WHO AM I, WHERE DO I BELONG, WHAT IS MY FAITH? 
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS OF THIRD CULTURE KIDS

The aim of this paper is to look into certain specific conditions of the development of persons who experienced living across cultures in their childhood and to take a glance at typical features of their personalities, styles of attachment, and spiritual life.

I would like to start with the definition of Third Culture Kids (TCK). I use this term in accordance with David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken who defined Third Culture Kids as those “who spent at least part of their childhood in countries and cultures other than their own” (Pollock & van Reken 2001: 6). They do not specify how long this experience should last in order to be labeled as TCK. The minimum they mention is one year. However, the period should be long enough for TCKs to be able to perceive it as having a significant influence on their development. As the authors point out, “…they are raised in neither/nor world” (ibidem: 6). It is neither their parents’ culture nor the world of other cultures in which they are raised. It is a mixture of various cultures, which makes for the development of their own style of life.

Let us take a look at the core experience, which had such an influence on their life. I will briefly describe the stages of cross-cultural transition which is part and parcel of their biographies (ibidem: 64–71):

– Involvement – means to get a foothold, to feel secure and a part of a certain community;
– Leaving – is the stage where, by loosening bonds with others, certain strategies are used, e.g. the diminishing of the significance of those bonds, focusing on a future place of stay, or neglecting the reconciliation of present conflicts (a belief appears that time and distance will heal the relationships);
– Transition – the very heart of the transition-process. It starts in the moment of leaving and ends with the decision to settle and become a part of a particular community. Chaos, doubts, self-doubt, loss of self-esteem, lack of status are part and parcel of this period. As Pollock and Van Reken mention (ibidem: 66): “this is the time when families become at least temporally dysfunctional”.

– Entering – the decision to settle down and become a part of a certain community was already made. It is the time to build a new status. If those strivings do not succeed, a tendency to withdrawal appears. It is the time of an emotional roller-coaster.

– Reinvolve – the role in a new society is set, which enhances the feeling of safety and having a sense of belonging; one can concentrate on “here and now”.

What is typical for TCKs is the fact that they experience those stages either too often or miss the reinvolve stage. Moreover, they go through the whole emotionally exhausting process during very crucial periods of their development – in childhood or adolescence.

Let us move to the scope of my research. I used grounded theory as the methodological background (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). It is an approach in which we develop the theory from data, not the opposite way around, as often done in traditional methods of doing research. We try to put our preconceptions aside and go “into the field”. As soon as we recognize certain analytical categories, we link them and look at the resulting patterns. Then we start to build a theory which may however, have references to existing concepts.

In my research I have applied a mixed-methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). I mainly used a qualitative approach, with some elements of a quantitative study. I have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, which included some items of J. Fowler’s Faith Development Interview (2004), Adult Attachment Interview by Mary Main (1985) and, for personality assessment, I have also applied the Rorschach Test.

The data was collected in the years 2010–2012. The research concerned Polish migrants, who came back home after spending some time (at least half a year) abroad. During the recruitment process it turned out that some of those migrants had not only very recent cross-cultural experiences but also earlier ones, dating back to their childhood, memories of living in a different country. There were 21 persons interviewed in total, out of which 5 participants met the criteria of TCK’s definition by Pollock and Van Reken. What has to be mentioned is

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1 Piotrowski’s system was used in the interpretation of the Rorschach test (Grzywak-Kaczyńska, 1978; 2006).
the way those persons were recruited. They were either my patients\textsuperscript{2} or persons who answered to my advertisement posted on a website for people searching for additional earnings. What has to be stressed here, as a result of these two recruitment procedures, participants were rather not people who successfully managed to adapt to a new environment.

I will focus on five TCKs whose early cross-cultural experience was very meaningful and, as it will be gradually unfold in this paper, in some cases strongly disturbing.

