

Third Culture Kids: Prototypes for Understanding Other Cross-Cultural Kids

By Ruth Van Reken and Paulette Bethel

In 1984, sociologist Dr. Ted Ward stated that Third Culture Kids¹ (TCKs) were the prototype citizens of the future. We believe that future is now.

With the increased mobility and cultural mixing of today's world, a childhood lived in, among, and between various cultures is no longer rare but has become the norm for children from a wide variety of backgrounds. The question is how those in the intercultural and social science fields can best evaluate the long-term outcome of this global change for the individual as well as for society.

Is it time for new developmental norms to be established? Do we need to find more useful ways to define identity? Should we continue expanding traditional models of diversity? How can we look at these universal issues when the details of each person's story are so different? We believe that it is time to seek a way to expedite such discussion, first, by finding new language through which we can join our research, and second, by using the traditional TCK model as a "Petri dish" to compare and contrast the long term effects of a childhood lived in and among a multiplicity of cultural milieus.

Finding new language

When Dr. Ruth Hill Useem first defined TCKs in the mid-1950's, her study focused on American children whose parents moved overseas as part of a career path (e.g., military, corporate, missionary, educational, or foreign service). Since then, many who have grown up cross-culturally but not in these particular contexts call themselves TCKs because they identify so strongly with the characteristics David Pollock described in his classic TCK Profile.²

This, in turn, has caused researchers and interculturalists in the field to engage in scholarly debates about who can rightfully be called a "third culture kid." Questions have been asked, such as, "Should the term include a child who accompanies parents into another culture because of immigration or as refugees?" and "What about children whose parents change cul-

tural worlds within national borders?"

While such discourse is necessary, it also offers the potential of detracting from conversations that lead to a more productive dialogue regarding issues children often face when growing up among multiple cultural worlds *for any reason*. Because of this, we propose a new term: Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK).

Who are Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs)?

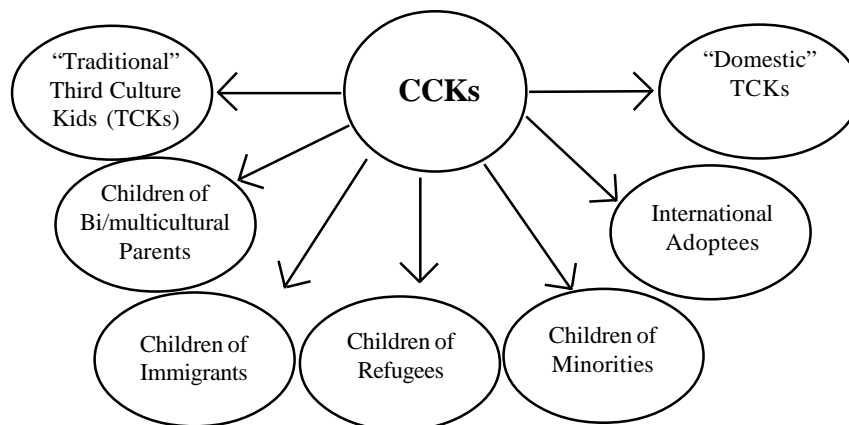
A Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK) is a person who has lived in—or meaningfully interacted with—two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during developmental years.

ethnicity of the country in which they live

- *International adoptees*—Children adopted by parents from another country other than the one of that child's birth
- *"Domestic" TCKs*—Children whose parents have moved in or among various subcultures within that child's home country

We believe this model accomplishes several purposes. First, by looking at the commonalities of issues children face when they are raised in meaningful interaction with two or more cultural worlds, each group does not have to "re-invent the wheel" and assume all responses are due to their specific situation. This can

Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK) Model



Some groups included in this definition are:

- *Traditional TCKs*—Children who move into another culture with parents due to a parent's career choice
- *Bi/multi-cultural/ and/or bi/multi-racial children*—Children born to parents from at least two cultures or races
- *Children of immigrants*—Children whose parents have made a permanent move to a new country where they were not originally citizens
- *Children of refugees*—Children whose parents are living outside their original country or place not by personal choice but due to circumstances such as war, violence, famine, other natural disasters
- *Children of minorities*—Children whose parents are from a racial or ethnic group which is not part of the majority race or

help to normalize each of these experiences rather than having them lead to a sense of "terminal uniqueness" as described by Janet Bennet.³ Also, by keeping the different circles, each subgroup can also more clearly see what, in fact, *are* the specific issues related to its type of experience. This validates the different ways children experience cultural mixing while they can still identify with the larger whole. Furthermore, by seeing the many intercultural patterns possible for today's children, we get a clearer vision of the growing complexity many children face as they try to define their own identities and sense of belonging. In today's world, children are often in more than one of these circles at the same time (e.g., a traditional TCK who is also from a minority group, a child of immigrants whose parents are from two

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different cultures, etc.).

