

# **Third Culture Kids / Global Nomads and the Culturally Skilled Therapist**

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*As society moves ever more toward globalization, more and more people grow up straddling two or even several cultures. This article utilizes literature about Third Culture Kids (primarily from a book by David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken entitled Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds) to help therapists understand the developmental issues, benefits and challenges faced by people who have grown up between cultures, whether they are "third culture kids" (TCKs), immigrants to a new country, or those who straddle subcultures within the same country, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and the disabled.*

*A Third Culture Kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (qtd. in Pollock and Van Reken, 2001, p. 19).*

## **Why the term Third Culture Kid?**

Third Culture Kids are defined by the common life experiences they share through the very process of living in and among different cultures. Third Culture Kids, also known by the term "Global Nomads," may come from the families of missionaries, business executives, education professionals, media representatives, and the foreign service. Their experiences tend to affect the deeper parts of their cultural being, including their values, beliefs and world view. Cross-cultural experiences affect adults too. However, when a child experiences cross cultural life during the developmental years, it has profound effects on that child's sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world (Pollock and Van Reken, 2001).

## **The Affect of Cross Cultural Living and High Mobility on Identity Formation**

When people first go to another culture as adults, they experience culture shock and need a period of adjustment, but their value system, sense of identity, and the establishment of core relationships with family and friends have already developed in the home culture. Their basic sense of who they are and where they belong are intact. Children and adolescents who must move back and forth from one culture to another are doing so before they have formed their own personal and cultural identity. As Pollock and Van Reken illustrate, "A British child taking toddling steps on foreign soil or speaking his or her first words in Chinese with an amah (nanny) has no idea of what it means to be human yet, let alone "British." He or she simply responds to what is happening in the moment" (Pollock and Van Reken, 2001).

## **Significance of Culture**

The word culture brings to mind obvious things such as how to dress and behave like those around us. However, it is the deeper aspects of culture, the system of shared assumptions, beliefs, and values, that provide the framework from which we interpret and make sense of life and the world around us. When we have stayed in a particular culture long enough to internalize its behaviors and the assumptions behind them, we have an almost intuitive sense of what is right, humorous, appropriate, or offensive in any particular situation. Being "in the know" gives us a sense of stability, deep security, and belonging. On the other hand, when we are having to learn and relearn the basic rules by which the world around us is operating, our energies are spent surviving rather than thriving, struggling to understand what is happening rather than fully participating in the event. Because Third Culture Kids/Global Nomads grow up relating to several different cultures, they often experience a sense of being off balance, of not belonging or not fitting in. This experience is also common to immigrants, African Americans, Native Americans and the disabled.

## Significance of High Mobility

Many people are aware that military families tend to move frequently, perhaps every two years or so. Some immigrant families also move back and forth between two countries. For them, issues of culture shock exacerbate the normal stress of any transition. Members of American subcultures such as African Americans, Native Americans, the disabled, and others must alternate between different cultures when they traverse between one neighborhood and another, and between school and home. These children must somehow incorporate the values and attitudes of their parents and grandparents while also trying to successfully fit into the larger society of school and popular culture. Everyone goes through transitions, but TCKs/Global Nomads, immigrants, and members of sub-culture groups go through major transitions far more frequently than those born and raised in one dominant culture.

## The Cross Model of Cultural Identity Development

There are many models of cultural identity development. W. E. Cross (1978) described a four-stage process in which blacks living in the United States move from a white frame of reference to a black frame of reference, and finally to a global frame of reference. He asserts that this same model also applies to other minorities including Hispanics, Asians, American Indians, women, and gays and lesbians. The Cross Model further illuminates what individuals growing up in a cross cultural context undergo in order to develop a cohesive and positive sense of identity.

**Pre-encounter Stage** - The individual consciously or unconsciously devalues their own blackness (the sub-culture) and concurrently values white (dominant culture) values and ways of thinking. He/she dislikes his own group and emulates the dominant group.

**Encounter Stage** - The individual encounters a profound crisis or event that challenges the previous model of thinking and behaving. The individual reinterprets all events from the perspective of his/her own group. Cross points out how the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. was such an event for many blacks. The individual experiences both guilt and anger over having been "brain washed" by the white society.

**Immersion/Emersion** - The individual withdraws from the dominant culture and immerses himself into black culture. Black pride begins to develop, but the internalization of positive attitudes toward one's own blackness is minimal. The individual abhors the dominant group and confronts the system. However, gradually, feelings of guilt and anger begin to dissipate with an increasing sense of pride. Gradually, both the strengths and weaknesses of one's own group and the majority group become visible.

**Internalization** - The final stage is characterized by inner security as conflicts between the old and new identities are resolved. Anti-white feelings subside as the person becomes more flexible, more tolerant, and more bi-cultural-multi-cultural.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of a Cross Cultural Upbringing

Dr. David Pollock and Dr. Michael Gerner explain the advantages and disadvantages for Third Culture Kids (Seoul Foreign School Web Article). As mentioned earlier we believe that the advantages and disadvantages for Third Culture Kids/Global Nomads also apply to immigrants, the disabled, African Americans, Native Americans, and anyone who has grown up in a cross cultural context. In this section when we speak of Third Culture Kids/Global Nomads we are referring to all of these groups.

### Advantages

**Linguistic ability** – many TCKs/Global Nomads are conversant in another language or have heightened interest and ability to learn a new language. In addition, the deaf child can sign, and African American and Native American children may have their own dialect or language.

**Cross-cultural skills** – most TCKs/Global Nomads have a high acceptance level of differences. They see other cultures as different, but not necessarily better or worse than their own. Many have the ability to incorporate the best characteristics of the cultures they have experienced.

