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Chapter 3

SOCIOCULTURAL ADAPTATION OF ADOLESCENT THIRD CULTURE KIDS: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL, FAMILIAL, AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is marked by biological, cognitive, and social transitions that often result in challenges to be negotiated (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). Adolescent Third Culture Kids (ATCK) – youth from one culture, living temporarily in a second culture, combining both to create a unique third (Usroem & Downie, 1976) – face additional challenges as they transition between childhood and adulthood across cultures. The ATCK population is substantial and growing; however, research on this group is limited, derived from adult populations, and focused on outcomes rather than the process of sociocultural adaptation, i.e., an individual’s behavior and ability to function day-to-day within a specific culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Applying Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) Ecological Systems Theory, this mixed-methods study provides evidence that ATCK sociocultural adaptation is associated with a combination of personal attributes, social experiences, and family interactions. Thirty ATCK between 14 and 18 years of age completed an online survey containing both quantitative measures and open-ended questions. The results highlighted the importance of individual and societal factors for ATCK sociocultural adaptation. Among other findings, the quantitative data indicated that higher levels of internal locus of control were associated with better sociocultural adaptation, whereas familial factors were not. ATCK with greater internal locus of control expressed greater sociocultural adaptation across all levels of parent-adolescent communication. However, among ATCK who expressed greater parent-adolescent communication, those who also expressed greater family warmth reported greater sociocultural adaptation than ATCK who expressed lower family warmth. Findings from
the qualitative data provided deeper insights into the challenges that ATCK face and the resources they draw upon. Our analysis indicated that risks for ATCK include differences in the rates of parent versus child acculturation and a tendency for the ATCK to "blame" parents for the overseas move and associated stress. ATCK advised pursuing social interactions as a resource in their own, as well as their parents', cultural adjustment. Consequently, the primary resources they discussed were individual and societal-based, rather than familial. Triangulating between the quantitative and qualitative findings, sociocultural adaptation of ATCK appears to be more strongly associated with individual qualities (focus of control, preparation for the transition) and societal factors (interactions with others, cultural exposure) than familial factors. Increased family conflict associated with an overseas move, combined with the natural tendency for adolescents to strive for autonomy, (Deeds, et al., 1998; Schwartz & Pantic, 2006; Steinberg & Silk, 2002) may weaken family support, rendering individual factors and social support (peers) more influential for ATCK sociocultural adaptation than family relations. Implications are discussed to emphasize how adolescents might best prepare themselves for a third culture transition.

Tens of millions of Europeans and more than 4 million Americans are expatriates who live and work outside their country of origin (American Citizens Abroad, 2007; Council of Europe, 2004). Expatriates can be described as individuals who temporarily reside in another country, often for employment, with the intention of ultimately returning to their country of origin (Cohen, 1977). Many of these individuals bring their families when they embark on an international assignment (Deeds, Stewart, Bond, & Westrick, 1998). One study estimated that at least 80% of expatriates are accompanied by a spouse or children (Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001). Existing studies on the expatriate experience have been conducted primarily from an organizational psychology perspective focused on the adult expatriate employee (Huang, Chi, & Lawler, 2005; Van der Velde, Bossink, & Jansen, 2002) and although a majority of adult expatriates bring their children with them, little is known about how this younger population adjusts and adapts to the new culture. This study addresses the gap in literature by focusing on Third Culture Kids, children from one culture who live temporarily in a second culture and combine aspects of both to create a unique third culture (Useem & Downie, 1976). Specifically, we focus on Adolescent Third Culture Kids (ATCK) because they face both the normative changes of adolescence as well as a transition across cultures.

Despite the substantial and growing ATCK population, research on cross-cultural experiences and the acculturation process (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Phinney, 2006; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000; Tadmor & Tetlock, 2006) has focused primarily on the adjustment of foreign students at American universities (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006), acculturation of individuals who immigrate to the United States (Van Eecke, 2005) or the experience of expatriate workers (Huang et al., 2005; Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). The few studies that investigated ATCKs focus more on outcome variables such as language ability and educational achievement and less on the process by which adaptation takes place. In this chapter, we describe the past literature on populations in transition, propose a theory to address the unique population of ATCK, and offer quantitative and qualitative analyses to apply this theory to the experiences of ATCK.
GLOBAL NOMADS, INTERNATIONALLY MOBILE YOUTH, OR THIRD CULTURE KIDS?

Several labels are used to describe children of expatriate families. The three most common are "Global Nomads" (McCaig, 1996), "Internationally Mobile Youth" (Parker & Rumill-Teece, 2001), and "Third Culture Kids" (Useem & Downie, 1976). Global Nomads have been defined as "anyone of any nationality who has lived outside their parents' country of origin before adulthood because of occupation" (McCaig, 1996, p. 99). However, the term Global Nomads appears to have multiple meanings, as it has also been used to describe individuals who travel frequently and is the name of an organization furthering children's "understanding of other cultures" (http://www.gng.org). Internationally Mobile Youth is a more specific label applied only to children of Foreign Service workers and/or military personnel (Parker & Rumill-Teece, 2001).

The most inclusive label, "Third Culture Kids," applies to anyone, of any age, who was a child within an expatriate family and includes the Global Nomads and Internationally Mobile Youth. Third Culture Kids have been defined as children from one culture, who are living in a second culture other than that of their nationality, and as such develop in essence a third culture by combining aspects of both (Useem & Downie, 1976). Third Culture Kids often experience multiple migrations as their families move from one culture to another and their time in each foreign culture is limited (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Because of the transitory nature of their experience, many Third Culture Kids do not identify with either their country of nationality or their current country of residence, but instead view themselves as part of a migratory third culture and self-identify as Third Culture Kids (Useem & Barker Cottrell, 1993; Werkman, 1977).

Much of the literature available on Third Culture Kids has been gathered from adult populations using retrospective techniques and describes the positive and negative experiences of Third Culture Kids. For example, Third Culture Kids have been described as culturally accepting (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999), bilingual (Gerber, Perry, Moselle & Archbold, 1992), academically and professionally successful (Useem & Barker Cottrell, 1993) and open to new ideas and experiences. Second language ability is particularly common among Third Culture Kids, with as many as 90% of Third Culture Kids reporting fluency in a second language (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Furthermore, some researchers have suggested that Third Culture Kids are more culturally sensitive than non-Third Culture Kids due in part to the experience of multiple migrations, where they are continually challenged to process, integrate, and adapt to new cultures and people (Straffon, 2003).

