rich by American standards, by local village standards,

the missionary family is wealthy enough to afford to send their children to a good school. The psychological distance marks a shift in Mike's communal frame of identity (i.e. how the surrounding village perceives him). The longer he attends the boarding school, the less he feels part of the village. The influence of the village communal frame is replaced by the students and staff at the boarding school. Although he may still be fluent in the local language, he never learns to read or write the language (indeed, the language may not even be written yet). In boarding school, because most of the people there are of American extraction, he learns about the history of American and implicitly picks up on the unspoken cultural messages about how to act and think like the Americans at the school. The communal, relational, enacted and personal frames of Mike's growing identity match for the most part, although because he still lives in an African country, there is an additional layer of behavior, thought and knowledge about the local culture that he possesses.

The move to Hong Kong presents a cultural identity shift for Mike. On the first day of school, a student asks Mike where he is from and Mike replies with name of the African country where he just lived. The class erupts into laughter at the thought of a white boy being from the continent of Africa. Unconsciously, Mike realizes that he will have to completely change his enacted and communal frames of identity, as well as some of his personal frame, if he wants to make friends at the new high school. In record time, he learns to speak with a British accent at school and use British vocabulary. Although it is a struggle, he also applies himself to filling in the gaps of learning he has, since he

switched from an American-based curriculum to a British-based curriculum. He learns the rules of rugby and cricket and joins the school's team.

Applying the four frames of Communication Identity Theory, we can see how Mike's nascent identity is getting more and more layers within the four frames and how the four frames no longer match well. In his personal frame, Mike now has a small piece of himself that is African and a growing piece that is a British expat, while still retaining the biggest cultural influence on his life to date, his American home life. In his enacted frame, he has learned to switch easily between a British international high school context and his American family home life. His relational frame, meaning his close relationships such as family and best friends, also requires switching back and forth of British expat and American expat frames. His communal frame is mostly influenced by the British international high school but he has also learned to interact within the local culture of Hong Kong. Perhaps he has picked up enough spoken Cantonese to order food and enough written Chinese to find his way around the city on public transportation. The bustle and commotion of everyday life in Hong Kong, a city that never sleeps, becomes the familiar to Mike.

Having developed a sophisticated way of navigating his expat American family life, his expat British high school life and to a degree, his local Hong Kong context, another shift in his four frames comes at the point of repatriation, when he returns to the Midwestern United States to start college.

Although Mike has visited the United States often as a child, he has never lived there.

Moving from urban Hong Kong to a small midwestern college town is a huge cultural

change, which is made worse because Mike didn't expect the change. He has always felt "American" in his personal and relational frames of identity yet living in America makes him feel less and less "American". American football is nothing like rugby and no one has heard of cricket being a sport. Although he tries to sound like he is American in order to fit in, occasionally a British word or way of pronouncing a word will slip out, which does not endear him to the very mono-cultural community of potential friends.

Once again, another layer of cultural identity is slowly added to his four frames of identity. In time, Mike learns to mute the elements of his personal, enacted and relational identities that are not in harmony with his new context, in order to make friends and find belonging. When the four frames of identity do not match, this is known as "identity dissonance".

### **Identity dissonance**

Identity dissonance is a difficult place to be. If a TCK has ever said to you, "I don't know who I am," this can be an indication of identity dissonance. Every TCK feels a degree of identity dissonance when they have an intercultural transition, like repatriation, but for some TCKs, the identity dissonance can feel insurmountable and seems to linger. Observing a child or sibling going through identity dissonance can be stressful for the TCK's family too.

Some identity dissonance is an unsurprising result of a big life change, such as an intercultural move or experiencing some sort of loss, both of which are key components of a TCK's experience. For many TCKs, however, intercultural moves can come at a time in their lives when they are undergoing a rapid and dramatic evolution of their own

understanding about themselves, i.e. as a teenager or young adult. So this time – an intercultural move AND being a tween/teenager/young adult - can be a double whammy for TCKs. Although identity dissonance is one the most studied areas in the TCK arena (many a psychological doctoral dissertation has been written on this topic), I think there are a lot of misconceptions about this time in the expat and TCK eco-systems. I write about one of these misconceptions (“prolonged adolescence”) here.

### **Identity coherence**

In time, identity dissonance coalesces into some form of identity coherence for an adult TCK. By “identity coherence”, I mean that the four frames of identity match closely. What identity coherence between the four frames looks like varies from TCK to TCK. The layers of cultural influence on identity are still present, even if they aren’t used extensively in day-to-day life.

Elsewhere I have written about TCK researchers Useem and Cottrell’s survey in the late 1990’s on the effects of a TCK childhood on adulthood. Many of their findings point to a sense of identity coherence that the survey respondents reported developing over time. While you can read the original findings reported here, two of the findings are significant to the topic of identity coherence.

The researchers found that TCKs are internationally experienced and tend to carry that experience into many facets of their lives. One of these facets is what the researchers called a “rich inner life”, which they did not define, but is something I have observed in many TCKs who have been kind enough to pull back the veil for me and share some glimpses of their inner lives. Our inner thoughts and lives are the most private of all yet I

continue to be amazed and delighted by the TCKs who take all their intersectionality of experience, hybrid identities, transcendence of categories and “chameleon-ness” and channel it into their work, their parenting, their relationships and their lives.

