



Third Culture Kids (TCKs)

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What is it?

"Third culture" describes the space between cultures where individuals from different groups meet, deliberate constructions created in response to the need to communicate across cultural boundaries. "Third culture kids" (TCKs) describes children who accompany their parents into other societies, as a result holding membership in three types of cultures simultaneously: their country of origin (called their "passport country"), any and all countries where they have lived, and the global trans-cultural and interstitial culture in which they have become competent. TCKs most often come from families in military, foreign affairs or diplomatic corps, multinational missionary or business organizations, any of which require extensive time living abroad.

Who uses the concept?

Sociologists studying the impact of high mobility lifestyles on children coined the term. Scholars in intercultural communication and psychology also study TCKs. Studying concrete examples of how TCKs adapt their language and behavior when interacting with members of various cultural groups highlights topics meriting greater attention. Recently, the concept has been expanded to include "cross-cultural kids" (CCKs): children regularly exposed to multicultural environments, frequently interacting with members of different cultures, not just those having lived in many countries. The larger category of CCKs includes children of immigrants, minorities, or multiracial parents, those adopted across national boundaries, or who have studied abroad.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

TCKs are particularly adept at intercultural dialogues since they have experienced so many firsthand. They are frequently proposed as model future world citizens, being multilingual, multiculturally competent, taking a global worldview for granted, and typically flexible, adaptable, and resilient. TCKs provide insight on how intercultural dialogues are effectively practised among individuals competent in multiple cultural settings.

What work remains?

The nomadic upbringing of TCKs creates a sense of belonging to anywhere - and nowhere. Research in sociology and psychology has mostly emphasized the difficulties faced by TCKs (not knowing where "home" lies, confusion about identity, etc.), while that in communication has emphasized their strengths (comfort with difference, speed in adapting to new contexts, etc.); the two strands of research need to be integrated.

Resources

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