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Helen Fail, Jeff Thompson and George Walker

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# Belonging, identity and Third Culture Kids

Life histories of former international school students

HELEN FAIL

Oxford Brookes University, UK

JEFF THOMPSON

University of Bath, UK

GEORGE WALKER

International Baccalaureate Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

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This article is based on a multiple case study which examines the lives of a group of 11 former international school students who all attended an international school between 20 and 50 years ago. The research design was based on a review of the literature on third culture kids and adult third culture kids, covering emotional and relational issues such as sense of belonging, identity and the nature of relationships formed. Data were gathered through both postal questionnaires and in-depth interviews and multi-dimensional pictures of the lives of the former international students have been generated.

Links between the literature and personal experiences are explored.

**KEYWORDS** Sense of belonging, identity, TCKs, culture shock, marginality

Cet article se base sur l'étude d'un groupe de onze personnes qui étaient, il y a entre 20 et 50 ans, élèves à l'École internationale de Genève. Cette recherche partait de la révision de la littérature sur les itinérants transculturels (enfants et adultes), qui traite de sujets liés à l'émotionnel et au relationnel, comme par exemple, du sentiment d'appartenance, de l'identité et de la nature des relations. Les données ont été recueillies grâce à des questionnaires envoyés par la poste et à des entretiens en profondeur. Des portraits multidimensionnels de la vie de ces anciens élèves ont ainsi été réalisés. Cet article explore également la relation entre la littérature et leurs expériences personnelles.

Este artículo se basa en un estudio de las vidas de once exalumnos del International School of Geneva que asistieron a dicho colegio entre las décadas del 50 y del 80. El diseño de investigación se basó en una reseña del material publicado sobre los denominados 'niños de tercera cultura', donde se trataban cuestiones tales como el sentido de pertenencia, la identidad y la naturaleza de las relaciones instauradas por esos individuos. Los datos, obtenidos mediante entrevistas y cuestionarios enviados por correo, permitieron generar descripciones multidimensionales de las vidas de los alumnos. Este artículo explora las relaciones entre las experiencias de esos alumnos y la bibliografía disponible.

Those in the international school community may wonder how an internationally mobile lifestyle ultimately affects the students they know. This article explores part of a study which examined the life histories of some former international school students. The original research examined (via a survey and in-depth interviews) a variety of issues that emerged from the literature on 'third culture kids'. **The purpose of the research was to provide data and examples of life histories for current international school students to consider as role models.** This article presents what the literature on 'third culture kids' says about a sense of belonging and identity. It then presents comments from 11 former international school students, who range in age from 45 to 65 years, about their sense of belonging and identity. **It is our hope that these comments can be used as discussion starters in international schools among students of different ages in order to explore their own thoughts and feelings about these two important and related issues.**

### **Third culture kids (TCK)**

Forty years ago the term was first coined by the Useems (Useem et al., 1963) and it triggered research in the 1970s and 1980s (Beimler, 1972; Chapman, 1975; Delin, 1986; Downie, 1976; Gleason, 1970; Hager, 1978; Jordan, 1981; Kelly, 1975; Krajewski, 1969; Mannino, 1970; Olson, 1986; Rainey, 1971; Riley, 1977; Shepard, 1976; Stoddart, 1980).

Pollock and Van Reken's (1999) book on the subject has now popularized the term and the subject in the international school arena and Pollock's definition is now more widely known and understood:

An individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents' culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience. (Pollock, 1988)

The terms 'global nomad' (McCaig 1992) and 'transculturals' (Willis et al., 1994) are also used to refer to TCKs. In reviewing the literature and research on TCKs, a number of issues emerged as being worthy of investigation. This article concentrates on two of those issues and relates theory to the personal experience of 11 individuals. What follows is a summary of the research related to belonging and identity and TCKs.

