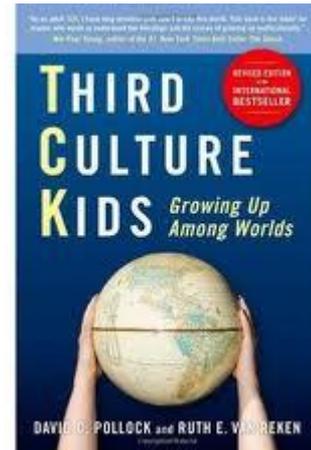


## Book reviews

Reviewer	Patrick Schmidt, SIETAR member
Author	David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken
Title	Third Culture Kids: <i>Growing Up Among Worlds</i>
Publisher	Nicholas Brealey Publishing
Details	£ 12.99, 306 pages, ISBN 978- 1857885255



We continuously talk about the necessity of developing intercultural competence, defined as the ability to adapt and communicate appropriately and effectively in a large variety of socio-ethnic settings. For the majority of us, it's a mind-set that doesn't come naturally.

People need to spend time abroad learning, as Milton Bennett puts it, to gradually generate cognitive brain-shifting and a new repertoire of behaviors. Yet, there's a group of people who seem to naturally possess this tool.

Authors Ruth van Reken and David Pollock were the first to report in 1999 on the phenomenon with their book *Third Culture Kids*. In their revised, more complete 2009 edition, they expand on the growing complexity of the term.

*TCK* usually refers to the children of expatriate military or diplomatic families but now the authors introduce a new category: *cross-cultural kids* are international adoptees or children of biracial or bicultural parents.

The increasing number of such culturally-mixed offspring are the future, the "new normal" in our globalized world and Barack Obama is the paramount example. Not only is he a *true* African-American (with close relatives on both continents), he spent part of his childhood in Asia as the "stepson" of an Indonesian Muslim.

The authors offer a simple definition of the TCK/CCK profile--children (up to age 18) who spend a significant period of their developmental years in a culture outside their parents' "passport country".

Somewhat like their parents, but in a far more extreme immersion, they have a sense of simultaneously belonging to the host and "home" societies without any real ownership of either. Elements from both (or multiple) cultures are blended, resulting in a unique individual.

And what are the traits that make them so different from the norm?

To begin with, they possess an inherent capacity for objective observation coupled with cross-cultural skills such as flexibility and tolerance. They respect differences and are willing to learn from them; they never assume that their way of doing things is best.

Their worldview allows them to experience true diversity and develop an acceptance of people for who they are, regardless of race or nationality. And they're quick to think outside the box, appreciating and reconciling different habits and beliefs.

Of course, there's also a downside. TCKs and CCKs often talk about varying degrees of rootlessness, a sense of being profoundly connected to people and places around the world yet somehow cut off from them as well.

Frequent, painful good-byes leave them unable to bond with others or identify with any one culture, leading to a breakdown of identity. To cope, they learn to exist on the periphery. The idea of commitment or intimacy is accompanied by tremendous insecurity.

The end result is restlessness, the need to always be on the move. Ironically, if they form strong relationships, it's usually with those who share their sense of rootlessness--other TCKs and CCKs.

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My two children, both young adults now, fit the portrait perfectly. Over the past three decades my wife and I have lived and worked in Germany, France, Malaysia, Canada, the USA and Austria. Our children grew up in a pot-pourri of cultures and languages.

Not surprisingly, they are multilingual, extremely open toward others and have an innate capacity for cultural frame-shifting. In their subjective worldview, however, they feel a strange, floating sense of non-identity. They may sound French, American and German in turn but they are none of these...and all of them too.

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The greatest challenge for maturing TCK/CCKs is to forge a sense of personal identity from the various environments to which they've been exposed. By addressing difficult experiences, they win the possibility of exploiting their intercultural knowledge and talents.

Pollock and Van Reken give good advice on how to put the past into context and be all the stronger for it. The contradictory aspects of being a TCK/CCK are explored and, ultimately, celebrated. The book is well written, with numerous interviews and anecdotes which make the concepts easy to grasp.

At times, the authors seem to repeat points--the challenges and benefits in Part II seem somewhat overdone--but this is a relatively minor point. *Third Culture Kids* is definitely *the* reference on coming of age in a multicultural setting.

It's a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand how traditional notions of identity and "home" are being radically changed by the ceaseless patterns of global mobility. And perhaps especially those who feel threatened by social evolution.

For in the end, despite some very real challenges, it's a wonderful gift indeed to grow up spanning two or more worlds.