

Third Culture Kids' Sense of Belonging

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“Where are you from?” Seemingly, this is a straightforward question that many can quickly answer without even thinking; oftentimes, the answer is simply one’s country of birth. But for third-culture kids (TCK), the question becomes more complicated. Describing individuals who are raised in a culture different from that of their family or their country of nationality (Holch, 2022), TCKs are often involved in multiple cultures. This not only makes it difficult to answer questions such as “Where are you from?” but can also stimulate a lack of belonging to a specific culture due to having cultural barriers, language barriers, distinct social standards, and a foreign demeanor. Today, there are approximately 220 million TCKs worldwide, with the number likely to increase due to globalization (Lama, 2019, quoting Iyer, 2013). This indicates that hundreds of millions of people may be facing a crisis of finding belonging. Thus, in striving for a more inclusive international community, it is necessary to understand the difficulties of TCKs to make better changes. Thereby, this paper shall explore the extent to which being a TCK negatively impacts an individual’s sense of belonging.

One factor that causes a lack of belonging in TCKs is the cultural barrier they have with the local community; such a barrier includes both being unknowledgeable of and unable to understand the cultural norms. First is the cultural ignorance that arises from TCKs' lack of attachment to a certain culture. Having been raised in their second culture- the culture in which TCKs currently reside (Díez, 2021)- TCKs may lack opportunities to learn the ideals, norms, and practices of their first culture- the culture of TCKs’ parents (Díez, 2021). Likewise, despite being raised in their second culture, because the TCKs family exhibits a differing culture, some perspectives of their second culture may be accidentally overlooked during their upbringing. These examples illustrate how TCKs can lack opportunities to fully integrate themselves into a

culture, thus being unknowledgeable of them. Consequently, such cultural unawareness limits TCKs' ability to find belonging in them, as they can not fit into a culture they do not know well.

While sometimes TCKs do exhibit adequate cultural knowledge, they may still encounter a cultural barrier from not being able to comprehend its ideals. As a result of the various exposure to different cultures from a young age, TCKs often intertwine the diverse cultures they experience. Such multiculturalism is coined by Dr. Danau Tanu of the University of Western Australia as a "cultural chameleon." (Wong, 2017) Being a cultural chameleon can cause TCKs to inhibit distinct standards that do not necessarily belong to any culture but instead are a combination of several. Therefore, TCKs may not be able to correlate with certain cultural rituals or expectations because they see things from another cultural angle (Rustine, 2018). Furthermore, this can also result in cultural confusion as TCKs are exposed to customs and standards that differ from what they are told growing up (Melenteva, 2018). Overall, these confusions TCKs face not only make it challenging for them to fit into the local community but also create obstacles for their surrounding families and peers to provide them with adequate understanding (Pingali, 2018). As long as they are not TCKs, and do not share a similar multicultural experience, these relatives or peers can have difficulties comprehending the TCKs' life and perspectives.

Another factor that plays a part in creating such a lack of belonging for TCKs is their language barrier. First of all, this is seen in TCK's inability to understand some of the slang, texting abbreviations, and internet phrases. Some examples include *btw* (by the way), *low-key* (having a subtle feeling for something), or *88* (bye-bye in Chinese). Not knowing these can make it challenging for TCKs to communicate fluently with the local community and if worse, not be able to socialize with them. Moreover, there are linguistic quirks that a non-native speaker

or a non-local can have difficulties comprehending. For instance, confusing the words "pants" and "trousers" or "crisp" and "chips" (Wong, 2017). These small, yet common, miscommunications can result in difficulties when TCKs try to communicate with the locals, thereby slowly creating a distance between them.

Next, another instance of TCK's language barrier is code switching-mixing of several languages when speaking (McCluney et al., 2019). Being multilingual, TCKs can also face the difficulty of not being natively fluent in speaking any language (Schmidt, 2017). Hence at times, they change between languages in one sentence, mixing and choosing terms in each that best communicate their ideas (Deliana & Ganie, 2019). Such a form of multilingual communication can often only be understood by other TCKs that speak the same languages. On the other hand, locals will be unable to understand TCKs and may even stimulate negative images towards them, perceiving them as annoying or showing off their multilingualism (Fang, 2019). Thus, code switching is another obstacle for TCKs to fully integrate into the local community.

Adding on, having an odd accent is another language barrier TCKs exhibit. As a consequence of being multilingual, TCKs may have a slightly different accent when they speak any language (Wong, 2017); and according to the *International Journal of Bilingualism*, regardless of fluency, having an ethnic accent will always be perceived as foreign (Wong, 2017). Such foreignness leads to subconscious assumptions being placed on TCKs (Wong, 2017). For instance, in her 2017 article regarding TCKs, Wong Elaine discussed how her hybrid accent resulted in people from the UK assuming that she was American, and people in Hong Kong assuming she was British. These preassumptions again highlight the foreignness that TCKs exhibit which therefore creates a barrier between them and the local community.

