

Book Review

# Third Culture Kids: Growing Among Worlds by David C. Pollock & Ruth E. Van Reken

Hasene Gündoğdu<sup>1</sup>

Recommended citation:

Gündoğdu, H. (2022). Third Culture Kids: Growing Among Worlds by David C. Pollock & Ruth E. Van Reken. [Review of the book *Third Culture Kids: Growing Among Worlds* by David C. Pollock & R. E. Van Reken] *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 4(1), 161–163. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cejr/2022/4/1/10851>

**Bibliography of the reviewed book:** Pollock, D., & Reken, R. (Revised Edition 2009). *Third Culture Kids: Growing Among Worlds*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

---

## Review

David C. Pollock, an American sociologist and writer, is most well-known for his book *Third Culture Kids*, as well as his co-authoring of *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. Throughout his career, Pollock has served as Adjunct Professor of Sociology in Intercultural Studies, U.S. State Department representative, a board member for agencies targeting third culture kids (TCKs), and the Director of Transitions for Global Associates. Additionally, he has gained extensive first-hand experience with TCKs while co-directing the Global Member Care Task Force and designing orientations for employees of Global Christian Schools.

Ruth Van Reken who is one of the writers is the second of four consecutive generations of third culture children and was one of four kids, all of whom were born on different continents. In her adult life, mainly due to her husband's career as a Navy doctor, she had opportunity to gain experience in four of the key categories of sponsoring agencies from which TCKs come: military, non-secular missions, government, and education.

It is possible to measure the influence of globalization on specific economies, and the integration and interconnectivity of people, businesses, and economies is greater than it has ever been. This contributes to the facilitation of linkages, which in turn leads to specialization, innovation, and economic advancement. Trade, capital, money, direct investment, information technology, people, and ideas are all moving more quickly across national borders because of the increased flow of goods, services, and capital across national boundaries. As well as this, growing economies and mass media have created "digital nomads". Digital nomads are individuals who are not tied to a specific area, instead relying on technology to carry out their jobs while maintaining a mobile existence. Telecommuting allows digital nomads to work from anywhere in the world, rather than having to be physically present at a company's headquarters. Many other advancements have made the digital nomad lifestyle possible, including content management software, low-cost Internet access via Wi-Fi, smartphones, and Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) to communicate with clients and employers while travelling. Additionally, the rise of the gig economy has played a role in this development. The digital nomad lifestyle, fueled by bloggers and influencers, is growing in popularity every day and more and more families are packing their belongings and heading out to see the world without a set schedule. During this digitalization of life style period, there is an argument (both within groups of digital nomads themselves and among those who work traditional 9-to-5 jobs) regarding what is best for the children's long-term well-being: Does living a life of travel and adventure deny them stability and security?

The new nomad, even though nomadic societies have been around for thousands of years, is motivated more by desire than by necessity. Understandably, this way of living has only recently gained popularity, coinciding with the introduction of remote working. As a result, there is no comprehensive or conclusive psychological research on the impact this sort of modern nomadism, particularly on the consequences it has for children.

---

<sup>1</sup> Education and Psychology Faculty (IPPI), Social Integration Programme, Eötvös Lorand University, Budapest, Hungary; [hasene@student.elte.hu](mailto:hasene@student.elte.hu)

Due to their constant relocation, TCKs are characterized by their ability to adjust to new environments and cultures on a regular basis. They may be the children of diplomats, government officials, and military personnel and recently digital nomads'; in fact, they are the children of anyone whose work requires a significant degree of movement and, as such, instability. Because of their numerous relocations, the term "home" is only a passing reference for them. According to specialists, the constant shifting and changing result in the loss of three things that are essential for the proper psychological and emotional development of children: a sense of belonging, a sense of recognition, and a sense of connection.

TCKs first caught the attention of Dr. Ruth Hill Uusem from Michigan University, whose research was then broadened by Pollock and van Reken. Simply defined, TCKs are born out of their passport country mostly in parents visa country, where parents are working and living, and develop on a different and a unique culture that is neither multicultural nor bicultural. TCKs build positive relationships with all cultures and at the same time do not have full ownership of any specific one. Common characteristics of TCKs include that they are highly mobile and open to new experiences and new countries, as well as their ability to easily adapt to the cross-cultural lifestyle. The majority of TCKs speak more than one language, which plays an important role in being a cultural bridge within society. Besides all these positive attributes, Ruth van Eken and David Pollock give various examples from the interviews they have conducted with TCKs, shining a light on not having a sense of belonging. For third culture individuals, "home" is everywhere and nowhere, creating a sense of loneliness and lack of belonging.

