

Multicultural third culture building: A case study of a multicultural social support group

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Abstract

Cross-cultural transitions provide rich opportunities for increased intercultural dialogue in multicultural social networks. This research uses Casmir's third culture theory as a framework to examine social support during adaptation, by presenting a case study of an ethnography of an international student group. The study contributes to cross-cultural adaptation literature by exploring how membership in a multicultural social support group influences member identities and interactions with the host-culture during transitions. Findings extend third culture theory from a combination of two cultures to an amalgamation of multiple cultural influences; membership the group influences multicultural identity construction, providing rich social support that complicates home/host culture bifurcations.

Keywords: *Third culture, social support, adaptation, multicultural identity*

Introduction

In the process of adapting to new cultures, many migrants negotiate multiple identities, which may no longer be discrete cultural entities, but are becoming blended and multifaceted (see Appadurai 1996). Such cultural hybridizations illustrate the dynamics of cultural identities within the context of globalization (Fuligni & Tsai 2015). Hybridized identities may be capable of sustaining multiple cultural influences by becoming more flexible, but only if an individual can maintain some sense of coherent identity structure—often facilitated by social networks formed during the adaptation process (Wang & Collins 2016). This makes salient research on heterogeneous social support groups of migrants from disparate cultural backgrounds, with the common factor of shared migration to a new host-culture. The current research addresses this topic by using Casmir's (1978, 1997) third culture theory to illustrate how this hybridized cultural space can add richness to cross-cultural transitions (note: when I use the term cross-cultural transition, I am speaking directly of people who shift from one nation-state to another, as it is utilized in the work I draw from by Casmir; Adelman; and Ward).

This research takes the position that a third culture is a socially determined communicative space, involving shared norms, rules, and values of its members, and influencing their identities. 'Communicative space' implies that such groups create shared social spaces for intercultural dialogue, where cultural meanings and identities can be renegotiated (Casmir 1997:99-100). This study addresses what occurs when multiple culture groups join together to create what has been known as a 'third culture', contending that such multicultural social networks are flourishing in migrant communities due to globalization. Specifically, it is designed to understand how third culture-building is exhibited by multicultural support groups, posing the following research questions:

RQ 1: How does membership in a multicultural social support group influence the identities of its members and their interactions with the host-culture during transitions?

RQ 2: What does a multicultural support group look like through the lens of third culture theory? How is third-culture building exhibited by such groups?

Theory in Review

Third Culture-Building

Casimir (1997) defines third culture as "...the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two [or more] different cultures can function in a way beneficial to all involved" (92). During the sojourner experience, Evanoff (2006) describes how normative approaches "typically suggest that individuals should either adapt themselves to the norms of their host-cultures...or maintain their own norms while respecting those of the host-culture" (421). He situates third culture theory as a useful alternative model for linking social support to cross-cultural adaptation research, through the frame of intercultural dialogue. This construct provides a bridge through which to link global issues of transnational cultural flows to individual/interpersonal issues of social support, identity, and acculturation.

Hybridized identities can be formulated through this notion of third culture, particularly when conceptualizing that that space creates connections with members of two disparate cultures. As Kramsch and Oryu (2016) state, "Culture has become deterritorialized, crystallized in the form of memories, identifications, and projections people carry in their heads," thus fostering imagined and real connections that can, in real time (and in virtual space—or any space created and/or facilitated by mediated networks), cause blending or even superseding of the two original cultures into a hybrid identity (10). Much of this draws from Casimir (1978), who proposed an interactive process model of third culture-building, describing how two individuals from different cultures combine their perspectives to create a unique third culture through a process of mutually negotiated meaning. Thus, a third culture is a socially determined communicative space (e.g., the context and environment in which communication takes place) that is created when individuals of different cultural backgrounds come together and form relationships and identities within a new cultural context (Broome 1993:104). Such cultures can exist as an outcome of deterritorialization, and happen more frequently in today's world than in an older, culture-as-nation-state iteration.

Third cultures can be made up of multiple cultural influences, moving beyond simple $A + B = C$ models, as can be seen in Belay's (1997) application of the theory to the UN and in Adair, Tinsley and Taylor's (2006) research on applying third culture theory to multicultural team-building. Much of the third culture literature conceptualizes these cultures as pragmatic spaces for the creation of shared schemas that "arise when people from different national cultures interact for a specific common purpose" (Adair, Tinsley, & Taylor 2006:209). These researchers describe third cultures as "...shared knowledge structure[s] consisting of team and task knowledge, as well as values and norms rooted in the traditional cultural belief system of one or more members" (207).

As such, Broome (1993) applies third culture to conflict facilitation to promote relational empathy, a facilitation technique allowing members from discordant cultures to experience empathy for each other outside of their cultural contexts, in order to move towards conflict resolution. From Broome's perspective, third cultures are cultural spaces (that is, interactive new cultures built by communication between more than one cultural group) in which both parties retain some of their cultural uniqueness; but conflict can be facilitated through shedding of cultural allegiances, which is permissible within the cultural space of the negotiation. Further, Weiss (2006) describes the need for third cultural spaces in situations of international business mediation in today's globalized world.

