

**GLOBAL NOMADS:
TOWARDS A STUDY OF 'ASIAN' THIRD CULTURE KIDS¹**

Danau Tanu

The University of Western Australia

Email: tanud01@student.uwa.edu.au

While nation-states still command authority over the demarcation of their borders, the increasing global flow of capital, goods and people means that the development of our attitudes toward identity is outstripping the ability of the nation-state to keep the definition of our identity tightly under its control. It can control what gets printed on our passports, but not what gets printed in our minds and hearts. Children and youths leading highly mobile lives are particularly vulnerable to the discomfort arising from the discrepancy between the name of the country printed on their passport and their sense of identification with that country. These children have been called by various names including, 'internationally mobile youths,' 'global nomads' and 'third culture kids.' Their transient globe-trotting lifestyle suggests that they are living at the forefront of globalization, and yet not enough research has been done on them (Cockburn, 2002; McLachlan, 2005).

¹ This paper was presented to the 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Melbourne 1-3 July 2008. It has been peer reviewed via a double blind referee process and appears on the Conference Proceedings Website by the permission of the author who retains copyright. This paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

This paper will highlight the complex identity issues faced by these so-called ‘third culture kids’ (TCKs) as a result of their highly mobile lives. Existing work on the subject has focused mainly on describing the nature and experiences of TCKs in an attempt to raise awareness of the struggles they go through and the benefits that their heightened intercultural understanding might bring. Yet, little work has been done to incorporate the research into the wider framework of discourse on identity. This paper will examine how Stuart Hall and Erik Erikson’s work on identity and adolescence provides an important framework for further understanding how globalization has impacted TCKs’ sense of identity. The need to study the role of ‘international education’ in developing intercultural sensitivity among TCKs will also be discussed. Finally, I will argue a case for studying TCKs whose parents are from Asia, particularly those living in Jakarta where there has been a boom in international schools which accommodate TCKs.

Third culture kids: Who are they?

The term ‘third culture kid’ (or TCK) was first coined by Useem et al in the 1950s (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 20), but has only recently come into popular parlance among TCKs themselves and those working with internationally mobile youths through Pollock and Van Reken’s (2001) work: *Third culture kids: the experience of growing up among worlds*. TCKs spend their formative years outside their parents’ home country (“first culture”) as ‘visitors’ in one or more host countries (“second culture”) to develop a “third culture” or an “interstitial culture” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Useem & Downie, 1976). They are typically, though not exclusively, children of expatriate workers, missionaries and military service people who expect to be repatriated at the end of their parents’ assignment. TCKs “[build] relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any...the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background” (“The TCK Profile” seminar material, Interaction, Inc., 1989, 1 as cited in Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 19). TCKs lead highly mobile lives during their formative years and this has a great impact on their sense of identity (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; McLachlan, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

TCKs often find themselves having to negotiate their identity on a regular basis in relation to the dominant culture. Pollock and Van Reken (2001, p. 53) identify four possible ways a person can relate to the surrounding culture (see below).

Foreigner Look different Think different	Hidden Immigrant Look alike Think different
Adopted Look different Think alike	Mirror Look alike Think alike

While globalization means that many of us today might move from one box to another at some point in our lives, the difference for TCKs is that they frequently change boxes during their childhood and adolescent years owing to their transient lifestyle (Pollock & Van Reken, p. 54). This carries both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, TCKs have been identified as having a high level of cross-cultural understanding and adaptability (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Straffon, 2003). On the other hand, they often experience an acute sense of identity crisis.

Cultural chameleon

At one level, their knowledge of multiple cultures as a result of their mobile lives and experience of attending international schools means that many TCKs have an expanded world view (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Hayden & Thompson, 1995; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Their exposure to different cultures at a young age enables them to develop a high level of “intercultural sensitivity” (Straffon, 2003) or the ability to “judge and understand others by their standards rather than one’s own” (Hayden & Thompson, 1995, p. 331). Given their situation, some learn to be cultural chameleons (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 92). Cultural chameleons will quickly pick up the cultures, languages, and mannerisms of their surroundings so as to blend in. They can tap into the cultural knowledge found in their multiple and fragmented identity (Ang, 2001; Hall, 1996) to help them act in accordance with the dominant culture. This makes it easier for members of the dominant culture to relate to them, and for TCKs to function within that society. In these situations, identity for the TCK is “strategic and

positional” as argued by Hall (1996). Hall (1993, p. 362) also states that “identity is always an open, complex, unfinished game – always under construction.” This is true of TCKs whose identity is in constant flux.

