

# Global Nomads and the Transaction of Difference: Understanding strategies of coping

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## *Abstract*

Global nomads are people who have spent a significant amount of their formative years outside their parents' culture(s). Within that experience are many transactions of difference felt through differences of cultural, social, and physical factors. This paper explores those transactions of difference along with strategies global nomads have used to cope with the challenges. The research was based on literature of global nomads, identity development, and marginality. Links between the experiences and intercultural sensitivity are explored.

## *Key words*

global nomads, Third Culture Kids, international mobility, marginality, identity, transaction of difference

## *Introduction*

I was born and raised in a rural homogeneous Minnesotan town to parents born and raised there—a hardworking family rooted in the community and dedicated to its progress and betterment. With a family busy nurturing their roots in our rural village, I had barely left the confines of the state border before starting at Macalester College, much less boarded an airplane destined abroad. Mobility and moving were not strong values in my family, though learning, growing, and understanding others in the world were.

Juxtapose that with my first-year college roommate who lived a highly mobile life, born and raised ten years in Haiti to a German father and American mother. After being evacuated from Haiti due to civil strife, she moved to Texas then Albania after her mom was appointed Peace Corps Director there. Evacuated once again because of civil strife in Albania, she went to boarding school in the Czech Republic. Before starting college, she did a year of service in South Africa with a dance troupe performing social justice dances. It was then she came to Macalester College and our story began.

Coming from a fairly homogeneous community, where life paths and trajectories were quite similar across the lifespan, I found myself wishing for a more riveting life when I was growing up, such as that of my roommate. I often wondered what it would be like to live a life where I was more seemingly different than those around me. My small attempts to be different in my small town were not enough for me. I wanted to know how it felt to truly be different from those around me, to have

a unique story. In my process of seeking out people similar to my roommate, I discovered a whole group of people called *global nomads* or *Third Culture Kids*, who have lived an internationally mobile lifestyle during their formative years.

In this paper, I will be reflecting on *transactions of difference* within the global nomad community, or in other words the interactions between the global nomad and their community that highlight differences. I will be probing what the literature says about how global nomads experience and cope with difference.

I will first provide a background of the relatively recent birth, growth, and discourse around global nomads. I will then introduce the concept of transactions of difference as laid out in relevant literatures. Following, I will engage and deepen the experience of the concept, looking at coping strategies of global nomads. I will conclude with implications that having an internationally mobile lifestyles has on intercultural sensitivity.

### *Achieved Identity*

Central to the discussion around global nomads is the need for a critical look at ideas of culture and identity. It is necessary to realize that these terms are highly contested within many disciplines, are used for multiple purposes, and can be viewed primarily as social constructions. As Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott (1995) write in their essay, "Culture as Disability," the "downside to the instinctive use of the term culture as a container of coherence [is] the container leaks." Barbara Schaetti, whose dissertation looks specifically at global nomad identity, effectively discusses the terminology of identity and culture, patching the leaks and filling the

container of discourse with valuable theoretical and applicable analysis. She builds on an idea of *achieved identity* as one explored, tested, and committed to by an individual (2000, p. 6). I have used Schaetti's foundation of identity on which to build this paper. The concept of achieved identity, as applied, is explained by Wenger:

As we encounter our effects on the world and as we develop our relations with others, these layers build upon each other to produce our identity as a very complex interweaving of participative experience and reificative projections. Bringing the two together through the negotiation of meaning, we construct who we are (1999, p. 151).

Who we are and how we construct ourselves to be is constantly changing, though I would argue that we are continually striving for identity congruence, a harmony of and between all the complexities and inconsistencies that plague our attempts to identify. For the global nomad, there are far more numerous and elaborate factors acting on the developing sense of self. This makes the idea of an achieved identity useful, allowing for agency and choice, as well as space for change.

### *Who are Global Nomads?*

Anthropologist and sociologist Ruth Hill Useem first introduced the term "Third Culture Kid" in the 1950s out of research she and Dr. John Useem were conducting in India, studying Americans working in various capacities, primarily "foreign service officers, missionaries, technical aid workers, businessmen, educators, and media representatives." She identified a "third culture" within the expatriate community, defined as "a generic term to cover the styles of life created, shared, and learned by persons who are in the process of relating their societies...to each other."

The third culture kid was one who grew up in this interstitial culture, sharing similar characteristics and reactions to a high mobility lifestyle (Useeem, 1993). In her model, she described the first culture as the home culture, the second culture as the host culture, and the third culture as the “culture between cultures,” which was the space of creating, sharing, and learning for those living an internationally mobile lifestyle (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, pp. 14-15).

