



CHALLENGES, CHANGES, & TRANSITION:

Third Culture Kids, Global Nomads, and Humanitarian Aid Workers

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Introduction

Living and working across international borders is often an exciting, enriching, and eye-opening experience. Engaging with cultures outside of our heritage culture challenges our norms, beliefs, and value systems. It exposes us to a myriad of new human experiences including new currency, languages, gestures, ways of communicating, forms of government, gender norms, standards of beauty, among many others. While interesting, over time the novelty of the lifestyle wears off and feelings of frustration, confusion, and/or being overwhelmed set in as we find ourselves surrounded by an infinite number of ways to be human that challenges what we once knew. The expatriate or migrant experience is one of complexity – a patchwork of time, events, geographic location, feelings, sacred objects, olfactory nostalgia and many, many memories.

Over the years, I have learned from my work with humanitarian aid workers (HAWs) that many have previously lived, studied, or volunteered outside of their passport country prior to entering the aid world. As a psychologist, I listen to people tell stories that touch somewhere on the spectrum between brutal hardship and breathtaking beauty. Stories entail stress related to being a minority (sometimes for the first time), the heartbreak of re-entry shock, the exhaustion and sadness associated with saying good-bye, the grief of not being able to say good-bye, the magic of connecting with someone without using words, the miracle of falling in love and the pain of it being lost. For some HAWs, these experiences are all too familiar; for others, they are disorienting. Coping strategies provided to HAWs to address these life changes are centered around maintaining resilience, which is helpful and has its place. Recent research in the last decade has focused on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after the experience of critical incidents and traumatic events among HAWs, which is also helpful. However, less studied is the non-emergency, non-crisis related toll of the HAW lifestyle. In my experience, using literature about Third Culture Kids and Global Nomads as a framework to help HAWs process life events can be illuminating and validating.

What are Third Culture Kids, Global Nomads, and Humanitarian Aid Workers?

In the 1960s, Ruth Hill Useem, a sociologist from Michigan State University, studied missionary families from the United States who lived in India for two years. Dr. Useem coined the term “third culture kid” (TCK) after observing that children of missionary parents did not identify with their parents’ home culture (their passport country), nor completely with their host culture (country where they were residing). Instead, these children developed a third culture, a culture between cultures, to which they belonged. Useem stated:

“A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having



full ownership of any. Although elements from each culture are as assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background," (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

In Pollock and Van Reken's book, *Third Culture Kids*, they define TCKs as individuals who spent their formative years outside of their parents' country of origin. The groups most associated with the term TCK were children of missionaries, children of parents in the military, and children of diplomats and business executives (Hervey, 2009). Subgroups also received attention for third culture experiences, such as international adoptees, refugees, children of immigrants, and transnational families, among others. To avoid diluting the term TCK, Van Reken and Bethel (2005) proposed "cross-cultural kids" as an umbrella term that includes TCKs and other subgroups.

Meanwhile, terms such as "adult third culture" and "global nomads" have been used to refer to individuals who have third culture experiences as adults. Norma McCaig (1991) initially coined the term "global nomad" to refer to TCKs. However, modern use of "global nomad" includes individuals who have lived in more than one country outside of their passport country for a variety of reasons (Bardhi, Eckhardt, & Arnould, 2012), and not just as children. Thus, adult third culture (ATC) and global nomads (GN) can capture the experiences of humanitarian aid workers, international development workers, government workers posted overseas, and long-term international volunteers. For the purposes of this article, global nomads will be used as an umbrella term to refer to all aforementioned experiences. That said, it is not lost that each of these groups have distinct experiences.

Many HAWs gravitate towards international aid work as a result of previous experiences as GNs. According to Useem and Cotrell (2001), GNs have a natural inclination to travel, enjoy speaking and working in foreign languages, and work or volunteer for international organizations. Van Reken (2001) found that GNs often held identities connected to the greater good and normalized change. Compared with monocultural citizens, i.e., those who have mostly lived in a single country and culture, GNs often have higher cross-cultural skills, higher ability to cope with crisis, higher level of independence, and a multidimensional worldview (Bonebright, 2010). Thus, aid work is a natural fit for GNs as they are "internationally savvy, highly adaptable, high achievers, skilled in crisis management, adept with language acquisition, and often serve as fortuitous cultural ambassadors," (Young, 2015).

While there are clear benefits for this level of adaptability, there are also challenges. GNs are noted to struggle with a solid sense of self. GNs often adapt to parts of their host culture and adopt their values. When this is experienced with multiple expatriation and repatriation, GNs can feel confusion from conflicting value systems from their "different cultural parts". This can lead to feelings of "self-consciousness, shame, fear, and frustration" (David, Edwards, and Watson, 2014, pg. 173). If these experiences are not properly processed, adolescent TCKs have been found to experience anxiety and depression.

