

## Homeless Souls: Issues of Identity Formation for International and Domestic Nomads

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### Abstract

This paper explores the complexities of identity formation in children and adolescents who have grown up in a world of constant change and transition. While these changes can be applied to the experiences of many mobile groups who transition within one culture, this paper focuses primarily on groups who live internationally mobile lifestyles, transitioning between several cultures within their lifetime. These children are often referred to as Third Culture Kids (TCKs) but may also be known as “global nomads,” “missionary kids,” or “military brats,” among others. Despite the many benefits that can result from broad cultural and social exposure, this paper looks at several challenges that these individuals face as they begin to formulate and embrace their true identities.

**Keywords:** Third culture kids, transition, identity

Throughout our lives we are all faced with the challenge of discovering who we are, who we are becoming, and who we are meant to become. This is quite a task. For some, the entire lifespan is spent reading, writing, and pondering the complexities of this task, while for others it may feel too daunting to actively explore. However we approach this idea of meaning and purpose in life, we have the valuable ability to interact, process, relate to and learn from the people around us who offer support during the journey.

The mental health field seeks to aid in this journey of self-discovery. Contributors in the field most often become a part of it because they are interested in these questions of meaning and purpose, with a hope to discover, uncover, and fine tune the current understanding of human behavior. There are many ways to find support as we search and formulate our personal identities in the world. Teachers, parents, friends, and other loved ones have a significant influence on who we are and who we become. However, the greatest and only true self-realization comes from within.

It is not uncommon for an individual, family, or community to seek out Mental Health providers in order to receive support and guidance as they seek to work through difficult life issues and maintain identity throughout the process of life. While most facets of the Mental Health field can offer valuable contributions, counseling may be particularly useful for those who are seeking to uncover the mysteries of who they are and how they fit in the world.

Counselors are trained to look at humans and their behavior holistically. A person is more than the symptoms that they bring to the room. They are the relationships that they have had. They are the joyful and painful events of a lifetime. They are the questions that they ask, and the fears that they face. They are the unique mold created by both significant and insignificant interactions that they have had with the world around them. A symptom is not a person, but rather an external manifestation of an internal conflict that an individual experiences when trying to negotiate their life experiences into their understanding of who they are.

This struggle with identity can happen for many people, for many reasons, and at any point in life. Children and adolescents who have lived a life of transition are a unique group who often have difficulty knowing and trusting who they truly are. Because of their perpetually changing environments, these individuals often struggle to internalize their surroundings. This can ultimately impair their ability to accept or understand how and where they fit in the world and what that means for who they are as an individual. Due to their unrooted lives, children who have lived a highly mobile lifestyle face unique challenges when

forming an identity. In an increasingly global world, these challenges are particularly important for counselors to understand as they holistically conceptualize the world of a global nomad.

## Identity

### *Personal History*

Will you remember me  
 when I go away?  
 will you remember me  
 when I am gone?  
 Will you remember me  
 when distance is near?  
 Will you always love me  
 will you always be here?

I remember these words, and I remember where I was when I wrote them. It was 1999 and I was sitting in my bedroom, protected by the long thin fabric that separated me from the outside world of flying termites, mosquitoes, and other unfamiliar insects. The mosquito net became a source of comfort for me as I spent countless hours inside my little cocoon, writing, thinking, talking, analyzing and searching. I remember those words to a song I wrote on the guitar. I was in ninth grade, living in Nairobi, Kenya, and I was desperately trying to figure out the source and meaning behind the feelings of sadness and loneliness that swept over me each day. We had recently moved from Rochester, NY where, over the last two and a half years, I had managed to establish some “significant” friendships and was beginning to have a “sense” of who I was as a blossoming teenage girl. In retrospect, I'm not convinced that these friendships were exactly positive or helpful in my search for identity, but they were friends, and after so much effort, I was as accepted as a teenage girl can be. The words to this song are so simple, and yet when I consider the time in my life during which they were recorded, I am met with that same overpowering sense of longing that I felt as a 13 year old girl in the midst of yet another life transition.