TCKs are the product of complicated experiences, which can be both overwhelming and liberating at the same time. In contrast to other children, TCKs confront a slew of difficulties as they learn the facts of life from a variety of cultures before they have even begun to form their own sense of self. They may gain knowledge with the cultures and practices of multiple countries while feeling dissatisfied with the culture and customs of their own place of origin. As such, while they may be uncomfortable in their parents' native country, they may be more at ease with the numerous types of terminologies and practices that exist in their nation of residency.

One must put themselves in their shoes to understand what TCKs experience, which, due to the unique circumstances, is not an easy task! Teachers frequently have difficulty recognizing and identifying TCKs because they are surrounded by individuals who do not comprehend their language, though there are several behavioral characteristics which can be used to identify TCKs. At first glance, these children may appear to be no different than other children, and they may appear to have adapted quite well to their new environment on a surface level. Upon deeper inspection, it becomes clear that they are not entirely at ease in their surroundings, so they may appear agitated and tense, or they may appear frustrated and unable to establish friends quickly. In extreme cases, they may be solitary and reclusive in their behavior.

Many times, the parents themselves are unaware of the struggles their children face and as a result, they underestimate the amount of care and attention their children require. Grief, sadness, and loss are internalized by the children (and the adults they grow to become) throughout their experiences. Many of them are unable to cope with the loss of treasured possessions and the rupture of relationships formed in each new location. Nevertheless, their suffering has been dismissed and forgotten.

In an effort to identify and explain the dynamics of TCKs, the first part of the book mainly focuses on understanding their world by way of stories. It begins with Erika's story, one of the third culture kids interviewed, and her question 'Where is my home?' Erika's story and experience in life, and the question itself, is not unique since it is the most common question shared by third culture individuals. Though their lives are very rich within the sense of diversity, this still brings conflict and the question of where to fit in. Ruth van Eken and David Pollock examine these questions via the real-life experience of TCKs.

In the second part of the book, Eken and Pollock look further into the TCKs world, including details, specific benefits (such as cross-cultural enrichment), and challenges (like the delusion of choice of being a third culture adult). They investigate how personal traits affect interpersonal relations, since most of the developmental traits become more apparent in adult life once the TCKs have reached this age milestone. However, if raised by parents who are intelligent, sympathetic, and attentive, TCKs may develop into individuals with outstanding abilities and skills. They have enormous potential as leaders if they are able to manage their life experiences and stressors effectively. Because of the various types of life experiences they have had, they are generally adventurous and full of life, willing to take on new tasks, are extremely curious, and are highly adaptable. It is common for them to be open-minded, to have outstanding language abilities in a multiple languages and to be sensitive to the needs of other people and cultures. They cultivate a mindset that is extraordinarily tolerant and understanding of others.

All of this lends them a diplomatic demeanor, which is a skill that is increasingly in demand within globalized and multi-cultural workplaces. It is possible for them to get along with a variety of individuals, and, since they are strong communicators, they frequently have excellent conflict management skills. Their exposure to a variety of cultures strengthens their desire to establish their own businesses. This is a comprehensive set of abilities and attributes that distinguish TCKs as future leaders and that help to mitigate some of the stress they are subjected to in their careers.

The book provides practical information and definitions regarding the third culture individuals (both children and adults), and tries to raise awareness for the children who grow up among cultures. In addition, it aims to give insights to educators and schools to develop new strategies to enrich their curriculum and adopt new teaching approaches.

Though written in 1991, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Among Worlds* is still viewed as the top resource on TCKs. Growing global economies has led to a quickly rising number of digital nomads and expats. Additionally, the migration flows in the last 10 years (rooted by Syrian civil war and the recent Ukrainian and Russian war) has led to millions of people being forced to change their countries. This will result in millions of kids being born into or raised in their families' visa country, and they will be adopting another culture. As such, this book will be providing insights to modern TCKs regarding the modern complexity of integration and adjustment problems.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank Emma Hák-Kovács, University of Guelph ON, Canada, for the English language editing.

### References

Pollock, D., & Reken, R. (2009). *Third Culture Kids: Growing Among Worlds*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing.



© 2022 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).