Basic information about the interviewees:

- three men, two women;
- Between 22–29 years of age;
- Different cross-cultural experience: West Africa, USA, Germany, Australia;
- Years of age when the cross-cultural experience took place: 4–18 years of age;
- Timespan of the cross-cultural experience: 4–15 years;
- Education: tertiary or university students;

I was trying to distinguish certain personality characteristics typical for these TCKs. Personality as a construct was based on the psychoanalytical and humanistic approaches. Psychoanalytical terms that served as hermeneutic frames to understand personality formation were: good enough mother, transitional objects, false-self (Winnicott, 1986/2009; 1971/2011), mourning processes (Klein, 2005), self-defense mechanisms (McWilliams, 2009). Also the theory of congruence between self and experience of Rogers (Rogers, 1959) and other psychotherapeutic streams that are derived from Rogers’ view (Greenberg’s psychotherapy concentrated on emotions or Perls’ Gestalt) brought some theoretical background for interpretations. What arose from the data and my attempts to understand those phenomena was a personality comprised of certain self-defense mechanisms which, in principle, are necessary to function but under certain conditions became too rigid and constraining for the inner growth of a person. Loosing contact with one’s true experience resulted in building up a “false self” – which was more or less a set of convictions about who somebody would like to be or think they should be, with limited access to one’s true self.

There were two personality traits which emerged from the personality-assessment\textsuperscript{3}:

\textsuperscript{2} After two or three psychological consultations. However not patients in therapy or those who declared that they want to start therapy.

\textsuperscript{3} This division is a large simplification. Yet it has to be made because of the space limit, and because of the fact that a more detailed subtypology was made on the whole group of interviewees (21 persons).
1) The anxious: restrained either in expressing emotions or missing the insight; often denied feeling emotions such as: anxiety, sadness, anger; in their life-stories and in the way they unfolded them they seemed to be either reserved in contact with other people or quite dependent; they missed effective coping strategies.

2) The impulsive: showed a tendency not to “look before they leap” and were prone to make too quick decisions; they seemed to be over reactive in social situations which predisposed them to experiencing emotional turmoil and anxiety in relationships.

I also observed how the style of attachment contributes to the process of cross-cultural transition. The notion of attachment and its role in human development was derived from Bowlby’s theory of attachment in which he defines this construct as: “any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual” (Bowlby 1980/1991: 39).

In case of healthy development, attachment behavior serves as a base for the development of affectional bonds, initially between child and parent and later between adult and adult. Those patterns of attachment are activated throughout the life-cycle (Bowlby 1980/1991; 1988/2005a; 1988/2005b). Bowlby’s theory evolved within the framework of the Ainsworth typology of attachment patterns (Salter-Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), which was further developed by Mary Main in Adult Attachment Interview (Main 1985). Based on the typology introduced by Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main I have distinguished three patterns of attachment in this group:

1) The anxious-avoidant pattern: characterizes a person who does not go too deep into relationships and often withdraws when he or she feels that the relationship develops toward something serious. However, such a person may have a huge network of “friends” from all over the world with whom he or she maintains rather superficial contact;

2) The ambivalent-absorbed pattern: a person with this style of attachment develops deep relationships quickly. They describe themselves as “very open”. They get used to moving to deeper levels of communication fast because very often there was too little time to do it slower. They notice that they are “over their head” in some relationships, which suddenly becomes a burden because they feel abused or disrespected. A very common result of this pattern of involvement in relationships is a sudden break up. The person may feel confused in assessing the level of their relationship (“I never know what base I’m actually on with people …”);

3) The secure pattern: a person relatively (in comparison to the two previous types) able to develop long-lasting relationships. However, they have problems with deepening the contact. They feel safer in the company of
“internationals” and avoid revealing negative emotions (it might be culture-specific, e.g. related to the taboo of expressing negative emotions in the Anglo-Saxon culture).

Only in case of the third attachment pattern we can speak about the relationship with parents serving as a Bowlby’s secure base which made for the ability to build stable relationships in adult life.

I will now focus on some typical psychological problems TCKs often have to face, which seem to be age-dependant. When brought up in a different culture in their pre-school years, they recall those years and that country – its inhabitants and their habits – in an idealized way. They go back to those times with an explicit joy and great sentiment. The interviewees unfold their memories of an idyllic time when they had no problems with peers – were happily enjoying their intercultural contacts with other kids from all over the world. They transitioned smoothly into the local school-system. They point out great disappointment and emotional turmoil they faced back in Poland when they had to adjust to completely different rules at school when it came to contacts with teachers and peers. The homeland of their parents was actually a foreign country to them.

