

# Third Culture Kids' Career Choices and Mission Call

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*The objective of this paper is to describe the survey on third culture kids' (TCKs') career choices and mission call. The survey aimed to find out how international childhood has influenced the choices of education and profession, how many third culture kids choose a missionary career, and which factors contribute to those choices. The data is based on responses of 48 Finnish and American adult missionary kids. The theoretical background is derived from studies on third culture kids, interviews, and biographies. It suggests that the years spent abroad have a significant impact on adult third culture kids' life choices. The survey results confirm that. The third culture kids have higher education than their peers and most pursue a college or university degree. Most third culture kids choose a profession with an international dimension and practical application abroad. Almost half of the missionary kids wish to become or have become missionaries themselves, and another third wishes to live and work abroad.*

**Key terms: third culture kid (TCK), adult third culture kid (ATCK), missionary kid, mission call, career choice.**

## Introduction

A career choice is foundational in determining the path of one's life, and the opportunities and possibilities that the path provides. Third Culture Kids (TCKs) form a unique people group whose characteristics, assets and shortcomings are somewhat different from those of the host or home cultures. The childhood years play a key role in the development of a person's character and outlook of life, and thus influence the choices made. TCKs naturally acquire knowledge and many skills that are a great asset for many professions. They often pursue careers that require cultural sensitivity, global awareness and good social skills, such as diplomats, negotiators, mentors, and counsellors. Spending childhood years abroad also make the TCKs face challenges that mono-cultural people are often unaware of.

There has been very little study on TCKs' career choices. The objective of this study is to find out how childhood in a foreign environment has influenced these children and which factors contribute to Third Culture Kids' career choices. Another objective is to find answers to how many TCKs choose a missionary career and how the mission call was formed among them, and what various forms it can take.

As a daughter of Finnish missionary parents to Tanzania, the author of this study has a great interest in the topic because she has seen the significance of years spent abroad on herself and Third Culture Kids. It is the author's desire that the results of this study be used to broaden the understanding of the citizens of the world, as well as to smooth the path of future Third Culture Kids and their parents in respect to choices they are to make, as well as contributing with more knowledge, awareness, and further research in this field.

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The method employed in this study is a survey questionnaire that was e-mailed to Finnish and American Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs). To increase the validity of the study, different ages and the two nationalities are involved, as well as people with different lengths of stay abroad.

The theoretical background of the study consists of studies and interviews carried out among TCKs and families working abroad, missiological literature, as well as biographical material of missionaries and their children. A foundational work on Third Culture Kids was written by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken (1999). Their worldwide survey and extensive material offers excellent ideas and concept for understanding the Third Culture Kids' world. The authors state that being raised in a cross-cultural and highly mobile environment will greatly influence the Third Culture Kids and their lifestyle (Pollock 1999, 21-22). Warinowski sums up several studies which further point out that TCKs are ideal recruits for global companies (Warinowski 2012, 24).

The hypothesis of the study is that a cross-cultural childhood leaves a lifelong effect on TCKs, who are more likely to pursue international careers and missionary work than mono-cultural people. Even those who decide to stay in their home country will carry the marks of their multicultural and mobile childhood in one form or another as their life unfolds.

### Third culture kids

The term Third Culture Kid (TCK), or Adult Third Culture Kid (ATCK) was coined by a sociologist and anthropologist Ruth Hill Useem in the 1950s, (Pollock & Van Reken 1999, 20) and is used for the children "who accompany their parents into another society" (Useem 1993, 1). Pollock defines TCK's as follows: "A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background." (Pollock et al 1999, 19).

For our convenience, we will refer to these people as TCKs, or, for Adult Third Culture Kids as ATCKs, respectively. A Finnish term, referring to TCKs and reflecting their highly mobile lifestyle is *Suitcase Kids* (*matkalaukkulapset*), and was introduced by Ann-Christine Marttinen (1992, 5). A recent term, used widely in business field and research, is *Expatriate Children* (Warinowski 2012, 18). Warinowski prefers the latter term to avoid an association with luggage, which implies that children would be only passive agents, moving alongside the parents from one country to another (Ibid, 31-32).