Despite some positive experiences, Third Culture Kids also face their fair share of challenges. For example, rates of depression and suicide are greater within the population of Third Culture Kids than the general population (Cottrell & Useem, 1993). This may be due in part to the temporary nature of the Third Culture experience and stress associated with cultural adaptation. Further, although described as feeling comfortable in various cultures, Third Culture Kids also experience cultural limbo, "a sense of home everywhere and nowhere" (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999, p. 30). Third Culture Kids often feel displaced from their home culture and often feel more at home with other Third Culture Kids than with individuals from their home or host country (Cockburn, 2002; Parker & Rumill-Teece, 2001; Werkman, 1977).
The findings are more varied in terms of academic success. Useem and Barker Cottrell (1993) reported that Third Culture Kids were four times more likely to complete a bachelor’s degree than non-Third Culture Kids. However, Pollock and Van Reken (1999) anecdotally noted that Third Culture Kids were more likely to switch colleges and majors and take longer to graduate from university than non-Third Culture Kids (Useem & Barker Cottrell, 1993).

Although the evidence suggests that Third Culture Kids are at increased risk for some problematic outcomes, no research to date has focused on factors that may increase this risk. The purpose of this study is to understand the unique experiences of Third Culture Kids by using established research measures and qualitative methods, with a narrow focus on the experiences of Adolescent Third Culture Kids (ATCK).

A Transitory Adaptation

While immigration implies a permanent move from one’s home country to a new culture with the intention of obtaining citizenship (Van Ecke, 2005), the ATCK experience is, by its very definition, transitory (Cohen, 1977). Immigrants are learning to assimilate experiences in order to develop a long-term strategy for living in a new culture (Berry et al., 2006). In contrast, ATCK are adjusting temporarily, with a view towards the next migration in their multiple migrations across cultures, or until they return to their home country. Thus, the experience of ATCK is less relevant to a theory of acculturation and may be more accurately depicted through a theory of cultural adaptation (Phinney, 2006; Straffon, 2003). Ward and Kennedy (1999) described cultural adaptation as a combination of psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation refers to an individual’s affective well-being, overall mental health and personal satisfaction in a new culture. In contrast, sociocultural adaptation refers to an individual’s behavior and learned ability to function day-to-day within the parameters of a specific culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999).

Although conceptually distinct, psychological and sociocultural adaptations have been positively correlated in studies conducted with populations in transition (Berry, et al, 2006; Maggoret & Ward, 2006; Montgomery & Foldsang, 2007; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1999). Difficulties with sociocultural adaptation have been linked to aspects of psychological adaptation, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Aroian & Norris 2002; Turjeiman, Mensch, & Fishman, 2008; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). Further, while poor sociocultural adaptation could increase risks to mental health, individuals with mental health disorders may also suffer from increased adaptation problems. However, there is some evidence to suggest that over time, sociocultural adaptation is a significant predictor of psychological adaptation (Beiser & Hou, 2001; Jasinska-Jahit, 2008; Lee & Chen, 2000). For ATCK, difficulty with sociocultural adaptation can lead to increased anxiety (Haslerger, 2005), which may hinder overall well-being, and lead to difficulties with psychological adaptation (Figure 1).
Because sociocultural adaptation may be a precursor to psychological adaptation, the present study focuses on factors that explain the sociocultural adaptation of ATCKs living overseas. Sociocultural adaptation can be particularly anxiety-provoking for ATCK already experiencing a challenging developmental period such as adolescence (Berry, et al, 2006). In addition to biological, physical, and cognitive changes, the adolescent developmental period is marked by changes in peer relationships (Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Schwartz & Pantin, 2006), greater family conflict (Steinberg & Silk, 2002) and boundary testing within family relationships (Dailey, 2006; Sneed, et al., 2006). Changes in peer relationships are exacerbated for ATCK by the transient nature of friendships within the expatriate community (Stroh, Dennis & Cramer, 1994). Short-term friendships are often standard for the adolescent living abroad, as expatriate families arrive and depart with increased frequency due to the nature of expatriate assignments. ATCKs are forced by circumstance to conduct their friendships with other expatriate families in a transitory environment, adding stress and anxiety to the adolescents’ lives as they strive for psychological adaptation within a new culture (Sonderegger, Barrett, & Creed, 2004).

The risk to ATCK and their ability to culturally adapt to their new environment can be summarized as a careful balance between coping with the stress of an overseas move and drawing on available resources to assist in the transition (Fowler & Silberstein, 2001). Based on available research on populations in transition, including foreign exchange students (Yang, et al., 2006), immigrant populations, and expatriate workers (Huang, et al., 2005; Van Ecke, 2005), we identify several resources that ATCK utilize to adapt to their host country. Past research yields three sources of resource allocation -- individual, familial and societal contributions (Table 1). Applying these themes to the experience of ATCK illuminates the process by which they socioculturally adapt within a new culture.

The Individual, Family, and Society

Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) theory of ecological systems suggests that individual development is influenced by multiple layers of inter-related contexts. This theory emphasizes that personal development is affected by individual characteristics and immediate surroundings, as well as more far reaching familial, social and cultural systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). While support provided by the family unit may have the most direct and immediate influence upon children, the society in which that individual resides also contributes to development. With this in mind, Figure 2 summarizes how individual, familial,
and societal factors contribute to the adjustment of ATCK. Applying Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) theory, we offer a mixed-method approach to provide evidence that ATCK sociocultural adaptation is associated with a combination of personal attributes, family interactions and social experiences. For ATCK, their socialization experiences are filtered through a frame of reference which includes not only individual, familial and societal influences, but also their interaction experiences within their home and host country. It is the combination of the home and host culture that creates a unique Third Culture experience. In this study, we focus on factors associated with better adjustment and link them to ATCK experience, namely, locus of control, parent-adolescent communication, family warmth, school belonging, and social interaction.

Figure 2. Sociocultural Adaptation of the Adolescent Third Culture Kid. Based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) Ecological Systems Theory.