It was certainly not the first time my family had moved, but it was by far the most profound and influential period of my life. By this time I had endured five major moves into

five different states and had experienced the turmoil that comes with transitioning/reentering into five different schools. This was my fifth. Later, we moved back “home” for one year before I made the decision to leave my family and move, yet again, to another state, another school, and another life.

As a child, my father's primary occupation was that of a professor and Clinical Social Worker. It's odd in many ways that we lived the nomadic life that we did considering his job, but he managed to move us around from place to place while he tested the many facets of his professional career and helped to establish Social Work programs at various universities in the process. He, much like his parents and siblings, lived a life that combined adventure and achievement in a most romantic and unsettling way.

And we went with him. My mother, older sister, and younger brother packed up and moved time and time again as my dad sought to find what he was looking for. On the outside it can look and feel like a selfish life to live. However, my parents worked beautifully with us as children. We consistently had family meetings to discuss the newest potential move, and we were always given an opportunity to voice our fears and concerns (although I don't think our objections would have influenced the ultimate decision in any major way). It was very clear that they, staying true to their Christian background, intended to follow God's lead. It was their personal faith that led us from place to place, one adventure after the other.

Coming from a family of wings means that I don't have a home. To many, the question of “where you are from” is a simple and straightforward one to answer. For me, it's complicated and awkward. “Here” is my most common response. It's not entirely true and not entirely false. Most importantly, people don't usually ask for more details. Unfortunately, it also doesn't give any voice to my experiences, or my identity.

This is the challenge for many children who grow up with a lifestyle of movement, transition, and constant change. While the changes allow for new experiences, adventures and opportunities for growth they can often impair an individual's understanding of self, identity, and sense of belonging in the world. There is a constant sense of being trapped inside one's experiences so that, rather than shaping and forming the person inside, the experience becomes the person inside. When a person belongs everywhere, then they really don't *belong* anywhere. They are homeless souls.

### *What is a Third Culture Kid?*

After many years of self searching and soul seeking, I have begun to familiarize myself with a term that encompasses the bulk of my experience. According to David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken (1999), two prominent researchers in the field, a “Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parent's culture...Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background” (p. 19). Individuals from this background integrate elements of other cultures into their own birth culture, essentially forming a new “third culture” (Eakin, 2001). This third culture is what distinguishes these individuals from the world around them. While they may have physical characteristics that resemble those of their “birth culture” they may have adopted traditions, languages, and customs from other cultures that do not correspond to those of their home culture.

While Third Culture Kids were the most widely researched group for this particular paper, other groups also face similar experiences and have comparable world views. Stultz (2003) identifies another group, whose experiences parallel those of a Third Culture Kid in terms of needs and challenges referred to as, “Domestic Nomads.” Rather than traveling between different countries, domestic nomads have lived among different cultures within one country. She notes that children who are brought up within a domestically mobile family can also have true TCK characteristics. Other terms for individuals with a history of this lifestyle have been referred to as Global Nomads, Military Brats and Missionary Kids, among others.

In the book *Unrooted Childhoods: Memoirs of Growing Up Global* (Eidse & Sichel, 2004), Mary Edwards Wertsch discusses how the question “where are you from?” can instantly reveal rootlessness in an individual. For many people this is a simple, straightforward question. For children who have an experience of high mobility this can be a complicated, and sometimes embarrassing question that challenges identity and the comfort of superficial social expectations. Some TCKs might respond by mysteriously stating, “nowhere” while others might suggest they are from “everywhere.” Wertsch noted that vague versions might vary by including the last place they have been, the one they liked the most or they may perhaps launch into a full blown explanation that incorporates far more than the questioner intended to hear (p. 125). “Questions like, 'where are you from?' place the nomad at a disadvantage in cultural situations. To ask a person to choose the quick answer requires that the nomad ignore the rest of his or her background. To give a longer answer may be

boring to the listeners, or seemingly snobby of the nomad (Smith, 1991 as cited in Stultz, 2003, p. 3).