**Why Communication Identity Theory is useful for TCKs:**

Communication Identity Theory (CIT) is useful to the TCK context because it explains why cultural transitions are so hard and why repatriation can be the hardest of all intercultural transitions. It also explains the layers of complexity that make up a TCK’s sense of self and interactions with the world; i.e. their identity.

CIT is also useful in explaining a lot of things about identity for other kinds of cross-cultural people. It can be applied to a migrant family situation where the parents and their kids have vastly different interacting frames. Many migrant kids report feeling the burden of being expected to live in a way that their parents find culturally appropriate and these ways don’t fit with how the kids see themselves, because they’ve had different experiences informing their identity frames than their parents. Also, adults tend to have much more developed sense of self, something that comes with age, compared to their kids and this can become another point of friction between the migrant parents and their kids. This is one example but CIT can be applied to all the other experiences of different types of cross-cultural people.

## **Reading 2: Why repatriation can be so hard**

### **Introduction:**

Out of all the cultural transitions, most TCKs will tell you that repatriation is usually the most challenging of all. Repatriation is when the TCK (and perhaps the globally nomadic family) moves to their passport country/culture for a sustained period of time.

Typically, repatriation for TCKs is prompted by distinct events, such as:

1. **Emergency** – this is when the family or TCK was not planning to repatriate but due to an emergency, such as political unrest or a serious illness in the family, repatriation becomes unexpectedly necessary.
2. **Educational needs** – this is when the TCK is ready for the next step in education and the passport country is deemed to present the best opportunities or be the most convenient option. The TCK may be starting university or finishing off secondary education (high school). The family may repatriate with the TCK, although this decision would need to take many factors into consideration – job changes, the other children and parental life goals.
3. **Employment change** – this is when the parent(s) have a change in their employment or roles within the sponsoring organization, which necessitates repatriation.

### **The psychology of repatriation:**

TCKs typically grow up expecting to repatriate at some point. This knowledge shapes their sense of belonging within the host culture, even if they are not aware of it.



This is particularly true for TCKs who have low global mobility patterns, i.e. they grow up in one or two cultures during their childhood. Although the TCK may feel a deep affinity for the host culture, they know they *do not* and *cannot* belong geographically, culturally or legally to the culture. This knowledge of “what could not be” is part of the grief that many TCKs report feeling as they leave their host culture.

Another way this expectation of repatriation shapes the psychology of a TCK is in relation to the passport culture. TCKs may draw some parts of their identity from an affinity for their passport culture. “My family is French and someday, I will go live in France.” This affinity may give the TCK a way to feel belonging, which can be a source of stability, particularly during a tough time after moving to another country. This fondness for the passport country is often reinforced by the family’s occasional visits, which are typically imbued with positive memories about experiencing fun events (for example, going to an amusement park for the first time) and the joy of seeing loved ones again.

The examples above assume one passport culture, shared by the parents. This is assumption is merely for simplicity’s sake. There are many TCKs (and CCKs) whose parents may be from different cultures and the children may have passports, and thus citizenship, from both. Clearly, if this is the case, the psychology of repatriation is more layered and complex. A TCK might wrestle with questions such as, “Repatriation to which passport culture? Do I feel a stronger affinity towards one passport culture over the other? Is one parental culture not available to the TCK as an option for repatriating (i.e.

poor job or education choices or political unrest?” Such questions illustrate the intricate layers that a TCK who has other cross-cultural connections, may have to consider.

For simplicity’s sake, I will continue to assume one shared parental passport culture with full recognition that some TCKs will not fit this model.

**The mythology of the passport culture:**

Inevitably, after the globally nomadic family leaves their passport culture, life moves on for everyone. The rupture that the departure of the family caused within the immediate family or circle of friends closes over in time. Society, culture and events move forward in time. People change; places of residence change – for better or for worse. Although the globally nomadic family may return periodically for visits to the passport country and notice signs of change, the full depth of what it means to live “back home” again cannot be fathomed on short, occasional visits. Once the family repatriates, this change is experienced as “reverse culture shock” – a feeling that what was once familiar has changed beyond all recognition. Every returning global nomad experiences some degree of so-called reverse culture shock but the intensity of this feeling depends on a variety of factors, including the extent of change and the inherent personalities of the repatriates.

Because of the inevitable evolution over time that society undergoes, the stories the parents tell their children about life in the passport culture (“home” for the parents) are not accurate descriptions of life as it is currently. The stories represent a past time, a mythology that may no longer be relevant now. Although the parents and children know that parental stories about “when I was a child” are located in a specific moment in the

past, these stories inform much of the implicit cultural knowledge a child learns about the passport culture. By “implicit cultural knowledge”, I mean things that are not directly taught to the child but are either implied, assumed or experienced. How one greets a friend on the street appropriately is an example of implicit cultural knowledge. What kind of birthday present is adequate to give at a party would be another example.

### **The repatriation experience:**

The cultural knowledge received from parents and the memories of vacation-esque experiences in the passport culture are the two structures of understanding available to TCKs at the point of repatriation. TCKs quickly realize that these structures are inadequate for navigating the challenges of life in their new culture. The cultural knowledge proves to be shallow or inaccurate, given the context the TCK is in. In addition to these structures being inadequate as frames of references, there may be other psychological factors that make the cultural transition harder. I write about these 15 factors here ([link to intercultural transitions page](#)). Along with these factors, the TCK is most likely also struggling with ambiguous loss over leaving their host culture and have unresolved and hidden grief as a result.