An older, broadly used term *Missionary Kid* (MK) means a child who, likewise, followed his parents into another culture, where one or two of the parents were involved in missionary work. *Mission call*, or *call for missions*, refers to a God-given command and guidance to carry out specific tasks in a certain country other than their own native culture. In modern days missionary work involves a broad spectrum of activities, varying from direct evangelising and church planting to developmental work and carrying out one's own profession and sharing the gospel through formed friendships.

Useem (Cottrell, Useem & Useem 1993, 20-21) referred to TCK's home culture as the *first culture*, and the host culture the *second culture*. Originally the term *third culture* meant the community of foreigners living together, such as missionary compound and military bases. The *third culture* currently stands for the "created, shared, and learned" lifestyle without fully belonging to either their parents' home culture or the host culture where they grew up (Ibid). The difference between the adults and TCKs who live abroad is that TCK's childhood consists of the formative years, which is fundamental for the development of their worldview, identity, and relational patterns (Ibid, 27).

### Benefits – a Mixed Blessing

All literature dealing with TCK issues point to some common characteristics that are typical of TCKs. Among the most commonly mentioned positive aspects are expanded and multi-dimensional worldview, the ability to adapt easily in many cultures, as well as cross-cultural enrichment, little prejudice

towards other people, and knowledge of several languages (Pollock 1999, 79-114).

Junkkari (2003, 121-122) lists several characteristics that the TCKs inherit and which are a blessing and a hindrance at a same time, like the two sides of a coin. First of all, a broader and multi-dimensional world-view may mix up a person's reality and identity, because they vary in different countries. A TCK can relate to foreign people's sufferings, because he has seen it firsthand, but this can bring anxiety and loyalty conflicts between the passport and host country.

According to the results of the study carried out among 700 American ATCKs, the childhood experiences abroad are mostly positive (Cottrell 1993, 2). TCKs exhibit a high level of involvement in intercultural activities, such as travelling, speaking foreign languages, and either working or carrying out volunteer work abroad. Furthermore, they adapt easily and can relate to people with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. They have developed interests and hobbies that help them connect with virtually anybody. Junkkari states that there will be an increasing demand for TCKs in the labour market as they master intercultural relationships on emotional level, and because they are courageous, mobile, and able to tackle issues in many cultures. (Junkkari 2003, 239).

### **Influence of TCK experience on career choice**

As the childhood years and experiences influence one's future choices, residence abroad that takes place before the age of eighteen is fundamental for determining a person's sense of identity, learning relational and social skills, and developing a personal world-view (Foyle 2001, 183). All this is then linked with the choices TCK will make concerning his future: education, profession, spouse, and place of residence. According to Foyle, the most significant factor in the development of TCKs as a special group of people is the high mobility and hence the transition experiences. TCKs identify themselves as global nomads and relate easiest with other TCKs, who share this multi-cultural heritage. (Ibid.) Studies carried out among TCKs suggest that exposure in a foreign culture in one's childhood greatly con-

tributes to one's decision to choose an international secular career or that of a missionary (Huotari 2004, 27-28).

Along with cross-cultural environment, high mobility is another key factor in TCK's life experiences, affecting career choice (Pollock 1999, 59). The negative aspect of this is feelings of homelessness, rootlessness and restlessness, which may have its ramifications on TCK's education and career in the long run. Many adult TCKs constantly live in the transitional stage, unable to settle down to create permanence and to have things of lasting value in their lives, which may hinder advancing in career, creating and maintaining business network (Ibid, 126).