**INDIVIDUAL QUALITIES**

Locus of control is a personality construct that describes where an individual attributes control for life events (Lefcourt, 1976). Individuals with a greater internal locus of control tend to perceive control within themselves, whereas individuals with a more external locus of control tend to attribute control to someone or something other than themselves (Nowicki & Strickland, 1971). Adolescents with a greater internal locus of control benefit from a variety of positive developmental outcomes (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Fan & Mak, 1998; Fouts & Vaughn, 2002; Kovacova & Sarmany-Schuller, 2006; Shepherd, et al., 2006).

Indeed, an adolescent's perception that he/she is able to affect the future, characterized by an internal locus of control, has been identified as a protective factor for many adolescent psychopathologies, including anxiety and depression (Feingold, 1994) and has been correlated with positive social and academic outcomes (Ginsburg, Lambert & Drake, 2004; Lefcourt, 1976; Manger & Eikland, 2000). For instance, adolescents with greater perceived internal locus of control were found to be more likely to deal with stressors in a positive manner (Fouts & Vaughn, 2002), expect to successfully navigate social interactions (Fan & Mak, 1998), and show more positive psychological adaptation (Leung, 2001). Conversely, as adolescent perceptions of more external locus of control increase, feelings of self-competence and overall sense of well-being decrease (Bursik & Martin, 2006; McClan & Merrell, 1998) and pessimism and self-doubt increase (Rotter, 1966).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Contributing to Socio-cultural Adaptation</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Familial</th>
<th>Societal</th>
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<td>2. Cultural Knowledge and Learning</td>
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<td>3. Gender</td>
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<td>4. Language Ability</td>
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<td>5. Loss of Control</td>
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<td>6. Mental Health</td>
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<td>7. Emotionally Responsive</td>
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<td>9. Cultural Orientation</td>
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<td>10. Family Communication</td>
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<td>16. Host Country</td>
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<td>22. Host Country</td>
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Source:
1. (Bennet & Hui, 1997, 2004; Sekaran & Schietzel, 2004)
2. (Chan & Fong, 1990, 1992; Carswell & Mari, 2000; Labbé, 1999)
3. (Daft & Littrell, 1998; Fong & Vong, 2000; Shepperd & Offen, 2000)
4. (Daft & Littrell, 1998; Fong & Vong, 2000; Shepperd & Offen, 2000)
5. (Deane & Fong, 2000; George & Perry, 2000)
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For ATCK, a greater internal locus of control may indeed play an important role in sociocultural development. ATCKs with higher levels of internal locus of control, who are confident that their life events can be affected by their own will, may have greater self confidence when engaging in new experiences within the host country. As such, sociocultural adaptation may be greater for those ATCK who perceive an internal locus of control. While individual factors such as locus of control are important for adolescent development, support from other systems, such as family, also influence ATCK sociocultural adaptation.

FAMILY MATTERS

Research with immigrant populations cites social support as an important component for adolescent cultural adaptation (McNeil, Kee & Zvolensky, 1999; Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Hyyuang, 2001; Sonderegger, et al., 2004; Thomas & Choi, 2006). For ATCK who have recently moved from their home country and are away from friends and extended family members, their immediate family is likely the most intact form of social support available (Scabini, Lanz & Marta, 1999). Importantly, Sit and Chan (2005) reported that ATCK tend to have strong and developed ties with their family members. Indeed within immigrant populations, the family and specifically parents have been shown to impact the sociocultural adaptation of adolescent family members more so than friends and peers (Costigan & Dokis, 2006; Kwak, 2003; Phinney & Ong, 2002).

While it seems that family support is crucial for ATCK, the association between family support and cultural adaptation with a population of ATCK is not clear. Indeed, at a time when ATCK may need a supportive family environment, the expatriate family may be unable to provide the support needed. Relocation has been described as a "life crisis" (Hausman & Reed, 1991) and in many respects, the expatriate family suffers an almost complete disruption in functioning (Werkman, 1977). Specifically, expatriate family structure is marked by increased levels of family conflict attributed to the move to a new country away from developed support networks (Shaffer, et al., 2001), such as from extended-family social support (Richardson, 2004), and increased demands of transitioning to a new career environment for the expatriate worker (Van der Zece, Ali, & Haaksma, 2005). The interaction of both work and home-life have been described as acting in a reciprocal manner and thereby either moderating or exacerbating overall family stress associated with expatriation (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998, 2001).

Communicative and warm families assist in healthy cultural adaptation of ATCK during this time of upheaval (Hess & Linderman, 2002). Families who engage in open communication with immediate family members appear to adjust better to stressful life events (Daley, 2006; Gilligan, 1982; Marta, 1997; Peterson, 2005; Walsh, Shulman, Bar-On & Tsur, 2006). Further, families who engage in open communication report higher levels of family closeness and adaptability (Olson, 2000). Family communication has been correlated with positive psychosocial outcomes (Rhee, Chang, & Rhee, 2003), and lower levels of risk behavior in adolescent populations (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, & Dittus, 2006). However, other studies have reported that communication is not necessarily indicative of positive family relationships, and that the quality of the communication must also be considered (Peraosa & Peraosa, 2001).
Family warmth, similarly, was consistently associated with positive academic and psychosocial outcomes among adolescents across different cultures (Sorkhabi, 2005). Family warmth was also associated with positive cultural adaptation within an adolescent sample of Chinese immigrants (Lim & Lim, 2004). Positive adolescent outcomes related to family communication may in part be due to the perceived warmth within the family unit. As such, better quality family communication may not necessarily be associated with higher levels of family warmth.

International School Ties and School Belonging

For expatriate families and ATCK, the international school often plays a larger role than simply that of an educational institution (Sit & Chan, 2003). The school setting may be the first channel by which ATCKs and their families can interact within a new community. Further, the school can serve as a hub for interactions with other expatriate families as well as host country nationals. International schools tend to comprise students from many different nationalities (Deeds, et al., 2003; Langford, 1999) and the faculty at an international school is often a global mix of ethnicities, experienced teaching in multiple countries (Gillies, 2001; Rucci, 1993). Further, parents of students in overseas schools tend to be well-educated professionals who set high educational goals for their children (Deeds, et al., 1989; Harvey, 1976). As such, curriculum in international schools tends to focus on rigorous academic preparation and foreign language training (Rucci, 1993).