While third cultures are widely acknowledged to exist within the dynamics of cross-cultural relationship-building (see Casimir 1978; Adair, Tinsley & Taylor 2006), the amount of research applying the construct directly to sojourners (e.g., short term voluntary migrants to a country, such as tourists or students studying abroad) is limited. Evanoff (2006) proposes third cultures as alternative cultural contexts through which to engage in intercultural dialogue, where sojourners integrate "norms across cultures which serve to govern relationships between individuals in cross-cultural situations" (422). The current research takes a similar, dialogic perspective on the third culture concept, evolving through sojourners' mutual social supportive needs to negotiate adaptation, providing space for multiple cultural influences to create, through dialogue, a shared schema that then impacts the adaptation outcomes of the members to the host-culture.

Third culture theory allows conceptualization of the communication by which hybrid cultures are constructed as a dialectical process, constantly shifting the tensions of its disparate cultural parts. These third cultures can become *more* than the sum of their parts: new cultures existing in the negotiated space between two (or more) interacting individuals, which are constructed through language, social interaction, and the creation of new hybrid cultural norms (Adair, Tinsley, & Taylor 2006). An emergence of a global society dictates that contextual fluidity is required for the reshaping of national and cultural identities through intercultural interactions (Chen 2015:75). Third cultures become both social structures that create new cultural schemas for members, and subsequent cognitive impacts that such shared schemas have on the individual members, influencing the way in which they transition to their new cultural surroundings.

Social Support

Social support provides a bridge between third culture-building and adaptation. Albrecht and Adelman define social support as “verbal and nonverbal communication...that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one’s life experience” (1987:19). Strong networks of social ties can assist in restoring self-esteem through identity-enhancement evaluations: “feedback from others about a stressful event can help the individual shift dysfunctional attributions that negatively affect perceptions about the situation or self and build a more functional response” (Adelman 1988:186). Social support has been repeatedly shown to reduce stress, promote psychological well-being, and increase a coherent sense of self (Yeh & Inose 2003).

When sojourners leave their home countries, they are “deprived of important others who have endorsed their sense of self in the past” (Yeh & Inose 2003:24). When feelings of helplessness and inadequacy arise from lack of certainty and attribution errors, individuals can cope through communicating with others who clarify the situation, reducing self-doubt and uncertainty (Adelman 1988:185). In this case, social support-seeking can increase intercultural dialogue, which in turn can go a long way towards easing awkward transitions often experienced by sojourners entering new environments (Albrecht & Adelman 1984). The creation of support networks can aid in reconstruction of identity and increased tolerance for the stress of adaptation.

Social support is provided through strong social networks, defined as “combinations of personal and social ties in the new culture in which affective, instrumental, and informational resources are exchanged” (Ting-Toomey 1999:242). Such social networks must be constructed with cultural context as a salient factor. Just as individuals define themselves through social networks, they also choose members of those networks based on similarity, proximity, and reciprocation of liking.

Home vs. host-culture relationships

Much existing work on social support networks and cross-cultural transitions focuses on the difference between home- and host-culture relationships, where individuals are encouraged to either assimilate to host-culture norms or maintain their home-culture norms (Evanoff 2006). This research often describes how migrants form social relationships with culturally similar others (home-culture networks) vs. members of the host-culture, and the affects those relationships have on their transitions (see, among others, Yeh & Inose 2003; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi 2004; Adelman 1988).

Relationships with culturally similar others (co-nationals)

In adaptation literature, social support findings show that ethnic-based social networks provide identity support during initial stages of immigrants’ adaptation processes (Mortland & Ledgerwood 1988). When an individual sojourns to a new culture, s/he may be advised to invest in social networks of co-nationals (home-culture members who have been in the host-culture for some time) for emotional support (Albrecht 1988). Established co-nationals send identity-supportive messages, for example: “I went through the same thing when I first arrived”. Such messages instill hope, confidence, and identity security (i.e., you’re not crazy) in recipients. However, Poyrazli et al. (2004) conclude that building social networks that include only home-culture members can *increase* stress in sojourners, while social groups that include host-nationals can reduce stress.

Relationships with culturally different others (host-nationals)

Ward and Kennedy (2001) emphasize that frequent, higher quality contact with host-nationals assists sojourners in adaptive satisfaction and increased host-cultural competence. Host-culture networks allow for the learning of mainstream cultural norms and acculturative practices (Chapdelaine & Alexitch 2004). Sojourners should form relationships with host-nationals for task, instrumental, and feedback support (Albrecht 1988). Network ties with host-nationals (members of the dominant cultural group) facilitate learning of mainstream cultural norms by giving newcomers opportunities to engage with the dominant culture through activity participation. This increases favorable attitudes towards the host-culture. However, while such contact is beneficial to sojourners when it is positive, negative contact with locals (such as receiving messages like negative stereotype cues, prejudicial behavior, and discrimination) may create a sharp increase in adaptive stress while decreasing perceptions of intercultural competence.

