

Characteristics and Repatriation Issues of Third Culture Kids: A Review of the Literature

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This article reviews the pertinent literature on the phenomenon of third culture kids—their characteristics, the repatriation issues they may face, and the assistance they may need to succeed in college.

A commonly underserved population in universities and colleges is third culture kids (TCKs), individuals who have spent part of their developmental years in a country that is not the home country of their parents (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). These individuals may be children of missionaries, military personnel, international business or service workers, or federal employees (such as diplomats). With the proliferation of globalization, an increasing number of children are experiencing the third culture kid life. In 1988, in the early stages of globalization, the U.S. Department of Commerce estimated that 675,000 American dependent youth lived abroad (Gaw, 1995). Approximately 40,000 of these dependent youth return, or repatriate, to the United States each year to attend college (Gaw, 1995). Though some TCKs choose not to return to their home countries, the large number of repatriated TCKs in the United States has prompted researchers to examine how repatriation affects third culture kids' entry into college. Third culture kids tend to be strong academically and bring global perspectives that are important to the university community ("Third Culture Kids," 2005). The purpose of this article is to identify the unique characteristics associated with the TCK lifestyle, TCKs' repatriation issues, and assistance TCKs may need for retention and success in college.

Characteristics of Third Culture Kids

In the 1950s, Ruth and John Useem studied children raised in international countries following their own experiences as missionaries in India (Useem, 1993). They coined the term "third culture kids" to represent these children, who experienced different developmental processes than children raised in the United States. According to Pollock and Van Reken (1999), a third culture kid

...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

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ownership of any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in a relationship to others of a similar background. (p. 19)

Pollock and Van Reken (1999) noted that third culture kids are greatly affected by their highly mobile lifestyles and cross-cultural development, whether positively or negatively. Third culture kids are typically more adept at language acquisition, more flexible and adaptable, more academically motivated, more tolerant, and more open to others' worldviews than children raised solely in the United States (Gerner, 1994; Useem & Downie, 1976). They are often more family oriented than American-raised children and they also show high levels of interest in internationally-mobile careers as adults (Gerner, Perry, Moselle, & Archbold, 1992). Cockburn (2002) suggested that third culture kids are also more likely than children raised solely in the United States to have a system identity; children of missionaries, military personnel, and diplomats may feel a strong sense of allegiance to and identification with their parents' sponsoring agency.

In many ways, high mobility and cross-cultural development may be detrimental to third culture kids. Pollock, Van Reken, and Gould (2001) noted that cross-cultural development can often create a sense of rootlessness in TCKs. This rootlessness makes it difficult for TCKs to develop their identity, particularly in adolescence. According to Pollock and Van Reken (1999), TCKs experience this difficulty because

while peers in their new (and old) community are internalizing the rules of culture and beginning to move out with budding confidence, TCKs are still trying to figure out what the rules are. They aren't free to explore their personal gifts and talents because they are still preoccupied with what is or isn't appropriate behavior. (p. 52)

Children derive their identity from how their culture defines or evaluates race, sex, class, socioeconomic status, as well as the *morés* and values of their culture. When a child belongs to more than one culture—for example, the culture of their host country and the culture of their parents' home country—identity formation can be difficult (Cockburn, 2002). According to Pollock and Van Reken (2001), children who cannot identify with a particular culture often have insecurity and setbacks in their development. TCKs may feel isolated and insignificant. This insecurity in identity formation can lead to serious problems of self-esteem and self-worth.

Third culture kids live highly mobile lifestyles; third culture families travel not only between home and host countries but also between multiple host countries or within their host country. According to Pollock, Van Reken, and Gould (2001), "high mobility has a definite effect on relational patterns... The cycle of mobility, with its many attachments, separations, and losses, causes [TCKs] to fear intimacy" (p. 77). As self-protection, TCKs who are highly mobile frequently avoid emotional intimacy and commitment. Their inability to commit to intimate relationships damages the peer interactions throughout childhood and adolescence and can cause problems well into their adulthood.