The term *Third Culture Kid (TCK)* stayed in academia for a while before being adopted by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken, who defined and explained a TCK to be:

a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture(s). The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (2009, p. 13).

Norma McCaig then coined the term global nomad in 1984, which has been used synonymously with Third Culture Kid ever since (Schaetti, 2000, p. 69).

However, there is one small, but notable difference in its common definition, which includes the explicit addition of the reason for the mobility: parental occupation. A child who moves around because of a parent’s job will have quite different life circumstances and experiences than a child who is displaced or migrates to another country. Though research around TCKs assumes a connection to parental occupation, it is never clearly stated. Additionally, the use of Third Culture Kid in both name and idea is rooted in the belief of culture as defining identity, two slightly nebulous concepts. Instead, I will use the term global nomad to both keep a tighter

scope as well as to come at the argument from less of a cultural discourse and more of a response to global mobility. For global nomads, there is a search for identity congruence, a harmony between vastly different worlds converged into a single life experience (Schaetti, 2000, p. 6).

This search, it would seem, is more difficult for global nomads because of the multiple ideologies, worldviews, and values emphasized by parents, teachers, peers, and society. Fail, Thompson, and Walker refer to these people as *validators*, necessary for validating one's identity and self-constructs. In cross-cultural situations, "these validators may change and communicate different values each time there is a cross-cultural move, and the child's identity will be very different therefore from someone who grows up in a homogeneous society" (2004, p. 324).

Thus, you have what Peter Adler refers to as the *Multicultural Man*, whose identity is a continuous cycle of birth and death, as embodied identities come and go (1977, p. 38). He posits the multicultural man as being "propelled from identity to identity through a process of both cultural learning and cultural un-learning" (p. 30) transcending an "indigenous culture" to be known through the configuration of his or her worldview (p. 25). Adler even goes so far as to characterize the multicultural man as one "intellectually and emotionally committed to the fundamental unity of all human beings while at the same time [recognizing, legitimizing, accepting, and appreciating] the fundamental differences that lie between people of different cultures" (p. 25). This positioning and understanding helps the person start to symbolize the various aspects of their identity, navigating through a *mazeway*, an

image of society, culture, and belief structuring the individual, which is perpetually being redefined.

What brings about these identity shifts?

### *Transactions of Difference*

An assertion made by Barbara Schaetti in, “Global Nomad Identity: Hypothesizing a Development Model,” suggests four themes common to all Global Nomads that interplay to form a global nomad experience, and thereby affect identity formation. These themes are (1) change, (2) relationships, (3) worldview, and (4) cultural orientation (2000, p. 76). Across these themes, development occurs through four *identity transactions*, which require interactions between the global nomad and their lived experience. These transactions are: (1) transaction of repatriation, (2) transaction of nationality, (3) transaction of difference, and (4) transaction of plurality (p. 84). The scope of this paper will only focus on the transaction of difference, the situations and developmental tasks associated with them, the strategies used, and the outcomes of the transactions for global nomads as presented in the literature.

As discussed by Schaetti, all global nomads will encounter many experiences of being different or marginalized. The three categories mentioned were *cultural marginality*, based on cultural values or behaviors; *social marginality*, based on acceptance by and of peers; and *physical marginality*, based on perceptions of physical appearance (2000, p. 177).

Within cultural marginality, transactions of difference might be anything from ways of communicating, eating, dressing, solving problems, as well as how and which holidays are celebrated. It was even noted that cultural similarity might be a transaction of difference when coming back to the home culture and suddenly understanding everything being said (Schaetti, 2000, p. 179).

Social marginality played out in feelings of isolation, loneliness, and not being understood. This type of marginality was often internalized and located with the individual who felt they just did not know how to fit in. It was mentioned that the simple question of, “Where are you from?” was often a trigger for setting the global nomads apart from those asking, having difficulty gauging the “authenticity of interest being expressed” (Schaetti, 2000, p. 179).