Identity crisis

At the same time, many TCKs experience a prolonged sense of identity crisis which can be understood in light of Erikson’s concept of adolescent identity development. Their mobile and intercultural upbringing impacts on TCKs’ sense of identity in several ways, a few of which will be discussed here. While they may know how to play the game of acting out certain parts of their identity at certain times in order to fit in, TCKs may not necessarily *like* playing the game and struggle to *accept* that their identity is multiple, fragmented and negotiable.

Erikson (1959, 1968, 2008) claims that adolescence marks a crucial phase in a person’s development as they go through a process of establishing who they are within and who they are vis-à-vis society. Jensen (2008, p. 4) identifies it as a time when individuals form a cultural identity by choosing a set of worldview beliefs which “often pertain to conceptions of human nature, the relation of the individual to others in society, and moral and religious ideals.” This process can be particularly complicated for those who are exposed to multiple cultures, as is the case for TCKs. Presented with often conflicting worldviews, TCKs are faced with the additional task of sorting through the multiplicity of value systems by which they might come to define their identity. As a result, many reportedly experience a period of “delayed adolescence” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 150). During this period, they may appear to be flippant and have “no real convictions about much of anything” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 93). Phinney (2008, p. 48) uses the concept of “emerging adulthood” in discussing how a multicultural upbringing may prolong the time spent by individuals in exploring their identity to well into their 20s and beyond. In the case of TCKs, there is the added factor of rootlessness (feeling that home is everywhere and nowhere) and restlessness (having a migratory instinct) stemming from their transient lifestyle (Fail et al., 2004; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Erikson (1959, p. 102) says that in adolescence “the young individual must learn to be most himself [sic – universal male] where he means most to others – those others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him.” TCKs often find

this learning process difficult as the people who mean most to them are scattered across the globe. Their exposure to multiple cultures and their transient lifestyle pose challenges for TCKs in establishing who they are within.

Erikson (1959) posits that while the sense of identity gained is not set in stone and may undergo adjustments later on, it should become more stable and manageable in late adolescence. Gaining a coherent identity, however, is difficult for TCKs when their identity is constantly being challenged (Fail et al., 2004, p. 323). Others will often try to fit the TCK into their own mono-cultural mould. In so doing, they will interpret a single fragment of the TCK identity as representative of the whole person while disregarding all other parts of the TCK's background. Downie (1976) found that American citizens raised overseas who repatriated for college had to set aside their multicultural background in order to fit in. They were unable to express themselves as a whole person because the dominant society would only validate one aspect of their identity – the American part. This can be frustrating because, as Hall (1995, pp. 67-68) says, “When it is we who are rearticulated, we don't like it so much.” Not to mention, each time they relocate, another culture is added to the list of cultural identities that the TCK must learn to manage. TCKs find it challenging to establish who they are in relation to others when only a fragment of their identity is being validated.

Some TCKs who are unable to reconcile their multiple fragmented identity express this sense of loss by putting on what Erikson (2008, p. 236) calls a “negative identity” where being different *is* their identity, which can come across to others as being arrogant (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Their inability to fit in with the dominant culture causes them to “learn more about who they are not, rather than who they are” (Walters, 2006, p. 79).

‘Normalization’ – it’s okay to be multicultural

An important part of TCK identity formation is the experience of the “normalization” process (Walters, 2006, p. 52). This can come in the form of meeting others of similar background, or being exposed to the literature on TCKs. The first time they encounter the term ‘TCK’ or ‘global nomad’ is a life changing experience for many (Fail, 2002; Schaetti, 2000; Walters, 2006). For the first time, their experiences are named and

validated. As Van Reken (n.d., p. 9), who is an adult TCK herself, puts it, “[being] a TCK becomes a way to frame or describe my life experiences.”

TCKs today

TCKs are said to feel most comfortable with others who share the third culture experience (Bowman, 2001; McLachlan, 2007; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti, 2000). In recent years, various organizations and websites have sprung up to serve as points of connection for TCKs and raise awareness about their experience to help them work through it. Currently, the most active among these is “tckid.com.” There is also a children’s book written especially for TCKs entitled, *The Adventure Begins: First Day at Detinu International School* to help “littler TCKs to finally have their own voice in the experience of living ‘among worlds’” (Munnerlyn, 2007). Yet, most researchers recognize the need for further research on TCKs. A few areas of research which my project will explore are identified below.

