

CROSS-CULTURAL KIDS: THE NEW PROTOTYPE

RUTH E. VAN REKEN

Sometimes our lives are shaped forever by seemingly innocuous moments. Such a time came for me one nondescript day in 1984. We were living in Liberia and my husband, David, brought our mail home as he did each day when returning from work. Nothing unusual there.

As he sorted it, however, Dave tossed a letter my way. “Here, you might want to see this. It’s from your mom.” My mother had always been a faithful letter writer through all the years our family lived apart because my parents were working in Nigeria while my siblings and I went to high school and university in the United States. Thus, the fact that she had written a letter didn’t pre-warn me that my life was about to change forever.

I opened her letter, expecting to find only the usual family news and chit-chat. Instead, another carefully folded enclosure fell to the floor. I picked it up and opened it to see an article by David C. Pollock simply titled “Third Culture Kids (TCKs).”

“Why did she send this?” I wondered. Maybe she presumed we’d be interested since my spouse Dave was a pediatrician working with children in what some might then have described as a “Third World” country.

I almost laid it aside. How relevant could it be? But, since I wanted to thank Mom for at least thinking of us, I took a moment to read it.

Suddenly I realized this article described me—not someone else! It had nothing to do with poor children raised in the “Third World.” Instead, it focused on people who, like me, had grown up in a culture or cultures outside the one their parents called “home” because of a parent’s career choice.

Still, I puzzled over the term “Third Culture.” At first reading I thought it meant that TCKs simply took pieces from the various cultures in which they had lived and somehow amalgamated them into a new, personal, and individualistic culture.

But that didn’t (and doesn’t!) make sense. While people can be individualistic within a culture, no one can have or be a culture all alone. Culture is something shared with others.

So what exactly was this Third Culture idea?

I admit that initially I did what I think many others do—I let go of my questions regarding the precise meaning of the Third Culture term itself while I focused more on the profile Pollock described.

He wrote of how children raised outside their parents’ passport culture(s), often feel they belong “everywhere and nowhere” at the same time. I remembered my own Adult TCK (ATCK) father telling me once, “You know, I’ve never felt like I quite belong any place.” As a child, I had remonstrated with him, explaining all the people who loved and accepted him. Now Pollock had named this as a common experience for TCKs!

Pollock also described how TCKs often had a large view of the world and understood the cultural nuances in the lands of their upbringing. On the other hand, many were woefully ignorant of the social customs in their own culture once they returned. I remembered my own reentry to the USA as a thirteen year old. Although I could bargain well in any market in Nigeria, I had no idea that when I ordered a hamburger for the fifty cents I had in my purse, the bill would be fifty-two cents because of tax and I wouldn’t be able to pay it.

As I read Pollock’s article, I realized he had put words to some of the very issues I’d been struggling with. At the age of 39, I had begun journaling to try to understand my own story. I wanted to know why, though I’d had a great childhood as a U.S. American in Nigeria, a quiet depression had dogged me at various points in my adult life. As far as I could see, there was no reason for it. I had never been sexually abused, my parents weren’t alcoholics or divorced, I had (and have) a great husband and three wonderful daughters. Even more, I believed that my life had purpose. So what excuse could I have for these places of depression, unseen by any but those closest to me?

My mother's letter had come at a critical time for me. And thus, on that unlikely day in 1984, a journey began that changed the course of my life.

Soon after reading his article, I made contact with David Pollock and shared my journaling with him. He invited me to attend the first International Conference on Missionary Kids (ICMK) in the Philippines and do a small presentation from my perspective as an ATCK. David also encouraged me to publish my journaling. In 1987, after rejections by many publishers who said there was no market for a book that appealed to such a niche group, Bill Van Dyke, a friend who ran a printing company, offered to print it for free.

That was an amazing gift in and of itself, but it also meant that everyone in the world who wanted to buy the book would have to contact me because it was self-published. Once it had appeared under the title *Letters I Never Wrote* (later changed to *Letters Never Sent*), I began to receive letters almost every day from adult TCKs, or parents of TCKs, who wanted to tell me their stories.

After a while, I realized the details in the letters might be different, but it seemed the basic story was the same. Questions related to belonging, identity, unresolved grief, or joy in the wonder of experiencing so much of the world first hand were common themes, no matter what nationality the TCKs were or where they had grown up.

