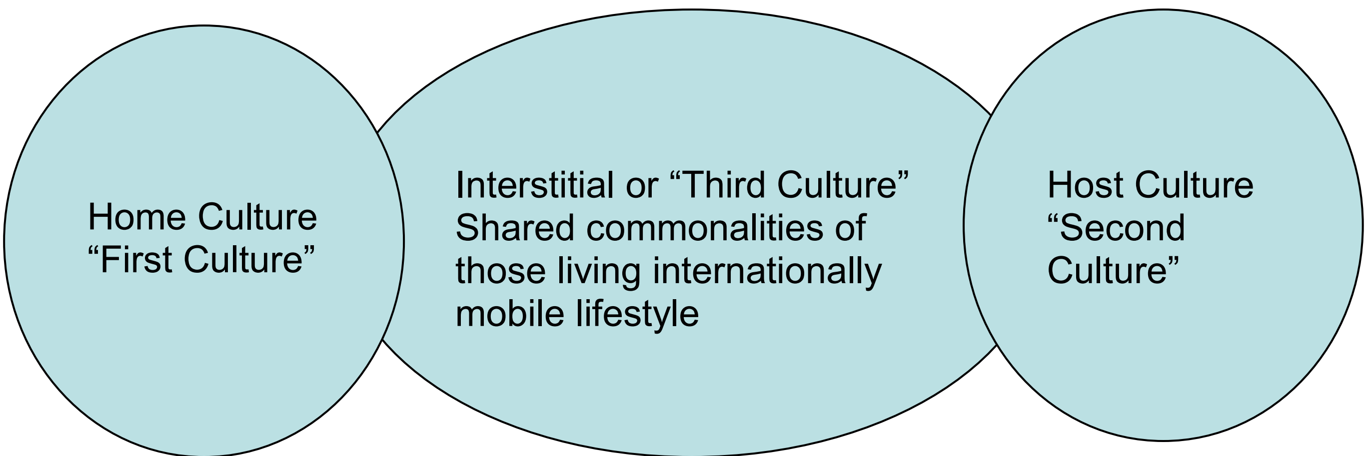
How Many Countries are Sitting in this Classroom?
The Benefits and Challenges of Teaching Third Culture Kids

Brittani Sonnenberg

Definition of Third Culture Kid:

"A third culture kid 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."
--David Pollock, from *Third Culture Kids, Growing Up Among Worlds*.

