

Exploring the Developmental Niche of Internationally Mobile Families: A Mixed
Methods Study of Settings, Customs, and Parent Beliefs Regarding Children's Education

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University of Nebraska, 2015

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The increasing interest in culture and growing mobility of individuals and ideas have raised awareness of families who move temporarily to places around the globe. This study explored the educational developmental niche of families from the United States who were temporarily living overseas. Parents from the United States were asked to complete an online survey with quantitative and qualitative questions regarding the educational setting, customs, ethnotheories, parent perceptions of the child about education, and general demographics. The children were mostly in international schools and home schools and parents were predominantly employed in religious/missionary occupations. Parent responses indicated overall satisfaction with their children's educational settings, continued connections with the United States, ties within the expatriate community, impact of factors on educational choices, and children's overall agreement. Themes emerged in goals and customs described by parents, the influence of religion/spirituality, and influences of others. Results are presented within the framework of the developmental niche. Significance and implications for those who work with and support internationally mobile families are discussed.

PREVIEW

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To my parents, from birth and marriage,

David and Gloria Glaze

Richard and Karen DeLeón

I am so grateful for your love, parenting, beliefs, and perspectives. Thank you for your positive influence, investments in others' lives, and interest in culture and social research.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Families from many cultural and national backgrounds temporarily live outside of their countries of origin. Most commonly, this occurs for parents' work related to foreign (government) service, corporate, missionary, military, education, or technical aid (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). These families may live overseas for several years at a time and are said to create a global culture (Pascoe, 2000). For those families who go from one overseas job to another or who stay long-term in their overseas location, the time away from their passport countries can add up to many years.

These families are referred to as internationally mobile, global nomads, sojourners, transculturals, and expatriates (Berry & Sam, 1997; McCaig, 1992; McDonald, 2010; McLachlan, 2005; for further, in-depth review of these terms and the history behind them, please see Cockburn, 2002). Feedbacq Moving (2013) reports that there are 230 million (3.1% of the world's population) expatriates world-wide; and, according to the U.S. Dept of State (2014), 7.6 million US citizens live outside their passport country. A term often used to describe the children of these families is "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs) (Useem & Downie, 1976). This term comes from the observation that the parents' passport country is considered the family's *first culture*, the host country where the family lives is the *second culture*, and the international lifestyle and blending of cultures creates a *third culture*. Adapting Dr. Ruth Hill Useem's (1976) definition of Third Culture Kids, it may be inferred that expatriate families could also be known as "Third Culture Families" (TCFs). Through their own writings and some published research studies, it has been documented that Third Culture Kids' sense of belonging is within families and relationships, particularly with other internationally mobile

individuals, not necessarily a sense of belonging to a nationality (Cockburn, 2002; McLachlan, 2005).

Like many parents worldwide, internationally mobile parents have concerns regarding their children's health, safety, education, relationships, and overall well-being. The added component for these particular families is carrying out their parenting and raising their children with the influence of more than one culture and in often unfamiliar locations. This is an increasingly "normal" scenario in today's global culture.

The type of formal schooling children receive impacts their day-to-day lives and their career and other endeavors as adults. Schools (including homeschools) around the world are set in culturally-based environments (national and international) and teach subject material in ways that also transmit cultural values and beliefs (Harkness et al., 2007). In internationally mobile families, children's school plays a particular role as it encompasses not only parent beliefs regarding education, but also their perceptions of culture, international learning styles, safety, and what is geographically available. In the US, parent school choices have shown to be related to priorities on quality of education, religion, and child's needs (Isenberg, 2007). In the US and other countries, parent choices for children's schooling was also impacted by parent values, beliefs, social networks, income and education level along with school size, resources, location, and learning environment (Bosetti, 2009; Dronkers & Avram, 2009). Bosetti found among parents in Alberta, Canada that parents often reported gaining information to make a school choice through conversations with other parents, friends, neighbors, teachers and administrators at school.

Parenting overall is part of culture as well as a way of transmitting culture (Harkness & Super, 2002; Schulze, Harwood, Schoelmerich, & Leyendecker, 2002; Westermeyer, 1999). Differences and similarities between cultures—in both form and meaning of parenting--highlight the diversity of today's global society. Theoretical perspectives in parenting emphasize the role that parents play in sharing culture with children. Parenting models exist within a framework of culture, society, and community (e.g., Bradley, 2002; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Lerner, Castellino, Terry, Villarruel, & McKinney, 1995; Weisner, 2002) with significant implications for parents, educators, policy makers and service providers.