During this time, Pollock continued to develop and refine his classic TCK Profile™. This included a list of common characteristics he had noticed that TCKs around the globe shared. Obviously, no single TCK had all the traits or characteristics, but the benefits and challenges that he described in his profile were common themes for them as a group.

As Dave Pollock began to take awareness of this topic from the halls of academia to where the people who were experiencing it lived, I began seeing short articles by other writers here and there discussing the profile. Usually there was a reference to his work, but often it seemed the authors didn't make clear that most of what they were writing was a rephrasing of the profile.

One day during a phone call, I said, "Dave, you need to write your material up. Pretty soon you'll be having to quote those who are quoting you!" Dave responded, "I know, but I don't have time." And, in another

life-changing moment, I heard myself say, “Then I’ll help you.” (After all, I figured he had this profile of the benefits and challenges of the TCK experience all worked out. How hard could it be?) Seven years later, after our then editor David Hoopes had said, “But you can’t just describe the characteristics. You have to explain them,” the first edition of what is now *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds* saw the light of day.

Pollock sharpened his description of TCKs to what is now the classic definition:

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

He added this last line after I called him to tell him of an experience I had had the night before. Someone who was working on her Master’s degree wanted to study how this process of amalgamating two cultures into a new one worked, the common way people were describing the Third Culture at that point. She gathered several of us who were by then adult TCKs married to non-TCKs to ask what we had incorporated into our lives from our host cultures. We had all grown up in different host cultures but we found ourselves laughing at each other’s examples and frustrating her to no end. “I didn’t know what polish to use on my floor when I got married because I grew up with all cement floors,” said one of us. The others followed with their examples of cultural ignorance as they had moved into adulthood in the U.S.

Each time someone started a new theme and others followed, she would break in. “No, that’s not what I’m talking about,” she said. “Those examples are just because of living in your expat world but I want to know what you took in specifically from the host culture that you still do.”

We were a bit nonplussed. Finally, I said, “I really can’t think of anything that I do specifically because I lived in Nigeria. I knew I wasn’t going to get married as a young teen like many of my Nigerian friends. My mother made me wear shoes so I wouldn’t get hookworm even though most of my Nigerian friends often went barefoot at that time. What we’re talking about is what we experienced, even if it came from being part of the expat world we lived in.”

After that, I called Dave and told him of the evening. “Dave, if the Third Culture is simply a phenomenon in which each TCK takes pieces from the home and host cultures and joins them somehow to make a third, TCKs will remain forever isolated. Ultimately, no one else will have come from exactly the same mix of home and host cultures as the next person. And the exact opposite was true last night. We all laughed and knew exactly what each other was talking about even though the details were different depending on where we were from or had grown up. But there was something profound we shared in the experience alone.” In time, Dave came to refer to this instant, almost magical connection when TCKs meet as a “reunion of strangers.”

But more importantly, this shared experience reflects more accurately what Drs. John and Ruth Hill Useem’s original work describes as the Third Culture when they went to India in the mid-1950s to study how people from two different cultures would do business together. Dr. Ruth Hill Useem was interested in what she saw among the expat families who had come to India from different countries and with different sponsoring organizations. She soon discovered that “each of these subcultures [communities of expatriates] generated by colonial administrators, missionaries, businessmen, and military personnel—had its own peculiarities, slightly different origins, distinctive styles and stratification systems, but all were closely interlocked” (12). The Useems realized the expatriates had formed a lifestyle that was different from that of either their home or their host culture, but it was one they shared in that setting. Dr. Ruth Hill Useem called the children growing up in that world Third Culture Kids and our name was born.

Dave’s expanded definition and description offered TCKs a place of belonging. They now had a tribe. Although this tribe is not one named in the traditional way of defining groups by nationality, ethnicity, or race, it is a model of a new way to describe culture as that of a shared experience.

But some researchers believed even Dave’s definition and Dr. Ruth Hill Useem’s definition that TCKs are simply “children who accompany their parents into another culture,” weren’t complete enough. Neither one said specifically why the parents had gone to another culture, although Useem had conducted all her research in the mid-1950s among those who were overseas directly as a result of their parents’ career choices (e.g., military, corporate, missionary, educational, or foreign service). Since then, many who grew up cross-culturally for all sorts of other reasons than a parent’s

career choice had heard or read the TCK Profile (Pollock and Van Reken, pp. 77-184). They identified so strongly with the characteristics described that they claimed membership in this group as well. Without a clear statement of the reason parents made a cross-cultural move, who could blame them for adopting this language to describe their own experience?

