

Globalisation of Third Culture Kids: An Analysis of the Subject vs. the Other

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Abstract

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) have been a distinct demographic within the population for over four centuries. However, it is only in recent times that focused studies have provided an avenue for these individuals to articulate their unique experiences. Owing to challenges such as language barriers and cultural misconceptions, this nomadic community has often felt marginalized and detached from the narrative of their own lives. This research endeavors to examine the educational dimension of young TCKs, employing Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* as a framework to elucidate the psychological, emotional, and physical consequences of the "Othering" phenomenon within today's globalizing world. By utilizing de Beauvoir's seminal work, which explores the systemic subjugation and objectification of women, we aim to shed light on the analogous experiences of TCKs. Drawing parallels between the two contexts, we seek to elucidate the profound impact of being perceived as "Other" and its far-reaching implications on the educational development and well-being of TCKs.

Keywords: Globalisation, Beauvoir, Education, Third Culture Kids, Subject vs. Other

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Introduction

The nomadic nature of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) during their childhood presents itself as a barrier to their educational, cultural and emotional development (Pollock *et al.*, 2010). TCKs are described as children of ‘expats’ (Selmer *et al.*, 2004) or professionals in such sectors which require the entire family to constantly move from one geographic location to the next (Tanu, 2015). While the origins of the term ‘Third Culture Kids’ have previously been discussed by Chakraborty *et al.* (2023), this paper focuses on the effects of rapid globalisation on these already nomadic, culturally diverse young adults. These children, who have ‘lived lives of luxury’ (Langford, 2012), would feel distanced and isolated from their own peers and, unless addressed at a young enough age, and would propagate feelings of depression or loss of identity (Fail *et al.*, 2004; Dewaele *et al.*, 2009).

Through the publication and popularisation of the works of Pollock, TCKs have also been given a firm, though biased, definition. That is, a generalised stereotype of their common personality traits and characteristics has been created (Tanu, 2015). In this way, TCKs have become slaves to their circumstance and are unable to rise above this social prejudice. These prejudices become the ‘prison’ that TCKs have to ‘choose to live inside’ (Rao, 2017). In other words, TCKs then begin to live in self-imposed silence. In a society that claims to preach the ideals of globalisation and neo-liberalism, this narrow-minded approach succeeds in practicing a neo-colonialistic approach instead (Pratt, 2019; Castells, 2000; 2008; 2010).

However, the examples in Pollock’s (2010) work discuss TCKs from a mostly American background who have relocated to a different country, most of which have English as one of their national languages. This does not mention the language related problems of many TCKs who have had to move from a country that does not have English as a national language. These TCKs have to first learn a new language and then begin to assimilate themselves into the new, host country (Tanu, 2015). Pollock also tends to generalise and simplify many of the issues that the TCKs face (Ridout, 2009). At the very beginning of the text, Pollock claims that a vast majority of the TCKs around the world ‘identify with’ one particular person (Pollock *et al.*, 2010). While it is possible for a large collection of people to identify with a position, it is an entirely different thing to identify with one, single individual.

After the initial introduction of the phrase in the 1960s and its subsequent popularisation by Pollock in his works, this new area of study held many scholars in fascination. This was a part of the society that had existed since the interaction of civilisations, however, it had been largely overlooked. According to “Just How Big Is the TCK Population?” (2013), researchers estimate the number of TCKs was around 73 million in the 1960s. By 2013, both “Just How Big Is the TCK Population?” (2013) and “Employee benefits & third culture kids” (2018) estimated the global population of the TCKs to have grown to more than 230 million. While the world developed, progressed and connected, due to the inception of the internet, what was once considered to be isolated incidences came to be known as the global phenomenon that it really is (Poni-Lado, 2015).