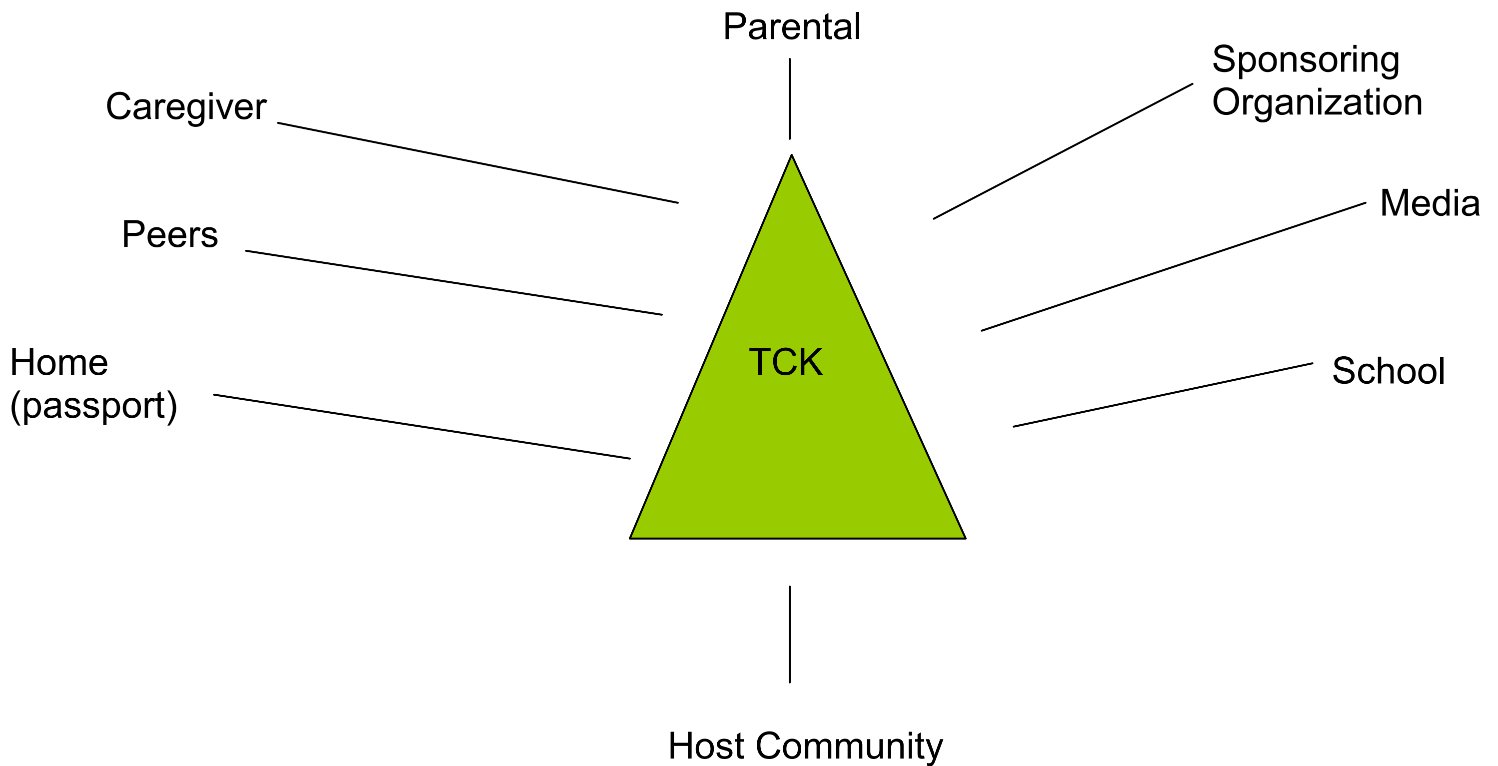
THIRD CULTURE MODEL:
(Adapted from *Third Culture Kids*)



You know you're a TCK when… (From *tckid.com*)

- "Where are you from?" has more than one reasonable answer.
- You've said that you're from foreign country X, and your audience has asked you which US state X is in.
- You flew before you could walk.
- You speak two languages, but can't spell in either.
- You feel odd being in the ethnic majority.
- You have three passports.
- You have a passport but no driver's license.
- You go into culture shock upon returning to your "home" country.
- Your life story uses the phrase "Then we moved to…" three (or four, or five…) times.
- You wince when people mispronounce foreign words.
- You don't know whether to write the date as day/month/year, month/day/year, or some variation thereof.
- The best word for something is the word you learned first, regardless of the language.
- You get confused because US money isn't color-coded.
- You own personal appliances with 3 types of plugs, know the difference between 110 and 220 volts, 50 and 60 cycle current, and realize that a transformer isn't always enough to make your appliances work.
- You fried a number of appliances during the learning process.
- You think the Pledge of Allegiance might possibly begin with "Four-score and seven years ago…."
- Half of your phone calls are unintelligible to those around you.
- You believe vehemently that football is played with a round, spotted ball.
- You consider a city 500 miles away "very close."
- You get homesick reading National Geographic.
- You cruise the Internet looking for fonts that can support foreign alphabets.
- You think in the metric system and Celsius.
- You haggle with the checkout clerk for a lower price.
- Your minor is a foreign language you already speak.
- When asked a question in a certain language, you've absentmindedly respond in a different one.
- You've gotten out of school because of monsoons, bomb threats, and/or popular demonstrations.
- You speak with authority on the subject of airline travel.
- You have frequent flyer accounts on multiple airlines.
- You constantly want to use said frequent flyer accounts to travel to new places.
- You know how to pack.
- You have the urge to move to a new country every couple of years.
- The thought of sending your (hypothetical) kids to public school scares you, while the thought of letting them fly alone doesn't at all.
- You have friends from 29 different countries.
- You sort your friends by continent.