Inevitably, during the repatriation process, the TCK undergoes an identity shift. I write more about identity shifts ([link to cultural identity shifts page on website](#)) and how identity is created ([link to communication identity theory](#)) elsewhere. Who the TCK thought they were, is no longer who they seem to be. (The majority of psychology dissertations on the topic of TCKs are written about recently repatriated TCKs and identity.)

I want to emphasize that some degree of identity dissonance and a reforming of belonging structures is experienced by all TCKs during repatriation. Identity dissonance and redefining belonging are normal reactions and part of the cultural adjustment process. However, the experience and degree of this process differs for each TCK. Some TCKs remember the repatriation process as the worst time of their lives; others do not share these harrowing stories to such an extent.

Many TCKs go through the repatriation process on their own, apart from familiar belonging structures such as family (parent or siblings) or friends. Even if a close friend or member of the family is present (i.e. two siblings or two best friends repatriate together) for the TCK, this may not be the positive force parents undoubtedly hope for. Like a drowning person clutching desperately at their rescuer, if one repatriated TCK is experiencing extreme psychological distress, such as contemplating suicide or struggling with addictions, this can unbalance the other well-meaning TCK sibling or friend, pulling both of them down.

The difference between these two continuums of experiences seems to be the accessibility and quality of relevant, desired belonging structures for the TCK. Belonging structures are psychological spaces where one *feels* one belongs, such as friends or family. Belonging and identity are deeply connected; how you think of yourself is where you are going to look to others for belonging.

In other words, TCKs need to find friends or family members in the passport culture where they can feel belonging. The difficulty lies in finding these kinds of people

who fit the categories of accessibility, quality, relevance and desirability. Belonging is a two-way street; it's not enough to *want* to belong; you have to *feel* like you belong.

### **Life after repatriation:**

Although TCKs have grown up with the often-unstated expectation that someday, they will repatriate, the reality of repatriation is inevitably a shock. Life in the passport country is not the fun vacation experience that the TCK remembers from childhood. There are jobs to be had, education to be gotten, bills to be paid, the trajectory of an adult life to set up. TCKs may remember this time as a liminal space. "Liminal" means between two places, feeling as though one were neither one place or another. In this place of in-betweenness, it can be difficult to have a clear picture of where one is heading, or even decide where one wants to head on the trajectory of adult life.

As parents of TCKs will testify, having a child far away going through liminal experiences can feel extremely unnerving and often the parents don't even know the half of what their TCK is feeling or experiencing. The parents hope their repatriated children "find themselves". Because the parents undoubtedly still remember the home country of their younger years, the parents may not fully realize the extent of transitions their child is experiencing and how disconcerting it is to live liminally every day. The geographical distance between the parents and their young adult TCK may compound the anxiety the parents feel about their child's wellbeing. The parents may sense that all is not well with their child, but have no idea how to help.

In time, the pain and disruption of repatriation subsides and the young adult evolves. A sense of identity and self is reformed and somehow the TCK pushes through

the in-betweenness to find a semblance of coherence, and, hopefully, meaning in their lives post-repatriation. Anecdotally (because this is not an area that is researched), the quickest I have seen this transition from repatriation to a more stable sense of self and happiness, is about five years. It is perfectly normal for the process to take longer.

Many TCKs point to at least one significant relationship that helped them out of the liminal space into a more secure, defined existence. Typically, this is a best friend, a close family member or someone who becomes the TCK's spouse. Without a meaningful, understanding relationship, the process of moving through liminality can be prolonged and painful. I write more about coping with identity dissonance [here](#).

APPENDIX K

WEEK 4 - READINGS

## **Intervention Readings and Summary Presentation – Week 4**

### **Self-Authored Readings on TCK Watering Hole Website:**

1. Three definitions of belonging
2. Belonging structures and the TCK
3. Issues adult TCKs may have with making friends

### **Reading 1: Three Definitions of Belonging**

#### **Introduction:**

The need to belong is a fundamental need of humans. The social psychologist, Abraham Maslow, ranked belonging right after the basic physical needs like air, water, food and shelter. In other words, the need to belong is almost as essential as breathing. We need to belong because our social nature as human beings; to not belong would be like trying to breathe on the moon without a spacesuit. Without air, you die physically; without belonging, you die psychologically (and maybe physically).

Belonging is one of those things that everyone instinctively recognizes and knows its feeling, but we find it hard to define. Who decides who belongs? How do we belong? Why do we feel belonging some places but not others? And why do we want to belong but others may not want us to belong.

This is my attempt to explain belonging, what it is and isn't. Elsewhere I write about TCKs and our unique understanding of belonging.

#### **Three definitions:**



Here are three definitions I have found useful. (References can be found on the resources and reviews page.)

Strayhorn (2012), a psychologist writing about college students and belonging, explained belonging as the “degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group”. This definition assumes belonging is social, i.e. that one is part of a group in some meaningful way. Another word for this kind of belonging might be “community” and often these words are used interchangeably by researchers.

Another definition I found useful was given in the context of a life change. Hagerty and her medical colleagues looked at elderly patients and how they adjusted after moving to a senior living center. Hagerty (1993) defined belonging as bi-directional. Hagerty wrote that belonging is both a perception that one is valued by others as well as fitting in with others.

Brene Brown, a psychology researcher, studies courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, all of which connect to the concept of belonging. She defines belonging as “being part of something bigger but also having the courage to stand alone, and to belong to yourself above all else.”