Using the TCK model as a “Petri dish”

Because TCKs were among the first cohorts identified in the literature to grow up among many cultures, they also give us a longitudinal view on some possible long-term outcomes of such a childhood. By identifying lessons learned from the traditional TCK experience, we can compare and contrast them with other groups of CCKs. As we see similarities, we can better test hypotheses for how this new way of growing up impacts children and our world. As we see differences, we can do further research for each group into the reason for those dynamics.

To begin our discussion, we have chosen to look at what we see as the most elemental issue many CCKs face—the primary question of personal and cultural identity.

Who am I? Where do I belong?

A common quote from many adult TCKs (ATCKs) is that they belong “everywhere and nowhere.” In “Phoenix Rising: A Question of Cultural Identity,” Barbara Schaetti, herself an ATCK and child of a bi-cultural marriage, writes an excellent description of this sense of cultural marginality as it relates to TCKs: “Cultural marginality describes an experience; one typical of global nomads [a.k.a. TCKs] and others who have been molded by exposure to two or more cultural traditions. Such people don’t tend to fit perfectly into any one of the cultures to which they have been exposed but may fit comfortably on the edge, in the margins, of each.”⁴ A quick word search on “cultural marginality” also brings up a plethora of articles written by members of each sub-circle of CCKs describing very similar feelings.

In many of these writings, a common theme related to marginality begins to emerge. How others would define many CCKs in terms of race or culture is not who they internally see themselves to be. In other words, the traditional ways of defining cultural belonging, diversity, or ethnicity rarely apply to cross-cultural kids.

This type of cultural marginality has been a hallmark of the TCK experience but defined in different words. By the mid-

eighties, Norma McCaig⁵ and Pollock were already describing TCKs as “hidden immigrants” when they re-enter their passport culture. Unlike most traditional immigrants, TCKs appear to be the same externally as the majority of their fellow citizens, but internally they have as different a world view and life experiences as any true immigrant would have. Who others expect them to be is not who they are.

In the years since McCaig and Pollock began using the hidden immigrant term, co-author Ruth Van Reken noticed while doing research for *Third Culture Kids* that TCKs who physically resemble the majority population of their host culture often have reactions similar to those typical of TCKs re-entering their home cultures. Soon the hidden immigrant description expanded to include any situation where the TCK looks like those in the dominant surrounding culture but thinks quite differently.

Meanwhile, co-author Paulette Bethel read *Third Culture Kids* while abroad during her Ph.D. studies. She soon realized that her experience of growing up as a fair-skinned African American in the Creole culture of New Orleans gave her a profound sense of connection with many aspects of the TCK/ATCK experience. In particular, as she looked at the Pollock/Van Reken Cultural Identity⁶ box designed to describe the TCK experience, Bethel realized it was a viable model for delineating her experience as well, although the circumstances of her childhood had been very different from the traditional TCK’s.

As a member of a minority group, Bethel had, in fact, changed cultural worlds daily as she moved between the larger cultural context of her local community, both black and white, her Creole culture, and transitioning between home and school cultures following de-segregation. Recently, we have wondered if perhaps the phenomenon of the TCKs’ hidden immigrant experience became labeled because it was one of the first times many from the affluent dominant cultural group experienced being in a minority situation without realizing it.

Applying what we’ve learned from TCKs to others

Pollock/Van Reken Cultural Identity Box:
 TCKs/CCKs in Relationship to Surrounding Dominant Culture

<u>Foreigner</u>	<u>Hidden Immigrant</u>
Look <i>Different</i> Feel <i>Different</i>	Look Alike Think <i>Different</i>
<u>Adopted</u>	<u>Mirror</u>
Look <i>Different</i> Think Alike	Look Alike Think Alike

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If we apply the identity box to the larger world of CCKs, perhaps we can begin to see some of the shared experiences that relate to cultural identity.