## The theory

### Sense of belonging

Gleason (1970) examined where TCKs felt most at home. One third to one half of all his respondents cited more than one country. Some say TCKs are at home everywhere and nowhere (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999; Useem, 1984; Wertsch, 1991), that they are rootless (Bushong, 1988; Loewen, 1993; Pollock and Van Reken, 1999). Wertsch (1991) claimed military children are constantly haunted by never belonging anywhere and having no sense of home. **She concluded that frequent geographical relocation has a long-lasting negative effect. Pollock and Van Reken (1999), however, suggest that TCKs can feel at home anywhere and they move regularly and make successful adjustments.** Sharp's (1987) analysis of 530 questionnaires from TCKs found 27 percent said it is better to be a citizen of the world than of a particular country. Fail (1995) asked respondents to rate their sense of belonging to a country, place, community or in terms of a relationship on a Likert scale. She found that people's sense of belonging was three times stronger to relationships than to a particular country (Fail, 1995). Walker (1998) examined the concept of home in children's literature. A sense of belonging is an integral part of feeling at home which can be attached to a place or significant relationships (Walker, 1998). Walker argues that home should offer the means of helping the young person find his or her identity. **The issue of identity can be troublesome for the TCK, as indicated by Pollock and Van Reken (1999), but this is separate from a sense of belonging.** Clearly some people do have strong feelings of attachment and belonging to adopted countries.

### Reverse culture shock

For some, a sense of belonging to their home country has been deeply challenged when they moved back to that home country. Reverse culture shock has been well documented in the research on TCKs (Austin, 1986; Bell, 1997; Downie, 1976; Firestone, 1992; Fray, 1988; Pollock and Van Reken, 1999; Schulz, 1985, 1986; Stelling, 1992). A former international school student has written on the subject of 'not belonging' (Dormer, 1979) and his article entitled 'We are the Rootless Ones' provoked responses in four subsequent alumni newsletters;

The trouble is that when many . . . students who have been in . . . for at least (say) 4 years get back 'home', they find that contrary to all expectation it does not feel like home at all. . . . in short, he does not belong. . . . It is perfectly normal to feel foreign in a foreign country. What is not normal is to feel foreign

in your own country. This is the essential feature of the conflict: you do not feel that you belong there, but you feel that you ought to do so. . . . the Ecolint graduate has been a stranger in a strange land for much of his life, and he knows how being a foreigner works. What he is not used to is being a stranger in his own land. It has been said that the Ecolint graduate is at home everywhere, but it would be more accurate to say that he is not quite at home anywhere. (Dormer, 1979: 3)

Dormer wrote a final article in 1982 in which he commented:

There are those of us who have roots and who are also narrow-minded, intolerant or rigid. But are there not also those who have roots in the sense we are using the term (who have a sense of belonging, who have somewhere they would call 'home') and who are also broad-minded, tolerant and adaptable? Roots are emotional, broadness of vision and tolerance are intellectual; is it not possible to develop the intellectual while preserving the emotional? (Dormer, 1982: 3)

He goes on to challenge the school to help students deal with the issue of rootlessness. He highlights that there are different responses to attending an international school in terms of how it affects one's sense of belonging. His feelings appear to have been generated from the gap between expectation and reality which is an example of Helson's (1964) disconfirmed expectancy theory. If someone has a strong expectation then any deviation from it is seen as greater than it really is. Dormer expected to feel as though he belonged in his passport country and then was disappointed when he did not (Jordan, 1981). As he points out, feeling that you belong or feeling at home are emotions and therefore represent an individual and emotional response to an experience rather than a predictable educational outcome.

### **Identity in TCKs**

Downie (1976) drew certain conclusions from his study of TCKs returning to college in the United States who were all American TCKs. They engaged in a high degree of identity management on returning to the United States which involved a setting aside of their third culture experiences in order to adapt to the new environment. They became socially marginal, that is 'a part of and apart from' their peers. They demonstrated an ability to cope and adapt to the new setting but they had ambiguous and ambivalent feelings regarding home and roots. They were not usually understood by their non-overseas experienced peers and had to set aside that aspect of their identity in order to integrate, make friends and adapt to the new situation.

However, all their past experience which was dormant emerged in interactions with similarly overseas-experienced individuals, foreign students and the faculty. Some do become socially marginal if they are not able to manage their social identity and relate to mono-cultural people. Downie (1976) claimed that the mobility TCKs experience in their developmental years denies them a sense of home, roots and the stable network of relationships that impart an important dimension of self-definition. **Thus they become future oriented and have plans for an international career and mobile lifestyle. Their identities tend to be founded upon their goals and aspirations rather than upon their backgrounds.** They view themselves as cosmopolitan people who feel comfortable in a variety of environments but lack a sense of belonging in any one. Shepard (1976) examined self-perception and personal ambition, both concepts related to identity, and discovered that the organization the parents worked for while resident abroad made the most difference to the way the individuals responded on his questionnaire. This suggests that the home life and values passed on influence the identity development. Cottrell (1970) investigated the children of mixed Indian–Western marriages living in India in the early 1960s. She reported the repeated claim that mixed race children are troubled children and that they would have problems of identity, insecurity and emotional instability. However, in an international school where everyone is a minority and everyone is different from each other, mixed race children are more common. Munayer (2000) discovered the issue of national and religious identity when growing up among a different majority was handled differently by different people. This obviously has implications for the identity development of the TCK as his or her identity and self-concept are constantly being challenged every time he or she moves to a different place and enters a different culture where learned behaviour may no longer be appropriate or acceptable. **The child therefore has to learn to adjust again and again and learns a certain cultural relativity and chameleon-like quality which may affect his or her long-term identity well into adulthood.** Werkman (1979) claimed that the self-esteem of teenagers reared overseas is more negative than that of stateside peers.