### *Identity Development*

What is identity? In a sense, identity is a series of questions that we ask throughout our lifetime in order to identify the aspects of ourselves that make us unique and different from other people. It is “who” and “why” am I? After social influence, shaping, and sculpting, who is the core person that sits below the surface? Who has been constant and present despite all other influences?

For many people this is the ultimate life question. For me, this has been the ultimate life question. In our Western culture, there is significant emphasis on the period in young adulthood, called adolescence, during which young adults are expected to work through many of these important questions as they shift and grow physically, mentally, and spiritually. Identity has often been viewed in terms of Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages. According to Erikson, the major task of adolescence is the search for and establishment of identity (Eakin, 2001, p.18). During the fifth stage, adolescents begin to formulate a personal identity by seeking answers to the question, “Who am I?” Although identity formation is a lifelong process, successful resolution of these key questions propels an individual to begin to work through the next developmental task of intimacy vs. isolation (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009).

For TCKs and many other mobile children, this stage is a challenging one to navigate. One TCK describes the sense of identity as follows: “I am, by inmost nature, a chameleon, a sponge, a being of multiple selves. When I arrive anywhere I observe the mores and values of the place and then seek to mimic them, becoming in a sense, each time, someone new” (Mansfield Taber, 1994 as cited in Stultz, 2003, p. 2). In order to negotiate certain aspects of identity, it is important to understand where one fits both within the family system and within the larger social system as a whole. Pollock and Van Reken (1999) note that, for young TCKs, the family system may be the most stable and consistent part of their lives, whereas social and peer relationships are constantly changing. In addition, cultural rules and norms are unpredictable, which means that decision making, which ultimately leads to independence, is nearly impossible to internalize.

As a result of these challenges in development, TCKs can be at risk for what Pollock and Reken (1999) describe as “Delayed Adolescence” because they are unable to utilize their environments for the purpose of negotiating and forming their identity. In Erikson's view,

failure to work through this stage impacts the ability to adjust socially and create deep and meaningful bonds with those around them.

Some external factors that influence a person's identity include cultural tradition, custom, environment, atmosphere, location or climate. Internal factors are often less tangible and can include comfort levels with difference or ambiguity, extroversion or introversion, cultural mediation skills, and adaptation skills, among others (Stultz, 2003, p. 1).

### *Relationships*

Children who go through significant transitions in life often become skilled at reading and understanding social situations. By nature these individuals have been forced to adapt and assimilate under various social conditions. As a result, many develop a keen sense of how to behave and interact in any given situation. While many people view this as a strength and use it for their benefit throughout life, it can easily become a way to escape and to avoid deep and meaningful relationships, which can also impede the process of identity formation.

In their exploration of the identity development of women who grew up globally, Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009) discovered that the majority of participants described events and used recurring words that indicate the impact that each transition had on their lives. Most women focused on adapting, surviving, and coping with the changes of these transitions. Rather than focusing on the important question of “Who am I” the developmental question shifts to “How do I act and behave.” Like the aforementioned quote, these TCKs become chameleons. Their ever-changing environments lead to ever-changing identities, personalities, and ways of behaving. This is a survival technique. Unfortunately this skill can seep into an individual's core so deeply that they are unable to let go of the need for social survival in order to just “be.”

Eakin (2001) suggests that, “TCKs cope rather than adjust, becoming both 'a part of' and 'apart from' whatever situation they are in” (p. 18). The separation and isolation that results from never truly feeling involved can hinder a willingness or ability to completely invest in the social environment that they are in.