The blurring of the line, however, caused researchers and interculturalists in the field to engage in scholarly debates about who might rightfully be called a Third Culture Kid. Questions were asked, e.g., “Should the term include a child who accompanies parents into another culture because of immigration or as refugees?” Or, “What about children whose parents change cultural worlds within national borders?”

Norma McCaig was one researcher who took great exception to the failure to keep the definition clear. An ATCK herself, Norma didn’t like having the word “kid” describe her when she was obviously an adult. In response, Norma coined the term Global Nomads to replace the TCK term and defined them clearly as those who “go overseas with a parent because of an international career” (McCaig, p. 2). She, and others, believed that if all types of cross-cultural experiences were mixed, researchers couldn’t study any of them because there would be too many differentiating factors.

For some years we were stuck. Those who wanted to maintain the “purity” of a TCK as only someone whose parents moved between cultural worlds due to a parent’s career, had to agree that others who grew up as immigrant children or refugees experience feelings similar to those of traditional TCKs. Others (including me) who wanted to let everyone into the “TCK Club” if they had grown up among various cultural worlds for any reason, had to admit things were getting a bit muddled. How could we meaningfully compare children who accompanied parents to a refugee camp with other children circling the globe as a multinational company paid their airfares and fees for their international schooling? Yet, why did refugees (and others who grew up in non-traditional TCK ways among many cultural worlds) respond so strongly when they heard about TCK characteristics?

While such discourse was necessary, it began to detract from productive conversation about the impact of a cross-cultural childhood in today’s fast-changing world. Several events made me realize we had to find some sort of solution to this quandary if we were going to move ahead.

First, I got an email from a then-stranger, Paulette Bethel. Paulette was doing her PhD work in China. She had read the TCK book for an assignment, and wrote to ask me why she, as an African-American who had grown up her entire life in New Orleans, had found language for her own story while reading *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. Soon after, I received a phone call from Kenny, an Asian immigrant's teenaged son. He wanted to know whether or not he was a true TCK. He had recently realized that, although classmates at his school in Indianapolis saw him as one of them, he entered an all-Chinese world every day when he left that school and returned home. His grandmother lived with them and spoke no English, his mother only a few words. Then I met Fiona while doing seminars with ATCKs in Australia. Fiona had never left her country at all but had grown up in the Outback of Australia before attending secondary school in Sydney and related strongly to the TCK Profile. After the meeting, she came up to ask if she was a TCK or not. What should I say to any of these questions?

Another apparently random moment in 2002 finally offered a key to open that door to new dialog on these issues.

The principal of a private local school in Indianapolis asked me to talk to her teachers about TCKs because several international business people had recently placed their children in this school. I realized during the presentation that most of the teachers were unimpressed because they saw these students as "rich, spoiled brats." They did, however, want to talk to me about the "multicultural kids" in their diversity program. As they explained how they divided students according to their "affinity groups," I realized that for them, at this moment in the early 2000s, multicultural essentially meant various racial groups. The idea of the deeper levels of culture being any particular part of their planning seemed totally lacking.

I pondered what I should do for my second (and last) day with them. Obviously, the term Third Culture Kid seemed irrelevant to them. But I feared if I used their term, multicultural kid, they would not be able to get past seeing it in racial terms. Because most of the TCKs in their school were white, they didn't fit the usual criteria for diversity or multiculturalism. I decided we needed to find new, more neutral, language if we were going to try to compare and contrast "multicultural" and "Third Culture" matters. The next day I proposed that we use a neutral term, Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK) so we could try to hear each other's views without prejudgment and even see if there might be some connecting points between our two

seemingly disparate groups. And it worked. We had a conversation looking at issues rather than labels. I felt happy to have survived the day with a bit more discussion and didn't think much more about what seemed like an isolated incident.

A Look through the TCK Lens

Despite observing the effectiveness of changing our language that day in Indianapolis, I still wondered, "How can we begin to examine the impact of this changing social scene when it crosses all the traditional lines of culture, of identity, and within the context of such diverse experiences?"