## **Marginality and identity**

There has been an interest in marginality, dating back to Park (1928) who studied what he called ‘marginal men’: people who had immigrated and therefore did not fully belong (Bennett, 1993; Stonequist, 1937). Adler (1975) talks of multicultural man as someone whose identity has become international because it is not static. His identity is fluid, mobile

and open to change and variation. Adler (1975) lists three main features of multicultural man: he is psychoculturally adaptive, he is one who is undergoing personal transitions and his identity is not fixed or permanent but is temporary and open to change. Pearce (1998) demonstrates that the people necessary for the development of one's self-concept and identity who act as validators (Weinreich 1983) may be conflicting and dissonant in a cross-cultural situation. **If parents, teachers, society and peers all play a part in validating the child's identity and self-constructs, 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.** Schaetti (1996) expands on the work of Bennett (1993) who speaks of 'encapsulated marginality' and 'constructive marginality' as two ways of responding to the experience of growing up overseas. Inevitably there is an experience of cultural marginality when one grows up outside of one's passport country. The question is whether one remains marginal and isolated (encapsulated marginality) or whether one chooses to develop a sense of self and relate to different types of people (constructive marginality). Herrmann (1977) tried to assess the influences on identity formation. She suggested that home life may be more significant than the school education in the identity development of the students (Herrmann 1977). **However, although the cultural or passport identity may be passed on by the parents in the home, the TCK identity is fostered in the school as it represents the third culture.** The issue of identity is critical because the identity of the TCK is challenged with every move. Brislin (2000) comments that culture consists of ideals, values and assumptions about life that guide specific behaviours. In the case of TCKs, those specific behaviours may change from place to place and so the question of identity must surely be challenged as the cultural values and appropriate behaviours are challenged.

Minoura claimed that the years from 9 to 15 were critical (cited in Uehara, 1986: 38–9). Japanese children who had been overseas between those ages often encountered an identity crisis in the readjustment and experienced the most problems. Inamura investigated adjustment problems of 362 Japanese children and adolescents (cited in Uehara, 1986: 40–1). He found that the older the returnees, the greater the problems, and the longer the stay, the more they worried about the re-entry. More than one-third said that their views of life had changed as a result of the foreign sojourn. Those who had been overseas from the age of 9 to 15 tended to identify themselves with Americans and were more likely to have an identity crisis on returning. Brislin et al. (1986) comment that

those who make the best adjustment when they are overseas are likely to have the hardest adjustment when they return home. Uehara (1986) points out that people 'who were deeply involved in sojourning cultures are likely to have acquired the cultures' values and characteristics, and hence tend to encounter readjustment problems after returning home' (Uehara, 1986: 46).

In the past Japanese returnees, 'kikokushijo', were viewed negatively, but their status is changing in Japan and their potential in language and cross-cultural skills is starting to be valued instead of being seen as something which separates them in a negative way from others (Goodman, 1990; Willis et al., 1994). What is interesting about the Japanese literature when it is compared with research among American TCKs is the host culture and its view of the TCK. For the Japanese, for whom conformity to the group is important (Brislin, 2000; Hofstede, 1997), the returnees are viewed negatively because they are not like everyone else, and to be different is not a virtue. For the Americans, who value the individual, the literature is often about making the most of the unique experiences the individual has had, and thus to be a TCK is of value (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999). The issue of returning to the passport culture is seen here as a challenge to the identity management of the individual rather than a sign of how adaptable and flexible the person is. Thus the 're-entry' issue is one which challenges the TCK's identity. Pollock and Van Reken (1999) comment that the TCK often identifies himself or herself in terms of 'other'. When in a foreign culture, TCKs identify themselves as coming from their passport country. When in the passport country, they identify themselves as coming from overseas (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999). This identity confusion is different from a sense of belonging and is what has caused some of the problems in adjusting to college if TCKs have returned to their passport country for higher education (Cassady, 1971; Gleason, 1970; Krajewski, 1969; Ridley, 1986; Schulz, 1985, 1986). Schulz (1985) examined the basic needs of missionary kids upon re-entry and found them to be linked to personal identity formation, cultural and social adjustment and interpersonal relationships with peers.