Along with the diversity of teachers, students and other staff, another challenge to ATCK is the transient nature of the international school experience. Changes in Board of Director, faculty, and in student peers are common in an educational setting designed for expatriate families (Gillies, 1992; Langford, 1999; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). For ATCKs who are experiencing many transitions within their expatriate lives, it is important that school be a stable place. Interactions with peers and teachers can assist ATCK to forge a sense of belonging within their school. The international school can provide a secure base for sociocultural adaptation of ATCK through the increased sense of belonging and cultural understanding that these experiences allow. Indeed, Straffon (2003) reported that the greater the length of time ATCKs spent attending an international school correlated positively to greater cultural sensitivity. The process of socialized affiliation with other international students links ATCK once again to the community, and by extension the host country.

**Social Interaction**

Interactions with people within a new host country foster cultural adaptation (Alba, 1990). Involvement with churches, organized sports, and social groups can provide a way for ATCK to interact with host country nationals and help to solidify a sense of belonging and purpose within a culture (Cornille, 1993). For ATCK, day-to-day interactions with host country nationals assist in the transfer and understanding of host country culture by increasing their understanding of interpersonal relationships and the cultural schemas and behaviors appropriate within the host country (Lee & Chen, 2000). Specifically, contact with host country nationals can dispel inaccurate preconceived ideas about the host country culture and
be a catalyst for adopting a more accurate understanding of the host country culture (Kim, 1977).

In addition, multiple interactions with host country nationals demonstrate the transparency of boundaries for ATCK. Boundary transparency has been described as the perception that one can move between cultures with relative ease (Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, & Wilkie, 1990). Perceived boundary transparency has been linked to positive cultural adjustment outcomes within a population of Asian International students living in Australia (Terry, et al., 2006). As such, the frequency and quality of interactions with host country nationals influence ATCK ability to communicate effectively and understand cultural meaning, which in turn promotes healthy cultural adjustment.

**Sociocultural Adaptation and the Adolescent Third Culture Kid: The Current Study**

The risk to ATCK and their ability to culturally adapt to their new environment can be described as a careful balance between the stress of an overseas move and use of resources available to assist in the transition (Fowler & Silberstein, 2001). The ability of ATCK to adapt to the new environment may be associated with individual characteristics such as locus of control, dynamics within the expatriate family (specifically ATCK perception of family communication and warmth), and interactions and affiliations within the host country. Accordingly, we tested six hypotheses using our quantitative data that examined links between adaptation and individual, familial, and societal factors. In addition, we conducted qualitative analyses of ATCK experiences. This mixed-method approach was particularly well-suited for understanding the ATCK experience. Given their unique experiences of living in and between multiple cultural contexts, existing survey measures may not be able to fully capture the important elements of successful adaptation. Thus, while the quantitative analyses provide insight into general psychological processes common to all adolescents (e.g., locus of control, family relations), the qualitative analyses offer a glimpse of what ATCKs view as personally important to their adaptation. The six quantitative hypotheses were as follows:

1. Higher perceptions of internal locus of control will be associated with more positive sociocultural adaptation.
2. Better perceived parent adolescent communication will be related to more positive sociocultural adaptation.
3. Greater family warmth will be related to more positive sociocultural adaptation.
4. Family warmth will moderate the relation between family communication and sociocultural adaptation. Specifically, ATCKs who perceive lower levels of family warmth in conjunction with higher levels of family communication will result in higher levels of sociocultural adaptation than ATCKs with lower levels of family warmth combined with lower levels of family communication. Those who perceive greater levels of family warmth will indicate greater levels of sociocultural adaptation regardless of their perceived level of family communication.
5. Locus of control will moderate the relationship between family communication and sociocultural adaptation. Specifically, ATCK who perceive greater internal locus of control are predicted to express greater levels of sociocultural adaptation regardless
of the level of family communication. For ATCK who perceive greater external locus of control, sociocultural adaptation is predicted to be lower across all levels of family communication.

6. Greater school membership (a perception of school belonging) will be positively associated with sociocultural adaptation.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty ATCK (Male = 11, Female = 19) between 14 and 18 years of age (M = 16.27, SD = 1.17) completed an online survey that contained both fixed response survey Likert items and open-ended questions. Eligible participants were required to be living with at least one parent, and currently living abroad for a limited time and with the intention of returning to their country of origin.

In the current study, 24 participants lived with both their mother and father in the family home, 2 lived with their mother only, 3 lived with their mother and significant other and 1 lived with their father and significant other. Participants were recruited from the expatriate community worldwide. ATCK participants indicated that they were currently residing in Africa, Asia, Australia/South Pacific, Canada/USA, Europe, Mexico, Middle East and South America. When asked to identify their home residence, regions listed were Australia/South Pacific, Canada/USA, Europe, India, and Middle East. Four participants responded to this question with “do not know” or “none”. Of the 30 participants, 29 ATCK indicated they spoke a foreign language.

Recruiting focused on 1) students and teachers from international schools that provide educational instruction in English to expatriate children and 2) organizations that provide services to expatriate families. Specifically, recruiting took place through international schools, consulate newsletters, local expatriate publications, and social networking sites. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. As the population of expatriate families had not been specifically identified by census thereby rendering participants difficult to locate, additional recruiting was facilitated through snowballing that included asking participants to forward information about the study to other Adolescent Third Culture Kids (Goodman, 1961). The survey took approximately 35-45 minutes to complete. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were thanked for their time and given the opportunity to enter a random drawing for one of three iPod Shuffle MP3 players.

Demographic and Background Information

Participants were asked to provide information about their gender, race/ethnicity and foreign language ability. Other questions were asked about siblings, education level of parents, typical family activities and interactions with friends. Also, questions about ATCK familiarity with host country culture and past travel experiences were asked.
Quantitative Measures

Instruments used in this study included measures that assessed Sociocultural Adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1999), Locus of Control (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973), Parent-Adolescent Communication (Barnes & Olsen, 1982), Family Atmosphere (Molloy & Pallant, 2002), and School Membership (Goodenow, 1993).