Possible Multiple Cultural Influences for TCKs:
(Adapted from *Third Culture Kids*)



*Adapted from *Third Culture Kids,* by David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009

Basic Resources for Learning More about TCKS:

Books:

1. Pollock, David and Van Reken, Ruth E. *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds.* London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009.
2. *Unrooted Childhoods: Memoirs of Growing Up Global.* Ed. Faith Edise and Nina Sichel. Boston: Intercultural Press, 2004.

Online:

1. www.tckid.com
2. http://www.denizen-mag.com/
3. http://www.tckworld.com/

Denizen | for third culture kids

Zwischenmiete

In my fourth sublet in Berlin in the past eight months, I am growing accustomed to another person's things around me, to her life quietly insinuating itself into my own.

By Brittani Sonnenberg

Zwischenmiete. Illustration for Denizen by David Habben

Brittani Sonnenberg grew up in Europe, America, and Asia (specifically Hamburg, Philadelphia, London, Atlanta, Shanghai, and Singapore). She has worked as a journalist in Phnom Penh, Hong Kong, and Berlin, and as a writing instructor at the University of Michigan and Carleton College. Her fiction and nonfiction has appeared in The O'Henry Prize Stories 2009, Ploughshares, Time Magazine, the Associated Press, NPR, and elsewhere. Sonnenberg is currently a European Journalism Fellow at the Freie Universität in Berlin

In my fourth sublet in Berlin in the past eight months, I am growing accustomed to another person's things around me, to her life quietly insinuating itself into my own. Her pictures, of nieces and nephews, of best friends and boyfriend, become mine, too, as I look at them every day with familiarity and a growing tenderness. Sometimes, I forget that it was not I who bought the plants and the curtains, but she. The lived-in feel of the place, the wear on the sofa and its fading floral print, convinces me that I have been here for years.

The longest I have lived anywhere is Atlanta, Georgia, in the American South. The five years of childhood I spent there were characterized by a sense of belonging that I didn't know I would never grasp again. I looked like the other kids on my block, I spoke like them—my only odd trait was my Nancy Drew addiction and considerable height that forced me into the role of "giant" in neighborhood performances.

Perhaps even then I had a vague memory of difference from having attended a British kindergarten in London. As a baby, in Germany, my birthplace, did I sense that my parents were foreigners? Before speech, what exists to shut you out from another culture? I like the image of myself being wheeled in a stroller in Hamburg, just as inarticulate and bewildered as the German infants beside me, as our mothers paused at a red light.

We moved to Shanghai when I was twelve, and it was there, I believe, that I began to find the crease between cultures, its comfortable folds and soft, dark layers that I learned to use as blankets. More specifically: in the misunderstandings between others and myself, there was a relaxing, a breathing out, a sense of never being known that placated me. I existed as a representation of something: of whiteness, of American-ness, a cut out doll. At my international school, or with local Shanghainese people, you were constantly forced to offer "truths" about your homeland, facts about the people and their habits, which everyone accepted despite the artifice of the setup, the preposterous nature of cultural diplomacy, as if my faded memories enabled me to explain a nation.

As a foreigner, I began to live half there (back in Atlanta) and half here (in China), sinking into bubbling whirlpools of nostalgia with other "third culture kids" when discussing memories of home. None of us pictured the same place, the shared talk offered the feeling of camaraderie as one by one we drifted thousands of miles away from each other to Campinas, Brazil; Seoul, Korea; and my grandmother's house in the North Georgia Mountains. Home became where you had left, where you were never going to live again.