I began to reflect on a statement that I had heard Dr. Ted Ward, then a sociologist at Michigan State University, make in October, 1984, during an international conference on TCKs in Manila. There he declared that Third Culture Kids were the prototype citizens of the future (57).

At that time, I thought Dr. Ward meant that TCKs were a model of what others should be like because of their "unique" cross-cultural backgrounds (if you can call an experience that millions share unique!). Later I realized that Dr. Ward hadn't said that TCKs were what everyone else should be like but rather they were what others would be like. Suddenly I had an "Aha!" moment. Conversations and interactions with Paulette, Kenny, and Fiona, let alone the teachers at this school and many others, were happening because the day that Dr. Ward predicted had come.

If the main characteristics of a TCK lifestyle include growing up among many cultural worlds with a high degree of mobility, then the responses of those not officially TCKs according to old models began to make sense. In a world hurtling towards cross-cultural mixing at every level, and with the ease of transportation taking people back and forth between different cultural worlds on a regular basis, there are many other ways besides a traditional TCK lifestyle whereby people can experience the same realities of living a cross-cultural, highly mobile lifestyle.

Paulette as a child was bussed to an all-white Catholic school. Like Kenny, she essentially crossed cultural worlds each day when moving back and forth between home and school cultures. Fiona switched cultural worlds whenever her family moved to different areas in her country. I met other young people who had grown up in a less externally visible, yet no less real, changing cultural world. They were children living behind what was

then known as the “Iron Curtain” and now came of age during the time the Eastern Bloc of Europe had opened up to the West. They told me that their world and the one their parents had grown up in felt totally different. Did it count as a cross-cultural experience when politics changed the cultural landscape between generations in a family?

I wondered if we could take Dr. Ted Ward’s idea of TCK as prototype another step farther. What would happen if we looked at other cross-cultural experiences through the TCK lens to see if some of the characteristics of the TCK Profile were also common to those who had grown up among many cultures for all sorts of other reasons? If there were such commonalities, what were they and why did they occur? Obviously, in the TCK world, we had assumed that certain characteristics, benefits and challenges occurred specifically because the children grew up outside their parents’ culture. But if others from very different backgrounds were sharing some of these descriptions, perhaps there were more universal reasons than we had considered. Most importantly, if we joined our discussions with these other communities, perhaps we could all begin to develop better understandings of how to maximize the new opportunities and deal effectively with the new challenges that many children and families face. It seemed worth a try.

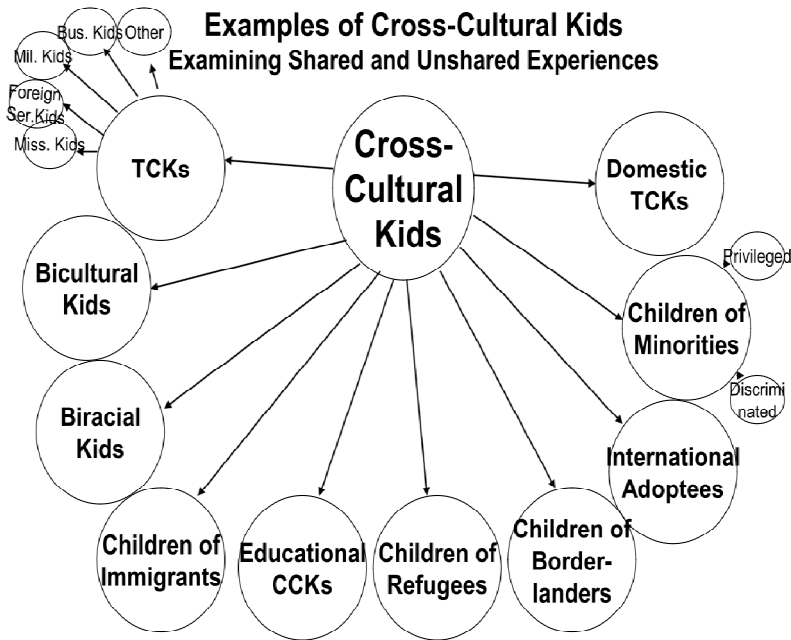
Back to the Drawing Board

For a starter, I remembered the throw-away term I had used at the Indianapolis school and decided to create an official definition for Cross-Cultural Kids:

A Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK) is a person who is living in—or meaningfully interacting with—two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during the developmental years of childhood (up to age 18).