High mobility can also leave TCKs with unresolved grief (Pollock, Van Reken, & Gould, 2001). According to Pollock, Van Reken, and Gould, third culture kids may experience the following losses:

Loss of a world - close friends, familiar places

Loss of lifestyle - routines, familiar patterns

Loss of possessions - favorite toys, clothes, furniture, their house

Loss of relationships - friends, extended family

Loss of system identity - upon reentry, when TCKs are no longer affiliated with the organization that sent them overseas

Loss of the past - a feeling of missing important experiences with family or friends while they were away. (p. 77)

Many TCKs are not allowed by their parents to grieve; parents often tell TCKs that they should appreciate the experiences that they have and not grieve their losses (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Others may feel as though they cannot express their grief because no one else would understand or be sympathetic. Third culture children may express their grief through anger, depression, withdrawal, rebellion, or delayed grief (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999).

Much like the development of monocultural children, the development of TCKs is affected by a number of variables: (a) length of stay in the host country (Barringer, 2001); (b) degree of contact with the nationals (Barringer); (c) acculturation of the parents (Barringer; Gerner, 1994); (d) the child's age at the time of the move; (e) the amount and severity of cultural differences between the child's home and host countries (Cockburn, 2002); (f) support from the employment organization of the parent (Useem & Downie, 1976); (g) number of moves the child and family make; and (h) type of overseas education: host country school, home school, boarding school, or military school (Schulz, 1985). For example, a military kid and a missionary kid will have very different developmental experiences based on their parents' employment overseas. Military kids are likely to live on bases and have less contact with host country nationals than missionary kids, who are likely to have greater cultural immersion because of their parents' work.

Repatriation

Unlike immigrant children, third culture kids are typically expected to repatriate to the home country of their parents (Cockburn, 2002). According to Werkman (1980; as cited in Lerstrom, 1995), "the task of readapting to the United States after living overseas is for many, the most difficult hurdle in the cycle of international living" (p. 3). Many researchers refer to repatriation, or reentry into the home culture, as a time of reverse culture shock (Gaw, 1995). According to Gaw, reverse culture shock is "the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one's own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time" (p. 2).

Individuals undergoing reverse culture shock may experience academic problems, cultural identity conflict, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties (Gaw, 1995). Barringer (2001) noted that repatriating third culture kids may experience prolonged adolescence, feelings of rootlessness, alienation, and an inability to make commitments. Gaw found that repatriating TCKs report feelings of alienation, disorientation, stress, value confusion, anger, hostility, compulsive fear, helplessness, disenchantment, and discrimination. Repatriating third culture kids also reported high

levels of interpersonal distance and negative reactions to American cultural values (Huff, 2001).

Repatriation problems are exacerbated by a lack of social support that many TCKs experience upon reentry. Many third culture kids report an inability to identify with their parents during repatriation (McLachlan, 2005). For many TCKs, “home” is not defined in the same way that it is for their parents; most TCKs rate “home” in terms of relationships, rather than geographical locations (Fail, 1996). Werkman, Farley, Butler, and Quayhagen (1981) found that, once re-entered, third culture kids have less emotional investment in families and peers. Many returning TCKs become socially marginal because of their interpersonal distance from family and friends (Gerner & Perry, 2000).

Repatriation and college adjustment

Approximately 95% of third culture kids who graduate from high school and return to the United States matriculate into American colleges and universities (Gaw, 1995). College adjustment, in conjunction with the difficulties of repatriation, can be challenging for third culture kids. Schulz (1985) found that college-entering third culture kids reported financial problems, difficulty choosing a major or career, difficulty in finding their identity, and difficulty finding friends with similar backgrounds and values.

Barringer (2001) found that third culture kids often experience prolonged adolescence because of their difficulty in forming their identity. In an exploratory study of college-entering TCKs, Downie (1976) found that TCKs experience high levels of identity management upon re-entry into the United States. Useem and Cottrell (1993a) indicated that TCKs can experience this prolonged identity formation well into their 20s. This would indicate that a large number of college-entering TCKs must deal with identity formation. Troubles forming identities may be exacerbated by third culture kids’ difficulty in establishing peer groups to which they can relate (Downie, 1976).

Because of their highly mobile lifestyles, TCKs may experience constant change after repatriation. Once repatriated, TCKs tend to move frequently and many find it difficult to settle in one place (Cockburn, 2002). Most TCKs change universities at least twice while completing their undergraduate degree (Useem & Cottrell, 1993b). Many TCKs change institutions because they never completely acculturate to their university. Third culture kids who remain at their schools tend to choose academic majors that support their need for change (interdisciplinary) and that affirm their international interests (Gerner et al., 1992).