### **Reasons for Choosing a Career Abroad**

One of the reasons for choosing an overseas assignment or an international career is the desire to experience and understand the surrounding world better. A common pattern among these people is that rather than returning to the home country, they may change the country and assignment after the first assignment has been completed. Many people with a high education may not have matching job opportunities in the passport country, but the specialists are a high commodity, especially in developing countries (Junkkari 2003, 21, 24). Other common reasons for pursuing a career abroad include a desire to advance in the career, willingness to learn more, higher living standard, escaping boredom or difficult circumstances in the passport country, and seeking for adventures (Ibid, 25-26). One TCK in this study said: "Life is more fulfilling abroad, compared with the materialistic lifestyle in my home country". Another one said: "I got used to international cycles in childhood. Finland with its "ice bears" is a small country, and living there would make me feel anxious." Pirolo, as a mission school teacher and administrator, has pointed out that a single factor affecting TCKs' success cross-culturally, and therefore career choice, relates to the parental attitude towards the choices made as a missionary and whether the benefits outweigh the losses in a TCK's life (Pirolo 2000, 200-201).

## Influence of TCK experience on mission call

The primary motivation for anyone choosing to serve as a Christian missionary is God's call for the specific task or country. The Bible's Great Commission found in Matthew 28: 18-20 is the Scriptural basis for a mission call. According to his findings, Jordan (1992, 111) suggests that only about 5% of any people who have a mission call will eventually enter a mission field. Cottrell and Useem's (1994, 4) study shows however that 10% of MKs will return to a mission field. According to a study conducted among Finnish TCKs who served as missionaries, the greatest factor influencing TCKs decision for becoming a missionary was a clear and personal call from God (Huotari 2004, 27). Out of 14 respondents five said that they knew already as children that they would become missionaries (Ibid). One respondent of the TCK study said: "My positive childhood experiences and my parents positive attitude towards missions and the local people made me eager and excited to choose a missionary career." (Korhonen 2005, 30). They agreed that their childhood on the mission field had prepared and equipped them for a missionary career and gave them a realistic picture of missionary life. Furthermore, they identified themselves as citizens of the world and recognized that their rootlessness had affected their choice. One respondent regarded being a missionary is a natural continuum of the TCK lifestyle. (Ibid, 25).

To conclude the findings, TCK experiences have a great influence on TCKs' lives and choices, including their educational and occupational decisions. Many TCKs develop successful careers and their multicultural background is maintained in some aspects of their lives. High mobility allows TCKs to travel and settle into new countries with ease, but it also creates alienation and rootlessness that may lead to instability and difficulty in decision-making, whether it concerns career or personal life.

## Research procedures

### *Methodology*

The data collection method chosen for this study was a written survey questionnaire. Since very few previous studies were carried out particularly on

career choices and mission call there is no existing sample survey questionnaire. The questions were formulated after reviewing existing surveys on TCKs to serve the purposes of examining how their past influences the choice of education, profession, and the development of mission call. Even though the objective of the survey is to map out common trends and denominators affecting career choices, this survey should not be regarded as purely scientific research, aiming at rigorous standards towards objectivity, reliability, or validity. The aim is simply to find common factors among TCKs choices. One of the criteria of the research project, however, was to accumulate a sufficiently large and diverse database to make valid assertions and to gain understanding from the survey sample. The analysis of the main study questions was carried out by quantitative methodology to find out the exact percentages of education and career choices, those with the mission call, and the main reasons behind the choices. The open-ended questions were analysed with qualitative methods to shed more light in the choices.

### *The survey design and questionnaire*

The focus of the questionnaire was on career choice and existence of a mission call. The first section of the survey questionnaire concerned TCK's age, gender, marital status, the number of years spent abroad as a child, schooling, education, and their parents' role in missions. The second section involved ten open-ended questions dealing with career choice, mission call, and choice of spouse. The third section consisted of three sets of experience assessment questions, which were rated on a Likert-scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). The sets measure childhood experiences, stress factors while living abroad, and personal development during school years. After each set there was an open-ended question about the relevance of childhood experiences for a career choice. Finally, the respondents could offer further comments on the topic at hand.

### *Data collection procedures*

The author of this study acquired contact information of ATCKs for the survey questionnaire through

her ATCK friends and schoolmates, their siblings, missionary friends, and teachers. A Finnish mission agency, Fida International, also served as a resource for contact information. The survey questionnaire was e-mailed to a total of 107 TCKs between October and November 2004, and 48 ATCKs responded.

