

Changed For Good: Global Nomads as a Community of Practice

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1. Introduction

What does Barack Obama (current President of the United States of America), Madeline Albright (former United States Secretary of State), Uma Thurman (actress), and Dominique de Villepin (former Prime Minister of France) all have in common? Political sway? A connection to Columbia University? A deep desire to see *Wicked* on Broadway? Perhaps you could find them all defying gravity in their seats at the Gershwin Theatre—but for the scope of this paper, the relevant commonality is that they are all “Third Culture Kids,” synonymously known as “Global Nomads.”

I will first provide a background of the relatively recent birth, growth, and discourse around global nomads. I will then give a few examples of globally nomadic upbringings and typical profiles. Global nomads often find “home” within an abstract versus a physical space, due to their high mobility. I will attempt to use the ideas put forth by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger about Communities of Practice to offer a model that helps show how finding acceptance, understanding, relating to others, and learning how to “be” in the world occurs in unique Communities of Practice located nowhere and everywhere as global nomads embark on their perpetual quest for home.

Central to the discussion around global nomads is the need for a critical look at ideas of culture, identity, and community. 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 (2000), 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 (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 (1999):

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. (p. 151).

I hope to delve deeper in the future to push the constructs I have built my anthropological framework around for so long related to culture, identity, and community.

The Birth of the Third Culture and Naming of the Third Culture Kid

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 (Useem, 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).

(Re-)Naming and Defining: Global Nomads

The term “Third Culture Kid” (TCK) stayed in academia for a while before being adopted by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken (2009), 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 (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 global congruence, a harmony between vastly (or slightly) different worlds converged into a single life experience (Schaetti, 2000, p. 6).

Global Nomads in the Spotlight

To get a better idea of how a globally nomadic lifestyle plays out and common elements that emerge in a “Global Nomad Profile,” below are the “chronologies of place” for the global nomads I mentioned in the introduction.

Barack Obama (current President of the United States of America)

- August 1961: Born in Hawai'i to a Kenyan father and American mother
- Age 6: moves to Jakarta, Indonesia with mother and step-father; becomes familiar with a different life-reality; first goes to Catholic school, then to public school
- Age 10: moves back to Hawai'i; goes to a prep school where he is one of few black students
- Age 18: moves to Los Angeles for college, then transfers to Columbia University; becomes very interested in issues of race and social justice
- Age 21: moves to Chicago to work with Developing Communities Project on public housing issues
- Age 26: visits Kenya before moving to Boston for law school
- Age 29: moves to Chicago for work
- Age 47: moves to Washington, DC, to be the first Black-American President of the United States of America

Madeline Albright (former United States Secretary of State)

- May 1937: Born in Prague, Czechoslovakia to Jewish parents who converted shortly after to Roman Catholicism
- Age 1: moves to England during the years of WWII in exile due to her father's connections to a Czech democrat
- Age 8: moves back to Prague, then on to Belgrade for her father's job as a Czech diplomat
- Age 9: goes to Switzerland for school, so as not to be indoctrinated with Marxist ideology in a Yugoslav school
- Age 11: moves to New York while her father worked with the United Nations delegation to Kashmir, then on to Denver after her father got a position at the University of Denver as a result of seeking political asylum
- Age 18: moves to Massachusetts to go to Wellesley College to study political science
- Age 22: moves to Missouri, where her husband does his military service
- Age 23: moves to Chicago for her husband's job at the Chicago Sun Times
- Age 24-38: moves back to New York, then Washington, DC, then back to New York, where she studies at Columbia University, then back to DC, commuting to New York to complete her PhD at Columbia
- Age 56: appointed U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations

Uma Thurman (actress)

April 1970: Born in Massachusetts to an American father ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk who taught at Columbia University and a Swedish-German mother born in Mexico

Childhood: grows up mostly in Massachusetts and New York, but spends time during childhood in India

Dominique de Villepin (former Prime Minister of France)

November 1953: Born in Morocco

Childhood: raised in Venezuela, among other places

College: moves to France to study Civil law and French literature

Career: becomes a diplomat, working in Washington, DC and New Delhi, India

Age 52: becomes Prime Minister of France

As one can see, there are many variations and manifestations of cross-cultural experiences; these examples are but a sliver of possible constructions. Common to all are patterns of mobility, and exposure to ideas, beliefs, and realities outside of a monoculture. Without more context, it is difficult to see the colorful narratives and details present that contribute to each person's worldview, and the benefits and challenge that come with the exposure. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) outline the most common paradoxical benefits and challenges that affect global nomads, impacting self-awareness, identity formation, and subsequently, further global engagement or lack thereof (pp. 87-98).