An Adult Cross-Cultural Kid (ACCK) is a person who grew up as a CCK.

This new definition is not based on a parent’s experience or choices in any specific way but rather on what the child experiences. As we can see from the diagram below, while we can look at similarities, it also makes it possible to see what the differences might be between the different types of CCKs. In addition, we can begin to see the many cultural complexities that children and families face in today’s changing world, given that many can be placed in more than one category at the same time.



This group includes (but not exclusively):

Traditional TCKs—Children who move into another culture with parents due to a parent’s career choice

Children of bi/multi-cultural home—Children born to parents from at least two cultures. May or may not be biracial

Children of bi/multi-racial home—Children born to parents from at least two races. May or may not be bicultural

Children of immigrants—Children whose parents have made a permanent move to a new country where they were not originally citizens

Educational CCKs—Children who may remain in their home or passport country but are sent to a school (e.g. an international school) with a

different cultural base and student mix than the traditional home culture or its schools

Children of refugees—Children whose parents are living outside their original country or place due to unchosen circumstances such as war, violence, famine, or other natural disasters

Children of borderlanders—Children who cross national borders on regular basis

International adoptees—Children adopted by parents from a country other than the one of that child's birth

Children of minorities—Children whose parents are from a racial or ethnic group which is not part of the majority race or ethnicity of the country in which they live

Domestic TCKs—Children whose parents have moved in or among various subcultures within that child's home country

Many other types of experiences could be added, including even less visible categories such as children of divorced parents who switch family cultures on a regular basis as they live between their two birth parents' households, or foster children who move between many family cultures.

Initial Impressions

Some unexpected results emerged from those early attempts with this new model. When Dr. Ruth Hill Useem coined the term Third Culture Kids in the 1950s, most TCKs had parents from the same country, who spoke the same mother tongue, and these families often remained in one, or perhaps two, host cultures while overseas. In recent years, however, I have heard some TCKs say, "Well, I think I must be a third or fourth or fifth culture kid. My parents are from two countries and races, I have their two passports and a third from the country in which I was born, and I've lived in six countries on three continents since then. How many cultures do you count for those?"

Brice Royer, the founder of TCKid.com, is a TCK who describes himself as "culturally complex." His father is a half-French/half-Vietnamese U.N. peacekeeper while his mom is Ethiopian. Before he was eighteen, Brice

had lived in seven places: France, Mayotte, La Reunion, Ethiopia, Egypt, Canada, and England. He writes, “When people ask me ‘Where are you from?’ I just joke around and say, ‘My mom says I’m from heaven.’” President Barack Obama himself is in six of these CCK circles: traditional TCK, biracial, bicultural, domestic TCK, educational CCK, and minority. Ironically, as I began using this CCK model, I saw that this diagram was also a way to demonstrate—and normalize—this growing cultural complexity that even many traditional TCKs now confront.

Comparing and Contrasting Cross-Cultural Kid Experiences

The next step in looking at the larger CCK model involved taking some of these particular situations that people were asking about and seeing if we could isolate the shared factors between the TCK model and the other types of cross-cultural stories. I began by meeting with Paulette Bethel, the woman who had initially written me from China but who grew up in Louisiana.

Paulette and I decided to compare and contrast our stories by looking at four common characteristics of the Third Culture experience itself: a cross-cultural lifestyle, high mobility, expected repatriation, and a system identity. I was born in Kano, Nigeria, and grew up living between Nigeria and the United States, obviously two different cultural worlds. Paulette was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and grew up in one place—New Orleans, Louisiana—but she was a child in days when school integration had barely begun in the United States. Each day, Paulette climbed onto a school bus near her home and got off at an all-white school in another area. Each evening she took the reverse trip. While I exchanged my obviously different cultural communities every few years, she made that exchange daily. In addition, her family roots included white Creole as well as African American heritage.

