



Being a Third-Culture Kid: A Profile

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People on the move are not new in the experience of human history. Nomadic tribes follow from one food source or grazing spot to another. Partial groups of people are taken into captivity after defeat. Persecution and escape from natural disaster or famine have caused mobility, but usually other people of your own "tribe" move with you. The Abraham-type mobility, splitting a family, was common after World War II when improved transportation, expanded world awareness, and visions of global commerce triggered the mobility of individuals and families.

People living and working in another culture today are affected not only by the host culture of colleagues from other places. While remaining, for the most part, evident members of their home or passport cultures, their world view, values, flexibility, and intercultural abilities are altered. They are not truly members of their new culture(s) or place(s) of residence (Culture 2), but they are not what they would have been had they remained in their own country (Culture 1). These people have become members of a "third culture" and their children are "third culture kids."

The term *third-culture kid* is not a new one. It originated about forty years ago with Dr. Ruth Useem, a sociologist at Michigan State University. She and her husband were doing intensive work with U.S. business and government families on overseas assignments. While working with the adults, she also had an opportunity to observe the kids. She said, "There's something different about these kids. They function at a whole different level. They think differently. They have a different base, and a different point of reference." She coined the term *third-culture kid*.

Some have reacted negatively to the term either at an intellectual or emotional level. The term may be inadequate to meet sociological or anthropological demands, but it has given us a point of reference and has given the people who identify with this new "tribe" a point of identity and belonging. Whether or not calling this group a culture is accurate, the fact remains that those who fulfill the definition share characteristics and perspectives that bind them together.

I was doing a seminar with foreign service kids some time ago, and one girl said, "When I sit down in the public school in Fairfax, Virginia, everybody else is saying, 'I went to such and such a place during the summer vacation.' But when I say, 'When I was in Paris in July...' the conversation comes to an end. But that's where I was in July! If I'm going to talk about my life's experiences, they relate to where I've been. They're a part of the geography, part of the whole culture. I'm not trying to be smart or put anybody down. I listen to everybody else share their experiences, but I can't say anything. When I do, it either stops the conversation, or somebody backs off, and I realize that I've made another social faux pas. It really hurts."

She was in a group of thirty-five kids packed into a very small living room, absolutely delighted because she could do what third culture kids can do with each other. She could say, "When I was in..." and the other kid could say, "And when I was in..." Nobody threatened anybody or was seen as arrogant. One of the delights of being a third-culture kid is finding other third-culture kids.

The general working definition for a third-culture kid is an *individual* who has spent a *significant* part of his or her *developmental* years in a culture other than that of the parents, resulting in integration of



elements from both the host culture and parental culture into a third culture. The key words in this definition need to be explained:

- **Individual.** Each person will respond differently to the experiences of life. Personality and temperament, experiences and perception, age when experiences occur, position and role of in the family, to name a few, are variables in each person resulting in individualized reaction and response.
- **Significant.** The amount of time for an individual to take on the characteristics of a Third-Culture Kid (TCK) varies with the individual.
- **Development.** This is the issue which makes the experience of a young person different from that of the parent. Mobility, and the impact of a variety of cultural influences, will shape a developing individual more profoundly than the mature adult can usually imagine.

When we explore characteristics of TCKs, it is important to recognize that we are exploring tendencies. No two TCKs will have the exact experiences or perceive them the same. The variables mentioned above will shape TCKs differently as do the variables in any cultural group. For example, a person who has been in Ecuador from the age of one to the age of seven is not going to be impacted the same as the person who has been there from age one to eighteen. Another individual who comes at seven and leaves at eighteen will be on still a different footing. The period of development during which the person was in the other culture will determine the details.

Going home for the third-culture kid is not going home as his parents perceive it. If the parents are assigned to their "home" country for a year, the young person actually goes home at the *end* of the year when they all return to the overseas location.

In the Middle

Often the TCK lives with a sense of being "in the middle." Some years ago a college student named Ruth Goring wrote an essay entitled "I Am Green." She said that she was neither the "blue" culture of her passport country nor the "yellow" culture of the host country. She was somehow a mix of the two (see Chapter 6).

There are other people who find themselves caught in a crack between passport and host countries. They are touched by both and identify with both, yet without a sense of being owned or owning either one.

In either case, TCKs often find they are at home everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time. Home may always be elsewhere, and a sense of rootedness at any point of geography may be unknown. One learns to adjust, survive, and succeed, but the sense of "place" is elusive.

Parents may be former missionaries, former foreign service people, or former international business people, but their kids will never be former third-culture kids. That identity doesn't stop because Mom and Dad go back to Hometown, USA.

Pain often results when an individual returns to his home country at the age of twelve or thirteen. By the time he is in high school, he may be far enough away from that experience to decide that he no longer can identify himself with third-culture kids. If he happens to be on a college campus where third-culture kids have a group that meets, he may stand at the edge, having the sense that somehow he belongs there, but insists, "I don't belong."



I met a fellow who came to one of the seminars we were doing in the Midwest on third-culture kids. He said, "That's me. I'm a third-culture kid. All the lights went on. But I really am not, because I was twelve when we came home."