Establishing one's identity is usually the work of adolescence (Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966). However, in the case of third culture kids and other ethnic minorities, it is not such a straightforward and uncomplicated matter (Munayer, 2000; Phinney and Rotheram, 1987; Tajfel, 1981). Tajfel (1981) differentiates between personal identity and social identity. He describes social identity as "That part of an individual's self concept



which derives from his (or her) knowledge of his (or her) membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (1981: 255).

Pollock and Van Reken (1999) would argue that for the TCK the identity comes from being a TCK. However, since the concept is a relatively recent one, most people growing up internationally have had to develop their own sense of identity. Frequently it is a national identity based on the nationality of their parents (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999), which may be challenged when they move back to their passport country as documented by Dormer (1979). Phinney and Rotheram (1987) speak of ethnic identity rather than national identity and define ethnic identity as follows: '(Ethnic identity) refers to one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings and behaviour that is due to ethnic group membership' (Phinney and Rotheram, 1987: 13). The phrase 'sense of belonging' shows that there is a link between a sense of belonging and a sense of identity.

Elsewhere they make the comment that:

Children raised in a pluralistic society may, to some degree be 'bicultural' or even 'multicultural' that is, to acquire the norms, attitudes and behaviour patterns of their own and another, or perhaps several other ethnic groups. (Phinney and Rotheram, 1987: 24)

## Summary of the literature

It is difficult to draw conclusions when there is evidence of conflicting findings. It is clear that a sense of belonging is a subjective, emotional response to a place or community of people. There is evidence that TCKs may have a multiple sense of belonging or no sense of belonging. It has been suggested that their sense of belonging may be in terms of relationships rather than geographical place. It is therefore interesting to see what the respondents said about their own sense of belonging and whether there are multiple and conflicting responses in line with the findings in the literature. In terms of identity, in light of the theory of adolescent identity development, the literature suggests that TCKs face many challenges as their identity formation is constantly being challenged by new and changing environments. The respondents in this inquiry were invited to reflect on their sense of identity as it is now.

## The personal experience

Here are comments from the interview data about belonging and identity. The first group of comments are from people living in their passport country and the second group are living outside of their passport country. In all cases names have been changed to protect anonymity.

### Those currently living in their passport country;

#### Richard

Of course England was home so it was always going back to what was familiar . . . but it became increasingly unfamiliar as these two years went on, but I never stopped to think about it at all, because theoretically it still had that role as home. We were 'abroad' quote, unquote, therefore England was home and I never really stopped to examine that . . .

Britain was horrendous . . . because what I hadn't realized, but what had clearly happened, is that X had become home, without any effort on my part, because I just lived there, it was all I knew. Other people had gone to school here and been brought up in a very British culture, British television and British everything, British beer, and here I turn up, English with a posh English accent . . . I was supposed to be English, I don't look foreign, I don't sound foreign and yet I am foreign, and I didn't get this at all . . . it must have affected me in some serious way, . . . because I felt disassociated from where I was from these people who seemed to represent values different from those I had and that's alright . . . if I'd gone to any other country, it would have been fine, because that's what you expect, but I didn't go to any other country, I went to the one which was supposed to be mine and it wasn't. . . . It was quite a shock because . . . it's like an earthquake, what you thought to be secure, you find just isn't, and what else is, . . . X became a big issue for me, and it was particularly X rather than the country, or abroad, . . . psychologically, in the sense that I sort of resented, mainly that I felt that I didn't belong anywhere, and I wasn't about to belong anywhere else, . . . I still don't know what to say (when people ask me where I'm from) . . . there was a certain shared experience with other school people but different people seem to adjust to this differently and I suppose it must depend on everything else in their lives, . . . when I go back to X, I still feel completely familiar, it's still home to me in a very fundamental sort of way, . . . I still need to go back there for a fix every now and then . . . X, that still feels . . . it is home . . . even if it's changed a lot, it's still familiar . . . I don't feel particularly a sense of belonging in England, . . . I've lived here much longer than I've lived anywhere else, and in London much longer than anywhere else but I never return to London thinking, gosh this is home, X (is my sense of home) but it's a fantasy now. . . . My best friend when I was at school, who

now lives in the States, . . . he's also experienced some of the same stuff, he doesn't really feel American, and actually he doesn't sound really very American, he has that mid Atlantic accent, so he's had problems.