What about mobility? That was simple. I took airplane rides, Paulette took bus rides, yet still there was physical movement back and forth between these different worlds. We got to the next characteristic of the TCK lifestyle—expected repatriation. My remembrances included returning to the United States at age 13 where others scorned me for acting so differently from themselves in the culture my passport said was “home.” Surely, repatriation was one aspect of my TCK experience that was quite distinct from Paulette’s CCK lifestyle. I remarked rather confidently,

“Well, Paulette, I don’t think we share this characteristic as you never left New Orleans.” She looked at me with some surprise and replied, “Ruth, don’t you realize I repatriated every single night? At school, I had to speak a different dialect—“white English”—but if I spoke that at home, cousins said I was being uppity. While I looked the same physically as those around me at home just as you did with your classmates in Chicago when you repatriated, my life experiences were very different from theirs and shaped me in ways they could not see. Maybe people are paying attention to this now that white people are doing this, but I’ve been doing this all my life!”

What she said made sense. So what about the last characteristic—a system identity? When Dr. Useem first studied TCKs, she noticed that many of them seemed to be in “representational roles.” Even the names used to describe their groups reflected this idea: Aaramco Brats, Military Brats, Foreign Service Youth, Missionary Kids, etc. These children knew that their behavior could impact a parent’s career adversely if they misbehaved or that they could reflect well on their parents if they did behave. Since Paulette’s family didn’t belong to any particular organizational system, I assumed this was one place of difference for sure.

Wrong again. “Ruth, don’t you understand that every time some terrible crime is committed, every African American hopes it won’t be a black person who did it because, if it is, our race is blamed, not the person. If a white person does it, then it is an individual’s crime, not one that represents the race. You aren’t indicted in people’s minds just because the perpetrator is white.”

After this interchange, I looked more closely at the other stories. Kenny, the Chinese immigrant’s son, had the same daily interactions between two distinctly different cultural worlds as he went from his Chinese culture at home to the U.S. American based system at school. The young Australian woman, Fiona, had parents who worked in the Aboriginal communities in the Outback. Certainly, this was as equally distinct a cultural world from her life in Sydney as my life in Nigeria had been from life in the United States. I heard from others. A friend born of Korean ancestry, adopted by a white U.S. American couple, told me others expected her to know the Korean language fluently even though she had never been there. Another friend of Chinese ancestry, born and raised in Brazil, attended international schools so she spoke with an American accent when she attended university in the U.S. but no one knew she thought in Portuguese!

Isolating a Common Theme—Identity

Although there were differences in the details of these stories, obviously there were definite cross-cultural interactions going on in each of those experiences. But what was the bottom line issue? One common theme became obvious: the search to find a clear sense of identity. Based on traditional ways of defining identity by race, ethnicity, or nationality, CCKs of all stripes told me how often they didn't fit the mold of who others expected them to be based on appearance alone. Since questions of identity are among the top issues TCKs struggle with, I decided to look at the stories of other CCKs through the lens of the PolVan Cultural Identity model that we had designed for TCKs and see what we might discover.

Relationship to Surrounding Dominant Culture

<p>FOREIGNER</p> <p>Look different</p> <p>Think different</p>	<p>HIDDEN IMMIGRANT</p> <p>Look alike</p> <p>Think different</p>
<p>ADOPTED</p> <p>Look different</p> <p>Think alike</p>	<p>MIRROR</p> <p>Look alike</p> <p>Think alike</p>

Pol/Van Cultural Identity Box

Copyright 1996-David C. Pollock/Ruth E. Van Reken

This model initially grew out of a conversation I had with David Pollock wondering why two TCKs I knew were behaving in ways common during reentry yet they weren't assimilating. One had become a "screamer" and the other a "chameleon"—but in their host, not their passport, cultures. In the end, we concluded that the one differentiating factor between these TCKs and many others related to the fact that the TCKs in question physically resembled their host culture as well as their home culture. My screamer had to adopt certain behaviors and dress to proclaim to the others, "Don't expect me to be like you. I'm not!" And my chameleon did all he could to make sure no one ever knew he didn't fit internally. He simply wanted to belong. I realized that up until that point, most TCKs I had interviewed looked distinctly different from people in their dominant host culture so they didn't have to scream to proclaim their differences. They also didn't have the choice to be a true chameleon in their host environment.

After our prolonged discussion, Dave distilled our conversation into the above model that demonstrates the various patterns of relationship TCKs might have with their surrounding dominant cultural worlds – be they host or passport culture. Because of mobility, how they are defined is always changing, depending on where they live at any given moment. When TCKs are in the foreigner or mirror box, who others see them to be is, in fact, who they are. A community will make allowances for what foreigners don't know about this group's cultural habits or colloquial expressions. True mirrors will not only know but follow the accepted behavioral patterns, practices, and shared values just as the community expects them to do. Life is relatively simple for all in both these categories because what others expect these TCKs to be is who they, in fact, are since it defines who they are in relationship to this community.