### The sample population

The survey questionnaire sample consists of 48 ATCKs, out of whom 31 were Finns, 15 from the United States, 1 was a Dane and 1 a Canadian. Eighteen of the respondents were males and 30 females. The TCKs had lived in 30 different host countries; in Africa (8 countries), Asia (8 countries), Europe (9 countries), and South and Central America (5 countries), and therefore the sample represents a broad sampling of TCKs throughout the world. Twenty-five TCKs had lived in one country, 13 in two different countries (5 of them on 2 different continents), 6 in 3 countries, and 4 had lived aboard an international mission ship and thus lived in and visited dozens of countries. All the parents of the survey sample had worked abroad as missionaries.

The TCK's length of time spent abroad in childhood (ages 0-18) varied between 2 and 18 years. The average length of time spent living abroad totalled 10,5 years. 29 of them (60 %) had spent 10-18 years of their childhood abroad, 9 (19 %) TCKs had spent 5-9 years, and 10 TCKs (21 %) 2-4 years. Sixteen respondents (33 %) had been born in the host country. The ages of respondents varied between 19 and 59 years.

### Survey questionnaire results

#### *Influence of TCK experience on major life choices* *Education*

This study aimed to find out how childhood abroad plays into TCK's career aspirations and mission call. According to several surveys carried out among TCKs from different countries, TCKs are more likely to have a university education than his peers (Tikka 2004, 103; Cottrell 1993, 2; Pollock et al. 1999, 235). Pollock et al. (1999) refer to a survey, carried out

among American adult MKs, according to which 94% of them pursued university studies. According to Cottrell and Useem, 81% of ATCKs had earned a Bachelor's (BA) degree in comparison to 21% of their American peers. Also 40% of these TCKs had achieved either Master of Arts (MA) or Doctoral degree. (Cottrell 1993, 2).

Out of 48 TCKs in this survey sample, sixteen had a BA degree and 2 were currently working towards it (35 % of TCKs). Furthermore, 11 TCKs had a MA degree and 10 were working on it, 6 of them as their first degree. One had quit her studies before completing the MA degree. Furthermore, one TCK held a licentiate degree and one a doctoral degree. In other words, 85% of TCKs either were working on or had achieved at least a BA degree and 48 % held at least a MA degree. One TCK held two BA degrees and three were currently working towards a second degree in a field other than their first major. These results confirm the TCK's interest toward a high level of education and love for learning.

### Occupation

A choice of career ranks among one of the most important decisions in a person's life. Numerous university theses state that a majority of MKs select service-oriented occupations, such as teachers, social workers, nurses and doctors, whose aim is to help the people in need. Byttner (2012, 24) discovered that the most popular major choices among American TCKs were international studies (18 %), social science (14 %), other science (12 %), and English (9 %). 66 % of the respondents stated that their TCK experiences had influenced in their academic interests and career choice (Ibid, 26). Furthermore, 58 % of the respondents either worked or wished to work with an NGO (Ibid, 28), indicating that TCKs have high interest in helping people with their special skills. According to the survey results conducted for this research project, there is a great correlation with this finding. One TCK said: "My childhood abroad has given me a heart for people, and I want to help them through my profession". According to Cottrell and Useem (1994, 3), few TCKs become corporate workers, and the survey data confirms this. IT-sector, research, technology, administra-



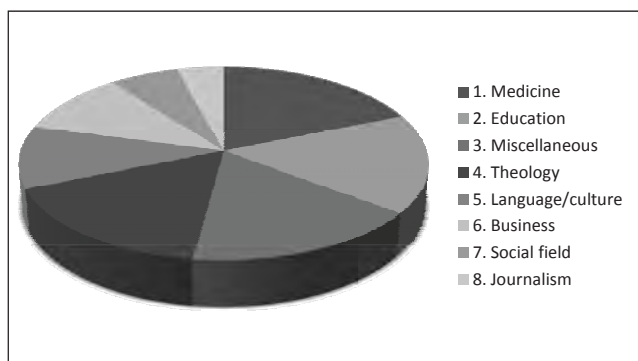


Figure 1. Distribution of professionals by different fields.