### **Application of the definitions:**

The first definition (Strayhorn’s) is useful because it locates belonging in a group (and a group can be two people). But for me, that definition doesn’t go far enough.

I like the second definition (Hagerty’s) because it shows that belonging is a two-way street - it’s my fitting in with others as well as getting signals back that I’m doing a good

job fitting in and am valued in some way. It's the "fitting in" that a lot of TCKs struggle with. "Fitting in" doesn't just mean looking like I belong to a group and dressing, speaking or behaving in a particular way. "Fitting in" has several interacting components, all of which have to work together in order to create this bi-directional belonging. I have to want to fit into a particular group or context and then I have to behave in ways that will indicate this desire. I also have to get cues of approval and indications that my involvement is valued from the group or context where I want to fit in and I have to feel that these cues and indications are important. To illustrate this, consider how you may have felt if there was a clique in a social context (maybe a new work context) and you were excluded. You may have wanted to fit into the clique and were behaving in ways that indicated your desire and good fit for the social group. But as cliques are wont to do, you were not getting cues of approval or demonstrations that your involvement was valued. This example is a common description of attempts to belong going wrong that we are undoubtedly all familiar with.

A less commonly discussed example of fitting in breaking down is when the opposite occurs. In other words, you get indications of approval and that your involvement in a social group is important but you no longer want to fit into that group and behave in ways that will help you fit. An example of this may be a job or career you've outgrown. It's been my observation that this is the more challenging place to be, out of the two instances. It is especially difficult when this occurs within a belonging structure that has been a long-term and important part of your existence, such as a long-term relationship or a group of friends that used to be close.

The third definition (Brown's) brings in the personal element. I think this is also an area that TCKs struggle with – learning to be comfortable with all of our complexity and with that acceptance, learning to belong to ourselves. This third definition also brings in the concept of identity. How can I belong to myself if I don't know who "myself" is? Many adult TCKs have told me that they find the well-intentioned advice "just be yourself" unfathomable. Which kind of "self" is a TCK supposed to be when one has developed many different facets of oneself, through living in a variety of cultural contexts? Most TCKs feel as though they have a different version of themselves for each of the cultures where they spent a meaningful amount of time (which is defined less as a length of time and more as the quality of the intercultural experience). A useful metaphor here would be a closet full of different kinds of clothes – work clothes, weekend clothes, exercise clothes, wedding clothes, etc. – that we exchange throughout our day as appropriate to the context.

However, as we grow to be adults, we find it expedient to mute many of those authentic selves in order to fit in more fully to the context where we find ourselves. In other words, there are clothes in our closet that we'd like to wear but never seem to get the chance to wear. In time, this constant muting and sublimation of authentic parts of ourselves can lead to a pervasive feeling of discontent. As adult TCKs, in order to live fully, we need to learn positive ways of unmuting our many selves, without pushing love and everything else that is worthy of value out of our lives. Although belonging is far more important than clothes in a closet, the clothes metaphor is useful here as well. We

need to learn how and where to wear clothes that are important to us but that we may have shoved to the back of our closets because they didn't seem to fit anywhere.

### **Conclusion:**

My take aways from the three definitions offered above are that belonging is social (even if you are naturally introverted), there are many ways in which it can go wrong and finally learning to belong within yourself is a hard hill to climb. While these definitions don't solve the chronic problems many adult TCKs have with finding belonging, knowing what belonging is and how it works can help us identify areas where we feel belonging and areas where we don't. Recognizing these areas can help those of us who are stuck in the mindset of "but I should belong here" move to a better fitting place. Knowing more about belonging can offer us a roadmap as we continue to progress through our life's kaleidoscope of time and change.

## **Reading 2: Belonging Structures and the TCK**

### **Introduction:**

One of the words you may have seen used on this website is "belonging structures". This article explores what belonging structures are and how they may differ for TCKs.

Belonging structures are **the social systems** where people can find belonging. In other words, the structures are spaces where belonging can be found, if the conditions are right. I define belonging here. The word "social" implies that there are two or more

people involved as well as you. A system implies that there are interconnecting elements working together or an organized framework. A **family** (within all definitions of this word) is everyone's first experience with a belonging structure. As a person grows up, **friends** become an additional belonging structure. A final common belonging structure is a **community**, which simply means those around you that are not your friends or family. You may have work, spiritual or shared interest communities.

Below I explore each kind of belonging structure and break down how they may differ for TCKs.

### **Belonging Structure – Family:**

As I wrote above, unless you were born an orphan, family is typically everyone's first belonging structure. A family does not always include a DNA connection between people; however, for most people the word implies an intimate and sustained connection. Within the family structure, we learn what it means to belong, either for good or for bad. In other words, not every TCK comes from a loving, positive and supportive family, as Tanya Crossman's (2022) recently published paper on TCKs and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) indicated. (Adult TCK author, Skeeter Wilson, also alludes to ACEs at the start of his 2020 book, *Take Nothing With You*.)

### **Family and TCKs:**

The family structure is important to how a TCK views belonging because they are usually the only people who have traveled and experienced the same cultures at the same point in time as the TCK has. However, even a primary belonging structure like family has more complicating layers to it than might appear. As any TCK with siblings will tell

you, age, personality and birth order within a family unit can lead to vastly different experiences within the same family. The oldest child in a family might have been sent away to boarding school to start elementary school, for example, whereas her younger brothers and sisters are homeschooled from kindergarten onwards. A younger sibling may adjust more readily to an intercultural move than his teenage brother, to use another example.