**High Flexibility** – TCKs/Global Nomads are usually flexible, adapting well to new situations and

new environments. They tend to escape cultural single-mindedness and tend to be less dogmatic and authoritarian than their counterparts back home. Because of this TCKs/Global Nomads are usually good teachers and role models and able to generate new perspectives and thinking-skills in their listeners.

**Three dimensional world view** – TCKs/Global Nomads tend to view the world as a global entity inhabited by “real” people with the same basic human needs. Their realization provides them with a much greater potential for leadership roles.

**Maturity** – In some instances, TCKs/Global Nomads are more mature than their “mono-culture” counterparts. For example, TCKs/Global Nomads routinely deal with international travel, foreign currency, a variety of food choices, and sometimes international crisis/unrest as part of their normal lifestyle. They may actually thrive in their ability to be open and ready for change. They may also be socially mature, being able to interact comfortably with people of all ages and cultures. TCKs/Global Nomads are people who can generally rely on themselves to think clearly and act appropriately. Immigrants, the disabled, African American and Native American children often have to face real hardships and perhaps grow up faster than what might be considered ideal in a perfect world. They understand the need to work and struggle for what they want.

**Family closeness** – Because Third Culture family members have shared the experience of adjusting to a new culture, they usually describe themselves as having close family ties. Also, disabled people often need to rely on family to compensate for their particular handicap.

**International orientation** – TCKs/Global Nomads often describe themselves as liking to travel, and indicate a preference for a career with an international orientation. All these abilities, properly recognized and nurtured, can open doors to particular career choices that foster the peaceful bridging of cultures.

## Disadvantages

**Rootlessness** – TCKs/Global Nomads usually feel that they belong to several cultures but own none. Because of this, TCKs/Global Nomads, as adults, may change colleges or jobs more often than their mono-culture counterparts. Part of their rootlessness might also be their need for change. It is important to remember that TCKs/Global Nomads have roots in their family, rather than geographical locations.

**Insecurity** – TCKs/Global Nomads may view relationships as short-term, loosening ties after 2 years or so, due to their internal clock. They sometimes make intense relationships very quickly, but keep a margin of safety. (“This is going to be really good, but only while it lasts.”)

**Unresolved grief or sadness** – The frequent breaking-off of relationships due to relocations may often cause sadness and unresolved grief. The immigrant, disabled, African American or Native American child knows the sting of inequality, disadvantage and opportunities lost, which all too often remain unresolved.

**Off balance** – TCKs/Global Nomads may feel lost, not knowing what they need, where to get it, whom to turn to, or why they feel this way. This is part of the process of integrating into a new/different culture which may or may not be welcoming.

**Out of phase** – TCKs/Global Nomads may not be in the same developmental stage as their peers. This may also contribute to their alienation on returning to their “home country.” (Delayed adolescent rebellion is a common phenomenon for TCKs/Global Nomads during their early 20s and career decisions may come later than for mono-culture kids).

The immigrant, disabled or African American and Native American child may also have more challenges to negotiate and more interruptions to the maturational process. These may include language problems, a physical or intellectual handicap and /or limited economic resources.

## **How Therapists Can Help**

Therapists who treat those who have grown up in a cross cultural context can assist these clients by helping them identify their current stage of cultural identity as demonstrated in the Cross model. The treatment process might also include the following: helping them to name themselves and their experience, recognizing problematic behavioral patterns, acknowledging losses and emotional wounds, identifying the effects of cultural imbalance, and finally, by aiding them in cherishing the many positive experiences and benefits of a cross cultural upbringing.

### **Naming Themselves and Their Experience**

In essence, the individual in therapy must answer some questions. How has the experience of growing up between or among cultures made them who they are? What values do they hold as a result of their experience? What can be done to heal unresolved grief and other emotional wounds? For many people simply discovering that there are legitimate reasons for their feelings not only helps them understand themselves better, it also normalizes the experience. As Pollock and Van Reken (2001) state, "Instead of feeling their history is a piece of life's puzzle that will never fit, they now see it as the key piece around which so many others fall into place."

### **Naming Behavioral Patterns**

If a client identifies certain lifelong repetitive patterns such as not allowing intimacy to develop in one relationship after another, or constantly moving, some questions might be asked. Is this behavior related to confusion of identities? Is it an expression of unresolved grief?

### **Naming Losses and Emotional Wounds**

It is often difficult to look at the past for fear of facing old pain. However, adults can realize that no matter how badly a certain situation hurts, they have already survived it and that situation is now past. By facing the pain it can be grieved and resolved and it is important for adults who have grown up between cultures to periodically reexamine this pain/loss. Journaling may help the client to uncover previously unrecognized losses. Another effective tool for both client and therapist is the use of a timeline. The timeline can be used to track where and with whom the client lived during what periods of time between ages one and 18. It allows both client and therapist to see where the transitions between various cultures occurred and at what ages in order to better understand specific separations and losses, and proceed to address areas that need to be healed.

### **Recognizing the Affects of Cultural Imbalance**

Therapists should help mixed culture clients to carefully think through the impact of culture on the client's developmental process. Some of the feelings adult Third Culture Kids struggle with may be largely a result of cultural imbalance; the feeling of being off balance, odd, and out of phase with those around them.

### **Cherishing the Gifts of a Cross Cultural Upbringing**

Often those who have had a cross-cultural upbringing may be defensive when asked about the painful aspects of their past. They frequently feel frustrated when others cannot relate to their life experiences. At the same time they do not want to negate a way of life that is a core aspect of their identity. It is important for the therapist to help the client to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of the experience, so that the many positive aspects and difficult challenges of a cross-cultural childhood can be integrated into a coherent story, a piece of the puzzle around which so many others fall into place. When the client is finally able to hold and own all facets of his or her life story together, he or she is likely to say that the blessings of a cross cultural childhood are many indeed.

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