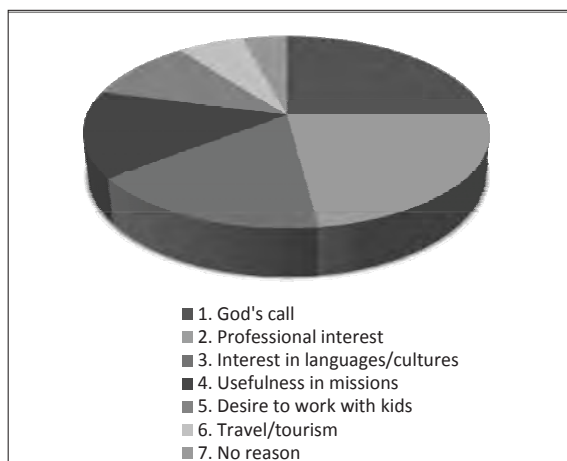


Figure 2. Primary reason for choosing a profession.

tion, and office work were not among the pursued professions. One TCK said: "I first majored in biology, but it did not feel right. Then I started pursuing missionary career." Out of two secretaries one worked in a hotel and the other one is a hospital.

The questionnaire sample represented: 8 pastors or ministers, 7 teachers, 5 nurses, 5 people in trade and business, 3 social workers, 2 translators, 2 journalists, 2 computer programmers, 2 doctors, 2 secretaries, 1 physical therapist, 1 psychologist, 1 kindergarten worker, 1 anthropologist, 1 Japanologist, 1 researcher on African studies, 1 engineer, 1 historian, 1 security checker, and 1 locksmith. In addition, several occupational sectors were completely missing from the sample, such as lower working class,

agriculture and forestry, traffic and transportation, industry and construction.

According to Cottrell and Useem (1994, 2), 56 % had also incorporated some aspect of their third culture childhood in their occupational choices. In comparison, the results obtained from the survey sample of this study showed that 62 % of the TCKs (30 out of 48) had chosen their occupation because of its intercultural dimension or its usefulness on the mission field. For example, out of the 7 teachers, three taught foreign languages, the fourth taught in an international school, and the fifth studied pedagogy in an intercultural programme. The respondents were asked what was their primary motivation for choosing their profession. Twelve TCKs (25 %) said the reason was God's call for missions, eight (17 %) said they had interest towards foreign languages and cultures, seven (15 %) said because the profession was useful in mission work, five (10 %) wanted to work with kids, and three (6 %) were interested in travel and tourism (figure 2).

### Mission call

One of the key questions in the survey was whether the TCKs had a mission call. The majority of TCKs placed their responses along the continuum between having a mission call and openness to God's guidance to work abroad at some point of their lives. It has to be noted that the choices of education, profession, missionary work and ministry are interrelated, thus they need to be looked at in broader context rather than over dissecting them. It was found that there were four distinct categories concerning people's mission call and willingness to be involved in mission work abroad, and these groups will be presented as follows.

#### *Group 1: No mission call or desire to work abroad*

18 out of 48 ATCKs (37,5 %) said that they do not have a mission call, and these respondents form the groups 1 and 2. The first group, 11 respondents (23 %) wanted to remain working in their passport country, but one of them had made a short-term

mission trip abroad and another one studied in a foreign Bible college. One respondent had taken the citizenship of her host country and worked there full-time. One TCK said that seeing the reality of missions when growing up had influenced him negatively and made him critical of missions, even though he had rated his childhood experiences as very positive. Interestingly, despite a negative response concerning the mission call, four of these TCKs still were involved in missions, and six had a part-time ministry in their churches.

