

TCK Identity

Have you ever heard of the acronym “TCK?” Do you know what it means? Are you feeling ready to work with TCKs? Well, here’s some information to get you started.

A TCK (Third Culture Kid) is someone who’s spent most of his or her growing up in another culture(s) other than his or her parents. Ruth Hill Useem, the woman who created the term TCK, defines it as the following:

A TCK describes young people raised in a country other than that of their parents. They blend the culture of their passport country with their country of residence and become truly multicultural, often finding it easier to relate to others who have lived abroad than to those who have stayed close to their roots.

David Pollock, a renowned author and speaker on the topic of TCKs, defines the TCK as *An individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents’ culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience.*

The people who likely fit this description are from internationally mobile families. This applies to kids from academic, business, foreign service, military, or missionary families living overseas.

Some people refer to kids who’ve grown up abroad as Global Nomads. *Global Nomads are persons of any age or nationality who have spent childhood years living in one or more countries outside their country of passport because of a parent’s occupation . . . global nomads are members of a worldwide community of persons who share a unique cultural heritage. In addition, they often share similar responses to the benefits and challenges of a childhood abroad.*

Adults who return to their roots, or their homeland, are known as former “expats” (expatriates). You can be a former diplomat or a former missionary, but **there’s no such thing as a former TCK**. A TCK is a TCK for life!

Defining “Third Culture”

Let’s take a look at how some of these aspects blend together. We divide “Third Culture-ness” into three categories; a) home culture, the culture inherited from your parents, b) host culture, the culture in which you’re currently living and/or where you’ve lived, and c) “third culture,” the unique blend of home and host cultures. By definition, culture entails people. Therefore, the “third culture” is what TCKs have in common with each other (Pollock 1989). It’s not a tangible place or society. It’s more of a way of life, a bond with others who have had similar experiences.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Just as in any situation in life, there are advantages and disadvantages in being a TCK. Sociologists refer to a multicultural childhood as an “open passport to the whole globe.” Experts say that the TCK is the prototype for world citizenship of the future – rootless, keenly adaptable, multilingual, and globally-minded. They have the opportunity to do very significant things in an ever-increasingly internationalized world (Pollock, *TransWorld Radio* 1987).

The advantages that a TCK experiences cannot be obtained in any other way. Mono-cultural kids won’t develop the linguistic and cross-cultural skills, nor the world view that

TCKs do. Seems fairly obvious that the positives outweigh the negatives (Pollock). Let's take a look.

Assets	Liabilities
--------	-------------

Growing Up

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generally more mature, have had more relationships with adults causing more sophisticated communication skills • have learned to be more independent and autonomous because of the nature of mobility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may feel a little “out of sync” with peers of home culture (e.g. dating, school) • often experience delayed adolescent rebellion by facing anger and loneliness in college, far from host cultures and family • tendency to bargain with life, grieving a childhood that cannot be relived |
|--|--|

Relationships

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to enter relationships at a deeper and more intimate level because of practice and urgency (knowing the time may be short) • value relationships • have a sense of realism about relationships, that grief and loss happens to everyone • independent and self-reliant, contributing in healthier ways to relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • guarded because of so many lost relationships, may put up boundaries to intimacy, refusing to be vulnerable • may distrust adults, danger of being cynical and mistrusting • tendency to be emotionally “dull” • once insulated and self-protected, vulnerable to loneliness |
|---|---|

Language

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • typically speak more than one language, find it easier to learn new languages • able to appreciate variation in logic and thought present in other languages • stronger oral and written communication skills • may even have better ability to key into others’ learning styles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited in any <u>one</u> language, because not entirely fluent – vocabulary and forms of expression may be incomplete • find difficulty with phonetics and spelling • may be more easily confused with multiple languages |
|---|--|

World View

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possess a “third dimensional” view, with knowledge, understanding and empathy for various perspectives on life • secure in own perspective because it’s been “tried and tested” • motivation to bring about change for the better, to help others (like in relief organizations) • based on experience, realize people around the world are more similar than different | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feel the pain of reality (such as starvation, poverty, destruction), frustration that others don’t share the same world view • danger of becoming impatient and arrogant with others who have “one dimensional” view of life • may feel confused about where loyalties lie and may be perceived as less patriotic |
|--|---|

Cross-Cultural Skills

- have learned to be observant, adaptable, flexible, compliant, less judgmental
- capable of mentoring others because life experiences have been so varied
- may be perceived as socially slow because take time to assimilate new surroundings and social mores
- tempted to become “social chameleons” just to fit it
- may be less assertive in new situations and perceived as lacking conviction

Cultural Identity

- rich cultural background with elements of various cultures internalized
- broad base of knowledge of the world and of people
- “hidden immigrant,” others don’t recognize or know your nomadic history
- may feel out of balance with home culture, never really feel like you belong
- question values and experience cultural discord
- struggle with unwritten aspects of culture (e.g. history, humor, rules, even trivia), can be a lonely feeling

Mobility

- adaptable, flexible
- confident with change even if you don’t like it
- sharpened perspective on life and a rich and colorful memory bank
- many and varied relationships and experiences
- recognition that the present time is important and should be lived to the fullest
- feeling of rootlessness, that “home” is always elsewhere
- migratory instinct, trouble making decisions or staying put with academic choices, career, family, etc.
- try to sustain too many relationships, often around the globe
- difficulty in planning because so many previous decisions have been preempted

Transition (from One Culture to Another)

- sensitivity and empathy for others because you’ve been through transition many times
- know how to put closure on one phase of life and welcome a new one
- feel like a victim of transition, brush off the pain without dealing with it
- unresolved grief that leads to anger and depression
- relive grief when others experience it, may have own delayed reaction