Many adult TCKs report their childhood family as being an important belonging structure. The shared experiences, memories, languages, love of the same foods between siblings who were there with you is a bond of understanding like no other. However, plenty of grown up TCKs also experience familial rifts and as adults, may be far closer to friends than family members.

The examples above assume the TCK's family is the one of their childhood but another kind of familial belonging structures evolves in a long-term partnership such as marriage or when one becomes a parent. For a parent TCK, there are some unexpected aspects to being a parent. As Useem and Cottrell's research in the 1990's found, rarely do TCKs raise their children in the same cultural environment as the TCK parent was raised. Navigating the cultural demands of parenting in a different culture can be unexpectedly challenging for the parent TCKs. Using a trivial subject as example, planning birthday parties for my child has been an annual conundrum for me. I have no sense of what kind of party is "too cheap" and what is "over-the-top". Where I grew up, the choice of party location was easy; the first choice was always the beach that led into the sparkling Caribbean Sea.

### **Belonging structure – Friends:**

Friends are the close relationships we make, rather than those we are born into, such as a family. As the Victorian era Scottish novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, “A friend is a gift you give yourself.” We collect friends along our life path and a lucky few of us find friendships that last a lifetime. Friends share many points of connection, whether the shared points are similar backgrounds, shared experiences or mutual interest in the same things.

### **Friends and TCKs:**

The belonging structure of friends also has unique characteristics for TCKs. One of the hallmarks of a TCK background is the number of times during our childhood that we have said goodbye to friends, due to someone moving (either the TCK or the friend). In addition to all the unprocessed grief this may have caused, the repetition of goodbyes also tends to create an ability to make friends quickly and deeply, but not sustain the friendship well over time, particularly in close proximity. In time, if the friend (or the TCK) does not move away, the TCK may not be sure what the next step is in the friendship. Because the TCK doesn't know what a good next step is in sustaining the friendship, the TCK may just drop the friend and discontinue the friendship. Maintaining a friendship over time is something the adult TCK needs to learn to do because they have never had the opportunity to learn it as a child.

According to Useem and Cottrell's 1993 study, many adult TCKs have made a point to stay in some sort of contact with old friends from previous host cultures; other

adult TCKs have not. For younger TCKs, the internet has given repatriated adult TCKs many more ways of staying connected to previous friend groups than TCKs of earlier generations. Although there is no research on this, anecdotal reports from the younger generation of adult TCKs report a mixed use of this relatively new way of staying in contact. Those who stay in touch report feeling a sense of contentment and validation at times by checking in with those who knew a former version of the TCK. Those who do not stay in touch do not report missing the previous connection. No doubt the variety of anecdotal responses to this question reflects the variety of adult TCK perspectives.

There are three types of friends that TCK tend to make during the repatriation process – other TCKs, people with an international background (i.e. CCKs) or people with an interest in all things international. You can read more about this here. This seems to be a common trend during repatriation and some years after repatriation, most adult TCKs report having various friends from a variety of backgrounds. While there is no research on the topic of friendships after repatriation, gathering friends from a variety of backgrounds would be a logical result and in line with a deeper sense of identity coherence, as described on other website pages. Building friendships would also contribute to the finding in Useem and Cottrell’s 1993 study where 70% of adult TCK respondents reported that it would be difficult to leave their current place of residence, because they have found a degree of belonging in that place.

### **Belonging Structure – Community:**

This belonging structure includes anyone that you interact with outside of your family and friend group. Although the word “community” is often used interchangeably



with “belonging” or “friends”, I use the word to mean a looser, more distant connection. Members of a community, i.e. a certain social group, may be friendly, but the entire group is outside a circle of closer friends. Communities often serve as nurseries for future friendships. In other words, they are places where we can find and make new friends, if desired, because they are natural places to discover like-minded people with whom we may share points of connection.

There are different kinds of communities, for example, **casual** or **loosely-structured** communities. A person you chat with before a spin class or the parents whose children ride the same bus as your child are two examples of **casual communities**. There can be more **formal communities** too, such as a church congregation, neighborhood, workplace or online gaming group. Formal communities usually have a more predictable and definable structure and specific rules of behavior than casual communities.

### **Communities and TCKs:**

For many TCKs, the word “community” doesn’t just mean a place that within physical proximity. It can also mean a virtual or psychological community, which exists only in relationship with the TCK and others. An example of a psychological community would be TCKs who went to the same international high school together but have not stayed in close contact. For TCKs, physical proximity is not a requirement for either friendship or community; they are often comfortable navigating distance relationships and feeling a sense of connection despite the distance separating them from a group. This can be hard to understand for others.

A community where most people find connection is shared citizenship. Feeling a sense of national identity is another psychological structure that many TCKs report complex and layered perceptions. Some adult TCKs report feeling a sense of their passport national identity as being the only source of continuity to their identity. For example, a TCK child with a French passport may have grown up hearing within the family how French the family was, in contrast to the surrounding host community that was not from France. As an adult, after the child repatriated, the sense of “feeling French” may have continued. In Useem’s and Cottrell’s 1993 study, a national sense of identity was found to be strongest in adults with a military background, compared to the other three types of TCK backgrounds. Useem and Cottrell guessed that this might be due to the tacit reinforcement of the national (passport) identity that happens on a military base.