Moving beyond home/host-culture networks

Ward (2004) describes the controversies of research on social support in terms of the manners that certain kinds of support influence sojourners: Do home-culture networks only provide emotional support? Do host-culture networks only provide instrumental support? Kashima & Loh (2006) find that ties with other internationals lead to better adjustment overall, providing both emotional and instrumental support. Specifically, being allowed to compare the home-culture identity to host-culture and other cultural identities during cross-cultural transitions "...enhances newcomers' heritage cultural identity...leading them to recognize their own cultural uniqueness" (Kashima & Loh 2006: 473), while still feeling supported.

It is here that third culture theory can become useful, particularly as globalization and hybridization of identities blur the lines of home/host-culture dichotomies (Sobre-Denton 2011:81), incorporating members of home- *and* host-cultures, as well as members who subscribe to neither or both (Chen 2015). The current research contends that such multicultural social support networks can create overlapping cognitive schemas that form new learned patterns of shared behaviors, becoming hybridized, multidimensional third cultures that culminate in *more* than the sum of their original cultural parts.

Using the intercultural dialogue framework taken by Evanoff (2006), the current research takes a constructivist approach to third culture-building/social support, where individuals from multiple culture groups create new cultural norms in their building of a multicultural third culture. The research attends to the application of additional cultures to the third culture model; i.e., what happens when multiple culture groups join together to create a third culture (Belay 1997). How does such third culture-building engage individuals in constructing their own hybrid identities with respect to mutual cultural influence?

Method

This work is designed to use social support as a context to study third culture development. The research contributes to cross-cultural adaptation literature by seeking to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: How does membership in a multicultural social support group influence the identities of its members and their interactions with the host-culture during transitions?

RQ 2: What does a multicultural support group look like through the lens of third culture theory? How is third-culture building and culture-specific behavior exhibited by such groups?

Research Design

This research encapsulates one four-month preliminary study and one 14-month ethnography of a multicultural social group: INTASU, an international group of travelers that existed in both virtual (mediated, networked) and real (corporeal, physical) space. The methodological choice is based on an epistemological framework that focuses on the social construction of multicultural support networks through subjective experience of personal accounts, participating and observing INTASU in virtual and

real space, seeking to ascertain how it creates realities for its members that facilitate feelings of support and cultural adjustment. During both phases, I joined the group INTASU, engaged in their activities and communication rituals in both virtual and real space, and formally and informally interviewed several members[1]. Conceptualizations of reality in the research sites were intersubjectively constructed as a result of dialogue between myself and the members (Guba & Lincoln 2005).

Site description

INTASU was a group of over 400 primarily international individuals living (or having lived) in the Phoenix area, many of whom were affiliated with a large Southwestern university at the undergraduate and graduate level, ranging in age from 18- to 82-years-old. In existence for fourteen years, INTASU defines itself on its webpage as, “the highly unofficial, non-religious, non-political, multinational INTASU” (retrieved 6/8/16 from www.groups.yahoo.com/group/INTASU). Members communicated primarily through various social events that occurred several times per week (including sports team practices, band performances, parties, dissertation defenses, and impromptu meetings for lunch). As INTASU existed independently of the university and has no official meetings, the social media served as a general networked space (in terms of the messages that are sent) for planning activities, engaging in gossip, sharing photos of events, connecting with members no longer in the US, and general interaction. Their organization was founded in 2002 and they are still active as of 2016, although their social media venues have (understandably) changed; the Yahoo groups page hasn’t been more than spottily active since 2014, but of course they now have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram et al. With roughly 40 countries represented, a wide variety of ages, education levels (high school students to PhDs), and religious and cultural affiliations, INTASU provided an excellent opportunity to explore interactions within the theoretical construct of third culture-building.

Data Collection

Preliminary study

This research took place in two parts: the first was a four-month exploratory study, when I gained access to the site through a founding member of INTASU. The primary research question asked how INTASU was created, and how it represented a third culture. Data collection involved three phases: (1) Participant/observation; (2) in-depth interviews of five key informants; and (3) monitoring of the listserv. During this exploratory study, I joined the group INTASU and monitored the Yahoo page daily—in lieu of informed consent, the site moderators placed the letter of intent from my IRB application on to the group’s page with my contact information so I could be contacted with questions, comments, and concerns; attended 20 hours of events, and interviewed five key informants (including the main gatekeeper, a roommate of one of my graduate student friends). These included two males and three females, ranging in age from 18 to 31; nationalities included French, Mexican, Lebanese-American, self-identified Anglo-American, and Indonesian. By the end of preliminary data collection and analysis, questions were generated that were then used to create the interview guides and research questions for the follow-up project.

Re-entering the site

The second part of the study was designed as an ethnography. I continued to use a grounded theory approach, moving inductively upwards through description, analysis, and interpretation of data (Miles & Huberman 2002:14). I re-entered the site two years after the exploratory study, collecting data for an additional 14 months (see Sobre-Denton 2011). During this second study, I engaged in 40 additional hours of participant/observation, including attendance of cultural events, hikes, parties, sports events, dinners, salsa-dancing, and weekly lunches, and monitored the listserv with a research assistant. I conducted 32 semi-structured interviews, including five follow-up interviews with key informants and 27 interviews with new informants. New informants ranged in age from 20-43 years old, including 14 females and 13 males. Nine were European; four from the Middle East; four from Central America and the Caribbean; five from Asia; one self-identified Anglo-American, and five who identified as bicultural/hybridized (one each: Iranian/Guatemalan; Japanese/Lao; Mexican/American;

Ecuadorian/American; and Lebanese/American). Informants lived in the US from one month to their whole lives. I also participated in 15 informal interviews during events, with eight female and seven male participants from Europe, Africa (Botswana, Kenya and South Africa), and the Middle East (Turkey, Egypt, and Iran).