Situating TCKs within a broader identity discourse

The existing literature on TCKs has been tunnel-visioned in various ways. Firstly, the focus has been on Westerners, particularly US citizens. Secondly, while some of the existing research is ‘thick’ in description (Geertz, 1975), it is thin on analyses. There have been limited attempts (for examples see Schaetti, 2000; Wurgaft, 2006) to integrate the findings or ‘thick description’ with the broader theoretical discourse on related issues such as identity and hybridity. This isolation has two important ramifications. Firstly, the research misses out on gaining a deeper understanding of TCK experiences. While the literature covers *what* TCK experiences are like, scant attention has been paid to a theoretical understanding of *why* they struggle with issues of identity and rootlessness. Secondly, the isolation means that the literature on TCKs brings little benefit to other subject areas. Thirdly, the research has overlooked the effects of ethnicity/race, culture, class and gender on TCK identity formation and their ability to be interculturally sensitive. Instead of treating the TCK experience as unique, the research on TCKs needs to be integrated into the broader discourse of identity, hybridity and migration.

Gender differences in TCKs

The existing literature has largely overlooked the issue of gender in TCK identity formation. The limited findings that do exist have been inconclusive (see Walters, 2006). The TCK experience raises the question: How do TCKs form and negotiate their gender identities in the face of multiple cultures which espouse multiple expectations regarding gender roles? Furthermore, Josselson (1987) suggests that relationships are more important for identity formation in a woman than in a man. If such is the case, does the TCK experience affect TCKs differently depending on their gender?

TCKs from Asia

While some research has been done on TCKs from Japan (*kikokushijo*), little has been done to integrate it with the Western TCK discourse. In addition, more research needs to be done on TCKs from other parts of the world, such as Asia, to see how much of their experience corresponds to the existing findings. In the case of TCKs from Asia, how does an ‘international education’ based on Western liberal-humanism affect their identity? Do they become ‘genuinely’ cross-cultural, or do they espouse a cultural hierarchy in their absorption of Western culture (Bhabha, 1984)?

Elitist interculturalism?

While the literature claims that TCKs are cross-culturally proficient, it still remains to be seen whether there are elements of elitism and Eurocentrism in their intercultural understanding. Many TCKs are educated at expensive international schools servicing privileged expatriate workers who live in an “expatriate bubble” (Fechter, 2007, p. vii), particularly when they are located in developing countries. In such situations, does the intercultural understanding gained by TCKs extend to an understanding of the culture of those who are less privileged? How does cultural identity intersect with class identity? Does international education as practiced in international schools promote intercultural understanding, or does it produce highly competitive elite cosmopolitans for the global market? It is important to consider the context of their lifestyle and education in studying TCKs.

International education

There is an emerging interest in the education of the ‘global citizen’ and the cultivation

of ‘international mindedness.’ International schools stand at the forefront of a trend to provide ‘international education.’ It is best to start by clarifying the difference between ‘multicultural education’ (also referred to as ‘intercultural education’ in Hill, 2007, p. 248) and ‘international education.’ Hill (2007, p. 258) suggests that while both types of education aim to promote intercultural understanding, they do so for different purposes: “in multicultural education it is to facilitate integration into the national system” whereas international education “seeks to integrate students into an *international* system where differences in culture are the norm.” International education focuses on cultivating an awareness of global interdependence. The International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program, which is now used at international schools throughout the world, was specifically developed by the International School of Geneva to cater to these schools (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; Hill, 2007). One of the basic tenets of the IB program, the importance of critical thinking, emerged out of the culturally diverse setting found in international schools to accommodate the multiplicity of views (Hill, 2007, p. 253). Today the International Baccalaureate Organization (2008) claims that their mission is to “encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right.”

Critics argue that international education as practised today is Eurocentric, elitist, and a far cry from the aims professed by international schools. Mitchell (2003) argues that international education is an outworking of global capitalism. It aims to produce the “strategic cosmopolitan” who is “motivated not by ideals of national unity in diversity, but by understandings of global competitiveness, and the necessity to strategically adapt as an individual to rapidly shifting personal and national contexts” (Mitchell, 2003, p. 388). It also implies the reproduction of Western worldviews (Matthews & Sidhu, 2005, p. 56). Educators in international schools are aware that critics believe that an education borne out of the Western tradition of liberal-humanism is Eurocentric and perpetuates Western hegemony (Tamatea, 2008).