Benefits		Challenges
Expanded worldview	v.	Confused loyalties
Three-dimensional view of the world	v.	Painful view of reality
Cross-cultural Enrichment	v.	Ignorance of the home culture

This list is by no means comprehensive, and the detail behind each point could fill a book. However, threaded through these and many of the other challenges is the quest for “home”—what it means and where it is located.

But can home be found in a Community of Practice?

2. Communities of Practice

The idea of groups of people with common interests coming together to perform some kind of action is not new, however the term “Communities of Practice” was first coined by cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. They noticed a complex set of social relationships and networks through which learning took place with the community acting as a “living curriculum for the apprentice” (Wenger, *Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction*, 2006). They first wrote *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, noting that the concept was “left largely as an intuitive notion” needing a more in-depth exploration (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 42) Wenger (2006) then went on to look critically and deeply at the notion, defining Communities of Practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”

From this definition, it would seem to be a stretch to consider global nomads a Community of Practice. After all, what is the concern or passion that can be done better? Also, global nomads live all over the world, sometimes in very isolated locations. How can that spatially distanced relationship include regular interaction?

Let us first look at the latter question: proximity of global nomads to one another. Within the Community of Practice concept, there is the provision for distributed Communities of Practice. By virtue of being a global nomad, one is highly mobile, and thus global nomads are distributed far and wide across the world. According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), there are numerous benefits and challenges of distributed Communities of Practice, some of which are listed below (pp. 113-137).

Benefits	Challenges
Wide network Diverse perspectives Highly-specialized knowledge Broader goals Constant outsider interaction	Size Distance Out of sight, out of mind Spontaneity and sharing of ideas is harder Knowing people and building trust Affiliation Culture Communication and values Access to technology

However, before we are convinced that, indeed, global nomads are a Community of Practice, we must return to the first question: what is a common concern of global nomads that can be done better? What would be an issue relevant to global nomads as a common experience? One of the most pervasive and important themes that emerges when talking with global nomads is the perpetual quest for “home”. To live everywhere and nowhere is confusing, and this quest is most certainly a common concern.

In order to be considered a Community of Practice, there must be three elements: a *domain*, a *community*, and a *practice*. The *domain* “has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people... In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information,” creating the *community*. “A community of practice is not merely a community of interest... Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared *practice*.” (Wenger, *Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction*, 2006) Are these three elements present when looking at global nomads? Let us explore.

3. A Model for a Global Nomad Community of Practice

Domain: Seeking “home”

Shared interest: If we use the domain of seeking “home” as a shared identifier of interest of global nomads, one will clearly see universal membership at one point or another. There is a commitment to the domain by virtue of the human need for roots. A challenge of the global nomad experience is often a deep sense of rootlessness, with an extreme difficulty in answering the question, “Where are you from?” (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999)

Distinguished competence: Being able to articulate an answer is “an important part of a global nomad's maturation and is facilitated when we allow a broader understanding of ‘home.’ Typically, home does not exist for the global nomad as a single place but as a multiplicity of relationships; it is not a ‘here or there’ but an ‘everywhere.’” (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999) In the “everywhere,” common characteristics emerge, such as flexibility, openness, empathy, and a three-dimensional view of the world.