Finally, my research assistant and I transcribed and coded 100 additional pages of listserv data, monitored over 14 months during the second data collection period. This included communication from a wider range of INTASU members—as about one fourth of INTASU members are in the US at any given time, social media allowed members who have left the state to stay in touch. It also allows traveling members to communicate with one another, finding people and places to visit while abroad. This data included posts by a core group of 30-40 active members (both within and outside of the US) who posted several times a week, and 348 individuals who posted at least twice over the data collection period (see McEwan & Sobre-Denton 2012).

Analysis

Preliminary data analysis

The data analysis for the preliminary study involved two phases: (1) open coding; and (2) interpretive axial coding where higher order themes were extracted. After preliminary data collection ended, a codebook was designed for the observation notes and the interview transcriptions, with 26 overlapping categories. Categories included, for example, descriptions of rules/norms of behavior in the group, and patterns of humor/teasing that took place. Data were then coded in a line-by-line format, in which each individual line was micro-analyzed for the presence of the coded categories. During this process, I also worked with open coding, to create an unrestricted picture of the data, including emergent patterns and coherent meaning (Lindlof & Taylor 2010: 219). Additional refinement of the data led to a total of 42 open codes.

Following this, I looked for axial codes, which “make connections between categories... [resulting] in the creation of either new categories or a theme that spans many categories” (Lindlof & Taylor 2010:220). Eight axial codes were identified, with data marked accordingly to the presence of one or more open codes in each axial code. Those data were subsequently used to describe the overall behaviors of the group. I returned to this process for my data analysis procedures in the 14-month study, while also using my initial findings as a comparison point through which to analyze data and interpret new findings.

Second study analysis and NVivo

While the preliminary research data were analyzed manually (using Excel and coding by hand), for the second study, I transferred data analysis to *NVivo*, a program that helps to manage and analyze qualitative data. *NVivo* incorporates a grounded theory approach that allows sorting of prerecorded data to reflect conceptual thinking, and to explore relationships between categories (Bazely & Jackson 2013). The program creates higher order ‘tree nodes’ (*NVivo*’s term for axial codes) and queries to search more data in less time.

I transferred the preliminary codebook and imported all my interviews and observation notes into *NVivo*. To update the codebook from the preliminary study, I compared incidents from all the data (from both studies) applicable to each coding category and modified categories to fit new incidents (or else broke off and created new categories). Next, I recoded my initial interviews and coded my new interviews and observations into free nodes (*Nvivo*’s term for open codes), according to the revised codebook.

From this point, I took the data from *NVivo* in its tree node categories, printed it out, and organized it into three themes determined by axial code and research question: cross-cultural adaptation, third culture-building, and social support. Then the data were directionally organized, illustrating the relationships among the three constructs. This model took several iterations, with the large themes arranged in various orders, as the relationships among the themes in the data became clearer. Patterns emerged after

completing this final step in the analysis process, allowing me to draw the conclusions illustrated in the figures below.

Results/Discussion

Research Question 1

To address RQ1, the dimensions of social support and cross-cultural adaptation were examined in detail, and two areas of focus emerged to link these dimensions: demographics and displacement of group members, and the cultural activities engaged in by INTASU.

Demographics and displacement. The demographic makeup of INTASU illustrates how members engage with one another and the host-culture, and how this differs from traditional home/host-culture dichotomies. Figure 1 describes traditional dyadic third culture formation:

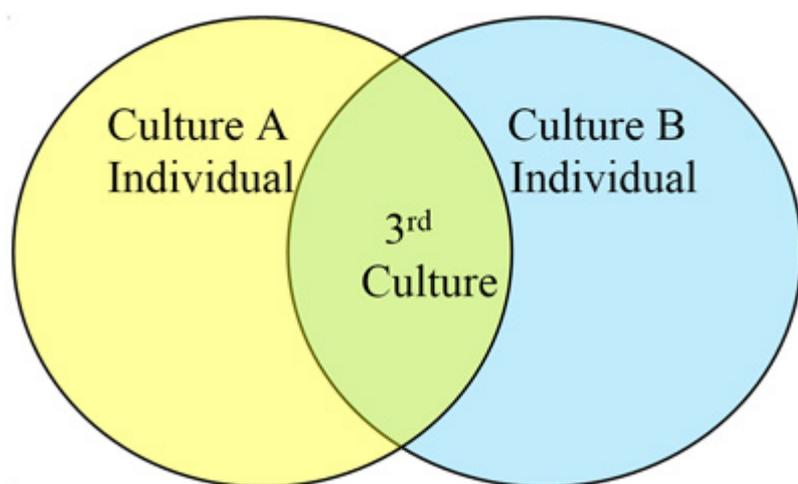


Figure 1: *Traditional Third Culture Theory*

Context: Culture A = home-culture; Culture B = host-culture *or*

Culture A = host-culture; Culture B = home-culture

Overlapping space = third culture

Many INTASU members cited the importance of having a group that includes Americans but isn't limited to them, as simply interacting with host-culture members does little to ease feelings of displacement stemming from adaptation. INTASU represents amalgamation of multiple cultures—not just Culture A + Culture B = Culture C (see Figure 1), but rather Cultures A + B + C + D + E (etc.) = culture Z, or a “*multi-culture*” (Belay 1997) (see Figure 2).