For some adult TCKs, the only sense of national identity they have, is the passport they hold and which immigration line they have to stand in at the airport. These TCKs may report a sense that their passport country is one of many countries to which they feel a sense of belonging. As Useem and Cottrell found in their 1993 study, many TCK parents pass along a “one country among many” perspective to their children by encouraging them to notice and treasure the diversity of the world’s people and cultures.

Other adult TCKs report having a sense of national identity that is defined by times in their lives. At one point in time, they may have felt an affinity with their parental passport culture but as an adult, they may have moved to a different country

where they eventually acquired citizenship and participate in activities only citizens can do, such as vote in national elections.

### **Conclusion:**

Belonging structures are important and natural parts of our lives; as humans, we are built to seek belonging. Understanding the different kinds of structures and how there is often there are more nuanced and complex layers of belonging structures for adult TCKs can help us better understand the times we don't feel belonging. Understanding the variability of belonging structures for adult TCKs also can make us feel validated for our perspectives and feelings about different ways to belong. It can also help us understand what has gone wrong when efforts to belong backfire.

### **Reading 3: Issues adult TCKs may have with making friends**

#### **Introduction**

As has been noted in lots of writings on TCKs, both by researchers and TCKs themselves, TCKs can have significant struggles to find a sense of belonging. Getting to a place where one feels a sense of belonging can take time, although we have all experienced times where there was an instant feeling of connection with someone else. As humans, we all crave and pursue a sense of belonging.

Although families are most of our first belonging structures, friends are a close second. This article is about friendships and the unique ways that TCKs can struggle with this, even as adults. This is not to say that the ways TCKs struggle are wholly unique to them; there are many people from all walks of life who struggle to belong in different

ways. However, this article explores the specific ways in which an intercultural and globally nomadic childhood can add a layer of complexity on the ordinary struggles to find, create and sustain friendships.

Elsewhere I have written about the three categories of people where TCKs often find friendship. In contrast, here are the five most common issues adult TCKs may experience with making friends:

### **Not knowing where to meet people**

The first step in making a friend is finding places where potential friends could be. In keeping with the theme of this website, I'll call these places "watering holes". When you are a child, your watering holes tend to be friends of the family, neighbors, schoolmates or community-based groups like churches or sports groups.

Often TCKs repatriate for school, around high school or college, which present new watering hole options. A university may have many kinds of student activities or clubs, catering to a variety of interests. University seems to be a time when everyone is looking for friends, whatever their background is, so this is time of life with a wide variety of available watering holes. However, the abundance and diversity of watering holes can be problems because there are too many choices. With too many choices, a common response is often to withdraw and choose nothing. Alternatively, the available watering holes may not be of immediate interest to a TCK. At my first college in the United States, for example, country western and 90's grunge music were most commonly heard in the dorm rooms. I preferred techno and Romantic-era piano concertos which did not win me any friends among my dormmates.

Not all watering holes are of the same quality. Because they may be cultural novices to where they live, sometimes TCKs might not recognize the yellow flags at some watering holes. A desperation to make friends and belong can also blind cultural novices to warning signs. TCKs have told me about experiences at unfamiliar watering holes where they were invited by new friends to cults, political fringe groups or places where illegal or harmful things, such as drugs, were occurring. These are not the kinds of places where healthy, supportive friendships can be found but it may take a while for a recently repatriated TCK to figure this out.

Jobs and the workplace are common kinds of watering holes outside of school for adult TCKs. The size of your workplace typically defines the size of your professional watering hole. You may work for a small company but only consider one or two people there to be in some sort of friends' circle. Or you may work for a large company and have a few connections in different departments. Outside of the workplace may be the clients or workplace-related connections that can sometimes make the transition from acquaintance to friend.

Another kind of watering hole for many adult TCKs is being a parent. If you are a parent, undoubtedly, you have made many friends through your kids. Some friends come and go, as your child changes grades or interests, but some friendships are enduring. Parenthood seems to be another time when many adults are open to making new friends through their children.

The availability of watering holes tends to diminish in time. This is true for everyone, TCK or not, and is explained better in writings about aging and caring for the

elderly. For an older adult or global nomad who is repatriating for retirement reasons, finding interesting watering holes can be very challenging. Most older adults have a well-established circle of friends and it is hard to break into what can sometimes be cliques.

### **Finding commonalities**

Another barrier to starting a friendship can be finding sufficient commonalities within the unstated and undefined, “appropriate” amount of time people will give to establishing a friendship. This phenomenon can be seen particularly in places where you don’t have daily interaction or activities together, in other words outside of watering holes such as work or school.

Commonalities assume that you have something in common with someone else. It is immediately evident to see that this can be difficult for TCKs. If you were born in London, grew up in a small village in Pakistan, spent most of your high school in Singapore before graduating from high school in Moscow, you probably don’t have much in common in terms of birthplace, background or education with the person trying to network with you at a professional conference. As experienced TCKs, we know that our response to the “Unanswerable Question” (“Where are you from?”) usually can determine how long the other person will stay and interact with us.

How you look is also a way that people assume certain commonalities that may not exist. TCK authors David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken called this phenomenon, the “hidden migrant” – in that you look like you should belong to a certain community but your inner life, your thoughts and perspectives, don’t belong.