The new country became the sublet, often quite literally. In Shanghai we lived in a furnished apartment suffused with anonymous gray hues: gray carpet, gray couch, mauve bed covers. In Singapore, where we moved next, the furniture was ours but the various houses we lived in were always rented, the pool held the memory of other children diving in, and waited patiently for us to leave, for other children to come.

I grew accustomed to my stark racial, linguistic, and cultural differences from those surrounding me. I began to base my sense of belonging, my self pride, with how well I could snuggle into that crease—how much of my American-ness I could lose, how much of the Chinese culture I could gain… for there was never any danger that I would ever go entirely one way or the other. I would never be accepted as a Chinese person, and, after we left Atlanta, I would never accept myself again as an American.

Walter Benjamin, in The Task of the Translator, describes the notion of "pure language," where, in the attempt of translation, the translator briefly accesses the exalted ground of a transcendent tongue that encompasses all languages. In the effort to translate, one speaks profoundly. Once the translation has been made, you come crashing back to earth, having performed the inevitable failure.

Pure language—die Zwischenmiete—renting a liminal space that you will soon leave, but which you inhabit with the desperate delusions of an exile. Neither here nor there—open, sympathetic, offering everything in yourself to the culture you have plunged into, knowing you will always be safe and relatively unknown in the deep fjord between your homes. I feel myself sailing across the gap, speaking excitedly with a new acquaintance about similarities between our cultures, finding the connections. Maybe I am speaking in English. Maybe it is halting Chinese, German, Khmer, or a laid-on Southern accent if I'm visiting relatives in Mississippi. Yet I am also looking up from the bottom of the trench, watching myself make the leap, watching myself re-fall.

I feel most afraid of being in America, or being among other Americans. I feel flattened, two-dimensional. In the presumption that there is no gap, I am lost in an open field. I don't know what to say. I quickly try to establish myself as having grown up overseas, as Other. I try to paint over my whiteness with the Asian places I have lived. "Oh, I know Atlanta well," another American says to me, at a party in Berlin, when I tell her that's where I'm from. "Well, I'm not really from there," I hurry to say. "It's just what I say."

Just what I say. I expose the mask to put on another, thicker one. The task of masking, its inconveniences—barely seeing through the eyeholes, the difficulty of breathing through the plaster—feels important, noble, modern and sexy. There is something martyr-like about the discomfort, the homelessness I insist upon. In it I am always fumbling, searching for the right word, the right explanation. The joy, when it comes, is of finally being understood, despite language, despite culture, despite foreign-ness, mask ripped off. The opposite rapture, which is always there, in the depths of the trench, the mask my own skin, by now, is the thrill of being unknown, never settling down, dreaming about your old homes in other people's beds.

The New York Times
nytimes.com

October 26, 2002

At Home Abroad / Third Culture Kids : Often more accomplished, but sometimes more troubled

By Gretchen Lang

VIENNA— Dragan Majetic feels gifted to have been raised abroad. His childhood in India, Africa and Japan opened doors to a world of excitement and opportunity out of reach to his peers back home in Belgrade. But sometimes Majetic wonders at the settled lives of those who stayed behind when his diplomat parents took him along for the ride. Would he have been happier if he had stayed home?

Now researchers are beginning to look at the adult lives of children raised outside of their passport countries to assess the long-term effects. Dubbed Third Culture Kids, or TCKs, by the American sociologist Ruth Hill Useem, these may be "army brats" or diplomatic dependents, missionary kids or the children of business executives. They have seen more of the world by the age of 18 than most people see in a lifetime. Many speak a handful of languages by the time they graduate from high school. According to social scientists, they are often uniquely accomplished — and sometimes uniquely troubled.

Though the exact number of children being raised outside their passport countries worldwide has not been tabulated, it is clear that in an increasingly global economy, the number is growing.

In the past 10 years the number of British nationals living abroad rose from 8.6 million to 14.2 million, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The number of new passports issued to Americans has nearly doubled from 3.6 million in 1991 to almost 7 million in 2001, according to the Bureau of Consular Affairs at the State Department.