INTASU was identified as welcoming those who may have felt ‘displaced’ in the past. This sentiment was felt strongly by Lillianna, who was raised as a third-culture kid. Lillianna’s parents moved to the US to escape political unrest in Lebanon. They had family in Arizona, and became integrated within a small, traditional Lebanese community in Phoenix; growing up, Lillianna felt that her life hybridized between two cultures, never belonging in either: “So you’re caught between these two worlds and you can’t tell which one you want to identify with”.

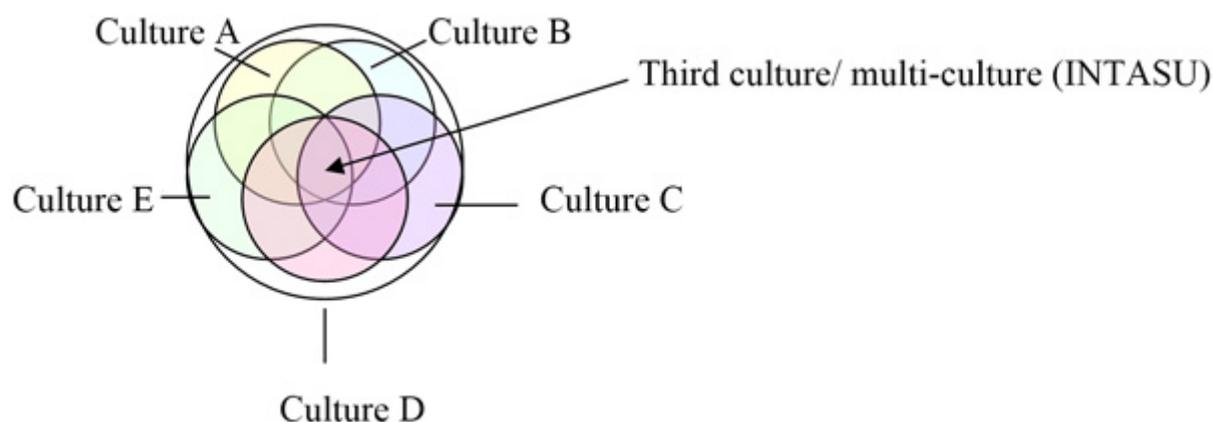


Figure 2: *Multi-Culture of INTASU with Multiple Cultural Influences*

Context: Cultures A through E are each distinct cultures, and where they overlap with one another, they create the third culture or multi-culture of INTASU

Within this overlap of cultural influences, members of INTASU found space for mutual influence and social support. Amanda[2], from England, explained:

I think for us it's kind of a safe place. We feel like we know that people make assumptions about us, about where we're from. So you're always very conscious about that. INTASU's a safe place to let it out and to tease people who you know are not going to be offended, or who are going to laugh about it because they know it's not serious. They recognize that. It's almost like a commentary.

This sense of solace fits well with the metaphor of home and family in INTASU.

Cultural learning through activities

Members of INTASU experienced the host-culture in more breadth, possibly, than people who have lived in the US their whole lives. François noted that being involved with internationals should influence individuals to explore their host-culture: “INTASU motivates its members to learn more about their host-culture from within a safe environment of peers”. For example, within my first month observing the group, I was invited to the following events (and more): salsa dancing, dinner parties, gelato nights, guitar recitals, group intramural sports, foreign film screenings, hiking, and band performances (INTASU had two bands made up of various members).

INTASU provided its members with many opportunities for dialogue, through which to learn about one another's cultures as well. For example, any international festival in the Phoenix area would likely be attended by a contingent of INTASU members (with them, I attended the Lebanese Festival, a Japanese anime festival, a Turkish dancing festival, among others). Additionally, parties were often designed around specific cultural themes. Group members were as likely to host a Super Bowl party to learn about American football as they were to get together to watch World cup matches. This provided space for learning about multiple cultures, all-the-while integrating members of INTASU out into the larger system of America.

In short, the dynamics of the group, its cultural learning experiences, and the sentiments of its members all point to the conclusion that INTASU was a multi-culture. As such, its members moved through Casmir's phases of third-culture building, and then *beyond* the model in the end. First, initial contact was made through word-of-mouth, or an invitation or referral by a member to attend an event. Second, contact was extended, so that awareness of that person by the group became more salient: the moderators invited the new member to join the listserv; that member attended a flurry of activities, becoming known by the central group members. Third, the new member might have planned an event, or begun a closer relationship with another INTASU member, or engaged in intercultural dialogue such as cultural teaching and learning. Fourth, interdependence was achieved, where “mutual acceptance of the fact that cultural

development and change...can best be achieved through mutual dependence among those involved in that process” (Casmir 1997:111).