### **André**

I think Switzerland is a very great place to come back to, it's not a place that you have to spend your life time in without ever having a chance to be somewhere else. If I need a place to come back to, Switzerland's ideal. . . . I feel comfortable being Swiss because I was born Swiss, I'm not that patriotic, I did my best to avoid military service, I didn't avoid it completely but I did quite OK, the national day . . . does not ring a patriotic fibre in me. I'm Swiss.

### **Pierre**

I had job offers in the States and I guess I made the decision that one had to establish a base somewhere, and that where I felt happiest was back in England doing business around the world . . . my greatest sense of belonging is here in England.

### **Michel**

I'm split, culturally speaking I'm really split, 50% American Anglophone and 50% Swiss, and this is thanks to the international school.

They thought I was an American at first, so when I said, 'well actually I'm French', they were absolutely flabbergasted, that's what they wanted, someone living here, well aware of the international environment.

(I feel different from the Swiss) definitely, absolutely, if it wasn't for my wife and kids who really want to stay here, I would have moved years before. I'm not really happy here. I think the people are too narrow minded, nothing changes, so this is my problem, I like change, and when nothing changes I get bored, and the people are boring and the whole system is boring. . . . (I've felt like this) probably ten or fifteen years now. . . . we don't have that many Swiss friends. . . . I'm not proud of being Swiss, neither am I proud of being French, it's a passport, although lately, I'd never been travelling with my Swiss passport, it's not valid any more . . . giving up my Swiss nationality wouldn't be heartbreaking, not at all. . . . (If I could choose to live elsewhere) I definitely would.

## **Those currently living outside of their passport country;**

### **Christina**

(My siblings have) all married Swiss and they've all become Swiss, I'm the only one who's stayed Bolivian, and married a total foreigner, and I'm the only one who's had her children abroad. . . . (I've been back to Bolivia) more and more, . . . I say I'm Bolivian . . . but even though Bolivian family and friends are very surprised that I'm still so attached to Bolivia, . . . it's probably . . . the happy days that I had.

I was shocked about two years ago, a very close friend of mine said, we were at a dinner party, and everybody was a foreigner, and someone said, 'what would you change in Switzerland?', and so we started, and then he says to me, 'but you as a foreigner,' and honestly, I was shocked, because I never considered myself as a foreigner here. . . . I can't imagine not being here, not having a place to stay, . . . so it's really my nest . . . but, I'd say, (I'm) a migrating bird, I might migrate to Bolivia from time to time.

### **Anna**

(My) friends in Geneva are all international, . . . even the Swiss ones have been elsewhere. . . . So I think my whole world is international. . . . I see myself as a vagabond, based in nothing. I could die in any country of the world. . . . I would like to be buried in my parents' grave in Sweden because I have no other place. . . . I am FREE like a bird. I can live where I like. Be with whom I like. Say what I want.

### **Heidi**

I define myself as a perfectly 100% imported product! . . . I've been living here for 35 years but I still don't have that sense of belonging. . . . The Sweden I would want to go back to, does not exist anymore. New York and its suburbs, the way I remember them, that doesn't exist anymore either. . . . I belong to something that existed in the past . . . I will be staying here . . . I am imported goods, I have another background, but . . . my children are here, my grandchildren are here. . . . I always had that idea, it's always in the back of my mind, of taking my suitcase and leaving, just on the spot like that, it's something I feel I could do, and I have to be very careful not to listen to that little devil, because life is going on, and my children will live here.