Locus of Control

Participants were asked to complete the Nowicki–Strickland Locus of Control Scale (NS-LOCS; Nowicki & Strickland, 1973). The NS-LOCS is a 40-item measure of locus of control and each item was answered 1 “yes” or 2 “no”. Participants were asked a series of questions such as “Do you feel that most of the time it doesn’t pay to try hard because things never turn out right anyway?” and “Most of the time, do you feel that you can change what might happen tomorrow by what you do today?”. Items were added together to create a single score with higher scores indicating a more external locus of control. For this study, scoring was reversed such that higher scores indicated more internal locus of control. Internal consistency for the NS-LOCS has been reported within a range from the upper .60 level to the lower .80 level (Nowicki & Duke, 1983). For this study, internal consistency for the NS-LOCS was .77.

Parent-Adolescent Communication

The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS; Barnes & Olson, 1982) is a 20-item measure of perceived parent-adolescent communication that measured the perceived communication between adolescent and mother and adolescent and father independently. Adolescent participants were asked to rate their responses to a series of statements regarding their relationship with each parent along a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 “Strongly Disagree” to 5 “Strongly Agree”. Statements included “If I were in trouble, I could tell my Mother/Father” and “There are topics I avoid discussing with my Mother/Father”. The scores from the mother and the father subscales were added together to create a single Parent-Adolescent Communication score. Items from this scale represent two factors, “Open Family Communication” and “Problems in Family Communication”. Items for Problems in Family Communication were recoded so that higher scores on the PACS represented greater family communication. Within this study, internal consistency for the PACS was .93.

Family Warmth and Cohesion

The Scale of Family Atmosphere (SOFA; Molloy, & Pallant, 2002) is a 10-item questionnaire that measures adolescent’s perception of social climate within the family unit. Participants were asked to respond along a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 “Strongly Disagree” to 5 “Strongly Agree” to statements that included “I enjoy being around my family” and “My family is full of tensions and disagreements”. Results from the SOFA have been positively correlated with results from other measures of the family environment such as the Family Environment Scale (Boyd, Gullone, Needleman & Burt, 1997). Higher scores on the SOFA represented greater family warmth and cohesion. Internal consistency for the SOFA was .82.

School Membership

The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993) is an 18 item questionnaire that measures school membership with a series of statements such as
"Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong at my school" and "There's at least one adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem". Participants were asked to indicate their response along a 5-point Likert scale from 1 "Completely False" to 5 "Completely True". Items were added together to create a single score, with higher scores indicating greater feelings of belonging in school. The PSSM has been positively correlated with student motivation, school satisfaction and academic success (Hagborg, 1994). For the present study, internal consistency for the PSSM was .80.

Cultural Adjustment

The Socio-Cultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) is a 41-item measure of cultural adaptation. Participants were asked to indicate the perceived difficulty they experienced in a number of situations related to living in a foreign country such as "Getting used to the local food/finding food you enjoy" and "Being able to see two sides of an intercultural issue". Response choices were presented along a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 "Extreme" to 5 "None". Responses were summed to create a single Sociocultural Adaptation score. For this study, responses were reverse coded such that higher scores on the SCAS represented greater sociocultural adaptation. Reliability for the SCAS was .87.

Qualitative Measures

Through several open-ended questions, ATCK were provided with an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings and present some ideas as to what has helped or hindered their sociocultural adaptation. Participants were asked, "What advice would you give to an adolescent who was moving overseas for the first time?" A follow up question asked participants, "What advice would you give to the parent of an adolescent who was moving overseas for the first time?"

During the literature review for this study, three consistent themes emerged regarding the how populations in transition cope with cultural adaptation. Those themes comprised three categories "Individual", "Family" and "Society" (Table 1). Applying these categories to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory helped build a framework for understanding how the experiences of other populations in transition would apply to the specific experience of ATCK. Responses to the qualitative queries were coded to each of these categories.

RESULTS

Individual, Familial and Societal Relationship to Sociocultural Adaptation

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the main study variables can be found in Table 2. The first hypothesis predicted that greater levels of locus of control would be positively correlated with greater sociocultural adaptation. An analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient supported this hypothesis, $r(27) = .41, p = .02$. 

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Among Sociocultural Adaptation, Locus of Control, Parent Adolescent Communication, Family Atmosphere and School Membership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Sociocultural Adaptation</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.41*</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Locus of Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Parent Adolescent Comm.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.82**</td>
<td>0.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Family Atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.52**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 School Membership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(M^-)</td>
<td>173.22</td>
<td>28.59</td>
<td>117.11</td>
<td>35.88</td>
<td>31.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SD)</td>
<td>17.05</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>23.39</td>
<td>7.09</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(N = 27\) for all scales

Note: Correlations marked with one asterisk (*) were significant at \(p < .05\) (1-tailed)

Correlations marked with two asterisks (**) were significant at \(p < .01\) (1-tailed)

Table 3

Regression model using Parent-Adolescent Communication and Family Warmth to Predict Sociocultural Adaptation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>(\beta)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>(p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong> Parent-Adolescent Comm</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong> Parent-Adolescent Comm</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Warmth</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong> Parent-Adolescent Comm</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Warmth</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC by FWPM Interaction</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(R^2 = 0.002\) for Step 1, \(\Delta R^2 = 0.00\) for Step 2, \(\Delta R^2 = 0.17\) for Step 3.

The second hypothesis predicted that greater parent-adolescent communication would be positively correlated with greater sociocultural adaptation, however, this hypothesis was not supported, \(r(27) = -.05, p = .40\).

The third hypothesis predicted that greater levels of family warmth would be positively correlated with greater sociocultural adaptation, however, this hypothesis was not supported, \(r(27) = -.05, p = .41\).

The fourth hypothesis predicted that family warmth would moderate the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and sociocultural adaptation. All variables were centered to control for multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). For the regression model,
sociocultural adaptation was the dependent variable, parent-adolescent communication scores were entered in Step 1, family atmosphere scores were entered in the Step 2, and a parent-adolescent communication by family warmth interaction term was entered in Step 3. Complete statistics for this analysis are provided in Table 3.

The overall regression model did not significantly predict sociocultural adaptation ($R^2 = .07, F_{3,6} = 1.63, p = .21$) nor did any of the single predictors. However, as hypothesized, the parent-adolescent communication by family warmth interaction was significant ($\beta = .51, p = .04$). The interaction relationship between parent-adolescent communication and family warmth on sociocultural adaptation is displayed in Figure 3 using methods established by Cohen and colleagues (2002). The combination of high levels of both family warmth and parent-adolescent communication were associated with better sociocultural adaptation whereas high family warmth and low parent-adolescent communication did not offer the same protective benefits.