Here is where the multifaceted culture of INTASU extends Casmir’s model. The interdependence allowed multiple cultural influences to create the third dimension of space that Casmir discusses, but in a more well-rounded representation of multiple voices rather than two overlapping cultural influences. This also created the place for a meta-third culture, in which INTASU as its own culture then engages with the host-culture, America. New members became assimilated into the culture of INTASU, and developed multicultural (even cosmopolitan) perspectives and active membership roles; then, from INTASU, they learned how to interact with the host-culture as a whole (as illustrated by Figure 3, below).

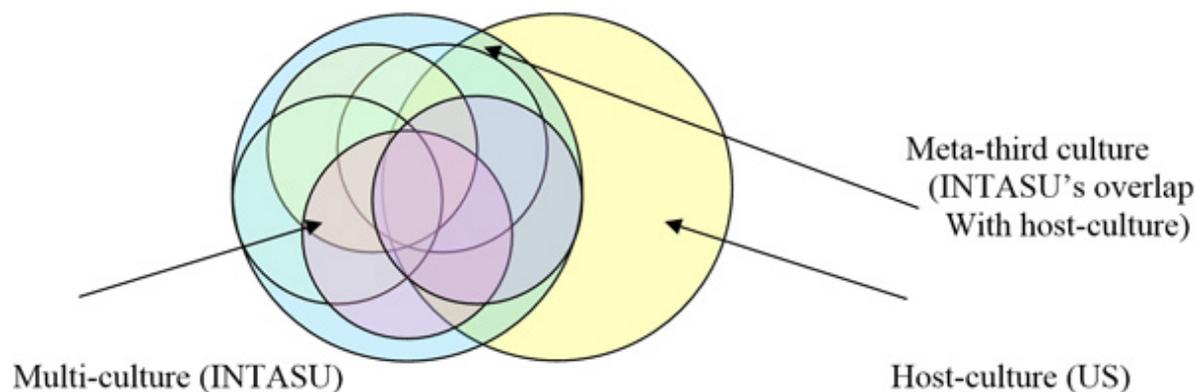


Figure 3: *Multi-Culture of INTASU Creates a Meta-Third Culture with the Host-culture*
Context: This meta-third culture space is where INTASU influences cross-cultural adaptation.

Several examples of this meta-third culture exist in the data. Often, members developed friendships outside of INTASU (through classes, work, etc.), and divided their time between INTASU and their outside friends. For instance, during the preliminary study, an active participant of INTASU from Saudi Arabia named Karah threw a party at her house. Her roommates included a member of INTASU (from Guatemala) and two colleagues from Intel (both US Americans). At one point in the party, Karah came into the kitchen, looking frantic. When asked if she was okay, she replied that her two worlds were colliding, and that seeing her INTASU friends interacting with her Intel friends was creating a sense of identity instability in her (which she described later in a more formal interview):

It is like I am constantly judging situations based on two different frames of reference, my American reference and my INTASU reference—who do I spend more time with? Who is ‘winning the party’? My Intel friends are dancing to Saudi Arabian hip hop and drinking Guatemalan wine, and my INTASU friends are eating In and Out Burger... whenever I hang with my INTASU friends we do the international thing, but with my Intel friends we are just American... now here everyone’s doing the same things and I’m not sure how I fit...

Karah’s experience merging INTASU with the host-culture created a third-cultural space, in which the multiple cultures of INTASU merged again with the host-culture (in this case characterized by Arizonan Intel employees), creating “a place beyond conventional social practices where no norms exist”, with a new set of norms (Evanoff 2006:423).

Research Question 2

In order to understand what INTASU looks like through the lens of third culture theory, it is important to note that this research engages in an *extension* of third culture theory. Under the dimension of third culture-building (as described above), two axial themes emerged from the data collected: the use of a home/family metaphor to describe the group, and the integration of relational empathy as a strategy for building and maintaining intercultural relationships.

Home/family metaphor

Identity is rooted in a sense of belonging (Sparrow, 2008). When individuals engage in cross-cultural adaptation, part of this process involves feelings of loss of home, family, and belonging. Third cultures may provide places where sojourners can find a home, even in a space far away from their own physical homes. As described above, INTASU served the purpose of creating a *home* for its members, a *family* in which they find support, and a sense that they *belong* somewhere. For INTASU members, a space called ‘home’ may not need rooting in any one culture or *place*—a sense of belonging can come with the creation of a family where there was no family before.

Members of INTASU often described the group as creating a space of ‘home’ for them, due to the following reasons: members often don’t feel at ‘home’ in the world, either because they are away from ‘home’ or family; members may straddle multiple cultural identities and thus are never completely at ‘home’ in any place; and/or a wealth of cultural experiences have left members feeling somewhat alienated from the culture they reside in. For such displaced individuals, INTASU stood in as a metaphor for ‘home’ as well as for ‘family’, providing them both with a set of peers who may be experiencing similar estrangement from their own homes, and socially supportive ‘family’ through which to reduce stress. Ling described how INTASU stood in for her family during difficult periods of adjustment:

I think not just because we’re all from different parts of the world, but because we’re all interested in different parts of the world, interested in different cultures... And we are not from here where we’re living right now, but I don’t know. I would say... It creates that sort of family or a sense of home away from home.