Collegial social relationships are often limited and difficult for repatriating TCKs (Huff, 2001). According to Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001),

Reentry has been shown to create a range of difficulties, and many returning students clearly experience psychological distress. Interpersonal relationships, particularly those with friends, appear to suffer, and loneliness is one of the most commonly reported problems of returnees. (p. 167)

Research on post-repatriation peer relationships indicates that TCKs have difficulty

finding peers who understand and appreciate their experiences abroad (Huff, 2001; Raschio, 1987). College-entering third culture kids report greater social adjustment problems than monocultural college-entering young adults. These TCKs will often seek out peer relationships with international students or other TCKs.

Third culture kids' perceived struggles in dealing with repatriation and entry into college was examined by Lerstrom (1995). Repatriating third culture kids were interviewed in order to identify key challenges faced when entering college. The students rated their challenges in following order:

- (1) boredom;
- (2) no one wants to hear;
- (3) you can't explain;
- (4) reverse home sickness;
- (5) relationships have changed;
- (6) people see wrong changes;
- (7) people misunderstand;
- (8) feelings of alienation;
- (9) inability to apply new knowledge and skills;
- and (10) loss/compartmentalization of experience. (Lerstrom, p. 8-9)

Third culture kids may need support from their universities to deal with these challenges. Researchers have noted that universities may address these challenges in special orientation sessions, support programs, or social organizations specifically designed for TCKs (Lerstrom, 1995; Schulz, 1985; Stultz, 2003).

Implications for higher education personnel

Although many college-entering third culture kids will successfully navigate the difficulties of reentry, there is a great need for university-based programs that will support their repatriation and college adjustment. Though TCKs tend to outperform their college peers academically, they struggle to acculturate to the social aspects of college (Schulz, 1985). Universities and colleges can promote college success and retention for TCKs by providing programs and services.

In his study of college-entering TCKs and their need for reentry programs, Schulz (1985) found that TCKs wanted reentry programs that took place at their universities and that provided ongoing assistance for them by focusing on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. When asked to rank topics that were most important to them and that needed to be addressed in university reentry programs, TCKs' rankings were

- (1) help in "finding self";
- (2) introduction to a listening person;
- (3) update on American social life;
- (4) introduction to other MKs [Missionary Kids] or TCKs;
- (5) adjusting to American lifestyle;
- (6) career guidance/counseling;
- (7) financial aid information;
- (8) hints for strong family relations;
- (9) community resources available;
- (10) information about college;
- (11) medical information; and
- (12) help with current English. (Schulz, p. 104)

Researchers suggest that universities and colleges should survey incoming TCKs during orientation to determine what their perceived needs are (Stultz, 2003). Stultz suggested that universities provide mentors who can help TCKs work through their identity formation crises and find support in the university community. She also suggested creating student organizations for TCKs, and educating professors and student affairs personnel on TCKs' unique characteristics. Colleges and universities may also provide psychoeducational outreach modules, social events, and support groups for

TCKs (Gaw, 1995).

Very few universities explicitly acknowledge that they provide special orientation services to incoming TCKs. Services that are offered to incoming TCKs include, but are not limited to, TCK orientation weeks provided at Taylor University and Messiah College. These orientation weeks offer campus tours, meetings with key personnel, information sessions, and discussion panels.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

There are few published research articles on the topic of third culture kids; most of the research studies about TCKs are reported in dissertations. In addition to the scarcity of research, the studies that have been conducted have many limitations. One limitation of many TCK studies is that they treat TCKs as a homogenous group. Researchers should acknowledge that the employment of the TCKs' parents will greatly impact the experiences of those TCKs. Many researchers have reconciled this limitation by grouping TCKs according to their parents' occupation for the purposes of the study. Another limitation is the heavy reliance of researchers on data from American TCKs. The vast majority of TCK research examines the experiences of American TCKs; future research should increase the emphasis on experiences of TCKs from other countries. Additionally, there is a need for more qualitative methods in TCK research. Qualitative methods can provide rich descriptions of the lived experiences of TCKs and provide information that may not be acquired through quantitative methods.

Conclusion

Third culture kids bring unique strengths to university and college campuses. In return, higher education professionals may provide services and support to assist TCKs with the various challenges that they face upon repatriation and entry into college. By providing TCKs with the necessary services and support, colleges and universities may improve chances of TCKs' success and retention in higher education and perhaps their success in professional endeavors.

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