In the end, this chart is another way of reflecting how the interaction of the visible and invisible aspects of culture as described in the iceberg model⁷ impact a CCK’s sense of identity. Like the TCK, when CCKs are in the foreigner or mirror box, their identity is clear and life is relatively simple. Who they are inside is who others expect them to be when looking from the outside. However, when CCKs are in the hidden immigrant or adopted box, life can become quite complicated. Who others expect them to be is not who they are. As international adoptee Crystal Chappell writes in “American, Korean, or Both? Politics of Identity Reach Personal Levels,” “Because of their racial features, Korean American adoptees face assumptions that, as Asian-Americans, they are foreigners. They always expect a story explaining why you’re here, why you’re so acculturated. I’ve been complimented on how well I speak English! Duh! That’s the final clincher.”⁸

Another reality is that in today’s mobile world, a CCK’s cultural identity as it relates to the surrounding culture is not static. Whether CCKs change cultural worlds overnight with an airplane ride or daily by commuting on a school bus, the relationship of their identities to the world

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around them is often shifting. As Bethel has discovered from her own experience, sometimes CCKs may be in more than one box at the same time. In Bethel's case, she recognized that she had been in all four boxes simultaneously.

The main stress, however, for most CCKs is not from the multiplicity of cultures they experience in their childhood *per se*. In fact, one of the strengths for many CCKs is that ultimately they learn to navigate their way quite well between the different cultural worlds in a way Muneo Yoshikawa describes as "dynamic in-betweenness."⁹ The deepest sense of cultural marginality most often comes, we believe, when CCKs try, or are expected, to fit into a cultural framework defined in the traditional expectations of a particular race, nationality, or ethnicity.

Where do we go from here

We believe one of the most important things to do in helping CCKs stop feeling so marginalized is to "de-pathologize" or normalize the CCK experience. How can we help to normalize the CCK experience?

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts to give a CCK is to acknowledge the reality that this world of multiple cultures they have experienced as children is a valid place of belonging, even if not rooted in one geographical place or ethnicity. As Pollock describes in his TCK definition, the sense of belonging is related to those of like experience rather than the traditional ways of defining cultural belonging.¹⁰

Another way to help both the CCKs and our society as a whole to think more constructively about this topic is to again think of changing the language. On the surface, at least, the term "marginality" sounds as if a person is forever on the fringes rather than having any place to belong. And if so many are marginal, who, in fact, is left at the core? We suggest a new term to name the reason behind what is often described as a sense of cultural marginality. Hopefully, this term will also help others who interact with them to better understand the CCK experience: The term we wish to use is "Hidden Diversity"—meaning a diversity of experience that shapes a person's life and world view but is not readily apparent on the outside,

unlike the usual diversity markers such as race, ethnicity, nationality, etc.

We also believe this term can help those who work with diversity issues to recognize that some people who do not appear "diverse" may be far more diverse than expected. Sathnam Sanghera writes a stunning commentary on this when he talks about how he as a dark-skinned Asian who has been brought up quite British and lived in one country most of his life, is frequently asked to attend or speak at meetings related to diversity while his white friend who has traveled the world from childhood on and had far more experience with diversity than he has ever known is never recognized as a resource for these same meetings.

Conclusion

This article seeks to use the TCK Model to begin a new level of dialogue on how interacting closely with several cultural worlds during developmental years may affect a child in the long term. We have taken a beginning look at issues related to identity. In the future, we would like to compare and contrast some of the findings regarding the hidden losses identified for the traditional TCK with these other subgroups of CCKs and continue to use the experiences of third culture kids as the backdrop for expanding the conversation about cultural evolution.

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1. "Children who accompany their parents into another culture"—defined by Dr. Ruth Hill Useem, originator of the term, in *NewsLinks: The Newspaper of International School Services*, Vol. XII, Number 3, January 1993.
2. Pollock, David C. and Van Reken, Ruth E., *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*, London: Nicholas Brealey/Intercultural Press, 1999, 2001, p.77-184.
3. Janet Bennet, "Cultural Marginality: Identity Issues in Intercultural Training." in M. Paige, ed. *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1993.
4. <http://www.transition-dynamics.com/phoenix.html>
5. Founder of Global Nomads, International
6. *Third Culture Kids*, p.53
7. Gary Weaver, in R.M. Paige, ed. *Cross-Cultural Orientation: New Conceptualizations and Applications*, Lanham: University Press, 1986.
8. This feature appeared in the Spring/Summer 1998 issue of the *Bastard Quarterly*. Copyright 1998 Crystal Chappell.
9. Schaetti, "Phoenix Rising," <http://www.transition-dynamics.com/phoenix.html>
10. *Third Culture Kids*, p.19

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