Not investing means that meaningful relationships can be difficult to establish. “Approximately 40 percent of TCKs struggle with a fear of intimacy because of the fear of loss” (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999, p. 139). For some TCKs transitions come every one or two years. With one plane ride, friendships are cut off and essentially lost. At an international school students may come and go within one semester. These relationships become common

and while camaraderie can be built based on the recognition of similar life experiences, it becomes scary and tiresome to fully invest in these relationships. As a result, walls are built and maintained in order to skillfully prevent social relationships from developing too deeply.

I'm afraid to tell you  
what's on my mind  
afraid of what I might find  
There is a truth  
But I live a lie  
trying to survive  
Can you forgive an unsettled conscience  
whose bane is the hurt  
inside  
It's out of my hands  
but completely my choice  
I hide my voice.  
I'm coming to terms with a life worth living  
unforgiving

This poem, written during the midst of transition, reflects the personal feelings of isolation that I was dealing with at the time. While I didn't realize it then, these words reflect the action of cutting myself off from those around me. In order to protect myself, I kept my relationships at a distant level and did so by becoming whomever it was that those around me would accept. Like many other TCKs this is a way of surviving and rejecting the pain, loss, and grief that is inherent in this kind of lifestyle.

### *Unresolved Grief*

TCKs often feel alone and isolated as they consider the many losses they have suffered in their lives. The feeling of loss can be unbearable as these children and adults remember missed chances and opportunities. For many, it is difficult to reveal these deep and emotional feelings which can often hinder the ability to show emotion, become vulnerable, make friends, and trust those around them (Trigg, 2010).

Whether conscious or not, children who live highly mobile lifestyles experience significant amounts of grief. The internal protection from social relationships serves as a defense against facing more loss in one's life due to the frequent comings and goings. Eakin (2001) notes that, "most TCKs go through more grief experiences by the time they are 21 than

monocultural individuals do in a lifetime” (p. 17). This tendency to protect oneself from the hurt of saying goodbye is held by many nomads and includes the tendency to either remain aloof in social situations or to quickly establish new friendships (Stultz, 2003).

Some women in Walters and Auton-Cuff's (2009) study on female TCKs describe feelings of emotional numbness and a need to deny strong emotions as a way of coping with their changing lives and protecting from the possibility of future pain (p.766). One TCK echoed these feelings of isolation by suggesting that she, “finally decided not to get close to anyone and go really slowly into relationships so I wouldn't be hurt when we had to go” (Eakin, 2001, p. 23).

Third culture kids, along with many other global or domestic nomads, can experience a sense of mourning for the things that once were but can no longer be. This grief can go on for many years and, for some, can last a lifetime. Unresolved grief can manifest itself as anxiety or crippling mental or physical pain (Trigg, 2010). For many global and domestic nomads, a sense of belonging can only be achieved after taking the appropriate time to grieve over the extensive periods of not belonging and the experience of repeated loss. (Wertsch, 2004).

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.

This poem, written by Alex Graham James (as cited in Pollock & Van Reken, 1999, p.165), reflects the very reason why the feelings of grief and loss go unresolved for so many

years. For many of these children, the process of moving and transitioning becomes *the* issue. While the sadness of parting with ones friends may well be noted, there is often no real room to deal with the true feelings of the situation. Before online social networking such as Facebook, the ability to maintain old friendships took tremendous energy and motivation. For a TCK, the focus quickly shifts from thinking about old friends to taking on the daunting task of establishing new ones. As morbid as it may sound, it is as if old friendships and social support networks have simply died.

Once a TCK leaves, there is little communication, little contact, and little remaining support. In a matter of hours they are left to fend for themselves while supports diminish and familiarity is lost. Pollock and Van Reken (1999) sum it up by stating that, “With one plane ride a TCK's whole world can die. Every place that's been important, every tree they've climbed, every pet they've had, and virtually every close friend they've made are gone with the closing of the airplane door. TCK's don't lose one thing at a time; they lose everything at once, but there's no funeral (p.167).