When, however, people are in the hidden immigrant or adopted box, life can become quite complicated. At school, educators may assume that students who are hidden immigrants know the historical or cultural references in the curriculum and don't give them the extra tutoring or help that they would give a clear immigrant. Those in the adopted box sometimes find others speaking to them with particular care, or even condescension, to make sure they understand the language. Often when folks ask these TCKs, "Where are you from?" and they say the local town, the inquisitor asks, "No, I mean, where are you really from?" meaning "It's obvious you're not really from here or you would look like the rest of us." Educators may assume a student in the adopted category will have

knowledge about the language or cultural practices of the ethnicity or nationality he or she appears to belong to when, in fact, that student may know no more about those things than anyone else in the classroom.

So how does this PolVan Cultural Identity box relate to the larger world of CCKs? As I listened to the stories of many CCKs who are not traditional TCKs, I realized the bottom line for many was that they had also lived in the hidden immigrant or adopted categories at some points in their lives. For various reasons, some had also frequently switched the ways in which they related to the surrounding dominant culture. For example, when Paulette went to her all-white private school, she related as a foreigner in that community by day, but each night when she went home, she became a hidden immigrant. Others assumed she was like them but her experiences at the school were shaping her in different ways from her siblings and cousins. Kenny was in the adopted box at school each day, looking different from most of the other students, but taking on many of their Western ways. Each evening, however, he became more of a hidden immigrant, appearing to be Chinese but no longer seeing the world through the same lens as his family. In the Australian Aboriginal community, Fiona stood out as a foreigner but when she returned to school in Sydney, she lived as a hidden immigrant.

Once this light went on for me, I began to interpret CCK stories using the new perspective of how they identified relative to how they physically resembled or differed from the dominant culture around them. The nuances became ever more complex. Chinese-Australians working in China had children who were hidden immigrants in China and adopted when in Australia. Liberian refugees' children who had been mirrors in Liberia supposedly became foreigners when their parents fled to the United States, but the reality is that this was only with the white community. When they were around African-Americans, they were in the hidden immigrant box. After the war ended and some tried to visit Liberia, instead of being the mirrors they had once been, now they were hidden immigrants there too. No wonder so many other types of CCKs grappled with the questions of identity similar to those with which TCKs have long struggled! When they saw the different patterns of how they and their various cultural worlds related to each other, it made as much sense, and gave rise to the same sort of "Aha!" moments for them as it had for traditional TCKs through the years. At last they could understand their story and their responses to different environments and they could

overcome the shame many had felt for years related to, “What’s the matter with me? I don’t seem to clearly fit anywhere.”

A Second Common Theme—Hidden Loss

As it became clearer to me why CCKs of many different backgrounds shared the search for identity common to traditional TCKs, I began to seek other points of connection between all the CCK groups. During seminars and private conversations, many seemed to relate to the topics of hidden loss and unresolved grief that are often present in traditional TCKs and the ATCKs they become. Again, the question of “Why?” arose.

For many TCKs the hidden losses often relate to mobility patterns of their global experience. With one airplane ride, they lose an entire world they may love and emotionally claim as home, but others don’t recognize the degree or impact of this loss because, officially, it is not the TCK’s “home.” Even for those TCKs who live in one host culture for their entire childhood, their best friends are frequently leaving them as their parents’ career moves them on. But many of the CCK circles aren’t nearly as mobile as the expatriate world of traditional TCKs. So what, in fact, were others CCKs relating to as they listened to, or read, this part of the TCK Profile?

In time, it became clear that each of these other categories of CCKs also have losses invisible to others (and often themselves). Bicultural children may never become fluent in the original language of at least one parent. When they go to a family reunion held for that parent’s family, they realize they cannot have extended conversation (or any) with their grandparents or other relatives. Children of refugees have also lost a world, the world their parents once knew and still declare as “home.” International adoptees have lost connection to the land of their birth as well as to knowledge of their biological history. Educational CCKs can lose a strong sense of connection to their local community because they attend school in a completely different world from that of most others who live around them. As I’ve talked with various CCKs about these types of losses, I have realized that they often share the same unresolved grief that is present in the TCK world. Not only are their losses invisible, as noted above, but if they admit they miss this or that, those around often try to encourage them to think about all the good rather than comforting them by simply acknowledging their loss for what it is and allowing the process of grieving to go on.

