

## CHAPTER 3

# Who Are “Cross-Cultural Kids”?

My name is Brice Royer and I'm from Ottawa, Canada. Actually, that's a lie, but that's the answer I give to acquaintances.

So where am I really from? You be the judge. My father is a half-French and half-Vietnamese peacekeeper and my mother is Ethiopian. It was an unlikely love story that transcends race, culture, and values, but they found love across barriers. I'm grateful for the diversity of my heritage.

And where do I belong? I'm not French, Vietnamese, Ethiopian, or Canadian, and I certainly don't belong everywhere and nowhere. I belong to a group of multicultural people—cross-cultural kids. I've always been the “For-efighter.” I look different and feel different. I even sound different—including among family members. I eat French food for breakfast, Ethiopian food for lunch, and my own special multicultural recipe for dinner. The truth is, I order Chinese take-out more often than I would like to admit, because let's face it, it's convenient and I can be lazy.<sup>1</sup>

—Brice Royer, developer of [TCKID.com](http://TCKID.com)

**SO WHO IS BRICE?** Certainly he is a TCK because his father had an international career and Brice traveled the globe with him. But what do we do with the rest of his story? It seems far more complicated than those we encountered at so far.

all over the world, we meet people like Brice whose stories defy simple categorization based on traditional definitions. Consider the angst of news broadcasters as they tried to define the 44th U.S. president, Barack Obama, during the

2008 campaign. Should they call him an African American? Half-white? Half-black? Mixed? While the pundits worked hard to define President Obama by race and ethnicity, few seemed to understand one of the most basic facts about his life story: President Obama is not only racially mixed, but, as Brice describes himself, he is *culturally mixed* as well.<sup>2</sup> He fits none of those groups exactly. Like Brice, Obama grew up as a TCK during the childhood years he spent in Indonesia, and he is also the son of a bicultural/biracial union. As a minority, Obama found himself moving, sometimes daily, between dominant and minority cultural worlds even when living in his passport country.

This experience of growing up in a profoundly culturally mixed environment is becoming increasingly common, not only for TCKs but for many others as well. These people may have grown up as children of immigrants or refugees, or may have been international adoptees or minorities. Some simply grew up in an environment where they commonly interacted deeply between and among various cultural worlds around them, rather than moving to other cultures with parents who were engaged in international careers. Although their experiences differ markedly from those of the traditional TCKs first described by Ruth Hill Useem, people who grew up amid this wide variety of cross-cultural experiences tell us how much they relate to the common characteristics for TCKs. They want to know: Am I a TCK or not? Pravin was one who asked this question.

Pravin began life in normal fashion—being born in his parents' homeland, India. From the moment of his birth, Pravin's parents wanted one thing: to give him every opportunity they could to be successful in a changing, internationalizing world. Part of their dream included helping him develop proficiency in English. With this goal in mind, they sent him to a British boarding school high on a mountain-side in the north of India, which required students to speak and write only in English.

Because his parents lived quite far away, they were not able to see Pravin during the school holidays. Finally the end of term came, and the day six-year-old Pravin had waited for all year: his parents were coming to pick him up for summer vacation. He could hardly contain his excitement! Yet he did have a slight fear—what if he didn't recognize his parents? How would he find them?

Finally, he saw them. He did know them after all! He ran to his parents, they picked him up, and then the unthinkable happened. Pravin couldn't understand what they were saying. Their words sounded vaguely familiar, but he could not respond even to the few words he understood. During that year away from home, he had forgotten his mother tongue, and his parents didn't know English. When they

took him back to their village for summer vacation that year and each year thereafter, he could no longer communicate with his former playmates. From that day to this, he has lived in and among many cultural worlds without feeling totally at home in any.

Stories abound of those who have grown up in a multiplicity of cultural worlds for many different reasons. This raises the legitimate question: Can all who grow or grew up among many cultures for whatever reasons be considered TCKs or ATCKs per se?

Some who work with or know about TCKs say no. They believe there are so many differences between these types of experiences that none can be properly researched if all are included under one umbrella. The problem then is that there seems to be little effort to understand why there exists such a commonality of response from those with greatly assorted cross-cultural backgrounds. Instead, each group is left on its own to understand from scratch its collective story.

Conversely, those who see themselves or others relating to the TCK profile, even if they never lived as traditional TCKs, say, "Yes, include everyone." They believe any child who has grown up among various cultural worlds is a bona fide TCK. But then how do we make allowances for the vastly different experiences of a child who grows up outside a parent's culture in a refugee camp and one who grows up in many different lands living in embassy housing with swimming pools and tennis courts available on the grounds? Surely these are not the same story?