![Figure 3: Family warmth as a moderator between family communication and ATCK sociocultural adaptation.](image)

The fifth hypothesis predicted that ATCK who perceive an internal locus of control would express higher levels of sociocultural adaptation across all levels of family communication than those ATCK who expressed an external locus of control. To test this, a linear regression model was constructed. All variables were centered to control for multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). The regression model included Sociocultural Adaptation as the dependent variable, Locus of Control was entered in Step 1, Parent-Adolescent Communication was entered in Step 2, and a Locus of Control by Parent-adolescent Communication was entered in Step 3. Statistics for the final regression model are provided in Table 4.

The overall regression model did not significantly predict sociocultural adaptation ($R^2 = .06, F_{3,23} = 1.51, p = .24$). However, locus of control (Step 2) significantly predicted Sociocultural Adaptation ($\beta = .40, p = .04$). Contrary to the hypothesis, the interaction between locus of control and parent adolescent communication was not predictive ($\beta = -.02, p = .97$). The relationship between parent-adolescent communication and locus of control on sociocultural adaptation is displayed in Figure 4. ATCK who indicated a more internal locus
of control had higher sociocultural adaptation scores than those ATCK who indicated a more external locus of control, across both low and high levels of parent-adolescent communication.

Lastly, it was predicted that ATCK who expressed greater school belonging would indicate greater sociocultural adaptation than ATCK who expressed less school belonging. When correlations were conducted, this hypothesis was not supported, $r(27) = .10, p = .31$.

Table 4

Regression model using Parent-Adolescent Communication and Locus of Control to Predict Sociocultural Adaptation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE $B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Adolescent Comm.</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Adolescent Comm.</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of Control</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Adolescent Comm.</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of Control</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOG by PAC interaction</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $R^2 = 0.002$ for Step 1, $\Delta R^2 = 0.16$ for Step 2, $\Delta R^2 = 0.000$ for Step 3.

**Qualitative Analyses of Advice to other ATCK**

Concerning the open-ended question “What advice would you give to another Third Culture Kid who is preparing to move overseas?” the responses were coded using an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), and themes identified from past research on populations in transition. Coding categories included “Individual”, “Family” “Society” and “Other”. Answers were coded as “Individual” if responses indicated individual expression, outlook, education, action or responsibility ($n = 22$). Individual responses included advice to “learn about the culture”, “learn about the language, and “be open to the experience – realize that every place is different”. “Family” coding was selected if responses indicated involved interaction or reliance on immediate or extended family members ($n = 1$). If responses indicated social interface or cultural interaction with either home or host country nationals they were coded as “Society” ($n = 13$). Responses that were coded as Societal included advice to participate in activities and get involved with other people. Several ATCK urged others to “try your hardest to make new friends” and “don’t shut yourself, be open to new environment”. As one 15-year-old female suggested, “Try and participate as much as possible with everything that everyone else does, follow people’s example”. Answers were coded as ‘Other’ if responses did not agree with former categories ($n = 5$). Responses were coded by the first author and a second rater with an 81% agreement between raters (Table 5).
Figure 4. Locus of Control as a moderator between Parent-adolescent Communication and ATCK sociocultural adaptation.

ATCK Advice to Parent

When asked “What advice would you give to the parent of an ATCK?”, themes were similar to those expressed in ATCK advice to other Third Culture Kids (Table 6). Responses were coded as Individual (n = 2), “Familial” (n = 7), “Societal” (n = 15) and “Other” (n = 11). As with the advice to other ATCK, many participants responded with suggestions for parents of ATCK with advice for parents to get involved, assimilate, or otherwise adapt to the culture of their host country.

Cultural openness and a willingness to explore the host culture were mentioned not only as advice for other ATCK, but also for their parents. One 17-year-old female succinctly advised parents of other ATCK to, “Adapt to local traditions.” Another 15-year-old female made the recommendation for how parents of ATCK should approach differences between home and host country culture.

Do not compare the overseas environment to the “home” environment. Be open to the host culture’s worldview—realize that the ideas and worldview learned at “home” will often conflict with the standards in the new society, but do not denigrate those who hold differing opinions.

The importance of social interaction, building a social network and developing support systems within the new country were recurring themes for ATCK (n = 15). One 17-year-old male advised parents to “Find others who are close to your ethnic group and help them get you settled in.” In a similar vein, another 17-year-old male suggested, “Mother should join an expat society and involve yourself more so in your son/daughter’s life than you did before. Dad should do the same whilst bringing in the cash.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Coded Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female, 14</td>
<td>Be yourself, learn about the culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 15</td>
<td>Don't be afraid to ask questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 15</td>
<td>Enjoy yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 15</td>
<td>Be open to the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 15</td>
<td>Try and participate as much as possible. Try to follow everyone else's lead and be open to their ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 15</td>
<td>You just have to accept that you're going to miss your old friends, and that things won't always be perfect. Be nice to everyone, be friendly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 15</td>
<td>To be strong and to learn a lot about country before hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 15</td>
<td>Be open to the experience - realize that every place is different and that it does you no good to compare to another place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 16</td>
<td>It is good and fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 16</td>
<td>It is when you go back to where you believe is home that there may (and probably will be) problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, 16</td>
<td>Everyone else in an International School knows what you have gone through</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table continues.
Female, 17

Female, 17

Mike, 15

Female, 17

Cotent of player

Needed to show that it is not enough to just say yes.

Allow your friend to be you, but be your own person.

Do not lose your identity by doing things with friends and pretending to be a different person.

Female, 17

Close
**Family Activities**

As advice to another ATCK moving overseas, only one participant indicated family interaction or support in their response. In light of this finding, further analysis of adolescent-family interaction was conducted. Participants had been asked "In which types of activities do you and your family participate?". Frequencies for these responses are depicted in Figure 5. Eating meals together was the most often listed family activity ($n = 16$), followed by watching television or movies ($n = 15$), and cultural exploration ($n = 9$).