In INTASU, members could find this family in all its senses. There was a hierarchical system, with the concomitant rules and norms that are found in the family structure. The founders, particularly François, served as the parents. The older generation included the founding members who acted as gatekeepers for the group, recruiting new members and arranging the vast majority of events. The younger generation included those who had been members for less than one year, and those members who were less active, attended but didn’t often arrange activities, and/or had fewer resources in the host-culture. Younger members relied on older members for advice and assistance; when they committed social faux pas, they were reprimanded by older generation members—in this way learning cultural norms of INTASU as well as societal norms of the host-culture.

When people defied the explicit rules and the implicit norms, there were consequences—the moderators or group founders could contact group members and sanction them. Moderators often encouraged members to talk through their conflicts. For example, an 18-year-old new member of Lebanese American descent posted her opinion on an Israeli/Lebanese conflict in a matter that inadvertently insulted some Lebanese Christians in the group; when some group members complained to Nacho, he and François took down the set of posts from the listserv, and invited the disputants out to a hookah café, where they talked through the issue for several hours until group members on both sides felt they understood each other.

Membership in this family was voluntary. Behaviors were passed down through the generations as was lore about past members and events in the life of the group (stories of jumping off a roof into a pool at a party have reached legendary status). There were members who have become estranged and members who returned after estrangements.

Certain ways of speaking originated by founding members were still used at the time of study, passed along over the listserv and as slang during interactions. Whenever a group member was inviting all members to a social event, they call it a ‘blasto’, which came from Nacho, who created this ‘word’ in an email string in 2002 to describe a trip to Rocky Point. According to François, “if you come and you listen to us you won’t understand stuff because one sort of the words will be in English, some in German, we just mix everything”. This can be seen in INTASU in several ways. Religious holidays (particularly around the Christmas season) were called “Chrismahanakeid”, “Passeaster”, “Roshashamadan” or other such hybrids. Group members’ birthdays were often recognized in Spanish, even if the group member is not from a Spanish-speaking country. INTASU members were called INTASUians. Such linguistic hybrids create a sense of multicultural community, allowing members to feel like insiders: “So you have, like [Nacho] mixes a lot Spanish and English. And we pretty much all do this, so you have those words also created within the group. So I think it creates a new group, like a new culture” (François).

In the creation of this home-away-from-home, individuals of differing cultural backgrounds used communication to build a ‘third culture’ that allowed them to share cultural ideas, feel socially supported, and create a strong sense of relational empathy. Members became interdependent in terms of emotional, social, and task support. Secondly, members created private systems of understanding (Casmir 1997:109) and behavioral conformity that transcended individual culture-group identities. For instance, while the group defines itself as a democracy, most members, when asked about the structure of the group, noted that there are some hierarchical norms that exist. There was a core group of about 20 to 30 people at any given time who were present at most events, holding the more power in the group: they tended to make the decisions. This power can be measured by the amount of responses to postings on the listserv (McEwan & Sobre-Denton 2012). There were certain people in INTASU—like, for example, François—who would post and always receive reactions. When individuals like François, Amanda, Rayna, Mia, Charlie, or Madison (all long-time members who attended multiple events) organized an event and posted it on the listserv, they almost always received responses and had high attendance numbers.

Relational empathy

Third cultural theory extension is particularly relevant and applicable to INTASU in terms of relational empathy. Relational empathy (see Broome 1993) existed in INTASU in terms of multiple cultural overlaps that led to the ability to place oneself in the shoes of any of the other members’ cultures, even if those cultures are literally at war. Relational empathy represents an opportunity for internationals to learn more about each other’s cultures (as well as their own), even if they don’t always find similarities with the other group members. One example of relational empathy that resulted in the international perspective gained by both home- and host-culture members through intercultural dialogue, was described by Lillianna:

It changes your mind in general. If now I watch the news, I think it’s pretty cool like...it’s good for Americans in the group. They learn a lot, more than they will know if they just watch the American news. For example if I hear about something happens in Pakistan I think of some of my friends from INTASU who are from there. So, the world cannot shrink til you know it. You break down borders. When you hear of an event you think of people you know in the group who it will be affecting. It really affects your mind and you pay more attention.
(Lilliana)

This illustrates how third cultures can lead to the development of an intercultural mindset, as INTASU’s members “begin to consciously evaluate the norms and values of both their own and...other culture(s)” (Evanoff 2006:422); in essence, transcending relativism. Lillanna had been able to ask friends from other cultures about information she had not been previously aware of, and to make comparisons across cultures: “So we’ve compared our cultures and it kind of opens your eyes to new worldviews, and so in a sense being able to be part of a community like this, it makes you more open-minded as to what else is out there”.