Community: Persons engaged with each other seeking “home”

According to the definition of a global nomad, potential participants in the community are persons who have formerly or are currently living outside a parent's culture(s). As universal as the quest for home may be, global nomads may consciously or unconsciously vary in their level of participation at any given moment, changing their relationship to the community and within the community. “Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 51-52)

Returning for just a moment to the idea of a distributed community of practice, one can see in Figure 1 that the structure for a potential global community of global nomads provides flexibility for variance in participation levels, allowing room for both full and peripheral participation as members question identity, mature, and engage. Wenger (2002) writes, “A large portion of community members are peripheral and rarely participate. Instead they keep to the sidelines, watching the interaction of the core and active members... These peripheral activities are an essential dimension of communities of practice” (p. 56).

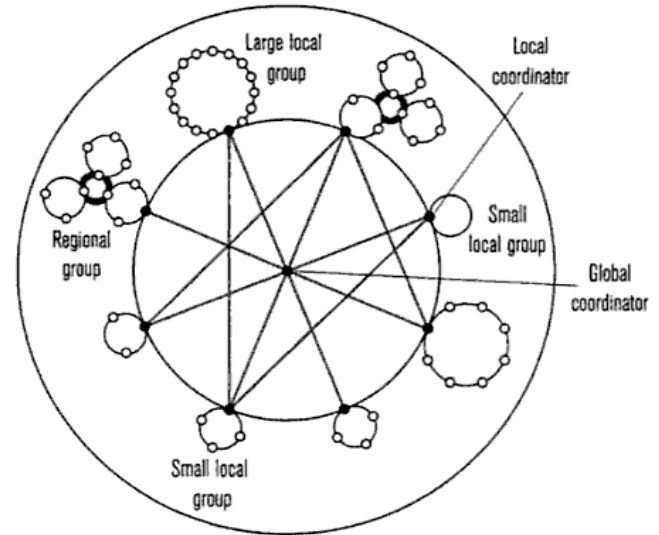


Figure 1: Fractal Structure for a Global Community (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 127)

As a Global Nomad Community of Practice forms, one will find a fairly dynamic ebb and flow of participation. Interestingly, for global nomads, there is most likely a higher percentage of overall participants compared to other groups, partially due to a “by-default” entry into the global nomad community, along with a “once a global nomad, always a global nomad” reality. One can choose a reaction and response to being a global nomad on a spectrum from complete rejection to full participation, but there is a greater likelihood for global nomads to fall on the spectrum closer to full participation for a majority of their life. The experience of being a global nomad is so intricately tied to formative identity development that questions of identity and meaning linger and endure over the life span, triggered at random by oft-unrelated events. Research has shown that global nomads feel most at home when they are with others

from similarly mobile backgrounds; by the time they reach adulthood, many prefer to live and work outside of their native country (Useem & Downie, 1976).

Practice: Ways and strategies devised and shared to find “home”

In order to have a Community of Practice, there must be a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems. When it comes to being a global nomad, it would seem there is actually no way out of being a part of the practice, that even to reject the global nomadic lifestyle and become completely acculturated into a monoculture is merely a strategy of coping with the potentially overwhelming domain of *seeking* home, by way of *rejecting* home.

However, what I see happening in *practice* is a great deal of awareness-raising among community members, accomplished through websites, Facebook groups, telling stories, blogging, and re-entry programs. The first step gives members a name by which they can identify themselves or their experiences, followed by communal spaces to ask, explore, and build on the available knowledge and accompanying strategies. Schaetti (2000) writes, “The subsequent search for congruence is one directed more by instinct than by conscious intention until such times as individuals are introduced to the term ‘global nomad’ or ‘third culture kid.’ This serves for many as a pivotal identity development moment; they now have a map with which they may become intentional in their search for identity congruence” (p. vi).

The ultimate goal of the Global Nomad Community of Practice is to find congruence of identity and “home” in the world, in relationships, in the abstract as opposed to the physical. This allows for home to be felt everywhere, even when reality puts global nomads on the cultural margins.

In discussing two dimensions of cultural marginality, intercultural scholar Janet Bennett says it is both encapsulating and constructive—both locking one into being different and feeling at home nowhere, as well as allowing opportunity for personal and professional gain, enabling a feeling of home everywhere. Additionally, Lee Knefelkamp writes, "Living in the liminal without a home is different from living in the liminal as a home" (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999).

