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## ABSTRACT

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) represent a group of youth who have lived overseas with their families for business, service, or missionary work. The implications of living in multiple cultures, especially during the developmental and formative years of youth, warrant investigation. This study informs the US counseling community about the characteristics and issues common among American TCKs and adult third culture kids (ATCKs) from previous generations. It begins with an explanation of the TCK situation; the history of their experiences; their living conditions; and how their own culture develops. Common TCK themes are identified such as change; relationships; worldviews; cultural identity; as well as basic TCK characteristics and issues. A review of the literature considers possible ATCK counseling needs. ATCKs may feel they do not fit into any one culture. Others express feelings of rootlessness, alienation, and unresolved grief. The need exists for counselors to help both young and older adults understand their experiences of growing up in a different culture. (Contains 25 references.) (JDM)

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Counseling Third Culture Kids

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**Abstract**

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are youth who lived part or all of their childhood in a society different from their own. Without guidance, obstacles unique to the TCK experience can limit these individuals who have the potential to make valuable contributions as adults in an increasingly intercultural world. The purpose of this manuscript is to inform the counseling community of characteristics and issues many TCKs and adult TCKs share and describe counseling with this population.

### Counseling Adult Third Culture Kids

Chuck Ball recently came home to Longview, Wash., although he's not sure what "home" means. His passport says he is an American, and English is what he speaks. But after living for 17 years in Kenya, where his parents were missionaries, Mr. Ball knows he is neither American nor Kenyan. Ball is what's known as a TCK, a "third culture kid," a youth with tenuous roots in two cultures, but an international outlook. ("Strangers in Their Own Land," 1998, pp. 14)

To most Americans, cultural identity is a no-brainer. If you're from America and have an American passport, you're an American. Football games, apple pie, and whatever else makes you think of the good old U.S. of A., all make you who you are. But what if you're like Chuck Ball and have lived somewhere else for a while, somewhere like Kenya? Suddenly, who you are involves another culture, place, people, group of friends, and over-all lifestyle. Are you really an American anymore? Your passport may say so, but your memories of another life and culture might be telling you something else.

Ball belongs to a unique group of youth who, for better or worse, have followed their missionary, diplomat, service, or corporate parents overseas into different societies to live. In the 1950s Ruth Useem (1993) coined the term Third Culture Kids (TCKs) to refer to this population. Historically, the TCK experience is nothing new. Since the beginning of our modern world with its changing economic and social nature, people have been moving in and out of different

societies (Stonequist, 1961). But the implications of living in multiple cultures, especially during the developmental and formative years of youth, are significant enough to warrant attention (Pollock & Van Reken, 1996).

Today programs exist within many international schools and in some colleges and universities to help TCKs adjust to new cultures as well as facilitate reentry back to their place of origin (e.g., Schaetti, 1996; Schaetti, 1997; Schaetti, 1998). However, many adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) from previous generations, received little guidance from communities abroad or at home. Those who provided support had very limited understanding of the TCK experience, and therefore little ability to counsel effectively the expatriate communities created. While some TCKs grew up and made the best of their situation, others have struggled (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999).

The purpose of this article is to inform the US counseling community of the characteristics and issues common among many American TCKs and ATCKs and describe counseling with this population. This article begins with an explanation of the TCK situation – the history of TCK experience, living conditions, and the TCK's "third culture." Next, the common TCK themes of change, relationships, worldview, and cultural identity are identified as well as basic adult TCK characteristics and issues. The final section of the review of the literature will explore possible ATCK counseling needs.

## The Third Culture Kid Situation

### History

Since the end of World War II, the US government, private corporations, and churches have sent personnel in increasing numbers to live in foreign countries. The nation's new superpower status and the Foreign Service Reform Act of 1946 brought the number of Americans living overseas to an all-time high of approximately 15,000 in the 1960s (Smith, 1991). Today, the US State Department estimates that approximately 3.2 million Americans reside overseas, tens of thousands of which are minors ("Strangers in Their Own Land," 1998).

### Living Conditions

Smith (1991) reports that while military families can rely on facilities furnished by the US State Department, families sponsored by private businesses or non-profit organizations must depend on what their host country provides. Approximately 600 schools overseas enroll American students. US citizens have established many "American Schools" that receive US government assistance and enroll nationals from all countries. Today, 24,000 American students are part of the overall enrollment of 93,000 students in these schools. Most children of US military personnel attend the 269 "US Department of Defense Dependent Schools" or Dodds that provide public education to Americans only, tuition-free and using tax funds.