The difficulty lies in the fact that the emotional impact of these losses are not often validated. Because there is no physical or tangible representation, TCKs are not often given the time or space to deal with these sudden life altering changes. They are left only with inner emotional turmoil which they become skilled at denying over time.

#### *Reentry and Reintegration*

Light headed  
dizzy  
falling down  
nowhere to be found  
wholesome and pure  
always around  
feet on the ground  
silent and scared  
not a sound  
weeping, weeping  
homeward bound

This is a poem I wrote upon returning to the U.S. after nearly a year of living in Kenya. I clearly remember the airplane ride home. A friend from school also happened to be

temporarily heading to the States on the same flight. I cried and cried and cried. My reentry experience was one of the darkest of my teen years as I attempted to reacquaint myself with the friends whom I had left behind. As meaningful and profound as my experience had been there was very little interest in knowing about it. My stories were quickly met with irritation, few people actually wanted to see pictures, and no one wanted to hear how I had changed. At school the most common questions were those that reflected a complete inability to relate, such as, “Do they ride elephants in Africa?” or, “Do people in Africa wear clothes?” And the most pressing and important question of all, “Do they have malls in Africa?”

I quickly realized that my experience had separated me, once again, from the friendships that I had fought so hard to establish only several years prior. My complex and overwhelming feelings resulted in anger, severe depression, withdraw, and rebellion, all of which Pollock and Van Reken (1999) discuss as expressions of unresolved grief.

Unresolved grief often manifests itself after returning “home” from a host culture. It is during this process that TCKs come face to face with the difficulties that are inherent with reintegration into the home culture, which is often more difficult than living life as a foreigner (Bowman, 2001). One woman who spent a significant part of her life in Nigeria notes that the challenge results in the expectations of the home culture. She states that when she, “came back to the States, everyone looked at me as though I was American. I was expected to be like everyone else” (p.2). For many who grow up as “foreigners,” this becomes their identity. They are used to being the minority but learn to adapt by picking up and utilizing the culture's languages, customs, and rules. The identity blur results when this global citizen returns home to realize that, while they are not a true citizen of their host culture, they also cannot relate or understand the rules, roles, and expectations of the country to which they are citizen.

Not all people struggle with these transitions. When the appropriate supports are in place, transitions can be smooth and fulfilling. For many teenagers who will return to large public American schools, however, this is a particularly agonizing transition. While they have been living in colorful cultures and participating in exciting adventures, many of their peers have stayed in the same place and maintained the same friendships within the same environment.

While this lifestyle is equally important, it can be extremely difficult for the TCK to express or validate their experience in a way that their peers can relate to. “Most teenagers returning to their passport home do not feel they fit in. Their interests and behavior are different, and they usually feel no one cares about them and where they've been” (Eakin,

2001, p. 18). When the people around you want to shut you out or put you in a “box” that they can understand, a sense of identity can be difficult to maintain. Eakin (2001) also notes that, “the experience of not being able to validate their overseas experiences with their teachers and peers can make it very difficult for teens to feel good about themselves and who they are. It's hard for them to feel much self-esteem when there is no positive feedback about the experiences they have had. This lack of self-esteem prevents them from presenting themselves positively to their peers, thus perpetuating a cycle of non-acceptance” (p. 40).

### *The Role of Counselors*

It is important to understand the impact that these life changes can have on a young individual. Understanding this process can allow for parents and other support systems to prepare and respond to their family members when things get rocky. While most parents mean to offer this support, they too are in transition and may find that in the midst of their own challenges and struggles they do not have the time or energy to support their child in the ways that are necessary for successful adjustment.