As our world becomes evermore connected, living in liminal space and “making a home in the intersection of multiple identities” will become commonplace (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999). In a 2008 article titled *Obama Has a “Third Culture” Team*, Van Reken quotes sociologist Dr. Ted Ward from 1984, calling TCKs “the prototype citizens of the future.” She muses that it seems the time has already come when a childhood lived in various cultures is the norm.

Locations of Interaction, Locations of Learning

In the dynamic multi-layered process of building and maintaining a Community of Practice, there are many locations of interaction and learning, seen through the social components of experiential learning as laid out by Wenger (Building Strategic Capabilities, 2006): Learning as belonging through community, learning as doing through practice, learning as experience through meaning, and learning as becoming through identity. Within these realms are various institutions, relations, and motivations that situate learning, such as schools, families, and desires to take on global leadership roles.

In the introduction to her article, “A Comparative Approach to Educational Forms and Learning Processes,” Jean Lave (1982) shares her concerns on anthropology and education, saying, “anthropology has not seriously tackled questions of learning” (p. 181). Too often, the location of learning has been focused solely on schooling and has come to occupy what is

known as “formal education.” All the other learning is seen to occupy an “informal” realm, seen as something spontaneous or inevitable.

Figure 2 attempts to show the locations of learning within the Global Nomad Community of Practice outlined above, with “learning” as a continual process occurring within the domain of seeking “home”. It

shows the reality that learning happens through action, interaction, questioning, thinking, and exploring. The people involved in the community, relevant practices, questions being explored, and goals toward achieved identity are unique to each community of practice, but the processes and elements remain the same.

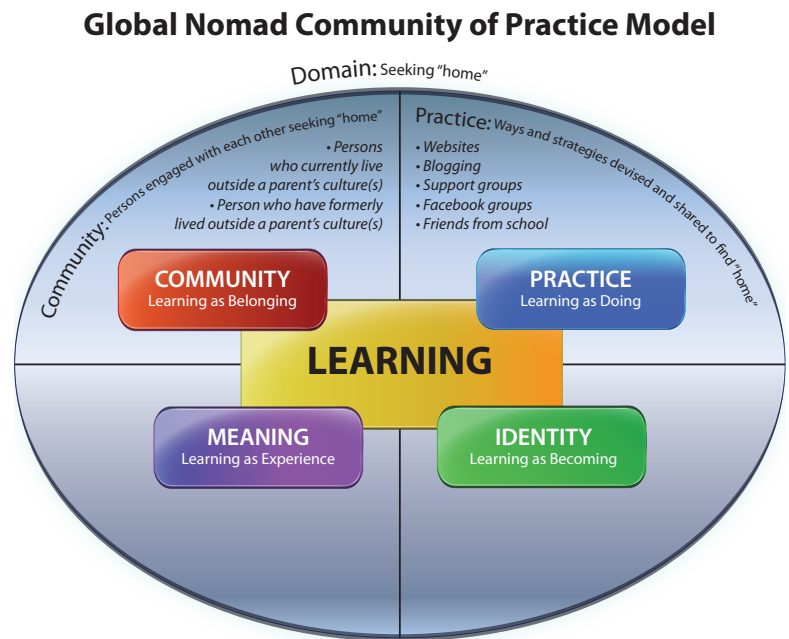


Figure 2: Global Nomad Community of Practice Model

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the possible application of the Community of Practice model to the reality of globally nomadic lifestyles and experiences, focusing specifically on the critical search for “home” and the learning that occurs within that domain. With the increasing prevalence of people growing up among worlds, between cultures, and with a three-dimensional worldview, there is more work that can be done in understanding locations of learning and ways in which people find the information for which they seek within such unique distributed communities. This knowledge has the potential to help in naming and understanding experiences, finding home in the abstract sooner followed by better practices and awareness of how to apply and use this understanding for the benefit of humanity.

Before the curtain goes down at the Gershwin Theatre, Barack, Madeline, Uma, and Dominique find themselves mesmerized by the words of “For Good,” the *Wicked* finale. As global nomads, their experiences have, indeed, been powerful in constructing their life trajectory, positively and negatively, as well as for good.

♪ Who can say if I've been changed for the better?

But because I knew you

I have been changed for good ♪

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