Conceptualizing Four Ecological Influences on Contemporary “Third Culture Kids”

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Introduction: Third Culture Kids

The expression “Third Culture Kid” (TCK) was introduced when two social scientists, J and R Useem, travelled to India in the 1950s to study Americans deployed there predominantly as corporate, governmental, military and missionary personnel (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). The birth of the TCK term stemmed from the apparent commonality of challenges, characteristics, perceptions and tendencies amongst the Useems’ three sons and other American children observed in India. They recognized that their children’s one year experience during their formative years, left an indelible mark on their development, whereby their sense of belonging became more “relationship-based” than “geography-based” (McLachlan, 2007, p. 235).

Throughout their children’s impressionable adolescence, the Useem’s sons absorbed cultural, linguistic and behavioral norms, as well as a frame of reference different to, but assembled from, what the parents regarded as the Indo-American “third culture” in which they were living (R. Useem, 1966, p. 145). TCKs integrated aspects of their “birth” culture (first culture) and their “new” culture (second culture), and created a personally blended “other” culture (third culture) unique to them as individuals (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 20). In other words, the TCK term implied that their children had a strong attachment to the United States (US) sojourners in India with whom they shared this life experience. In this construction, TCKs tended to be raised in one culture, relocated to another, and notably, repatriated back.

The TCK definition came to represent Western children who had spent their developmental and school-aged years outside their parents’ culture, building a relationship to a non-Western culture, while never
developing full ownership of either. R Useem posited that TCKs found that their values and behaviors did not fit with the stereotypical characteristics of their American home culture. Rather, they became more comfortable occupying the space between the practices of home and host cultures, otherwise known as the cultural “third place” (J. Useem, Useem, & Donoghue, 1963; R. Useem, 1966). That is, without a fully developed identity and corresponding cultural patterns to use as a base for interacting with their host culture, today’s TCKs may find that both home and host cultures offer significant input, but their development is primarily influenced by the patterns of an “international” lifestyle. As Eidse and Sichel (2004, p. 1) explained, these kids may be “born in one nation, raised in others, flung into global jet streams by their parents’ career choices ... shuttle[d] back and forth between nations, languages, cultures and loyalties”. The intersection of two definitive cultures—as had been originally observed in the 1950s and 1960s—no longer adequately represents contemporary TCKs (Velliaris, 2010; Velliaris & Willis, 2013).

Throughout this chapter, “children” or “child” will refer to the beneficiaries of parental involvement; a heterogeneous population of predominantly preschoolers and school-aged adolescents between the ages of 2–18 years. Understandably, within this population, children may vary in how they are affected by changes in their ecology, their understanding of those changes, and their capacity to respond adaptively. The TCK term will be replaced by “transnational child(ren)” and conform to the definition provided by Basch, Schiller and Blanc (1994, p. 7) who expressed it as the “process by which immigrants [children] forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement”. That is, their international parents “take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them [transnational children] simultaneously to two or more nation states” (Basch et al., 1994, p. 7). Additionally, as Vandenbroeck (1999, p. 29) stated, “identity is not static, but is dynamic, multi-faceted and active ... never completed and is a personal mixture of past and future, of fact and fiction, creatively rewritten into an ever changing story”. Accordingly, “identity” has been considered in a holistic rather than fragmented way (i.e., identities).

“International parents” or “parents” will be used as the collective term of reference for diplomatic, international business, government agency, international agency, missionary or military personnel, or those couples living an internationally mobile life for any professional reason.