It is during this time that counselors can be of particular support. “One study of children of U.S. Military parents showed that as many as 10 percent sought professional counseling when they returned home. Sometimes no more than a counseling session or two is required to clarify some small thing that has assumed large proportions. A few may have serious problems including deep bouts of depression, anxiety attacks, drug and/or alcohol abuse problems, and suicide attempts” (Eakin, 2001, p. 90). She also notes that, “finding real friends takes an investment of time and patience that is sometimes hard to give. It is at this time that parents must be aware of a teen’s need for assistance. Parents must understand that a particular set of behaviors may be, in fact, a cry for help” (p. 46). Counselors can also be aware of these important aspects of adjustment. Paying careful attention to the sources of the behaviors can allow for insight into the child’s new world.

Isolation, rejection, and loneliness can be devastating and can result in serious emotional and behavioral impairment. “Since 1950, the annual suicide rate among U.S. teens aged 15 to 19 years old has tripled...Eating disorders have multiplied, and counselors report this is one of the major mental health problems among their clients” (Eakin, 2001, p.38). Returning TCKs demonstrate some difficulty adjusting socially and academically, however the most common problems are those that have to do with their peers and fitting in. “Returning home to school is a scary proposition for these young people. They face what most consider the hardest school adjustment they'll ever make” (Eakin, 2001, p. 40).

In her book, Eakin (2001) lists several “red flags” that are useful in terms of identifying potential maladjustment behaviors in children and teens such as:

- wanting to be alone, shutting himself in his room for hours at a time, cutting off normal communication within the family, becoming secretive;
- sudden drop in grades;
- emotional acting out – moody, tearful, angry;
- any major sleep change – wanting to sleep more than usual, or staying up very late and then not able to get up at the regular time in the morning;
- childish behavior – return to a previous stage;
- more illness, colds, headaches, or ennui;
- accident-prone – including falling or dropping things;
- change in eating habits – particularly watch for dieting in girls;
- lack of interest in past passions such as shooting baskets or reading, or developing new unhealthy passions, or no passions;
- inability to get along with members of the family, lack of patience, irritability, resistance to affection or touch;
- lonely and unable to make friends.

(Eakin, 2001, p.91)

### *Strengths*

Despite the challenges that a high mobility lifestyle can create, many TCKs are able to find value in the rich life experiences that have shaped who they are. Despite the perplexing nature of this lifestyle, Bowman (2001) notes the particular strengths that these children can offer in our increasingly global society. As “global citizens,” TCKs often speak multiple languages, are comfortable with different cultures, and adapt quickly from one environment to the next, which allows them to move from one country or culture to another with relative ease. As a result, Third Culture Kids are prime candidates for jobs in international business and have been described by some as ‘the map of the future’ (p. 2).

Pollock and Van Reken (1999) also point out that there are many benefits to this lifestyle such as an expanded worldview that promotes a unique understanding of philosophical and political perspectives. As a result, they maintain a tangible way of looking at and understanding the world. While many of their Western peers can only identify with

other cultures through books, movies, or the nightly news, TCKs have the benefit of first hand sights, smells, sounds and situational experience.

In a growing global economy, the number of TCKs will increase accordingly. More children and families will spend time overseas. Ann Baker Cotrell, a sociology professor at San Diego State University states that, “this is the future...TCKs are showing us where we are going and we are just catching up” (As cited in Lang, 2002, p. 1).

### Conclusion

As our society continues to shift and broaden, it is important to shift with it. The struggles that each individual might face while trying to uncover the hidden depths of their identity may become ever more complex as we continue to integrate many global and cultural components into who we are. The journey for identity and self-discovery will never end and as our collective understanding of human nature continues to shift with the changing times, so too will the journey itself.

As I reflect on my own lifetime of change and transition, I am faced with the reality that I have a responsibility to both myself and to the field of Counseling. As an individual, the responsibility lies in the continued search for identity and the process of dealing with the grief and loss that has occurred within my own life. As a counselor, the responsibility lies in utilizing the knowledge I have gained throughout a lifetime of change by helping others to work through their own process of adjustment. As I begin to fine-tune the strengths that have emerged as a result of this lifestyle, I can begin to encourage others to embrace and draw on their own strengths in order to promote self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-understanding.

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