The community of the TCKs who share a common culture is presented as a ‘strange paradox’ in the works of Pollock. This is so as the word ‘culture’ by definition means the customs, traditions and beliefs shared by a group of people hailing from a similar geographical source (Cheng, 2001; James, 2005). Vidal (2000) then argues that ‘culture’ can be defined as the sharing of experiences as well as the traditional meaning in this modern 21st Century world. He writes that the culture of the Third Culture community is in the shared experiences and the

shared feelings that are at the heart of TCKs and that it cannot be limited by the geography alone. This work investigates:

- (i) the effects of Globalisation on Third Culture Kids (TCKs) and how it affects their further growth and development
- (ii) TCKs feelings of alienation and isolation through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's Theory of *Subject vs. Other*

Globalisation

Globalization is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses the growing interconnectedness and interdependence of global cultures and economies. It represents an intricate process through which a myriad of elements, including ideas, knowledge, information, goods, and services, diffuse and proliferate across the globe, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. Globalization extends to encompass the seamless movement of financial products, technology, information, and employment opportunities, engendering a complex web of interactions that traverse national frontiers and bridge diverse cultures.

Recent research has underscored the profound impact of globalization on various aspects of contemporary society. Scholars have delved into the intricacies of globalization's influence on economic development, cultural exchange, and the dissemination of technology. Stiglitz (2017) examines the implications of globalization for income inequality and social justice, shedding light on how this global phenomenon can both exacerbate and mitigate disparities within and among nations. However, a large number of recent research shows that globalization and 'interconnectedness' is responsible for reshaping cultural identities and fostering transnational flows of cultural goods and practices Appadurai (2016). In the realm of technology and innovation, Bhagwati et al. (2020) delves into the dynamics of technology transfer and its role in driving global economic toward positive growth.

Here, TCKs possess a distinctive worldview characterized by the perception of the world as a unified global entity inhabited by individuals who share fundamental human needs, shaped by their experiences of living in multiple cultures (Pollock et al., 2010; Chakraborty et al., 2023). TCKs, and Adult TCKs (ATCKs), are also seen to have valuable attributes such as diligence, discipline, and reliability, traits that are highly sought after by employers in today's globalized job market (Useem et al., 1996; Fail et al., 2004). In this case, TCKs are seen to be at an advantage as they are more adaptable and have more cross-cultural competency, which contribute significantly to their success in diverse organizational settings.

Notably, the phenomenon of globalization has not been limited to TCKs alone. Non-TCKs, individuals who have not experienced a similar level of global mobility during their formative years, are also undergoing a significant transformation in their cultural awareness. This transformation is in large part due to the rapid inter-connectivity facilitated by modern media and communication technologies. Recent studies also indicate that the exposure of media fosters a cross-cultural understanding among non-TCKs, further underlining the profound influence of globalization on individuals' cultural perspectives (Matthews et al., 2012).

Education

As mentioned before, there are a few aspects that present themselves as predicaments in the particular situation of the TCKs who have had to constantly change schools up until this point, for example, different education systems follow their own syllabi at every level which makes it harder to transfer in or out of different systems of education. Morales (2015) proposes particular ‘transition programmes’ for schools in order to help transfer students who may need that extra support during the initial stages of resettling into a new education system.

The medium of education is also an incredibly important factor in the life of a growing child (Yaacob *et al.*, 2014; Ng *et al.*, 1993; Nelson, 1998). However, this is often overlooked when relocating to a new region (Ramanathan, 2016). As seen in the case study made by Reay (2002), children in a classroom environment tend to group together according to their intellectual capacities. In some cases – like in the case of Shaun (Reay, 2002) – peers tend to bully the minority who seem different from the masses (Sreekanth, 2009). It is for this reason that it becomes a problem when a TCK relocates to a new school in a new country where the medium or language of study is also different as they would first have to learn the new language in order to be able to communicate and then start acquiring new knowledge using that new language (Pollock *et al.*, 2010; Useem *et al.*, 1996). For many, this process becomes cyclic – this is further explored as well.

Subject vs. Other

Beauvoir (1972) has described in her works a feeling of alienation of one segment of the society from the other that has built up over the years. Her journals chronicle the subjugation of women over the years with the proverbial ‘man’ standing at the head of the patriarchal hierarchy thereby giving the ‘man’ the title of the ‘*Subject*’ and giving the title of the subjugated ‘*Other*’ to ‘woman’. This analogy of the *Subject* versus the *Other* can be carried through to the parts of society where one community feels belittled or inconsequential as compared to its counterpart. In the case of my dissertation, the normal persons of the world, who have a sense of belonging and identity as well as a firm hold on their own cultural heritage, will be referred to as the *Subject* as they represent the majority of the population who may or may not be aware of the trials and tribulations of the Third Culture Community. As such, the Third Culture Community will be referred to as the *Other* as they are the minority of the population who have isolated themselves over the years and have practiced self-imposed silence as a form of subjugating themselves (Pollock *et al.*, 2010).