## Miriam

When I go to Holland I don't feel Dutch at all, I know nothing about the country, I know nothing about the politics, I couldn't vote in a Dutch election and the culture is quite foreign to me. . . . I've always resisted changing my nationality because I've lived here (in England) longer than I've lived anywhere else. I've lived here since 1969, and that's over thirty years, and I've been married to an Englishman, have English children, and I really should be English, but I've never wanted to give up my Dutch nationality, because . . . changing your nationality, means giving up one, and I never wanted to do that. I've always said, you don't change your nationality every time you change countries and I think that is a condition of this kind of world we live in that's very cosmopolitan, but the more cosmopolitan you are, and I am, the more you want people to be able to identify you as something. . . . People always assume that I'm American actually, which really gets up my nose. I have this accent, I was working for an American company, and my family were in America, I was condemned to be American, and then sometimes I would think, 'oh I can't be bothered to change this, I won't challenge it, I'll just let it ride', and then people would start telling me things about my childhood or my education which weren't true and then at some point I'd have to say, 'hang on a minute, I'm not what you think I am, I'm Dutch', 'Dutch, how can you be Dutch?', but this feeling that if I just allowed people to assume I was something I am not, they pigeon hole you and they put a whole lot of values and assumptions and culture into you which doesn't exist, and it's not the truth, and really my truth is very, very unusual, and different and particular and I think that's important. . . . I don't really feel that Dutch . . . the other complication is that we're Jewish so I get into another kind of ethnic dishonesty, they say, oh that's funny you don't look . . . Dutch, you're so dark, and so instead of saying well that's because I'm Jewish, . . . I'll say, oh well my sister is blond and has got blue eyes, which is true, my sister is blond and she does look very Dutch, there's this kind of thing, wanting people to believe in me so much as a whole Dutch person that I don't want to admit to that ethnic side to me. You're rootless and you're not – you haven't got anywhere to go back to . . . I've always envied people who could go back to a town where they grew up and they'll meet people in the street who they knew and that kind of thing. Geneva isn't that kind of place because people move on. . . . It's a kind of rootlessness and at the same time it's liberating because it means that you're much more adaptable to wherever you live.

Where's home? Well it is here (in England) now but then there's always some of you that thinks that home is where your parents live . . . but going to America (where my parents live) does not feel like going home. Holland doesn't feel like home really.

## Bilal

When I go, so to speak, 'home', I go to the South of India . . . I think when I retire my base will be here (in Geneva) going to India in the winter months, get away from the cold here . . . November through to March in India . . . and when it starts getting too hot in India . . . come back here for the spring and summer . . . My greatest sense of belonging is without hesitation Geneva. Although people always say that it's the most boring place in the world . . . Home is South India, in terms of roots and origins, home in another sense is where I'm comfortable in the long run, and where I'm comfortable in the long run is Geneva. It's amazing I go everywhere, but when the plane touches down in Geneva airport, I say, 'aahh, home again', and I think my wife seems to be getting into that mode too, which means that we are very comfortable here, in the sense that we like the surroundings, we feel comfortable, and it's a place where we feel secure, and there's nothing unknown, maybe it's a question of being in control of the environment, more than anything.

## Mathias

For me Austria represents relaxation, . . . I totally fit in, and I think they take me for Austrian, . . . in France, I'm taken for a Frenchman, I speak fluent French, totally at home, there's a way of life and an attitude, in France, . . . and in Austria it's the same. In England, I remain sort of ambivalent, . . . I actually don't want to integrate too much . . . I don't want to take on all the English habits, I love India and feel very at home in India . . . I am not going to move back to Austria, I couldn't live there . . . I don't identify with any country one way or the other. London is very convenient, (it) is like going back to IS because it's the last truly cosmopolitan city . . . it's become such a huge international community and I think that we probably feel more at home amongst our fellow internationalists . . . because we have a different outlook on life. . . . I enjoy having no roots, I don't feel it's important to have roots, . . . I feel at home wherever I am . . . I think a lot of international people . . . don't feel bound by nationality, that nationality binds them or restricts them, I think they look at the world as though . . . they don't identify with one country at all. I think the Americans who live here still feel very American, but I think . . . the Europeans tend to discard their national mantle quite quickly because they're not too proud of the past.

## Lara

I feel very integrated in the community. . . if I can give (my daughter) that community life, that sense of belonging which I never really felt . . . I don't think I'll

ever have it as my daughter will, or my husband has, which is fine, I've used it differently, I'm not 100% American, I'm not 100% European, so I take the American mentality but with a European sample, so it helps me understand the two cultures, the two perspectives so that's a competitive advantage.

