



## *U.S. Third Culture Kids/ Global Nomads*

by Sara Thurston-González

Director, International Student Center,  
Kansas State University  
and

Ph.D. Student, Higher Education and Administration,  
Loyola University Chicago



### *Definitions...*

- Third Culture Kids
  - First defined by R.H. Useem in the 1960s as those who have grown up in different places around the world because of their parent's work. The term has evolved over the years to include all children who accompany their parents into another culture, whether domestically or globally. I specifically adopt R.H. Useem's original definition of this term.



## *Definitions...*

- Global Nomads
  - This term, coined in 1984 by McCaig, is used synonymously with third culture kids and is commonly used in the literature.
- Other terms less commonly used:
  - Internationally Mobile Youth - Gerner, Perry, Moselle and Archbold; 1992
  - Transculturals - Willis, Enloe and Minoura; 1994



## *Clarification*

- Third culture kids are represented by all nationalities. A child of an Ecuadorian couple who live in Japan has similar characteristics to a child of a U.S. American couple who live in Kenya. This is limited to third culture kids who are U.S. citizens



## *What does third culture mean?*

- The “third culture” is the result of the composite of two other cultures. The first culture is derived from the origin of the parents’ culture. The source of the second culture is from the host culture in which the family is living. The third culture is the culture that is formed with the intersection of those two cultures. It develops as a result of schooling, living environment, and social networks.



## *Characteristics of U.S. TCK*

- Significant time abroad (at least 1 year) during developmental years (birth to 18 years old)
- Raised in a cross-cultural, highly mobile environment
- Distinct differences from the host culture
- Expected repatriation
- Living a privileged lifestyle
- System identity



## *TCK Experiences- Education*

- TCKs...
  - Value education
  - Seek out higher education
  - Have well-educated parents
  - Attend strong college prep schools
- Experiences influence their college selection - fit is important
- Experiences influence their college experience – what they do and who they do it with



## *TCK Experiences- International Mindedness*

- How they see the world
- Levels of intercultural sensitivity
- Mobility tendencies
- Occupational preferences
- Family tendencies
- Language development



## *TCK Experiences - Career*

- International aspects
- Impressive career achievements
- Desire for independence and flexibility
- Interest in helping others



## *TCK Experiences – Sense of Belonging*

- TCKs need forums to explore and reflect on transition, change and difference to make meaning of them
- Adaptable, able to fit into multiple places
- Can relate to anyone, make new friends easily, though feel most at home in third-culture networks with people who are internationally minded and have lived abroad, or to be internationally located.
- Very few feel at home with peers in U.S.



## *TCK Experiences- Family Relationships*

- Strong family relationships due to high mobility and family being the only constant factor.
- TCKs like, respect, and feel emotionally attached to parents. They spend more time together and specifically more quality time than U.S. counterparts.
- Lower divorce rate than U.S. counterparts
- Marry older (after 25), gravitate towards partners with international experience
- Raising of TCK's children is influenced by international experience.



## *TCK Experiences- Personal Qualities*

- Outlook on Life
  - (-) Depression
  - (-) Prolonged adolescence
  - (-) Self-centered
  - (+) Feeling control over their lives
  - (+) Flexible
  - (+) Problem solvers when it comes to unexpected or difficult situations.



## *TCK Experiences- Personal Qualities*

### • Gender Differences

#### ■ Females

- Greater concern with interpersonal relationships, more difficulty leaving childhood friends, and more difficulty with re-entry to the U.S.
- More likely to believe their overseas experience enhances their social relationships and community involvement, and make new relationships in new situations more easily
- Reach out more to help those who seem unsure and experience more stress over conflicting thoughts of stability and mobility.
- More likely to see multiple sides to an issues
- Most likely to pursue international careers

#### ■ Males

- Greater satisfaction with how their lives unfolded vs. females
- Have a higher acceptance of other cultures, learning languages, travel, and interest in future international careers than U.S. based counterparts



## *TCK Experiences- Personal Qualities*

### • Civic Engagement

- High levels of volunteerism
- Volunteering with international dimension
- Participation in advocacy or protest activities



### *TCK Experiences-Reflection on Life's Path*

- Quite satisfied with school years and exposure to different cultures
- Believe experience has had a beneficial impact on most roles and relationships
- Quite satisfied with the way their lives turn out