![Histogram of Family Activities](image)

**Figure 5. Frequency of listed activities to which ATCK and their family participate.**

**DISCUSSION**

Cultural adaptation has been studied within a number of transitional populations. However, few studies have focused on the experience of adolescents living abroad temporarily. Because sociocultural adaptation among immigrants appears to be related to subsequent adjustment, we used Bronfenbrenner's (1986) theory of ecological systems to explore the individual, familial, and societal factors that explained ATCK sociocultural adaptation. Specifically, we examined how ATCK perceptions of locus of control, family warmth, family communication, and school belonging, related to their sociocultural adaptation.

As predicted, higher internal locus of control was correlated with better sociocultural adaptation, however, greater family warmth, family communication and school belonging were not uniquely associated with better sociocultural adaptation. Rather, family warmth and communication interacted to explain better sociocultural adaptation. Analysis of the open-ended responses indicated that individual factors as well as friendships and peer relationships may be more instrumental in ATCK sociocultural adaptation than family factors.
LOCUS OF CONTROL: A SELF FULFILLING PROPHECY

The first hypothesis proposed that locus of control would be related to sociocultural adaptation. Indeed in this study, ATCK who indicated higher levels of internal locus of control expressed better sociocultural adaptation. This was in line with past literature which suggests that adolescents with an internal locus of control benefit from a variety of positive developmental outcomes (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Fan & Mak, 1998; Fouts & Vaughn, 2002; Kovacova & Sarmany-Schuller, 2006; Shepherd, et al., 2006).

Further rationale for the relationship between a more internal locus of control and better sociocultural adaptation may be explained through the attribution of optimistic outcomes. Individuals with an internal locus of control are also likely to attribute or anticipate positive results to their activities (Fouts & Vaughn, 2002). In this regard, locus of control may serve to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy, where ATCK with a more internal locus of control are more likely to enter into social situations within the host culture anticipating that they will be well received. As one 17-year old female noted, “If you give everything and everyone a chance, it will really improve your living situation overseas.” In comparison, ATCK who are more externally located, those who anticipate situations as outside of their control, may expect to have more difficulty interacting with peers in a new country. As such a more externally located ATCK may have more trouble maintaining a positive outlook and may blame others or the culture itself for difficulties with their adaptation. Another 17-year old female stated, “Don’t become bitter towards your parents or the culture you’re going into”.

ATCK with a more external locus of control may enter into new activities and social encounters expecting a negative outcome and find themselves behaving in a manner where this negative outcome becomes inevitable.

Complicated Family Relations

Research on populations in transition often links healthy family functioning with better sociocultural adaptation. For adolescent populations in transition, stronger family ties and increased family closeness have been reported (Gerner, et al., 1992; Sit & Chan, 2005). Indeed, family is an important component for healthy adolescent cultural adaptation (McNeil, et al., 1999; Phinney, et al., 2001; Sonderegger, et al., 2004; Thomas & Choi, 2006). The second and third hypotheses investigated the relations among parent-adolescent communication and sociocultural adaptation, and family warmth and sociocultural adaptation. Neither hypothesis was supported in the current study as parent-adolescent communication and family warmth were not significantly correlated with sociocultural adaptation.

Past literature linking family communication and adolescent cultural adaptation has focused primarily on immigrant population and not on expatriate populations (Thomas & Choi, 2006). Again, differences in the intentions of individuals in such immigrant populations versus the intentions of individuals within the expatriate population may serve to explain why family warmth and communication were not correlated with sociocultural adaptation. Immigration is often a single move to a new country for the purpose of survival or a means to reach a better life (Van Eeke, 2003). The adolescent immigrant may perceive the move as necessary for economic, health, or personal safety. In comparison, ATCK often experiences multiple migrations, living in many countries before reaching adulthood. Instead of an inevitable move for a better life, ATCK may perceive their multiple migrations as a choice.
made by a parent and not essential for survival, therefore, parent child communication may play a less vital role in explaining sociocultural adaptation.

Perhaps the following response can provide some insight into the struggle ATCK experience with regard to the parent-child relationship. When asked “For an adolescent who is moving overseas for the first time, what advice would you give to their parent?” One 17-year-old female participant responded:

This is hard for your kid. The closer to high school they are, the more friends they have, the harder the move. If it’s your job that caused the move, for a while you will be seen as the "enemy" because you ripped them away from all they knew. But no worries. Under all that angst, they know that was not your intention and it was not your fault. They may even understand that you did them a favor by exposing them to other cultures. Just be patient. Transitions are hard.

This quote reiterates the complexity of expatriate family functioning as parental figures may be seen as the cause of any associated stress. The potential for family conflict associated with an overseas move combined with the tendency for adolescents to strive for autonomy by distancing themselves from their family and forming outside friendships (Dailey, 2006; Deeds. Et al., 1998; Schwartz & Pantin, 2006; Steinberg & Silk, 2002) push ATCK to gravitate towards others in their peer group for support. Indeed the advice to other ATCK indicates the importance ATCK place on securing friendships with others who have had similar experiences.

Interaction of Family Warmth and Parent-Adolescent Communication

We expected that family warmth would moderate the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and sociocultural adaptation. This expectation was fulfilled, however, the findings were contrary to our hypothesis. High family warmth and high parent-adolescent communication resulted in higher sociocultural adaptation than did high family warmth and low parent-adolescent communication. These results are consistent with past research on the protective role of family warmth and parent-adolescent communication (Lim & Lim, 2004; Sorkhabi, 2005). Contrary to the hypothesis, however, high family warmth did not buffer against low parent-adolescent communication. In the context of a major move to a new country, positive, open communication between parents and adolescents may still be necessary for adolescents’ sociocultural adaptation even if there is a high level of family warmth. For individuals who expressed low family warmth, the relationship between sociocultural adaptation and parent-adolescent communication was opposite to the predicted direction. ATCK who expressed low family warmth and low parent-adolescent communication indicated better sociocultural adaptation than those ATCK who expressed high family warmth and low parent-adolescent communication. Perhaps consistent low family warmth and low levels of parent-adolescent communication is less distressing than the inconsistency between low-parent-adolescent communication and high family warmth, especially when ATCK reside in a foreign country. In sum, our findings indicate that sociocultural adaptation is best facilitated within the context of a warm and communicative family.
Locus of Control as a Protective Feature

We hypothesized that the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and sociocultural adaptation would be moderated by locus of control. Specifically, we predicted that individuals with a greater internal locus of control would have better sociocultural adaptation than those with a greater external locus of control, regardless of the level of parent-adolescent communication. Although parent-adolescent communication was not directly related to sociocultural adaptation, there was a main effect for internal locus of control. Consistent with past research which described how locus of control acts as a protective feature for many aspects of adolescent development (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Fan & Mak, 1998; Fouts & Vaughn, 2002; Kovacova & Sarmany-Schuller, 2006; Shepherd et al., 2006), ATCK who indicated a more internal locus of control expressed better sociocultural adaptation across both low and high levels of parent-adolescent communication, than ATCK who indicated a more external locus of control.