Being with people “like me”, i.e. finding commonalities, is the basis of all friendships, no matter what your background is. Having many connections of shared experiences, opinions and preferences is the fabric of what makes us humans ultimately feel like they fit in and belong. However, many non-TCKs give up trying to find commonalities, once they have exhausted the usual, expected list. Knowing that it is vital to find some commonalities within an undefined but finite span of time, this can leave the TCK with difficult choices, especially if they like the person they are interacting with. Should the TCK just answer questions truthfully and risk the other person giving up trying to establish some commonalities? Or should the TCK give bridging answers that invite more discovery, even if an authentic answer may be more complex? At what time should the TCK reveal the complexity that an intercultural background presents, within a budding relationship? Timing is essential in this calculation. Wait too long to reveal an aspect of an authentic complexity and you risk looking like a liar or hypocrite. Don’t wait long enough and you risk overwhelming the other person and losing their growing interest in the relationship.

These questions have no easy answers but the TCK also knows if they get the triangulation of the factors within an interaction wrong, they risk losing that potential friendship. For some TCKs, this loss can feel like one more indication that they are “weird”.

### **Feeling too compartmentalized**

Because of their multi-cultural upbringing, TCKs have multi-faceted identities that transcend common categorization. As chameleons, they can adapt with skill to many

different kinds of contexts and relate to a wide variety of people. However, not all of these contexts and social interactions ultimately turn out to be satisfying.

Everyone inhabits a myriad of categories, or words, that describe our identities. If you were asked to write down as many words as you could that you felt described who you are, you could probably generate a very long list. You would probably find a lot of connections between many of the words on your list. For example, “son, husband, dad” are words that describe different roles you may have in relation to loved ones. Within those words, “son, husband, dad”, there are layers of meaning and definition that can be unpacked. Being the dad of a toddler, for example, assumes somewhat different behaviors, words and actions than being the dad of a 25-year old, yet both of those roles are “father” roles. In this example, the category of “father” is a relatively consistent element of identity, no matter what the age the child or parent may be. Although there is a great deal of consistency and agreement between many kinds of people as to what a father is, there are plenty of examples where the definition of a “father” is not so easily given. (For the sake of brevity, this article won’t explore these areas, just to note that even what seems like an easily definable word such as “father” can have many layers of complexity as well.)

There is less obvious consistency in other words you may write down about yourself. For example, if you wrote down “love to cook” as part of your identity, this doesn’t tell the reader what you like to cook (casseroles or Sri Lankan curries?), in what circumstances you enjoy cooking (only dinner but not breakfast?), or for whom you enjoy cooking (dinner parties or just loved ones?). How you define “love to cook” may be



very different from another person who also loves to cook. One only has to go to a church potluck (a staple of the missionary kid furlough experience) to taste this truth.

The problem with many pre-defined, socially acceptable categories is that they feel limiting and simplistically binary to a TCK. Pre-defined, binary categories are “this or that” (black or white, left or right, good or bad) and the concepts are generally thought to be mutually exclusive. To a TCK with a rich, multi-faceted, hybrid identity, binary categories can feel restrictive and constraining. You may love to cook, but you need to do it with the culturally “acceptable” ingredients, such as goat cheese and fig paste (to use American examples that proliferate on Food Network shows), but never ingredients like composing your own curry blend and extracting coconut milk (as a TCK who grew up in Sri Lanka might know how to do). A TCK who is trying to make new friends may accept such restrictions on the expression of their identities as the price of belonging. For example, with my mono-cultural friends, I know better than to suggest the hole-in-the-wall Ghanaian restaurant for lunch, even if they do make the most amazing jollof (fish and rice dish common to West Africa). However, if the restrictions are sufficiently confining and there are inadequate outlets for hidden but important facets of their identity, adult TCKs may feel incomplete, resentful and bored in time. To put this in terms of the chameleon metaphor, these TCK are not allowing their full range of colors to be seen in some form or another. Recognizing binary categories that feel uncomfortable is the first step in figuring out what to do about them.

### **Lack of skill in sustaining and growing new friendships**

The globally mobile nature of a TCK's childhood has been written about extensively. Ann Cottrell (2011) who is one of the most published researchers on TCKs, wrote about two kinds of mobility a TCK would experience. One is where the family and the TCK move from country to country; she called this "mobile, long-term" because there were frequent, intercultural moves over a long period of time (at least the TCK's first 18 years of life). The other she called "settled, long-term" and this is where the family stays put but the people around the TCK successively move. Regardless of whether you had a "mobile, long-term" or "settled, long-term" childhood, stability, predictability and durability of your friendships could not be guaranteed. Either you were moving or your friends were moving, which meant you had to make new friends regularly.

Many researchers who study TCKs comment on how quickly and deeply TCKs can go into a relationship. As one TCK remarked to me, "Everyone leaves me feeling like I'm their best friend." Part of this is TCK's unparalleled ability to adapt and bridge into other people with empathy. Another part of this is that a TCK has learned that time is not a given. If one wants to make a friend, the best time is now, because tomorrow that friend could have moved on.

However, this skill of going "fast and furious" into a friendship can be misplaced in a stable, settled life, where your interactions are with people you work with or people you live next to, after repatriation. TCKs have to learn a new skill, i.e. the "slow burn" of a relationship, rather than the "quick flame" they are accustomed to. "Slow burns" of relationships are what non-TCKs are accustomed to and they generally don't understand

the unstated urgency and depth that a TCK can reach in a relationship swiftly. Another downside to the “fast and furious” model in a stable environment is that a certain intimacy and knowledge are quickly reached and after that, the TCK may become bored with the relationship. This is an often-heard complaint of being friends with a TCK, particularly in romantic relationships. Having “mined” all the gold in a relationship quickly, the TCK moves on to the next gold mine, to discover new treasures, leaving the former friend bewildered.