In looking at particular issues in social research, it can be helpful to utilize a framework or model. As Brazelton (1991) wrote, it is important to use a theoretical model in selecting variables to measure and questions to answer in research (specifically referring to cross-cultural work). He encourages this to decrease researchers' projection of biases in interpretations of results. The Developmental Niche framework looks at cultural transmission to children through their (a) physical setting, (b) surrounding cultural customs, and (c) caregiver beliefs/ethnotheories (Harkness & Super, 2002; Super & Harkness, 1986, 1997; Raghavan, Harkness, & Super, 2010). It takes into consideration pieces of the whole to be taken into account in looking at families and culture. This particular framework, which emphasizes parental ethnotheories, guides the current investigation due to the history of the framework's development, its use in various areas of research around the world, its concise yet thorough design, and its relevance in the study of internationally mobile families.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to use the developmental niche framework in an examination of parental ethnotheories regarding children's education among internationally mobile families. Because culture is transmitted through parenting, and internationally mobile parents are temporarily exposed to a variety of cultures, it is significant to explore effects international living may have on parenting beliefs regarding children's education. By surveying families with school age children (ages 6-18) living outside their passport countries, information will be gained to address missing literature regarding parenting beliefs among this population.

This mixed methods study will address the developmental niche of internationally mobile families from the United States, living overseas. A concurrent triangulation mixed methods design will be used, in which different but complementary data will be collected on the same topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). In this study, multiple-choice questions will be used to investigate the developmental niche areas (setting, customs, ethnotheories) that influence one another. The responses for these were drawn from the literature. Qualitative, open-ended questions will be included to obtain additional, supplemental information. The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is to bring together the strengths of both forms of research to corroborate results and provide a more holistic picture of these families. For the sake of time and access to this mobile population, an online survey will be used.

Research Questions

The primary research question is:

Using the developmental niche framework, to what extent are internationally mobile parents' ethnotheories (parenting beliefs) regarding their children's education impacted by changes in setting and customs?

The sub-questions are:

- a. To what extent do changes in physical environment impact parent ethnotheories about their children's education?
- b. To what extent does exposure to different cultural practices impact parent ethnotheories about their children's education?
- c. To what extent does exposure to host country and international parental ethnotheories impact the internationally mobile parents' ethnotheories about their children's education?
- d. What is the parent's perception of the child's role in and response to the educational setting?

Mixed methods research questions:

- a. Qualitative Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the impact of changes in setting and customs on the parental ethnotheories of internationally mobile parents regarding children's education.
- b. Qualitative Question: How are parenting beliefs and practices regarding children's education impacted by changes in setting and culture among internationally mobile parents from the United States?

- c. Quantitative Purpose: The purpose of this quantitative study is to examine the impact of setting and culture change on parental ethnotheories regarding children's education.
- d. Quantitative Question: How do changes in setting and culture relate to ethnotheories regarding children's education for internationally mobile parents?
- e. Quantitative Hypothesis: Changes in setting and customs will impact parental ethnotheories regarding children's education.
- f. Mixed Methods Purpose: To enhance understanding of the developmental niche of internationally mobile families from the United States who are temporarily living abroad through the use of qualitative and quantitative methods and their joint analysis and comparison.
- g. Mixed Methods Question: To what extent does combined use of qualitative and quantitative responses enhance understanding of internationally mobile parents' ethnotheories of children's education?

Significance

This investigation is significant for a number of reasons. First, much of the available literature on internationally mobile families, and parenting in particular, is anecdotal and subjective; although valuable, a clear need for empirical investigation exists. Second, in looking at the extant literature, the majority of studies have not employed theoretical parenting models as a framework for understanding. Third, the investigations that do employ a parenting model are set in culturally stable contexts or consider families who have permanently moved between cultures. Finally, school

selection for internationally mobile families is a relevant concern that impacts the child, family, and parents' work longevity both in the short-term and in the lifespan of the individuals involved. This investigation will help address these gaps. Results will be useful for better understanding internationally mobile families, for observing the application of the developmental niche in a newly-researched area, and for more effectively tailoring services to internationally mobile families.

The developmental niche framework has been applied to non-moving families and to immigrant families but not to internationally mobile families who temporarily live outside their passport countries; therefore, this study will contribute to the research on parenting in a global setting. International mobility is becoming more common—from both perspectives of the families traveling to work outside of their passport countries and communities receiving families into their passport countries who have come for work (e.g., cultural variety in cities within the US). Understanding more about the impact of culture on parenting can help the well-being of children, the employers and support systems in connection with the parents, and the communities and world-wide networks where these families live.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions will be used:

Cross Cultural Kid: “A person who has lived in—or meaningfully interacted with—two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during developmental years” (Van Reken & Bethel, 2005, p. 3). These include international and domestic Third Culture Kids; children of immigrants, refugees, minorities; international adoptees; children of bi/multicultural parents.