I said, "That doesn't change anything. You're still a third-culture kid." (He is no longer a kid – that's another problem with the term.) He said, "Do you mean that I really am a part?"

After the session I went into the lobby and sat down, and third-culture kids came from all over the place. As the fellow I had been talking to walked into the room, he hesitated at the back of the group for a moment, then made his way through, and sat on the floor right in the middle. He was happy as a pig in the mud. He joined the conversation and talked about his experiences of coming home, and how painful it was not to go back or to have had a chance to say good-bye, and on and on. He came up to me afterward and said, "This is the first time since I was twelve that I have felt that I belonged."

Our tendency is to think that children have unlimited resilience. You can do anything with kids and they bounce and they adjust. Sure they do. We're all made to adjust, and adjustment does take place. Whether or not it's a good adjustment, and whether or not it leaves a residue of pain, is a different matter. When a kid at five years of age is taken away from an *ayah* and brought back to the United States, he may have suddenly lost someone who was extremely important. That *ayah* may have played a role in the child's life that was very close to, or maybe superceded the relationship with the mother. We have to bear in mind that these are real live people who have real live feelings and real live memories.

It's also important to emphasize that third-culture kids have the same needs as every other human being. They are no different from anyone else. Being very mobile and living in a cross-cultural setting creates complexities in the meeting of those needs. Individual personalities have various levels of resilience. That resilience has limits but it can also be enhanced and supported by wise and informed caregivers.

It is important to remember that there is a third-culture-ness inside the borders of one's own country. I was doing a seminar in Addis Ababa, and a Kenyan in foreign service said, "I was never outside my country as a teenager, but my father was involved in government, and we moved from tribal area to tribal area. This sounds like me." It may be that some people moving from Massachusetts to California have moved from one deeply rooted and distinct culture to a very different culture. There may be "third culture-ness" inside national borders that produces experiences similar to the international TCK.

There are other variations in the TCK experience. Let me go to the Department of Defense as an illustration. Even though the American bubble is carried along with the military, there is a military culture and there is an American culture. An individual may find herself crossed between those two cultures. Basically it's still American culture, but the subculture of the military presents a different set of values that influence the individual. She is the product of two *cultural* influences in her life as well as the high mobility of the military community.

There are some third-culture kids who try not to identify with other third-culture kids in their home country because they are reminded of the hurts they carry with them. Some try desperately to fit in, because someone has communicated to them that it's really not OK to be a third-culture kid. "If you're going to go back to your own country, be like the kids there."



Tendencies: A Profile of TCK-ness

The two major overlays or categories of influence for the TCK are 1) transition from mobility and 2) the transcultural experience. Both influences have significant benefits for most people but at the same time both produce challenges that must be recognized and addressed.

Overlay #1 Mobility. Most TCKs develop significant flexibility and adaptability. Seeing, hearing, tasting, and smelling new things is a way of life for most and contributes to their ability to accept and adjust to what is new and different. This significant benefit, coupled with their experience, if not habit, of moving frequently or regularly, contributes to a sense of rootlessness. Belonging everywhere and nowhere has a major impact on one's identity. Home is always "elsewhere" for many TCKs and they often long to get to the "other place" in order to feel at home.

For some, the struggle with identity and belonging is intensified when they still have a sense of belonging overseas after having returned to their passport country. Some say or imply that the TCK must "get over" their TCK-ness and fit in with (become exactly like) the people in the passport country. Return as a younger child may also contribute to the individual's belief that his TCK-ness is invalid.

The solution for many is to recognize that other third-culture kids are their "tribe." Others who share the experiences of growing up in a culture other than their own make up this "tribe." Beyond belonging to the tribe, the individual needs to recognize that the TCK effect is not a disease. Responses are understandable and normal, given the influences and experiences.

Frequent and regular mobility, broad world perspective, rich memories, and a confidence in change, may all contribute to a migratory instinct. Mobility is not wrong, but being victimized by it may be destructive to individuals and those around them. Moves during educational years may be deeply disruptive. Career paths can be frustrated by moving too soon and too often. Members of the family of origin may be stressed by the lack of stability and lack of proximity.

The nuclear family subsequently formed by the TCK may also fall victim to frequent relocation. This may undermine the relationship of the couple and in turn may create undue and destructive tension with their children. Such mobility makes long-term planning difficult, intensifying the tendency to focus on the "now" without being free to make proper and reasonable choices for the future. Some TCKs fail to plan for the future or to make their preferences known because their mobility as children often preempted desires and choices made, leaving them disappointed and sad. Many learn to cope by refusing to reveal preferences and solid plans for the future.

TCKs seem to find their rootedness in relationship rather than in geography. When they consider where they belong, they think in terms of people rather than place. They generally value relationships highly, but also have the sense that loss comes to all at some time. For some, there may be a chronic sense of impermanence and dread of anticipated loss.