Yet, amazingly, there are some major connections even between these experiences.

In 1997, Ruth and her husband traveled to Ghana and learned that many friends from their nine years spent in Liberia lived in a nearby refugee camp.

Ruth wanted to see her friends, but what would she say? Their experiences since they last met were beyond belief. How did anything in her life relate to the horrors of war and displacement they had known?

In the first moments of meeting, it seemed like old times. The familiar sounds of Liberian English rang like music in her ears. They all chatted to catch up on news of family and friends. But soon the conversation began to include the sadder stories of the many friends who had died in the war and the atrocities so many had been through. Ruth could only grieve for them. How could anything in her life relate to theirs?

One friend finally asked what she had been doing since their last meeting. To Ruth, all she had done seemed rather irrelevant in this situation. Her fairly routine activities

paled in comparison to their dramatic and sad stories. Yet in sharing her life story and also her work regarding TCK topics, her Liberian friends began telling her their stories—what it felt like for them to realize their children had no idea about the Liberia they as parents had known. How their children were now caught in a world between worlds, neither fully Liberian nor fully Ghanaian.

There they were: a white ATCK woman with enough means to travel to Ghana for a family visit, and her friends—black men, women, and children, victims of a terrible civil war, living on the rations given by the U.N. Still, in that moment of talking about the impact of living and growing up outside the environment defined as “home,” they connected in a shared experience that transcended all the differences in their outer circumstances.

So are these children of refugees TCKs or not? If not, why do they relate? What are their points of commonality and contrast?

As the cultural mixing of today’s world increases, these questions regarding who can or cannot be included as an “official TCK” are important ones to address. Historically, we assumed the difference between the TCK experience and that of immigrant children was simple: immigrants moved to a land to stay and many never took even one trip back to the homeland after arriving in the new country. TCKs moved with the expectation of one day returning to their original country. But in today’s highly mobile world, immigrant children go back and forth, often with great regularity, between their country of origin and their adopted land, just as TCKs do. How do we factor all of these changes into our understanding of how we define and describe the many “new normals” we are seeing in our changing world?

Somehow we need to better understand both the commonalities these groups share as well as understand their differences so we can use what we have learned for the good of all. But how can we do that?

We believe there is a way.

Just as we have included children from the various communities of those who work internationally (corporate, military, missionary, foreign service) under the broader language of *third culture kid*, so we can enlarge our language and make room under one umbrella for all types of cross-cultural childhoods. In doing so, we can use the TCK experience as a lens for viewing common themes children express when raised among many cultural worlds for any reason. By seeing what is shared, we can also see what is specific to each particular type of cross-cultural experience as well. We propose using the term *cross-cultural kid* to help us carry this topic forward.

## IDENTIFYING CROSS-CULTURAL KIDS

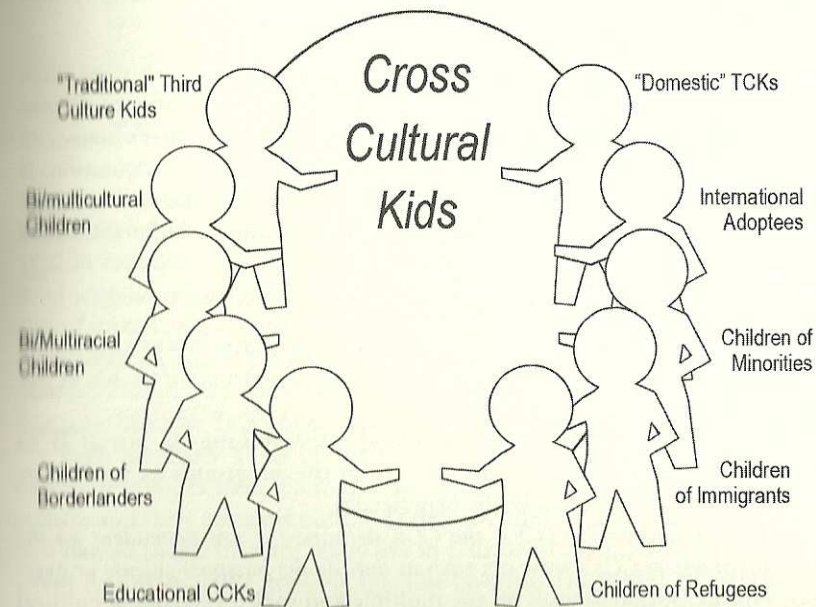
Coauthor Ruth Van Reken developed the following definition of cross-cultural kids:

- A *cross-cultural kid (CCK)* is a person who is living or has lived in—or meaningfully interacted with—two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during childhood (up to age 18).
- An *adult CCK (ACCK)* is a person who has grown up as a CCK.