Recognizing Common Benefits

It is not, however, only the challenges that are shared. If we begin to look through the TCK lens, we can see many gifts that are also present among other types of CCKs, but perhaps have not been consciously recognized for the value they offer in a globalizing world.

For example, if we consider how TCKs often function as cultural bridges, have we seen that potential gift in these other types of Cross-Cultural Kids (CCKs)? What intercultural skills do the children of minorities develop as they negotiate two different cultural worlds each day while going from home to school and back? How can we help all CCKs not only recognize but build with intentionality on those strengths as they move out towards careers in an increasingly globalizing world where cultural mixing is becoming the norm rather than the exception?

We laud TCKs for the language skills they often possess because of their interactions with very different language groups in their childhood. But what about immigrant children who also speak in various tongues? Or the educational CCK, or children from bicultural families? Perhaps if we named this ability to move between languages as the gift it truly is, more families and schools would work harder to keep the original language of the parents even though the dominant culture speaks another one.

Oftentimes a “large world view” is cited as a benefit of the TCK experience because children growing up internationally have had opportunity not only to see the world first-hand in a physical sense but they have also learned that people of different places and cultures may interpret the same situation very differently. This may help them be more understanding and listen well to differing points of view with the hope of coming to better understanding for all. The same type of broader awareness is true for many other CCKs. Minority children may not have traveled the globe, but, in their homes, discussions of politics and cultural assumptions may be quite different from those in the majority culture. Children of refugees have likely heard viewpoints of the dynamics behind the reasons for their displacement from home that differ greatly from what others may understand about that same situation based on a sixty second byte on the nightly news. This ability to see world events with cultural complexity is another gift to be developed and used in today’s world. Newscasters such as Fareed Zakaria or Christiane Amanpour are examples of CCKs using this gift well.

The Way Forward

The more we look at the TCK example, the more we can see that we may need new language and models to discuss the changing realities of culture and identity in our globalizing world. What would have happened in the 2008 U.S. presidential race if political pundits had stopped focusing on the traditional ways of defining identity by race and looked instead for the candidates' "hidden diversity"—a diversity of experience that shapes a person's life and world view but is not readily apparent? (Bethel and Van Reken) They might have discovered that both candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, were adult TCKs who had far more cultural complexity to discuss than racial complexity.

What we are discussing here is only the beginning of what I hope will be many useful exchanges between those living in these cross-cultural situations and the people who study and observe such things. The old models and categories of cultural or social identity are no longer accurate for many people in today's world, yet they still inform many of the diversity programs promoted throughout at least the United States. Hopefully, a more thorough discussion of the new realities of cultural interactions that countless children now experience in their formative years will lead to finding new models that are large enough to include the many changes we see around us.

The truth is, in today's world, until we know someone's story, we cannot make assumptions about him based on what we see alone. Perhaps, in the end, if we learn from the TCK example how to see interpret culture as a shared experience as well as shared nationality, race, or ethnicity, we will find new ways to overcome the barriers that have so easily divided us in the past.

Bibliography

- Bethel, Paulette, and Ruth Van Reken. "Third Culture Kids and Curriculum Issues in the International School System: Recognizing (and Dealing Effectively with) the Hidden Diversity of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in the Classroom." Unpublished paper presented at the Comparative and International Education Society Conference, New Orleans, 12-16 March, 2003.
- McCaig, Norma. *Global Nomads*. Brochure. Washington D.C.: Global Nomads International, 1988.

- Pollock, David C., and Ruth Van Reken. [1999] *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up among Worlds*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2001.
- Useem, Ruth Hill. "Third Cultural Factors in Educational Change." In *Cultural Factors in School Learning*, eds. Cole Brembeck and Walker Hill. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1973, 1-19.
- Ward, Ted. "The MK's Advantage: Three Cultural Contexts." In *Understanding and Nurturing the Missionary Family*, eds. Pam Echerd and Alice Arathoon. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989, 49-61.