Thirdly, the distinct social standards TCKs portray separate them from the local community. Due to their multicultural background, TCKs often develop standards that are a product of a mixture of cultural ideals. Whether it is their value system, work ethic, standards, or social behavior, TCKs depict different social standards and behavior (Holch, 2022). According to a study done by Rustine Amy in 2018, TCKs often portrayed themselves as either having a “global” perspective or exhibiting a relatively western mindset. These distinct worldviews again make it difficult for TCKs to find individuals with similar standards or ideals. Moreover, TCKs can also experience confusion with politics and values (Zelek, 2021). For instance, TCKs who belong to one culture that is collectivist and another that is individualist (Zelek, 2021). These contradicting cultural paradigms results in a dilemma in which TCKs are not sure which philosophy to comply with. At times, TCKs may find a middle ground and identify themselves as being somewhat neutral: for instance, being both collectivist and individualist (Fukui, 2015). Yet, this can also become an obstacle for them to fit in the local communities which are usually skewed to either one paradigm or the other. Such challenges are likewise seen where the political or social values of the cultures TCKs are related to are different from each other. Thereby, due to exhibiting different value systems and norms, TCKs are unable to find a sense of belonging in the local communities.

Lastly, TCKs' disconnection from the locals may also be caused by the foreign demeanor that they naturally exhibit. Despite sharing the same physical traits as a local-such as having the same eye, hair, and skin color-TCKs can sometimes still be recognized as being different (Wong, 2017). Such an “outsider demeanor” often leads to difficulties for TCKs to truly feel accepted or belonged to the local community. For instance, in an occurrence of Wong Elaine in Hong Kong, a saleswoman at a supermarket tried selling her seaweed in broken English (Wong, 2017). Here,

despite Wong being fully Chinese, and therefore looking just like a local Hongkonger, Wong's identity as a TCK still manifests a distinguishable “third demeanor” that the locals can detect. This demeanor can result in alienation in interactions with locals as they preassume that TCKs are different and may feel reluctant in interacting further.

On the other hand, despite the difficulties to fit into the local community, TCKs can find belongingness among other TCKs. Due to their multicultural experience, TCKs are often interculturally sensitive: being relatively open-minded and aware of varying cultural differences (Waala, 2020). Such cultural acceptance TCKs display allows them to bond with each other more easily. For instance, according to a research by Huff Jacob in 2021, TCKs find more commonality among other TCKs than those from their first culture. This trend is similarly discussed in the book *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing up among Worlds*: “the sense of belonging [of TCKs] is in relationship to others of similar background” (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 29). Hence, it is evident that TCKs can find belonging with those that have the likewise experience and upbringing as them: other TCKs. This not only decreases TCKs' feeling of being different but also allows them to connect with people that correlate with their feelings and worldview (Rustine, 2018). Such senses of belonging among TCKs can especially be found in international or embassy schools (Melenteva, 2018), where members are all likewise different-multicultural, multilingual, and split between various cultures.

Furthermore, TCK's sense of belonging also does not have to be specific to a place or region. Belonging can also be found amongst the people TCKs connect with. For instance, in a study conducted by Rustine Amy in 2018, when the TCKs are asked about their sense of belonging, they often discussed how they viewed themselves as belonging to relationships and the people rather than a specific place. This is likewise indicated in a recent study by Waala

Monika in 2021, which demonstrates how TCKs find relationships to define their belonging more than geographical locations do. Having moved from location to location since young, these TCKs perceive location as a variable, whereas the only things that actually stay with them are the memories and relationships they have. They therefore no longer connect to the locations, but more to the people they value (Lijadi, 2017). Moreover, in some cases, belonging is also perceived wherever their family lived: in Rustine's 2018 study, some TCKs noted that they identify home and find belonging wherever their family is. As a result, TCKs can find a sense of belonging in the people they connect with.

Nevertheless, it shall be noted that these senses of belonging are not guaranteed. Although TCKs may find a company with other TCKs or within an international community, such as an international school, such belonging is very restricted. TCKs are not always surrounded by other TCKs and they can not stay in an international community permanently. Although there are approximately 220 million TCKs worldwide (Lama, 2019, quoting Iyer, 2013), they are still a minority when compared with the global population of 8 billion people (Worldmeter, 2022). Thus, it will be inevitable for TCKs to step out of their international circle and interact with the local community, thereby indicating that the belonging they attain from other TCKs is relatively short-termed and vulnerable. Correspondingly, the belonging TCKs find among the people and relationships are also not guaranteed. As explained earlier, due to cultural differences, it can be difficult for TCKs to find belonging among the people they interact with in the first place.

In conclusion, to a greater extent, being a TCK will negatively impact one's sense of belonging due to cultural barriers, language barriers, distinct social standards, and a foreign demeanor. This is especially evident from their lack of ability to fit in with the local community

and identify as local to any nation or culture. On one hand, TCKs can form their own belonging by creating an international community of their own. However, such belonging is provisional and restricted, being limited to a certain group and place. In addition, some may argue that belonging can be found in people rather than in specific places. Yet, at times, TCKs also have difficulties finding belonging within relationships as their unique multicultural experience makes it difficult for non-TCKs, including families and peers, to fully understand their worldviews and perspectives.

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