Figure 3-1 illustrates some of the many types of CCKs. We define these particular groups of CCKs in the following way:

- *Traditional TCKs*: Children who move into another culture with parents due to a parent’s career choice.
- *Children from bi/multicultural homes*: Children born to parents from at least two cultures. May or may not be of the same race.

### The Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK) Model



**Figure 3-1** The Cross-Cultural Kid Model  
(© 2008 Ruth E. Van Reken)

- *Children from bi/multiracial homes:* Children born to parents from at least two races. May or may not be of the same culture.
- *Children of immigrants:* Children whose parents have made a permanent move to a new country where they were not originally citizens.
- *Educational CCKs:* Children who may remain in their home or passport country but are sent to a school (e.g., an international school) with a different cultural base and student mix than the traditional home culture or its schools.
- *Children of refugees:* Children whose parents are living outside their original country or place due to circumstances they did not choose, such as war, violence, famine, or natural disasters.
- *Children of borderlanders:* Children who cross borders frequently, even daily, as they go to school, or whose parents work across national borders.
- *Children of minorities:* Children whose parents are from a racial or ethnic group that is not part of the majority race or ethnicity of the country in which they live.
- *International adoptees:* Children adopted by parents from another country other than the one of that child's birth.
- *Domestic TCKs:* Children whose parents have moved in or among various subcultures within that child's home country.

These groups represent only a few of many other possible inclusions, such as foreign exchange students. We have been asked whether children of divorce who spend half their time in one parent's home and half in the other's house can be regarded as having a cross-cultural experience. Considering such questions is part of the current discovery process. Undoubtedly there are, and will continue to be, more categories than those named here. But for now, we begin with these few examples of CCKs.

Please note several things about the CCK definition and our model:

- *The traditional TCKs discussed in this book are also CCKs.* Just as a corporate "brat" or missionary kid is a TCK, so are TCKs a subgroup of CCKs, as our new paradigm shows.
- *Each category listed under CCKs could have additional subsets, just as TCKs do.* This enables continued study in each of the subgroups as we further compare and contrast the specific experiences.
- *Unlike the definition for TCKs, the CCK definition is not dependent on the question of where CCKs grow up, such as outside the passport culture or overseas.* This definition focuses on the multiple and varied layering of cultural environments that are impacting a child's life rather than the actual place where the events occur.
- *CCKs are not merely living side by side with those from other cultures, but are interacting with more than one culture in ways that have meaningful or relational involvement.*

- *CCKs and adult CCKs represent any and all nationalities, ethnicities, and economic groups.* Our focus is not on the traditional ways of defining diversity but rather to look at the shared commonalities of the experience that transcend our usual ways of categorizing people.

Like Brice and President Obama, many CCKs grow up in more than one of these cross-cultural environments. Looking through this expanded lens helps us see how the layers of cultural mixing and matching in today's changing world are becoming increasingly complex for many children and families.

The Ngujos laughed when they saw the CCK model. "We never stopped to think of how many of these groups our kids are in." When asked to explain, Mrs. Ngujo said, "Well, I came from one region in Kenya; my husband came from another. We both spoke Swahili and English, but neither of us spoke each other's mother tongue. I guess that makes my kids members of the bicultural group. My husband took a job with a large international bank, so our family immigrated to the States. There we became part of a minority population for the first time, but soon his bank began sending us on assignments all over the world. At that point, our kids became traditional TCKs. I'm glad to know there is a term to describe all four experiences at the same time!"

President Obama himself is in six of our categories: *biracial*, *bicultural*, *TCK*, *minority*, and then *educational CCK* because he attended a local school where he studied in a different language from his home culture during his four years as a TCK in Indonesia. He is also a *domestic TCK*. When he grew up in Hawaii, he lived with his white grandparents in an environment where many others were also of mixed race and cultural backgrounds. When he moved to the mainland, others defined him as primarily "African American." His autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, describes his struggles to come to terms with his identity during that time in a way TCKs of all backgrounds understand.

Even for many TCKs of one primary ethnic/racial background, life is getting more complicated. No longer do they navigate primarily between one host culture and their passport culture as they did in the days when Ruth Hill Useem first named them. Instead, many live in four or five (and sometimes more!) different countries while growing up. The layering of cultural influences in their lives grows exponentially as well.

The question, however, remains: While it may be good to find a common term to describe children who grow up among many cultures, how does that help us begin to compare and contrast these experiences with all of the obvious differences between them?