#### *Group 2: No mission call but could work abroad*

The second group in the survey (7 respondents, 15% of the total sample) was formed by those TCKs who said they did not have a mission call, but they were open to work abroad, should the need arise, on international assignments, for example in developmental projects or as professionals, but not as traditional missionaries. Otherwise they were happy to remain in their passport countries. A few of them commented that ordinary life did not fully satisfy them and that their contribution would be more beneficial for the people abroad. Five of these seven TCKs had chosen their major or profession in order to have international career prospects later, and some had attended special intercultural programmes.

#### *Group 3: Processing The Call*

Seven TCKs (15%) said that they were processing their mission call. They had lived abroad as children the shortest time of all groups, 8,5 years in average. All of them said that they had interest towards missions, but were neither sure of their call nor if it would lead them to foreign missions or ministry in their homeland. One TCK said she was struggling with the call and another one stated: "I have some "vibes" about mission work, but I can't define it at this point". A few TCKs family situations, studies or work did not allow for travelling at this point, but three of these ATCKs had lived abroad in adulthood.

#### *Group 4: Definite Mission Call*

The rest of the TCKs, 23 in total, (48%), had a clear and definite mission call. Seven of these ATCKs

were currently working as missionaries, one was a retired missionary, and one acted as a pastor to an expatriate church abroad. Thus 19% of the TCKs of the total sample were currently involved in full-time missions. Two had returned to their childhood host country and 1 to a neighbour country, where they could use the language they had learned in childhood. Two had remained in the same continent and the other 4 had moved to an entirely new field and continent.

Nine respondents were students who were actively preparing for long-term missions in the future, and two of them were planning on leaving within a few months. Another five respondents were missionary candidates that had recently graduated and were currently working in their passport countries. Ten of these 14 student missionary candidates had already been involved in foreign missions as adults in different countries and several times for the duration of a few months up to few years.

In other words, 48% of the total sample (9 Americans and 14 of the Finns) embraced a call to full-time missions, and another 15% were open for it, totaling 63% of the total sample. Several respondents in this category stated that their positive childhood experiences and their parents' positive attitude towards missions and the local people had made a difference thus contributing to their eagerness and excitement of choosing a missionary career.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to investigate how TCK's childhood experiences affect career choices and the development of a mission call. The hypothesis set forth for the study were that TCKs are likely to choose professions with international application or that they may become missionaries themselves because of their intercultural background.

It was found that the TCKs have a very high level of education. Out of 48 respondents, 85% held a BA degree and 48% a MA degree. Furthermore, 42% of the ATCKs had chosen intercultural professions and yet another 20% had specifically chosen a people- or service-oriented occupation or international program that would enable them to work abroad.

The primary reasons for choosing one's profession were God's call for missions, interest towards foreign cultures and languages, and intercultural application of a chosen profession. Almost 50 % of the ATCKs who took part in the survey had a mission call and were preparing for a missionary career. Another 15 % were ready to work abroad in their professions and yet another 15 % were open for mission work and God's guidance.

The findings of the survey sample correspond with the studies indicating a high level of education and international career choices. The percentage of those aspiring to work abroad as missionaries, however, was remarkably higher than in a majority of studies conducted earlier. In addition, the respondents reported very positive childhood experiences and attitudes towards their parents' work. Even a majority of those TCKs who had chosen to work in their passport country maintained global awareness and a love for missions throughout their lives.

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Siirtolaisuusinstituutilla on sääntöjensä mukaan oikeus ottaa vastaan lahjoituksia ja testamentteja Suomesta ja ulkomailla. Aikaisemmin saamansa lahjoitukset instituutti on sijoittanut mm. tutkimusrahastonsa, josta tuetaan vuosittain suomalaiseen siirtolaisuuteen liittyvää tutkimusta, dokumentaatiota ja konferenssitoimintaa.

Instituutissa ylläpidettävä siirtolaisuusarkisto ottaa myös vastaan lahjoituksena erilaisia dokumentteja jälkipolville säastettäväksi. Tällaista materiaalia ovat mm. käsikirjoitukset, kirjeet, valokuvat, äänilevyt ja pienimuotoiset tarve-esineet.

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