The result of this combination of effects is something of a paradox. On the one hand, TCKs tend to develop friendships fairly quickly and at a deeper level than most non-TCKs. They have had practice doing it – living life enriched by communication and the sense of urgency because of mobility. On the other hand, TCKs may be guarded in developing relationships and careful not to allow others to know them too well and thus become too vulnerable. When you move, you may not want to leave unguarded information in the hands of people who no longer feel a loyalty to you. They may also limit intimacy to reduce the pain of



separation. Such responses may be appropriate in the normal flow of a mobile lifestyle. The problems arise when these habits are carried into relationships such as the family of origin, marriage, parenting, and deeper lifetime friendships.

Because of the regular experience of leaving or being left, highly mobile young people may develop a "quick release response." When there is a hint of another separation, real or suspected, the TCK may let go of a relationship too soon and too fast. This is a defense against the pain of separation, but it can be destructive to relationships that could be long and meaningful.

Unresolved grief is not an uncommon result of a TCK's multiple losses. The lack of permission to grieve, time to process grief, or people to empathize and comfort, may result in repression of grief. Anger, depression, over-sympathizing with others in grief, and sometimes delayed grief responses triggered by what may seem insignificant losses may be indicators of unresolved grief.

The TCK often develops a strong independence. The ability to function on one's own is one of the necessities of mobility. However, when independence goes unchecked, isolation from others can produce unnecessary and inappropriate loneliness.

Dr. Ruth Useem noted in her research that it was not unusual for TCKs to experience what she called "delayed adolescence and delayed adolescent rebellion." There may be several factors related to both mobility and cultural exposure that contribute to this. The TCK may be actually more mature than the peer counterpart in the country of origin. Factors contributing to this maturity include expectations and demands for certain behavior, relationship to adults in the international community, independence, communication skills (including multiple language ability), and knowledge based on a "big world" exposure.

There is uneven maturity, however, because knowledge of one's passport culture and its ways may be limited, with gaps in social skills, interpersonal relationships, humor, and general rules of cultural behavior and etiquette. Sometimes there is the overlay of "grieving one's childhood," wherein the individual discovers certain aspects of experience and relationships that were nonexistent or deficient in the place where he or she grew up. There may be a longing to experience what others in the "home" culture had.

Delayed adolescent rebellion may be the result, not of rebellion, but an emotionally charged combination of unresolved grief, anger, and loneliness, and no longer sensing the need to be compliant. TCKs need to know that such a response may emerge in their early twenties. It does not necessarily damage one's life unless rash decisions are made or actions taken which have irreversible or far reaching consequences.

Over the long haul of one's life, the benefits of mobility can far outweigh the difficulties. But the challenges must be addressed both before and when they arise. Knowing the dangers allows us to make better choices.

Overlay #2 Cultural Exposure. A TCK may respond in a variety of ways and intensities to multicultural input. Parents' attitudes and behavior, agency policies, and the individual's personality and attitudes are some of the variables which determine cultural influence beyond the forcefulness of the culture itself. Influences include the parents' passport culture or cultures, the culture of the sponsoring



agency, the school or schools attended, the host culture itself, caregivers, and the expatriate (third-culture) community itself.

The greatest benefit is the world view developed by most TCKs. It is three-dimensional, with not only knowledge but understanding and empathy. The sense of security in getting around in the world and acting appropriately in it is significant preparation. The person can become a cultural bridge and an active, positive influence in an increasingly intercultural world.

Challenges include the pain of seeing the real world with its hunger, sickness, cruelty, injustice, war, and death. The TCK often sees the world very differently than those who have never “been there.” Another challenge is dealing with people who have not had travel opportunities. TCKs may appear to be less patriotic or loyal to their country of passport because of a broader experience, and seeing that country from a different perspective. They may also be impatient with others because of their lack of experience, willing ignorance, or limited perspective. The TCK is challenged to be patient and understanding of those who have had less opportunity.

There is a serious need to be aware of and guard against the tendency to be arrogant about one's experience and knowledge. Sometimes it helps to remember that the TCK did not usually have this broad experience by choice, but rather as the product of parental decisions. Nor is the monocultural person usually that way by choice, but the product of parental choices and opportunities.

TCKs can recognize that the monocultural person knows things about one culture that they may need to learn, while the TCK has cultural knowledge from outside. Such knowledge serves TCKs well in many situations in life, but they may feel like “hidden immigrants” in their passport country. The sense of being off balance because of unknown history, rules, people, or humor, can be a shock to some. A lack of understanding of home country values – and sometimes conflict with them – creates a sense of being an alien. A Korean TCK said “I think I am more comfortable as a foreigner in a foreign country than being a disguised stranger in my own country.”

TCKs as adaptable, flexible observers are sensitive to prejudice, and tend to be compliant and suspend judgment of others. They can be “cultural bridges” and mentors for others' attempts to move cross-culturally. The stress of being caught in the middle of cultural difference is a challenge, but the skills and insights of TCKs make them extremely important in today's world. Language skills need to be valued, developed, and used in connection with cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity.

As Ted Ward has been quoted, “The TCK of today is the prototype of the citizen of the twenty-first century.” The TCK is also a person of the twentieth century and a culture broker in a changing, demanding future.