### Lessons from the TCK "Petri Dish"

Before Ruth Hill Useem gave unifying language to this experience, those who lived in these various third culture communities assumed the issues they and their children faced were specific to their group (or sector) alone. Why were missionary kids so strange when they returned to their passport country for high school or college? Why were military kids such "brats"? And on and on the wonderings went. Each group looked at sector-specific phenomena they saw occurring among children being raised in their particular system. There was no assumption of commonality between the groups because there were so many different details in how or why the families had gone to another country.

Understanding that virtually every child in each of these sectors grew up with similar experiences—such as a cross-cultural upbringing, high mobility, expected repatriation, and often a system identity as we mentioned in chapter 2—expedited the discussion for everyone. Each group no longer had to look only at the specific details of the basic phenomenon they saw; understanding and resources could be shared among all the sectors.

By looking at the shared whole, however, issues that applied specifically to each sector became more visible as well. For example, how did the long and often multiple separations from at least one parent, coupled with the fear (for those in a war zone) that this parent might never return, play out specifically for military kids? How did the sense that they and their families represented an entire nation affect children growing up in the foreign service? How did the "God" piece of growing up in a religious system impact the missionary kid? How did watching decisions made by a parent's corporation based on the "bottom line" that might adversely influence the local economy shape a business kid? Figure 3-2 illustrates these influences.

In other words, it's not entirely God's fault that a missionary kid might carry unresolved grief; that is a common characteristic for TCKs of all sectors. At the same time, dealing with separating a view of God from the religious subculture they have known may be a challenge unique to TCKs in the mission sector. Neither is the military to blame for a person who has "itchy feet" and is always looking to move after two years. But the fear of a black limousine pulling up to the front door to announce a parent's death may be specific to a child raised in this subset of the TCK experience. Once universals are defined, other specific issues can be discussed.

These same lessons apply to understanding CCKs. Figure 3-3 gives us examples of what CCKs of all backgrounds share and what issues may be specific for each particular type of experience.

### Third Culture Kids: Potential Commonalities and Differences

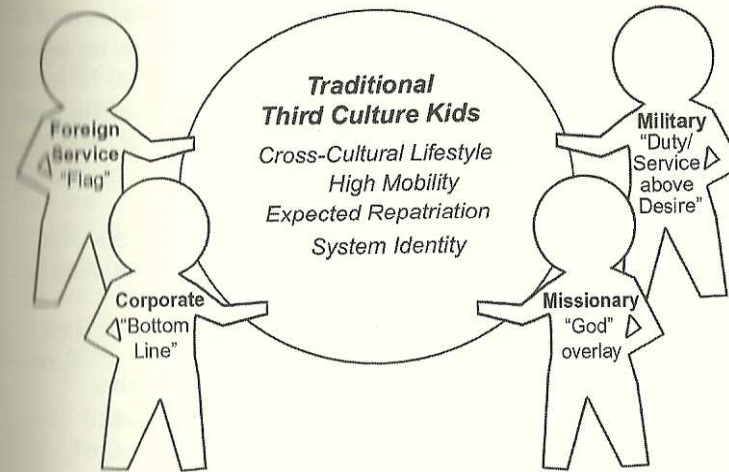


Figure 3-2 Third Cultural Kids: Potential Commonalities and Differences  
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### Cross-Cultural Kids: Potential Commonalities and Differences

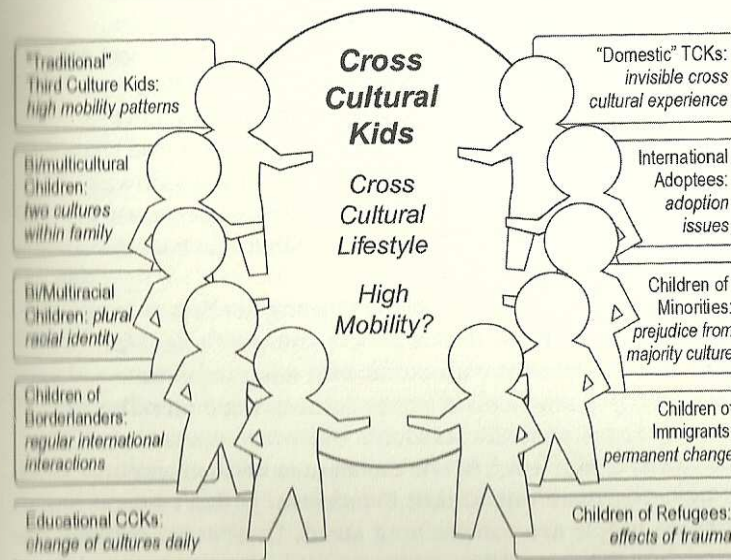


Figure 3-3 Cross-Cultural Kids: Potential Commonalities and Differences  
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