Physical marginality and looking different from host country nationals, and sometimes those in their passport country, was often talked about in Schaetti’s interviews as something matter-of-fact, with some mentions of yearning to look like those around them (Schaetti, 2000, p. 179-180). Pollock and Van Reken introduced the PolVan Cultural

Identity Model of Cultural Identity in relationship to the surrounding culture (see Table 1), naming and describing four situations global nomads could find

**Table 1: PolVan Cultural Identity Model:**  
Global Nomads in Relationship to Surrounding Dominant Culture

<b><u>FOREIGNER</u></b>	<b><u>HIDDEN IMMIGRANT</u></b>
Look <i>different</i> Think <i>different</i>	Look <b>alike</b> Think <i>different</i>
<b><u>ADOPTED</u></b>	<b><u>MIRROR</u></b>
Look <i>different</i> Think <b>alike</b>	Look <b>alike</b> Think <b>alike</b>

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themselves in, based on how they look and think in relation to the dominant culture. They characterize *foreigner* and *mirror* cultural identity as “what you expect is what you get” and *hidden immigrant* and *adopted* cultural identity as “what you expect is not what you get”. Each variation brings a variety of transactions of difference, placing people in various margins within the societies in which they find themselves (2009, pp. 54-56).

How do global nomads navigate these transactions of difference? What strategies do they use to cope with the challenges associated with their unique situations both within and outside their passport culture and their journey through the maze?

### *Transactions of Difference Strategies*

Many global nomads spend years unaware of the existence of other culturally, socially, and physically marginalized people like them with whom they might identify (Bennett, 1993a, p. 116). Potential responses to living on these margins were proposed by Bennett and further explored by Schaetti as *constructive marginality* and *encapsulated marginality*. Marginality as used here is not intended to carry any negative connotations, but rather to refer to a “cultural lifestyle at the edges where two or more cultures meet” (Bennett, 1993a, p. 113).

An encapsulated response is defined by Schaetti as being at home nowhere, and a constructive response as being at least partly at home everywhere. Encapsulated marginality can even bring on a state of being called *terminal uniqueness*, where the person sees himself or herself as being so distinct that they cannot imagine a peer

group with which they can relate (Bennett, 1993a, p. 115). Encapsulated experiences are often more acute in childhood and adolescence, tending to move toward a constructive experience in adulthood (Schaetti, 2000, pp. 182-183). Relating these two responses back to the earlier discussion of identity congruence, an encapsulated response indicates a fragmented identity, whereas a constructive response shows an integrated identity (Bannett,1993a, p. 120).

Common strategies used in response to transactions of difference were defined as *passing*, by developing different personas as a way to fit in; *isolating*, by removing oneself from situations that could set them apart; *defending*, by endorsing a right to be different; and *linking*, by connecting with others who were similarly different. Other strategies less commonly described by global nomads were *learning*, by actively getting to know about their surroundings; and *emoting*, by using emotions theatrically to manage difference. Into adulthood, passing and linking remained commonly used strategies, but two additional strategies emerged, including *normalizing*, by accepting, anticipating, and preparing for difference; and *applying*, by finding the value in an experience and being able to use the skill or lesson in subsequent environments or contexts (Schaetti, 2000, pp. 180-181). Table 2 shows the different strategies as well as the phase of life where it was prevalent.

**Table 2: Difference Strategies in Childhood and Adulthood** (Schaetti, 2000, p. 189)

	Pass	Isolate	Defend	Link	Learn	Emote	Normalize	Apply
Childhood	★	★	★	★	★	★		
Adulthood	★			★			★	★

### *Implications for Intercultural Sensitivity*

It would seem self-evident that being exposed to multiple cultural contexts would be conducive to building intercultural sensitivity. However, as argued by Milton Bennett, “intercultural sensitivity is not natural”. In the past, cross-cultural contact has had ill consequences: bloodshed and oppression. To change this “natural” behavior, he argues for education and training in intercultural communication (1993b, p. 21), best done through lived experiences and exposure, I would argue. Global nomads often have little choice in the environments in which they will spend their formative years, but by virtue of the opportunities offered in these environments, the challenges presented through transactions of difference, and subsequent inescapable growth, the experience can be a “catalyst for contacts between cultures” (Adler, 1977, p. 38), thus leading to greater intercultural sensitivity.

Though my roommate and I spent our formative years in rural villages worlds apart, I think it is important for everyone to have an awareness of the various diversities around them, whether religious, economic, or cultural in order to better understand others. This paper has explored specific realities of being a global nomad and the specific strategies used to manage the many transactions of difference that will emerge in their lives. These strategies carry infinite relevance, as we will all at some point find ourselves in such transactions. The joy of the human family is the difference and the diversity. Important is how we respond and react to our differences and how we treat others.

*“For the earth is but one country and humankind its citizens.” –Bahá’u’lláh*

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