School Belonging

Our original hypothesis predicted that feelings of greater school belonging would be correlated with better sociocultural adaptation and was not supported. However, anecdotal support was given in as response to the question regarding advice to other Third Culture Kids. One 16-year-old female indicated that there may be some support found in the international school community when she advised, “Everyone else in the international school knows what you have gone through”.

Future Directions Based on ATCKs’ Own Words and Experiences

In the course of this study, several additional factors besides locus of control emerged as possible individual influences on sociocultural adaptation. Individual responsibility for their international experience became a recurring theme in the open-ended questions. Participants responded with suggestions for preparation prior to a move such as the suggestion from one 17-year-old female, “Research before you go, learn the language, and just have fun with it”, and in similar fashion one 15-year-old female recommended, “To be strong and to learn a bit about country before hand.” Advice for after moving to a new culture related to individual attitude and outlook. One 16-year-old male stated, “Be open to new ideas and realize that what you believe may not be right.” And a 17-year-old female advised, “Just be open and if you’re angry about moving, let it go.” Perhaps assessing locus of control, while useful, needs to be augmented with other measures that assess how ATCK accepts responsibility for their experience in a new culture, specifically those responsibilities related to sociocultural adaptation.

Investigation of ATCK responses elicited during this study also provided further evidence in support of additional societal influences that may impact sociocultural adaptation. Interacting with others and building a social support were common themes, such as this suggestion from a 17-year-old female to “Find people your age and get to know them. Let them help you around.” Getting involved and learning cultural social cues were also mentioned by a 15-year-old female, “Try and participate as much as possible with everything
that everyone else does, follow people's example." These and other comments listed in Table 5 were in line with the underlying theory of this study, that social interaction with others is an important component of sociocultural adaptation for ATCK.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

There are several limitations to this study that merit consideration. First, the sample size was small and the population of ATCK was sampled by convenience. Both of these limitations impact the generalizability of our results. Additionally, the small sample size raises issues of statistical power (Cohen, 1992) within some of these analyses.

In addition, there may be sampling bias as the participants in this study were recruited for an online survey. Although computer access is available to many people, it is hardly ubiquitous. Availability of computer access may have prevented qualified ATCK from participating in this study. Furthermore, participants were recruited primarily through online groups, expatriate organizations and via word of mouth. Participant answers may be biased depending on from whom, or where they heard about this study. ATCK may have been directed to this study by an expatriate organization, church, or a parent. There is a possibility that the organization or person who introduced this study may influence the answers a participant gives.

Finally, with the exception of the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS; Ward & Kennedy, 1999), the measures used to investigate the constructs within this study have not been validated with a population of Third Culture Kids. While many of these instruments were found to be reliable with other populations in transition, the unique population of Third Culture Kids may make these measures less effective in describing the experiences of ATCK.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the results of this study contribute broad strokes to the overall picture of ATCK sociocultural adaptation, it also highlighted new questions that need further investigation. Triangulating between the quantitative and qualitative findings, sociocultural adaptation of ATCK appears to be more strongly associated with individual qualities (focus of control, preparation for the transition) and societal factors (interactions with others, cultural exposure) than familial factors.

We are not suggesting, however, that family is unimportant to ATCK adaptation, but rather, that other aspects of the family may be an important target for future research. For instance, based on research that suggests there are fundamental differences in personality and temperament between individuals who chose to live overseas and those who do not (Huang et. al., 2005; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregerson, Black & Ferzandi, 2006; Ward, et al., 2004), it is likely that there are also differences in parenting styles between expatriate and non-expatriate parents. Future exploration in this area of research could provide useful information for
understanding how parenting styles may differ for expatriate families, and how those differences may affect ATCK.

Past research has found that adolescent children tend to acculturate more quickly than their parents (Kwak, 2003). Indeed, some of the responses that emerged from the open-ended question regarding “advice to the parent of an ATCK” indicated that parent acculturation may be slower than that of ATCK. The discrepancy in the rates of acculturation between a parent and child can create not only family conflict, but can impact the sociocultural adaptation of the child (Castigian & Dokis, 2006; Phinney & Ong, 2002). Examining discrepancies in acculturation (or sociocultural adaptation) rates, may be another promising area for future research.

As described previously, language ability is an important component of sociocultural adaptation (Birman, et al., 2002; Lau, et al., 2004; Yang, et al., 2006). It stands to reason that the language ability of parents would be an important component of overall sociocultural adaptation in expatriate families, and in particular for ATCK. While ATCK were asked about their language ability (only one ATCK in this study did not speak a foreign language), the survey did not ask about the language ability of their parents. One 15-year-old, female expressed her concern about parents who don’t learn to speak the host culture language. “Don’t make your child talk on the phone because you don’t speak the language.” Further research should investigate not only ATCK, but also one or both parents. Specifically, the language ability, social interaction and sociocultural adaptation of one or both parents should be explored in future studies with ATCK.

The experience of living overseas is complicated for ATCK, as they are transitioning between childhood and adulthood, and across cultures. Indeed, it appears a combination of individual resources, familial and societal support mechanisms, and personal experiences that are not always positive, inform how ATCK adapt within their new country. The struggles, concerns and less than perfect moments expressed by ATCK are simultaneously balanced by rewarding and positive experiences. As one 15-year-old female participant described

You just have to accept that you’re going to miss your old friends, and that things won’t always be perfect. In fact sometimes they’ll be horrible. Be nice to everyone, be friendly. In the end, living overseas is a wonderful experience and you should really realize that or you’ll end up regretting it.

Indeed, the ATCK experience is one that appears to develop in a transitory state between cultures and between developmental stages. Perhaps it is that practice of living between cultures that provides ATCK with a sense of equilibrium to manage the unpredictable emotions and experiences of living overseas.

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