Another interesting sequence illustrating relational empathy can be seen in the relationship of Yitzchak, an Israeli, and Walid, from Lebanon. My initial experience with their relationship came at Walid’s birthday party, where François introduced me to Yitzchak as “another Jew for you!” It seems that François and Yitzchak were counting up the Jews in INTASU at the party, and competing with Walid, who was counting up all of the Arabs. The competition became a huge joke, in which people were lumped into categories based on religion, as well as enjoyment of bacon, financial stinginess, and taste for Maneschewitz. I asked both Yitzchak and Walid about this competition in subsequent interviews, and both explained to me how such jokes create for them a sense of camaraderie:

The idea is that most of the time when we meet, we just discuss things openly. Like, I’ve never discussed things openly with my other friends...And we always—often, let’s say a political conversation and then we start arguing and half of us will be drinking beer and hugging. I’ve found that it’s scary. Yitzchak can be like any brother I have. It’s very interesting. We’re so close. I guess we stop—we break the religious boundaries. (Walid)

Yitzchak describes a similar sense of openness in communication:

I can argue with the guys and it's no big deal. We can argue about politics and what's going there in the Middle East... And I would talk with Walid and say, "When are you blowing up? Should I hide now? Let me know before it happens." And stuff like that. So we're laughing about these things all the time...because in INTASU, I think there are a lot of different members who could potentially represent cultures in conflict, but yet the way that it's handled tends to be.... a way of talking about it or making jokes about it or lightening the situation where it becomes less cultural and more personal and sort of easier to get over and move on from.

The use of humor to diffuse areas of traditional intercultural conflict, like the Arab/Israeli relationship, created intercultural dialogue, in a manner that became constructive. Group members could air their disconnections in a productive manner, and can learn from one another, through dialogue. In dealing with intercultural conflicts, the ability to achieve relational empathy directly influences how the conflict is resolved. Lily, an American member, said that she felt she had grown from hearing others' perceptions of American culture through travel and membership in INTASU: "It's interesting to meet new people and see their side of the story, see their view of America. Every single culture, country, people, they have different ideas of what America is like."

The home/family metaphor and relational empathy within INTASU illustrate how this group took on the characteristics of a third culture. In essence, INTASU illustrates the creation of a multi-culture, or an extension of third culture to a more multifaceted perspective. This third culture was created and maintained like a society (or a large family), which existed and grew through its in-group behaviors, including: recruitment strategies (word-of-mouth only), manners of dealing with host-culture stressors, a unique sense of humor utilizing sarcasm and stereotypes, group-specific slang, and an almost ritualized way of dealing with conflict.

Extending Third Culture Theory

A contribution of this research is that third-culture building is useful as a theoretical framework to better understand social support in cross-cultural transitions, in that it is what takes place communicatively through interactions among multiple individuals with the potential for multicultural identities, and can lead to a greater fostering of such identities. The multifaceted social support group created by INTASU gave its members a sense of identity security and belongingness, which when combined with heightened self-awareness, led to more effective adaptation. Venable and Subanthore (2005) describe the common strength of traditional models of third culture in that they are actively attempting to establish a new culture; however, they find the limitation of this approach in that the third culture, while distinct from cultures A and B, is still a derivative of these cultures. The current research directly addresses this critique, in that the creation and evolution of INTASU developed unique new cultural rules and norms, creating a new multi-culture in which the members of the group transcended cultural boundaries.

An additional contribution to the third culture literature involves Broome's (1991, 1993) description of relational empathy. INTASU followed this conception as a manner through which to understand and deal with one another's differences in attitudes, religious backgrounds, perceptions, cultural values, communication styles, needs and/or goals that impede successful conflict resolution. Further, the creation of relational empathy in this voluntary multi-culture group increased the sense of emotional support that group members received, as well as their ability to adapt to the host culture. Group members used relational empathy to assist one another in dealing with the stressors of the transition, and to support one another when things got difficult—either during personal crises or intercultural problems. Indeed, it was the relational empathy created within the group during the meta-third culture experiences, where INTASU members engaged with the host culture, that created a safe space for the trial and error process of host-culture adaptation. In this manner, the current research elaborates third culture building and relational empathy beyond a two-dimensional process that only addresses conflict resolution, towards a communicative process-based phenomenon, which can be applied beyond the borders of INTASU, effectively creating not only a multi-culture, but a meta-third culture. This can be applied beyond

INTASU as an influencer in cross-cultural adaptation and the building of social support across cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

This research identifies new strategies for examining experiences of travelers as they interacted with one another in the social sphere. Beyond the theoretical benefits gained from applying third culture theory to multicultural social support systems, globalization in America and the rest of the world calls for more effective communications within other international settings. Sojourners, migrants, hybridized people, and host-nationals participating in positive transitional and social experiences through multicultural support systems and intercultural dialogue form lasting cross-cultural relationships, moving toward reducing stereotypes of other cultural groups (including the host culture), and encouraging skills that are necessary in negotiating a global environment that is simultaneously growing and shrinking.

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[1] I received IRB approval for this research at Arizona State University in 2006, then again in 2007 when I re-entered the site.

[2] NOTE: All names have been changed, and most of the names have been changed to the participant's choice of name. Name changes are designed to protect identity while preserving nationality of the participant.