## Conclusions

So in what ways is there a link between the theory and the personal experience? These are, of course, all adults speaking who are no longer in a process of establishing a sense of identity or belonging but who are reflecting on something that has been established during the course of their lives. It is important to remember what life history and narrative analysis remind us about how people make sense of their life stories. When a person tells his or her life story, the information has been edited and events selected to create a story which is compatible with the present (Clausen, 1998; Giele and Elder, 1998; Josselson and Lieblich, 1995):

Memory has a way of making the past consistent with the present as people amend their ongoing autobiographies. (Josselson, 1987: 9)

Narrative is the representation of a process, of a self in conversation with itself and with its world over time. Narratives are not records of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life. (Josselson and Lieblich, 1995: 32)

The person being interviewed is not simply recalling facts but interpreting the past in the light of the present (Bergman et al., 1991; Cohler, 1982; Courgeau, 1990; Josselson, 1987; Wadsworth, 1991; Waterman and Archer, 1990). Polkinghorne (1988) claims that the purpose of descriptive narrative research is to uncover the common themes or plots in the data from a collection of stories. So what are the common themes from the collection of stories presented here?

### Encapsulated marginality

It is apparent from comments made by Richard, Heidi and Michel that there is an aspect of their lives in which they feel marginal to the mainstream. They feel outsiders in the countries in which they are living, even though Richard and Michel are living in their passport countries. Time has not actually made any difference to the feelings of marginality. They all claim they have no real sense of belonging in the communities

in which they are living. Their comments echo assertions made by other researchers in the field (Bennett, 1993; Cottrell, 1993; Wertsch, 1991; Wickstrom, 1989; Wrobbel and Plueddemann, 1990).

### **Constructive marginality**

There is evidence from many of the interviewees that they have used their multicultural identities to their advantage and that they have a multiple sense of belonging in different places and an ability to adjust and fit in and enjoy the advantages of being 'a part and yet apart' (Downie, 1976) of and from a place. There is a certain ambivalence which does not necessarily disturb them but gives them a sense of being different from those around them. They are positive and enthusiastic about the advantages of their background and the ability it has given them to feel at home in different places and also to relate to other people like themselves. Mathias, particularly, comments on his international lifestyle and the fact that he has settled in a cosmopolitan city where there are many other people like himself. He clearly feels comfortable in such a situation. Again, this resonates with findings in the literature (Cottrell and Useem, 1994; Pollock and Van Reken, 1999).

### **Reverse culture shock**

Richard's experience seems to confirm the evidence in the literature that the adjustment to university in one's passport country, if one has not been well prepared for the experience, can result in a major identity crisis (Austin, 1986). Certainly this is an area for international schools to consider in their preparation of students for higher education. Students who attend a university in a country which is not their passport country may find the adjustment relatively easy as they are used to being a 'foreigner in a foreign land' (Dormer, 1979). The problem documented by Richard is the surprise of feeling like a foreigner in his passport country. This very much confirms comments made by Pollock and Van Reken (1999) and Helson's (1964) disconfirmed expectancy theory.

### **Positive and negative**

There are examples of positive and negative personal experiences just as there are positive and negative findings in the literature. Sadly qualitative, interpretative research data cannot provide facts and figures to parents of TCKs to reassure them that their children will grow up as well balanced individuals with a deep sense of belonging and strong sense of identity. The data do, however, illustrate the comments and claims made in the literature, and what is important is that the data provide a springboard



for discussion. They provide case studies for examining the issues so that readers can see to what extent they identify with those speaking (Yin, 1994). It is hoped that they will be used as such, and that they will help current international school students prepare for the future. As Socrates said, 'An unexamined life is not worth living'. May research in the area of third culture kids provide an opportunity for current international school students to examine their own lives with reference to those who have gone before them.

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## Biographical notes

DR HELEN FAIL has experience teaching in national and international schools in the UK, France, Israel, Nigeria, Switzerland and the US, and as a cross-cultural consultant with international schools specialising in the profile of the Third Culture Kid and transition. She currently leads the MA in Education: International Schools at Oxford Brookes University. [email: hfail@brookes.ac.uk]

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PROFESSOR JEFF THOMPSON is Professor of Education at the University of Bath and Head of Research at the International Baccalaureate Organization Research Unit. He teaches and researches in the field of international education. [email: [jefft@ibo.org](mailto:jefft@ibo.org)]

PROFESSOR GEORGE WALKER is Director-general of the IBO and is based at its Headquarters in Geneva. He was previously Director-general of the International School of Geneva and Head Teacher at a number of schools in the UK. [email: [georgew@ibo.org](mailto:georgew@ibo.org)]