This not just an extroverted/introverted issue. Both TCK extroverts and introverts can struggle with knowing the appropriate behaviors with which to sustain a new friendship over a long period of time. For example, how often is “too often” to call a friend or suggest getting together? What topics are “too deep, too fast”? In time, I’ve observed that most adult TCKs get the hang of sustaining long-term friendships with people they like and trust. Like anything, it is a skill to learn.

### **Not knowing the cultural baselines**

A “cultural baseline” is the “normal”, regular expected behavior, responses or actions in a given situation. Examples of these could range from ordinary, everyday activities, like how you interact with someone unfamiliar to you at work (to handshake or not to handshake?) or if it’s okay to take the last donut, to the special occasions – what an appropriate wedding gift may be or visiting someone in the hospital.

TCKs are pretty good at picking up on cues for ordinary, everyday activities in unfamiliar situations; after all, adapting to the “new normal” each time they moved from culture to culture is a well-honed skill. Where adult TCKs reportedly struggle the most is

with the special occasions. If someone throws a surprise birthday party for you, do you open your presents at the party or afterwards? What is appropriate wedding attire for a wedding where you don't feel as though you know the hosts well?

Speaking personally, one of the hardest cultural baseline for me to navigate has been children's birthday parties – both ones I've given and ones where we were guests. The list of questions is endless. What's an appropriate gift? What's the correct amount of money to spend on a gift? Should the parent expect to stay or leave the party? What kind of party is considered “appropriate” and within the unstated norms”, what is considered “shabby and cheap” and what is considered “over the top” and “showing off”? For child's party that I've ever hosted, I've never known if I hit the “sweet spot” of appropriateness.

This lack of cultural baseline knowledge is also something many migrants report as a concern and a barrier for fitting in. The rom-com movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, highlights this lack of cultural baseline knowledge with increasing hilarity. TCKs who may feel like “hidden migrants”, may feel additional pressure to fit in with the unspoken cultural baselines, knowing that their appearance may not automatically provide an obvious cultural excuse for a cultural misstep. (Ironically, at the same time, the same appearance may protect them from the downside of racial and cultural biases. “You can't be from Africa because you're white!” as African-background TCKs so often hear.)

It is easy for supportive mono-cultural friends to assure the adult TCKs in their lives not to worry about cultural baselines. If people are judging you, these caring friends

might tell you, that is their problem and you are worth more than how someone thinks about your party-planning skills. While such wise counsel is true, for an adult TCK, who has constantly felt “not normal” or “weird” (the two most common adjectives TCKs use to describe themselves), feeling like they are missing an unspoken cultural baseline can dredge up feelings of incompetence and reinforce that pervasive feeling of not belonging. TCKs know that “weird” and “not normal” are pejorative labels and actions (or lack of appropriate actions) can have unintended, unspoken consequences that are inexplicable to us.

**Conclusion:**

Undoubtedly, there are more commonly found issues with TCK making friends from the community that is available to them. The five problems I have covered are the ones that have emerged in my interviews with adult TCKs and are supported by the research on intercultural communication and TCKs. I have omitted the role of personality in making friendships (a helpful explanation for differences in personality characteristics is the Big Five). Also, because it is so complicated, I’ve left out any discussion of the cultural context, for example, loosely-scripted versus tightly-scripted cultures. Cultural context is important to any discussion about belonging and making friends because in some cultures, the path to friendship is smoother than in others. TCKs tend to be good at problem-solving, as Useem and Cottrell’s 1993 research found. Acknowledging the unique dimensions that a TCK background can bring to social interactions and personal relationships can serve as a first step in figuring out past or current issues a TCK may have noticed in a relationship.

APPENDIX L

IRB HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH APPROVAL

EXEMPTION

GRANTED

[Leigh Wolf](#)

[Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation - Tempe](#)

Leigh.Wolf@asu.edu

Dear [Leigh Wolf](#):

On 5/24/2022 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Chameleons among Us: Adults and Belonging after a Globally Nomadic Childhood
Investigator:	<a href="#">Leigh Wolf</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00015962
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None

Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First phase recruitment methods email consent 23 May 2022.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• First phase recruitment methods interview and script 18 May 2022.pdf, Category: Screening forms;</li> <li>• IRB Social Behavioral template LMalone May 2022 final.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;</li> <li>• Post_intervention_Follow up interview email consent_18 May 2022.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Second phase recruitment methods email consent 23 May 2022.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• Supporting documents Format and outline of Chameleons among us intervention 23 May 2022.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Supporting_documents_Demographic_survey_18-May-2022.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Supporting_documents_Post_intervention_survey_18-May-2022.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</li> <li>• Supporting_documents_Repatriation_experience_survey_18 May 2022.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group</li> </ul>
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The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 5/24/2022.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at [research.integrity@asu.edu](mailto:research.integrity@asu.edu) to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required.

Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

REMINDER - - Effective January 12, 2022, in-person interactions with human subjects require adherence to all current policies for ASU faculty, staff, students and visitors. Up-to-date information regarding ASU's COVID-19 Management Strategy can be found [here](#). IRB approval is related to the research activity involving human subjects, all other protocols related to COVID- 19 management including face coverings, health checks, facility access, etc. are governed by current ASU policy.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

Cc: Lois Malone