An assessment of international education is not complete without considering the context in which it is practised. The legacies of colonialism and present day hierarchy of global economic structure need to be taken into consideration when assessing a TCKs’

level of intercultural understanding. My research will explore the ways in which the school environment, curriculum, attitudes of the educators and family background affect a third culture kid's identity and their level of intercultural understanding. I believe their perception of identity will be closely intertwined with their level of intercultural understanding.

Jakarta as fieldwork site

The concept of "third culture kids" turns the basic question, "Where is your research site?" into an interesting dilemma for the researcher. Third culture kids (TCKs) are by definition not tied to a single geographical location. Where then does one study them? Logic would whisper, "Everywhere and anywhere." Now, while "everywhere" is ideal, it is not practical for a researcher working alone who has opted for an ethnographic fieldwork methodology. In response to "anywhere," I have chosen Jakarta as my research site for several reasons, taking into account the availability of potential subjects and 'control groups,' my language skills and familiarity with the location, as well as existing research. The importance of these factors lies in the questions my research intends to explore.

Firstly, Jakarta has seen a boom in the number of international schools since the 1990s. International schools accommodate many TCKs. The *Living in Indonesia: A site for expatriates* website lists twenty schools of various types under the category of "international schools" (Expat Web Site Association, 2008). Approximately ten of these were established after the 1990s. Some of these international schools are continuing to expand their operations. The website also lists three local national schools which are deemed suitable for expatriate children.

Secondly, the decline in Western investment in Indonesia since the 1998 riots has changed student demographics at the international schools in Jakarta, providing for a unique site. For example, until 1998, the student body at the largest international school in Jakarta, the Jakarta International School, consisted of many nationalities, but the majority were from Western countries. Today, the student body there is mostly from Asian countries. The situation is the same with the Australian International School. This trend allows the researcher of TCKs to explore several questions. Do they readily

identify with TCKs from Western countries? Can TCKs identify with each other purely based on their common “experience of growing up among worlds” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. v), or is it the specific educational experience of international schools which allows them to have something in common? Will the minimized presence of Western peers affect their multicultural outlook and identification with Western TCKs? Furthermore, the international schools today also accommodate a significant number of upper-middle class, local Indonesian students. Since this group is living in their parents’ country, they do not classify as TCKs. This provides an opportunity to compare them with those who do classify as TCKs. Is their experience and outlook different from that of TCKs? Again, their presence as a ‘control group’, so to speak, provides the opportunity to explore the extent to which TCK identification is a product of growing up overseas or a specific educational experience. Jakarta offers a site well suited to identifying various factors affecting the TCK experience.

Thirdly, using Jakarta as a site would allow me to build on Anne-Meike Fechter’s anthropological study, *Transnational lives: expatriates in Indonesia*, published in 2007. It is a study of the expatriates (many of whom are parents of TCKs) from Western countries living in Jakarta, and provides a backdrop to the world of many TCKs. Fechter claims that these families live in an expatriate bubble. If so, how does being in a developing country affect intercultural understanding in TCKs? Fechter (2007, p. 166) also describes the lives of the younger generation of expatriate workers who claim to be “part of the global tribe,” and suggests that further study into these claims is required. It is highly likely that this group includes adult TCKs, who may provide further insight into the TCK experience. In addition, Fechter makes mention of Indonesian young professionals educated overseas. These young Indonesian professionals seem to be converging with Western young professional expatriates in a “shared identity as globally-oriented professionals” (Fechter, 2007, p. 166). They can serve as a comparison group.

Conclusion

Present theories on identity offer a solid conceptual framework for understanding the ‘identity crisis’ faced by many who have been greatly affected by globalization. The ‘third culture kid’ is a classic example. However, further study needs to be done on

TCKs. They can be better understood by incorporating them into the broader discourse of identity and adolescence. Studying the context of their third culture experience will also shed further light on the nature of their intercultural understanding and how it is affected by the global capitalist structure. It is important to explore the interplay of identity and globalization in order to tease out how we can develop a sense of intercultural understanding that will help us move beyond an uncomfortable tolerance of difference.