The parallel between the *Subject* versus the *Other* in both the cases of ‘Man’ versus ‘Woman’ as well as ‘People with a Definite Cultural Identity’ versus ‘TCKs’ can be more easily explained in the following way. According to Beauvoir (1972), throughout history, the community of ‘women’ is seen to be at the peripheries of society, always looking at the activities of the ‘men’, observing and not being able to voice their opinions or being heard. Similarly, TCKs are also seen to exist at the peripheries of societies (Pollock *et al.*, 2010; Walters *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, it was only around the 1960s that scholars and researchers began to take notice of this entire community of people that has existed under the radar of the masses (Gillies, 1998).

That is not to say that there are no benefits to being a part of the Third Culture Community in the modern world. Even though women were the subjugated minority of the collective society, according to Beauvoir (1972), there are many instances in the modern world where

women are seen to enjoy some benefits simply due to their gender. Be it longer life expectancy (Waldron *et al.*, 1973; Holden, 1987), better memory-span (Larrabee *et al.*, 1993; Sundermann *et al.*, 2016) or simply the fact that women are not under any compunctions to hide their sorrow in public (Martin *et al.*, 2000; Doka *et al.*, 2014), women are seen to have some advantages due to their gender. Similarly, the question of the TCK is multifaceted. While there are definitely advantages to leading a nomadic lifestyle, living in the higher echelon of the population in new and diverse countries (Pollock *et al.*, 2010; Tanu, 2015), there are also some major drawbacks, which will be mentioned in the following chapters.

The term ‘*Other*’ as described by Beauvoir (1972) is extracted here not to distinguish TCKs from the masses based on their gender, class, race, sexuality or race. TCKs, from their youths, have disjointed childhoods, feelings of rootlessness and question their very identity (Pollock *et al.*, 2010), unlike the ‘normal’ majority of the world’s young population who experience comparative cultural consistency and have more defined senses of identity (Fail *et al.*, 2009).

Beauvoir condemns this biased approach of the world when she explains that as the *Subject* is seen to be the more ‘active’ part of the society which apparently contributes more to society, they are therefore justified in procuring more rights and privileges in their daily lives. The *Other*, in contrast, is seen to be merely vessels in the society who have to follow the lead of the *Subject*. Similarly, until the introduction of the term ‘Third Culture Kids’, the fact that there was another segment of society – living, breathing, going through different and, at the same time, same struggles on a daily basis – was unknown to the majority of the masses (Pollock *et al.*, 2010). The *Subject* in this case subjugates the *Other* through ignorance and lack of education. My dissertation serves as a modest initial attempt to change this.

Conclusion

Good education is required for the growth of the society, for the progress of the nation as well as for the expansion of the mind. It is extremely important for the population of today – especially for the youth – to understand that there are many smaller, different segments of society that together make up a larger collective community. This is especially true in the 21st Century era of Globalisation (Castells, 2008; 2000; Dale *et al.*, 2002; Pennell, 1998). Where the world used to view TCKs as the more ‘handicapped’ part of the society (Gilbert, 2008; Limberg *et al.*, 2011), people are beginning to recognise that there are characteristics and traits ‘in-built’ within the TCK community which, if honed and harnessed, could become an asset (Fry, 2007). Organisations and business institutes today are seen to covet employees who are more adaptable, open-minded, approachable and flexible rather than those with more rigid, narrow and stringent views of the world (Castells, 2010; Peterson, 2009).

ATCKs are seen to be a ‘powerhouse’ of these traits and are seen to possess these qualities in abundance (Cottrell, 2007; Useem *et al.*, 1996). As the world progresses from a restricted outlook to a more liberal view of the different strata that exist within any given society, the ‘minorities’ of the world have started to garner more focus and freedom. With more research being done on these factions of humanity and more knowledge of their existence being shared, it is becoming possible for these smaller, marginalised parts of the population to have a voice and not only ever feel like the *Other* within their individual spectrum.

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