### The TCK's "Third Culture"

While Ruth Useem (1993) studied the cross-cultural encounters of families who lived overseas in the 1950s, the term "third culture" was used to identify a very special experience. It refers to the lifestyle created by youth who are in the process of adapting and relating the society they came from with the new one in which they live. McCaig (1996) contends that the intensity of this "third culture" lifestyle can depend on a number of variables:

Length of stay, degree of contact with host nationals, the size of both the sponsoring and expatriate communities, and the willingness of parents to encourage their children to engage the culture and its people. Perhaps the strongest connection, both culturally and emotionally, that a child can have to a host country is through a caregiver. Often this person imparts language, culture behavior, and, to some degree, values to the child depending on the child's age. (109-110)

Other factors are also believed to contribute to the diversity of experience found in the TCK community (Cottrell & Useem, 1996; Smith, 1991). However, Schaetti and Ramsey (1999) claim that, despite the varying degrees of intensity and diversity each TCK experiences of a culture, most TCK experiences they have investigated have the following four common themes:

Change. Because of the constant change of location, friends, schools, and cultural experiences in their lives, TCKs learn to rely on change and develop special skills to adapt and be most flexible to new conditions.

Relationships. TCKs make friends quickly and learn to adjust to losing them just as quickly because of the transient circumstances of the TCK lifestyle.

Worldview. TCKs view the world three-dimensionally. They know first-hand that all people share in common fundamental humanness. Therefore, what they read in the news takes on a dimension that extends beyond the news source. When an ATCK who lived in Hong Kong learns of the news of the student protest in Tienanmen Square, memories of people, places, lived experiences and historical contexts come to mind and a strong sense of empathy, compassion and concern plays in the heart. TCKs have also realized that it is possible for an individual to maintain their own personal truth, while other truths exist in different contexts.

Cultural Identity. Upon return to their home culture, Bennett (cited in Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999) asserts that TCKs realize their experiences in host cultures have made them “culturally marginal.” In other words, they belong completely to no one culture. This cultural marginality has the potential to make the TCK feel at home nowhere. In a sense, the TCK performs a balancing act between two or more cultures. But cultural marginality also allows TCKs to internalize more than one culture. This internalization gives a TCK powerful cultural understanding and insight out of the grasp of most monocultural individuals.

The four TCK themes recognized by Schaetti and Ramsey (1999) can have both positive consequences on this population as adults and negative

consequences, depending on how these adults make use of the unique skills they acquired as children (Schaetti, 1996).

### ATCK Characteristics and Issues

#### Characteristics

A study conducted by three sociologists/anthropologists and reported by Useem (1993) and Cottrell (1993a; 1993b; 1993; 1994) in 5 separate report articles examines data collected from 700 American adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) from 25 to 80 years old who lived at least one year overseas as a minor dependent. The data consisted of a 24-page questionnaire about their TCK childhood abroad and their subsequent lives as adults. Cottrell and Useem (1996) report the following portrait of ATCKs:

1. ATCKs are internationally experienced and continue their international involvement. (pp. 31)
2. ATCKs are adaptable and relate easily to a diversity of people. (pp. 32)
3. ATCKs are helpers and problem solvers. (pp. 33)
4. ATCKs feel different but not isolated. (pp. 33)

The authors of this study paint a very positive picture of the overall way ATCKs view themselves. However, from the very same study Cottrell and Useem (1993b; 1993c; 1994) also reveal evidence of the following problems among TCKs: prolonged adolescence, feelings of rootlessness, alienation, and the inability to make commitments.

Issues

Other authors (Carlson, 1997; McCaig, 1996; Pollock, 1996; Pollock & Van Reken; Schaetti, 1996, Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999) have examined ATCK issues of prolonged adolescence, rootlessness, alienation, and unresolved grief in some detail.

Prolonged Adolescence. Pollock and Van Reken (1999) claim that in order to function as an independent adult, a person must successfully go through certain stages of life, namely establishing personal identity, creating strong relationships, making decisions competently, and becoming independent. The authors comment:

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. (pp. 152)

The child who has had the same set of customs and values his/her whole life can test, process and internalize them without question. However, the TCK may not have the opportunity to go through these stages comfortably since the cultural rules have changed. They may still focus on what the customs and values actually are, as opposed to how to challenge, process, and internalize them. Therefore, TCK s may experience prolonged adolescence (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999).

Rootlessness. ATCKs feel varying degrees of rootlessness, depending on how many times their family moved and whether or not their parents kept a home base, a home they would always *have* to return to after an overseas assignment was finished. If no vestige of an original home base was kept in the TCK's home culture and the family frequently moved, home often doesn't become a question of place but rather of relationships with people. The old cliché "home is where the heart is" has the greatest relevance to the most highly mobile ATCK. However, for many of those who attended boarding schools, relationships with their parents are not as much associated with home as is the boarding school they attended. But generally, when associations with home have little to do with a place, TCKs may feel no roots to one place as an adult (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999).