Similar to GNs, HAWs learn to migrate on short notice, become extremely resourceful and resilient during transitions, and have a propensity to build a "cultural identity that reflects on all of their experiences, without developing a sense of belonging to any single culture," (Bonebright, 2010). Although there's a dearth of research studying the identity and transition concerns of HAWs, it is presumable that they



also experience anxiety and depression from unprocessed cultural experiences. Frequent international moves, being a racial minority and/or marginalized as a female, stigma of exogamy, staying closeted as a gay person, rapid good-byes, navigating multicultural workplaces and leadership styles, managing long-distance relationships, and more, all of these experiences can lead HAWs to struggle with self-identity, anxiety and depression, and relational grief. So, in light of this, what can GNs and HAWs do to deal with the many changes?

How to Deal with Change

“Change is situational, transition is psychological,” (Bridges, 2004).

Change cannot be helped in the lives of HAWs, but the transition is often overlooked. HAWs are often asked to serve wherever the need is, which requires swift and unpredictable departures, and leaving behind friendships, romantic relationships and routines. According to Bridges (2004), it is during transitions when people resort to old habits. Old habits are great if these involve eating healthfully and leaning on other wellness routines. However, if old habits include binge eating, misusing alcohol or drugs and/or other maladaptive behaviors, they can become harmful. Bridges (2004) asserts that having an intentional transition period is important and defines transition as the internal process that helps us prepare for the change. Transition consists of an Ending, a Neutral Zone, and a Beginning.

- During the Ending stage, scheduling time to reflect on losses is recommended. For instance, answering the question, “What is it time to let go of in my life right now?” Letting go of the old, or status quo, can make space for what is to come with the change.
- The Neutral Zone is a period of time for confusion and distress. Instead of racing to fill the gap between the old and the new, schedule time to reflect and feel the emotions that naturally arise when something ends. (The Neutral Zone is what I like to think of as a play pen for our emotions. When there is designated space and time for difficult feelings and departure rituals, recharge and repair can follow more easily). The Neutral Zone can allow for the discovery of emerging needs which can help you assess whether your life is in alignment. Many people sprint past the Ending stage and skip the Neutral Zone to avoid feelings and old memories that arise. Often, they discover later that the feelings didn’t dissipate, rather, they were accumulated and transformed into an emotional or behavioral health concern (anxiety, panic, depression, etc.).
- When there is a Neutral Zone, the Beginning stage is a period of adjustment which can be pleasant. It can be a time of excitement as we make space for learning about the new environment and allow ourselves to experience novelty and pleasure.

TCK/GN scholars have addressed the unresolved grief that is unavoidable with multiple transitions. HAWs similarly face similar losses inherent with multiple transitions. Van Reken (2001) noted five stages of transitions for TCKs which can apply to HAWs. They are Involvement, Leaving, Transition, Entering and Reinvolvement.

- The Involvement and Leaving stages include preparing yourself and your family for the move, resolving interpersonal conflicts before you leave, confronting the grief that comes with leaving a place and people we love, and conveying respect and appreciation for those in the community



that have added to our lives. It can also include intentional ritual around parting from sacred objects that you can't take with you to the next assignment and creating farewell rituals when possible.

- As you prepare for your destination, Transition and Entering involve taking inventory of the resources you will have and those you will lack. Research the destination and decide early on to accept the known drawbacks (so long as they aren't harmful) and to enjoy the benefits. Attempt to reach out to folks in the places you're going to and make connections early and/or consider finding a mentor who is having a positive experience in the new destination.
- Reinvolvement consists of pacing the embrace of your new life. HAWs have spoken of the "instant family" phenomenon where strangers become friends very quickly because it is a matter of physical or social survival. Yet, done without reflection, this can also lead to making decisions based on emotional reactivity, rather than ones that are balanced between emotions and rational assessment. One example of an emotionally reactive decision might be diving into an intense romantic relationship to avoid feelings of anxiety, sadness, loneliness or loss.

Although the experiences of Third Culture Kids, Global Nomads and Humanitarian Aid Workers vary, the similarities of living a nomadic international life can help with understanding some of the non-trauma related challenges, specifically as it relates to multiple transitions inherent in this lifestyle. When we can name our experiences and take time to reflect on them, we take stock of all the changes and have an opportunity to make meaning out of them. Even when rapid changes occur (i.e., evacuations) that can make it near impossible to have a transition period, post departure reflection can still have value. With all that HAWs give of themselves, processing their own journey is the least that they can do to give back to themselves.