"This is the future," says Ann Baker Cottrell, a sociology professor at San Diego State University. "TCKs are showing us where we are going and we are just catching up."

In the early 1990s, researchers from the University of Michigan — where Ruth Hill Useem is an emeritus professor of sociology — along with Cottrell and another researcher, Kathleen Finn Jordan, polled 696 American TCKs who had spent all or part of their childhood overseas to find out how that experience had influenced their adult lives. The questionnaire addressed respondents from ages 25 to 80, who, it was hoped, were over the worst "re-entry pains" and had settled back to life in the United States. The study grouped the respondents according to what kind of work their parents did, such as military, government or business.

In papers analyzing this data, Cottrell found marked differences in the way people who have grown up overseas choose to live as well as in the way they perceive themselves and the world.

The study found that the American adult TCKs were on the whole more successful than their homegrown peers. They consistently had a higher degree of education and were often employed in the top ranks of their profession. Seventy percent were executives, administrators or in professional positions, Cottrell said. She pointed out that many of these children start out as the educated elite. In 80 percent of these families, at least one parent had a bachelor's degree, she found, reflecting the "considerable cultural capital available to TCKs."

Of overseas kids returning to university in their home countries, 63 percent said their international childhood had influenced their choice of study. Some chose international topics of study, others subjects like English as a second language, business and nursing with the hopes of returning abroad to work.

"My father was a TCK so it seemed normal for me to consider going back overseas as I did," said Ruth van Reken, who was born and raised in Nigeria before returning to live in the United States. "I became a nurse as I had seen many, many very sick people around me as a child growing up in Nigeria and I definitely wanted to make a difference."

Children raised overseas are more likely than their peers at home to work and live abroad, although the exact number who do so is unknown. Cottrell said a loose survey of embassies abroad found them "stuffed" with TCKs.

Kevin Gaw, an educator who grew up in Malaysia, said 45 to 50 percent of his classmates in Kuala Lumpur had chosen to live abroad.

But if many TCKs go on to lead successful and adventurous lives, those lives can sometimes feel lonely and dislocated, they say.

Cottrell's data supports this. Of her respondents, 90 percent said they felt "out of sync" with their compatriots back home — sometimes 50 years or more after their overseas childhoods. If they return to their passport countries, they are missing vital cultural reference points, like pop culture icons, and have a different outlook on their own countries and the world. Many feel their special skills and broader outlook are wasted in their homeland.

"My 10 years of living in a different country is often seen as suspect here in the United States," said Gaw, who now heads the counseling and career department at the University of Nevada, Reno. "People here don't seem to understand or trust what I have to offer."

Majetic's experience typifies the dilemma. Born in India to Croatian parents, Majetic, 38, spent his childhood in Zaire and Japan. He returned to Belgrade in 1978 speaking fluent English and Japanese. Although his classmates in Belgrade were impressed by his exotic upbringing, he quickly learned he no longer belonged in the former Yugoslavia.

"I never really fit in there," he recalled. "I never felt it was my home. The bottom line is when you come back home your peers aren't really interested in hearing your stories. I feel they don't really listen or pay attention to what I'm saying. You think, 'Oh, I'm not really accepted here' and you want to go abroad again."

With his language skills, Majetic landed a job teaching English in Japan and then studied for his Masters in Business Administration at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He worked his way through his degree with an internship at IBM in New Jersey. After graduating he joined the drug manufacturer Eli Lilly, where he now works as area marketing director for Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Along with his wife and two children, he lives in a fashionable suburb of Vienna.

But his success has come at a price.

"This lifestyle is very difficult," Majetic said. "Everything is temporary. It's difficult to make friends. I just don't want to make the effort."

"I see my university friends and they are very happy," he says. "They earn one-tenth of what I do, but they are content with it. They have found happiness where they live, with what they've got."

Both at home and abroad, adult TCKs seem to do best when they find their own community made up of expats and globe-trotters like them. There are a handful of Web sites for TCKs including the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Youth Foundation and TCKworld (www.tckworld.com).

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