Developmental Niche: Theoretical framework to view “the development of children in cultural context” (Super & Harkness, 1997, p. 26). The components/subsystems of the Developmental niche are (1) physical/social setting, (2) culture and customs, (3) caretaker ethnotheories/beliefs. These influence each other and the cultural context created for the child.

Ethnotheory: A component/subsystem in the developmental niche, the beliefs of the caregiver.

Expat community: Network of individuals living in countries outside their passport country, usually for work.

Immigrant: Individuals and families who leave their passport countries, usually permanently and voluntarily (Berry & Sam, 1997).

International Baccalaureate (IB) Program: International education program that, through advanced coursework and exams, prepares students for higher education, primarily through a diploma program in high school. This program is found in many international schools.

International School: School for international student body, with curriculum different from national school, where students can easily transfer between international schools. They are typically accredited by an external association (e.g., International Baccalaureate, Council of International Schools) and most are taught primarily in English or French with foreign language electives. Many international schools align with the education systems of the United States or the United Kingdom, or have a more international focus on the IB program.

Internationally Mobile: An individual or family who moves internationally, usually for job reasons.

Sojourner: Individuals and families who leave their passport countries, voluntarily and temporarily (Berry & Sam, 1997).

Third Culture Kid: Children whose parents are employed (e.g. foreign service, corporate, military, education, missionary, aid workers) in a country outside their passport countries for a significant portion of their growing up years (Van Reken & Bethel, 2005).

Transcultural: Individuals who have a third culture (McDonald, 2010, p. 40).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter presents a review of selected literature to provide a context for the study of internationally mobile families. Culture and parenting are reviewed first. The theoretical framework comprising the foundation of the study, the developmental niche, is then described, including its origins and selected applications in various cultures and settings. Following this, a review of internationally mobile families addresses literature regarding contextual factors and resources for these families, family moving and dynamics, education, and how the components of the developmental niche may uniquely influence these families and Third Culture Kids. The contextual picture provided is useful for understanding the lives and experiences of internationally mobile families and their education choices. The literature also points to the need for future research utilizing theoretical frameworks such as the developmental niche to further understand the cultural aspect of internationally mobile families and the influence this may have in the parents' ethnotheories.

Culture and Parenting

Culture is the “sum total of a group's life-ways, including the group's material culture, world view, social organization, symbols, status, child raising, language, technology, and citizenship” (Westermeyer, 1999, p. 75). It is a framework for all aspects of our lives, including parenting. Schulze and colleagues (2002) wrote, “Much of parental cognition is itself socially and culturally organized” (p. 152). The way parents think of and act out parenting behaviors, goals, and objectives is set within and is a part of a cultural context.

This cultural context is created (and transmitted) *through* families, communities, and lifespans (Harkness & Super, 2002). Parenting in different cultural contexts has been an area of prominent research since the time of early ethnographic studies in the 1930's through the present (Harkness & Super, 2002). Differences and similarities have been documented in daily family activities and parent-child interactions between families in different cultural groups (e.g., Portes, Cuentas, & Zady, 2000; Schulze et al., 2002). Researchers have examined parental values and practices, family socialization, and child outcomes pertaining to a cultural context as well as variations in parenting in specific cultural communities worldwide. The bulk of evidence concludes that, along with other sources, culture is transmitted through parenting and is itself culturally influenced (Harwood et al., 1999). Cultural influence on parenting style has been noted as a way that culture is then transmitted to children (Harkness & Super, 2002). The influence of culture on parenting, along with the child's personality, family, other relationships, school, community, and society all play a role in identity formation and development (Berk, 2003; Gauvain, Beebe, & Zhao, 2011).

For internationally mobile parents, physical residence often includes cultural aspects of daily life and parenting that differ from their passport culture and/or other cultural communities where they have lived. This presents challenges, particularly in relation to the transmission of parental culture of origin. Internationally mobile mothers highlight the importance of sharing their culture with their children while living in a different cultural community, by eating traditional foods, celebrating certain holidays, listening to specific music and learning the language (Lengré, n.d.; Mecking, 2013b). In internationally mobile families, if the transmission of parental culture to children is