

# **The ecology of “Third Culture Kids”: The experiences of Australasian adults**

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I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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## **Abstract**

The ecology of human development has been shown to be different for different cultures and sub-cultures within a particular culture, and to play a significant part in shaping the outcome traits or character profile exhibited by individuals who experience a given ecology. This is the case for members of that sub-culture of children who spend childhood years abroad; who expect to eventually repatriate to their passport country. Those who experience the phenomenon have been called Third Culture Kids or TCKs, and the outcome profile for those with a North American background has been identified. However, no literature on children in the Australasian context exists.

A progressive naturalistic study, using both qualitative and quantitative methodology, was undertaken providing foundational data on the experience of adult Australasians (Australians and New Zealanders) who had experienced such a childhood ecology. The Australasian self-reported reflections were compared with descriptions of the North American and international experience presented in existing literature. Further, accepted models of human development were merged and adapted to produce a TCK-specific model of human development. This model was a significant product of this research project. Components of particular importance to development that nurtured the outcome profile traits were identified and represented in the model. The study incorporated three phases: phase 1 involved the in-depth interview of 3 respondents who had experienced the TCK ecology on three different continents, phase 2 involved data collection on the demographics of the broader Australasian TCK population asking questions about family choices, education, and career trajectories ( $N=50$ ), and phase 3 collected in-depth descriptions of the childhood TCK ecology through voluntary response to an extensive written survey and asked for comparison with the imagined alternative ecology had respondents remained in their passport country ( $N=45$ ). In both phases 1 and 3

respondents were asked to describe character traits they believed they manifested as a direct result of immersion in the TCK ecology and then suggest traits they might otherwise have manifested had the imagined alternative ecology been the nurturing environment. Tabulation of the emerging data allowed comparison and contrast with the North American outcome profile traits that have been described in literature. In both tabulations many outcome profile traits were identified as being in polar contrast with each other; the TCK could manifest either or both of the apparently opposing traits. Manifestation was dependent upon the immediate context within which the TCK was functioning. There was shown to be a significant overlap in the outcome profile for Australasians and North Americans. However, in this study Australasians presented stronger in their self-report of altered relational patterns and traits related to resourcefulness and practical abilities than was described in the North American literature. In comparing outcome profile traits of the real TCK ecology and those that were associated with the imagined alternative ecology respondents reported that they would have been more confident and more socially competent, but less tolerant and less globally aware had they been raised in the passport country. The self-reported outcome traits or profile were linked to the developmental ecology by exploring the processes and tensions that were at work. It was shown that dynamic tensions emerged and increased in valence as the individual gradually developed polarised traits that manifested according to engagement in the multiple contexts the TCK was required to manage. The results of this study have implications for those who deploy families abroad, as well as those who educate, and nurture the social potential of TCKs. This study has served to extend understanding of the phenomenon at the international level and laid a foundation for specific understanding of the Australasian context.

## **Acknowledgements**

More than 70 Australian and New Zealand adults, who had spent childhood years abroad, shared their perspectives and memories about those experiences. Their willingness to trust me with their data and their recollections has made this work possible. There is much yet to be explored about the developmental ecology of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) but the contribution of the respondents in this research project has helped to lay a substantial foundation, especially to the understanding of the Australasian experience.

The path followed in undertaking this research was challenging, mainly due to the remote location of the researcher from the academic institution. The commitment above and beyond reasonable expectations by Dr. Irene Styles, who supervised the final stages of this work, meant that it was finally brought to a conclusion. Her capacity as an academic is appreciatively acknowledged.



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