Alienation. Pollock (1996) notes that when ATCKs live in their own culture again, they often have the "hidden immigrant" experience. This means that even though they look the same as those around them and are accepted by them, once they open their mouth to express themselves, their telltale accent, language skills, and/or values and opinions make them different. They feel like an immigrant inside even though on the outside they look like everyone else. At this point it becomes difficult for an ATCK to fit into a group. Carlson (1997) points out that ATCKs can feel alienated by the groups they try to join, and some often just expect to be alienated because of past experiences. Unfortunately, some ATCKs find that after a while it is easier to be alienated than it is to try to fit

in. Carlson (1997) further remarks:

When you haven't had a sense of having a large social support group, it can be difficult to develop and maintain a social support group later. Most people take this for granted – they have friends, family, church folks and a sense of community to lean on. They know they are isolated only if they choose to be. But for those of us who have moved around a lot, stable community is a new concept, and it takes time to really understand and trust it. (pp. 6)

Unresolved Grief. To many who have never experienced living overseas during their childhood and teen years, unresolved grief as a result of living in multiple places seems like a moot point. Certainly, having the opportunity to experience new cultures and make new friends is a fortunate and exciting thing. However, the grief of saying goodbye to friends and familiar places on a regular basis is also very real to the TCK, and for some it is difficult to fully address (McCaig, 1996; Pollock and Reken, 1999). ATCK Alex Graham James (cited in Pollock & Van Reken, 1999, pp. 165), expresses his unresolved grief in the following poem “Mock Funeral.”

There was no funeral.

No flowers.

No ceremony.

No one had died.

No weeping or wailing.

Just in my heart.  
I can't....  
But I did anyway,  
and nobody knew I couldn't.  
I don't want to...  
But nobody else said they didn't.  
So I put down my panic  
and picked up my luggage  
and got on the plane.  
There was no funeral. (165)

Unresolved grief often results from losses that are “hidden” in TCK experience. TCKs lose their world as they knew it when they leave their original home or their home in another culture. They lose their lifestyle, their old identity, possessions, relationships, role models and more. TCKs and ATCKs are known to express these losses in the form of denial, anger, depression, withdrawal, rebellion, vicarious grief, and delayed grief (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999).

Much like a relationship with another person, the TCK who has the greater cross-cultural identity and emotional investment with a different culture, the more that person will need to grieve when that culture is no longer part of his or her daily life. But regardless of the pain of grieving, some say these people are the most satisfied with their time living in that other culture and would not have traded their intercultural experience for anything (Bell, 1999).

### Unlocking the Potential of ATCKs for Good

Bennett (cited in Schaetti, 1996) states that in many ways the ATCK's unique experiences as children has the power to "encapsulate" them. They might feel like they don't fully fit in to their culture of origin, or any other culture for that matter. Other issues like prolonged adolescence, rootlessness, alienation, and unresolved grief can further complicate their lives (Eaken, 1996; McCaig, 1996; Schaetti, 1996; Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). If gone unchecked, dysfunctional behavior like alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders and depression occasionally result as an outlet for these feelings and experiences (McCaig, 1996).

However, as with any hardship, there always exists a way to use life experiences and skills learned for good. Authors like Schaetti (1996), Pollock and Van Reken (1999) have touched upon how to "construct" good use out of ATCK hardships. The challenge of the ATCK is to understand exactly how past experiences have made them who they are, and embrace their situation as opposed to letting it trap them in endless, self-defeating cycles.

Pollock and Van Reken (1999) propose that therapists can help ATCKs. Although they make no attempt to claim to know how therapists should counsel them, they identify some problems unique to ATCKs' life patterns like rootlessness, alienation, unresolved grief, prolonged adolescence, identity and world view issues, cultural imbalance and many others not mentioned in this article. They also make a facilitative three-fold suggestion to the therapist of

ATCKs. First, recognize “hidden losses” by charting where the ATCK has moved over the years. Charting this information may bring to life how much loss and separation the ATCK experienced. Secondly, recognize the impact of the government, church or corporation that sent the family abroad. These systems may have enforced rules the ATCK could have resented or, on the other hand, they may have protected and nurtured them. Finally, realize that ATCKs may be paradoxically defensive. They may not want to express their pain because they do not want to “negate” the only lifestyle they have known. Or, in the case of the ATCK of a missionary, they may not want to negate their faith.

The counseling and psychology communities have a great deal to offer this relatively substantial, yet often unrecognized and underserved population. A few organizations, colleges and universities (e.g. Global Nomads International, Interaction, Inc., Third Culture Family Services, Transition Dynamics) dedicate efforts to better understand of the needs of ATCKs. But still, strong counseling and psychological research and studies on the topic are scant.

#### Discussion

ATCKs have a great deal of special experiences, perspectives and skills to contribute to the communities in which they live (Schaetti, 1996; Smith, 1990). ATCKs have a broad understanding of the world and different cultures and skills in managing change of place, culture, and relationships. These skills and understanding can broaden the outlook and way of life of the people around them and enrich the communities in which ATCKs live (Smith, 1990).

The key to unlocking this resource of global perspective, knowledge and skills is to guide ATCKs to understand themselves more completely so that they can make use of their talents and be who they really are, people who have lived in multiple cultures (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999; Schaetti, 1996).

In conclusion, the issues unique to many ATCKs are worthy of the attention of the counseling and psychological communities. If only to recognize the origins of life and mobility patterns among ATCKs, counselors and psychologists will benefit themselves and better serve the ATCK population by investigating the psychological components of the ATCK experience.

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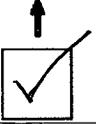
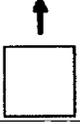
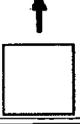
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