### *TCK Cross-Cultural Reentry, General*

- Mild to severe difficulties, including trauma, illness, or stress
- Feel like they don't fit in, difficulty finding one's place
- Not completely attuned to everyday life in the U.S.
- Feel out-of-synch throughout lifetime
- Changes in identity- feeling like a citizen of the world, hero, pioneer, more multicultural exposure
- Self-understanding/individuation



### *TCK Cross-Cultural Reentry, General*

- Greater perspective and change in values
- Search for one's own roots/heritage
- More aware of own culture by comparing and contrasting
- Spiritual openness
- Reconstruct meaningful lives within an unfamiliar setting



### *TCK-Reentry and Transition to College*

- One of the most difficult times to enter the U.S. – reentry AND college transitions
  - Leaving family for the first time, being separated from childhood friends, new automated routine, economically insecure, lack of opportunity to “go home” for the weekend, feels awkward when unfamiliar with U.S. culture
- Least problems from higher income TCKs, lived less than 2 years overseas during grades 1-7, and moved less than 3 times.



### *TCK-Reentry and Transition to College*

- Missionary Kids-highest achievers, though low self-concept
- Federal Civilians – most academically adjusted
- Biz Kids –lowest academic achievement
- Generally, similar adaptation to college for TCK and U.S. raised, though manage it differently



### *TCK-Reentry and Transition to College*

- Sometimes viewed by U.S. raised students as “different” or “strange”
- Typical problems can include: finances, content of coursework, decision of career, personal identity, finding friends who share similar backgrounds and values



## *Preparation and Adjustment Support for College-Aged TCKs*

- Website References
  - American U, College of Wooster, Colorado State U, George Mason U, Lewis and Clark College, U of Pacific, Wheaton College
- Mu Kappa Chapters
  - Organization for Missionary Kids at 40 colleges
- Student Organizations for TCKs
  - Brown U, George Mason U, Syracuse U, U of Denver
- U of Pacific, School of Intl Studies – Choice  
“international student or domestic student
- International Orientation Inclusion – College of Wooster



## *College Choice for TCKs*

“The decentralized nature of American higher education means a multitude of application procedures and admissions standards which translates into a very lengthy and complex process of selecting colleges and universities... Information about colleges is uneven in quality and availability, and communication is hampered by great distances. Due to the plethora of individual aspirations, purposes, backgrounds, and resources of college-bound students, surveying the college choice and admission experience of overseas students is challenging.” (The College Board, 1997)



## *College Choice: Individual Characteristics for TCKs*

- Socioeconomic Status
  - Higher Status: Affluent families, well-educated parents, high education aspirations
- Ability
  - Overseas SAT scores far exceed the average SAT scores
- Significant People
  - Family, specifically parents, counselors, & friends
- Gender
  - Varied Responses



## *College Choice: Organizational Characteristics For TCK*

- Pre-College Educational Experiences
  - College Prep, AP, IB
- Pre-College Location
  - Pre-disposition:
    - By nature of experience, influenced
  - Search:
    - More open to geographic diversity in college search
    - Have different criteria due to prior international location: International-type Majors, Language Opportunities, Study Abroad Locations
    - Access to Information: Internet, overseas U.S. higher education information centers, paper sources



## *College Choice: Organizational Characteristics For TCK*

- Pre-College School Guidance
  - Number of counselors available, amount of time to dedicate to guidance, own experiences, usually highly educated
  - Advice on choices and applications
  - Descriptive School Profile
  - Pre-departure orientation
  - Alumni Surveys
- College Recruitment Initiatives
  - Visit to schools may be limited
  - Campus Visits

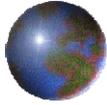


## *College Choice: Organizational Characteristics For TCK*

- College Academic Quality and Reputation
  - Institution
  - Major Department
- Cost/Financial Aid Opportunities
  - Predisposition/Search Stages
    - Perceived cost
    - Lack of information
  - Choice Stage
    - Financial Aid Offered and Total Cost of Attendance
- Location
  - Geographical Preferences: Country, then if US, the State
  - Size of City or Campus



*Presenter Contact Information:*



Sara Thurston-González

Email: [saratg@ksu.edu](mailto:saratg@ksu.edu)

Phone: 785-532-5332