References

- Ang, I. (2001). *On not speaking Chinese: living between Asia and the West*. New York ; London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1984). Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse. *October*, 28, 125-133.
- Bowman, D. H. (2001). Identities blur for 'third-culture kids.'. *Education Week*, 20(34), 8.
- Cockburn, L. (2002). Children and young people living in changing worlds: the process of assessing and understanding the 'third culture kid'. *School Psychology International*, 23(4), 475-485.
- Downie, R. D. (1976). *Re-entry experiences and identity formation of third culture experienced dependent American youth: an exploratory study*. Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle: selected papers*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: youth, and crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (2008). The problem of ego identity. In D. L. Browning (Ed.), *Adolescent identities: a collection of readings* (pp. 223-240). New York: The Analytic Press.
- Expat Web Site Association. (2008). International schools in Jakarta. *Living in Indonesia: a site for expatriates* Retrieved September 19, 2008, from <http://www.expat.or.id/orgs/schools.html>
- Fail, H. (2002). *An examination of the life histories of a group of former international school students*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Bath, Bath, UK.
- Fail, H., Thompson, J., & Walker, G. (2004). Belonging, identity and third culture kids: life histories of former international school students. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 3(3), 319-338.
- Fechter, A.-M. (2007). *Transnational lives: expatriates in Indonesia*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Geertz, C. (1975). *The interpretation of cultures : selected essays*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hall, S. (1993). Culture, community, nation. *Cultural Studies*, 7(3), 349-363.
- Hall, S. (1995). Fantasy, identity, politics. In E. Carter, J. Donald & J. Squires (Eds.), *Cultural Remix: theories of politics and the popular* (pp. 63-69). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, S. (1996). Who needs an identity? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1-17). London: SAGE Publications.
- Hayden, M., & Thompson, J. (1995). International schools and international education: a relationship reviewed. *Oxford Review of Education*, 21(3), 327-345.

- Hill, I. (2007). Multicultural and international education: never the twain shall meet? *International Review of Education*, 53(3), 245-264.
- International Baccalaureate Organization. (2008). IB mission and strategy. Retrieved May 25, 2008, from <http://www.ibo.org/mission/>
- Jensen, L. A. (2008). Coming of age in a multicultural world. In D. L. Browning (Ed.), *Adolescent identities: a collection of readings* (pp. 3-18). New York: The Analytic Press.
- Josselson, R. (1987). *Finding herself: pathways to identity development in women* (1st ed.). San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.
- Matthews, J., & Sidhu, R. (2005). Desperately seeking the global subject: international education, citizenship and cosmopolitanism. *Globalisation, Societies & Education*, 3(1), 49-66.
- McLachlan, D. A. (2005). The impact of globalization on internationally mobile families: a grounded theory analysis. *Journal of Theory Construction & Testing*, 9(1), 14-20.
- McLachlan, D. A. (2007). Global nomads in an international school: families in transition. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 6(2), 233-249.
- Mitchell, K. (2003). Educating the national citizen in neoliberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28(4), 387-403.
- Munnerlyn, J. (2007). The adventure begins. *teachtck.com* Retrieved June 9, 2008, from http://teachtck.com/?page_id=4
- Phinney, J. S. (2008). Ethnic identity exploration in emerging adulthood. In D. L. Browning (Ed.), *Adolescent identities: a collection of readings* (pp. 47-66). New York: The Analytic Press.
- Pollock, D. C., & Van Reken, R. E. (2001). *Third culture kids: the experience of growing up among worlds*. Boston & London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Schaetti, B. F. (2000). *Global nomad identity: hypothesizing a developmental model*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, The Union Institute, Ohio.
- Straffon, D. A. (2003). Assessing the intercultural sensitivity of high school students attending an international school. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27(4), 487-501.
- Tamatea, L. (2008). A practical and reflexive liberal-humanist approach to international mindedness in international schools: case studies from Malaysia and Brunei. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 7(1), 55-76.
- Useem, R. H., & Downie, R. D. (1976). Third-culture kids. *Today's Education*, 65(3), 103-105.
- Van Reken, R. (n.d.). TCK relationships and grief. Retrieved August 14, 2008, from

<http://tckacademy.com/class/001/tckclassminicourse001.pdf>

Walters, K. (2006). *A story to tell: the identity development of women growing up as third culture kids*. Unpublished MA dissertation, Trinity Western University, Langley.

Wurgaft, N. (2006). *Also known as: an exploration of cultural hybridity*. Unpublished Psy.D. dissertation, Antioch New England Graduate School, Keene, New Hampshire.