Adult Third Culture Kids & Finding Their Place

By Molly Milgrom, LCSW, LICSW

I love working with people in their 20s and 30s. Generally, they have begun to differentiate from their parents, have moved beyond pure rebellion for rebellion's sake, and are really digging into the exploration of who they want to be and what they want out of life. For many, it is a trying time. Some have just graduated from college, while others are working their first job (or jobs). It is the first time that most don't have a set path to follow. "Quarterlifers" are deciding for themselves where they want to live, what kind of jobs they want, and whether to pursue romantic relationships. It may be the first time that their peers are making significantly different life choices from their own.

In a nutshell, this phase of life is all about values, identity, fulfillment, and freedom. Young adults who were raised straddling two or more cultures, "third culture kids," must grapple with additional issues such as cultural expectations and cultural conflict. They "ha[ve] spent a significant part of [their] developmental years outside of the parents' culture" (Pollock and Van Reken, 2001, p. 19). They may have grown up as expatriates, such as the children of Foreign Service officers, military parents or missionaries. They may have spent significant time abroad in one or several countries. As they reach adulthood, third culture kids often find that they don't exactly fit in one specific culture; rather, they identify with norms and values from several groups. This can feel odd because it clashes with the human tendency to neatly categorize our experiences. Labeling and predictability help us understand the world and our place in it. Adult third culture kids don't neatly fit and this can be unsettling.

This is where my work and my passion meet. Aspects of my own narrative have helped me in my work with this population. My family spent significant time living abroad. We valued cultural experiences, diving headfirst into the lifestyles of other people while abroad, and inviting others to share in our own during their sabbaticals in the United States. In my work with adult third culture kids, it has been helpful to reframe the experience of "not fitting" as "third culture." This reframing provides context and a new freedom; we fit in the middle and that makes us unique.

While adult third culture kids may struggle with belonging and loneliness, the experience of straddling multiple cultures also lends itself to distinct strengths. We are often very adaptable. Not content to adhere to the party line without consideration for alternate viewpoints, we are critical thinkers. We are globally-minded, an essential skill for modern society. Adult third culture kids are often inclusive, open to meeting new people and trying new experiences. We inherently have more choices for where in the world to live because we have been exposed to many sets of values and can make thoughtful choices about what fits for us.

As a clinician, there is no greater feeling than helping a client find a sense of security—to feel at home in their own skin. It is an honor to share in this exploration with my clients.

If this post has resonated with your own experience, it may be helpful to speak with a counselor.

It may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What are my values and priorities?
- How are these related to the culture(s) in which I was raised?
- How are these in conflict with my family or the culture in which I live?
- Which of my strengths and skills stem from my childhood experiences?

References

Pollock, D.C., & Van Reken, R.E. (2001). Third culture kids: The experience of growing up among worlds. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Further Reading

Fail, H., Thompson, J., & Walker, G. (2004). Belonging, identity and Third Culture Kids: Life histories of former international school students. Journal of Research in International Education. 3(3), 319-338. doi: 10.1177/1475240904047358

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