When the transition took place during adolescence more emotional turbulence, anxiety, and feeling of isolation in relationships with local peers was reported. Some of the problems which contributed to isolation were the following:

I. A language barrier: more acute than in pre-school contact;
II. The feeling of being different: typical for this developmental stage becomes more acute in a different culture;
III. The fear of peer-rejection: as a consequence of the previous two factors;
IV. When cross-cultural transition took place more often (three or more times) and/or during adolescence also the problem with creating and maintaining affectional bonds with other people (attachment) appears.

I will now describe some of the other repeating patterns in the narratives. All of my TCK interviewees pointed out that it is difficult for them to make up their minds when they have to deal with important life-decisions. What they want to study? Where to do it? Where is the place where they will really gain a sense of belonging? What job they would like to have? What was quite repeatable was the feeling of being lost, what we can find in the following narrative of a 21-year-old woman:

Yes, I think I was totally on the edge. I didn’t know in which direction I should go and who to listen to, and I was doing bizarre things. I didn’t know what I wanted, whether I should be here or escape from here because it would be better for me to be there. I really thought it would be better for me to be there. On the other hand,
unconsciously, I thought that I’d rather stay here. And this kind of being on the edge is very disturbing.

We can sense the confusion even from the structure of the sentences. In case of this interviewee the chaos was also caused by the absence of role models who could support her in times of hardship. Lack of strong mother and father figures seems to be a repeatable pattern in experience of TCKs. It might have been caused by the fact that parents felt lost in different culture themselves and did not seem to be good guides in the new environment.

What makes up TCK’s life is loss. They had to leave their homes, friends, the whole environment they grew up in. They adopt two ways of dealing with this. Either they try to acknowledge the loss, are aware of it, and speak out loud about it, or go through life completely unaware. However, it is sometimes hard for them to admit that their experiences were very painful indeed (Pollock & Van Reken 2001). My interviewees reported that their parents perceived emigration as a chance for them to have exceptional conditions to develop: they could pick up foreign languages, build up their educational potential – what is there to be sad about? As a result TCKs often suppressed sadness because they did not have the conditions to deal with their losses. Here is an example of a statement of a person (male, aged 24) who did not have a chance to resolve his grief:

This is it, that I had problems with peers right after coming back from Nigeria, because I wanted to share my memories with others. But I couldn’t. They always wanted me to stop talking nonsense, as they called it.

A couple of interviewees had problems with their national identities. They perceived themselves in some part Australian/German/American etc. and in some part Polish. This does not have to be negative in itself. What was evidenced in my research, is the fact that such a “patchwork identity” might be problematic when there is a lot of ambivalence and lack of insight into certain parts of it.

What they quite often found difficult is the answer to the question where they actually want to be and where they belong, because everywhere something was missing (“here is okay, but I miss…”/”I hate being here because…”). They may spend years in search of the ideal place to stay, not finding one. A new and more tempting opportunity seems always to be somewhere else (in the word of Pollock and Van Reken this phenomenon is called “migratory instinct”).

They may be very good at adjusting to a social environment (cultural chameleons), and this is perfect for establishing superficial relations. However, a problem may appear when they internally feel very insecure. This makes it hard for them to develop deep personal bonds because it demands some
knowledge about who they really are, what are their needs, where are their limits, what can they accept and what is intolerable in the behavior of other people towards them. To build such a knowledge about oneself is is necessary to have a “mirror” (however, not a distorting mirror) of significant others which gives an opportunity to have constant self-reflection and to find answers to the questions mentioned above. In case of some of my interviewees they sometimes missed this opportunity, as indicated in the following statement: “…I didn’t know what is normal anymore…”. What may result from this deficit is delayed adulthood – gaining maturity⁴ later than the peers.

It would have been interesting to include in this research a control group of Polish young people who did not experience a cross-cultural transition in their lives and to compare in which aspects their identity formation significantly differs from that of TCKs’.

At the end of my paper I would also like to stress some spiritual factors that play a role in TCKs’ development. I understand religiosity and spirituality as related concepts. Both religiosity and spirituality involve the process of meaning-making in relation to the sacred (Pargament 1997; 2011). Religiosity is a more institutionalized form of these strivings whereas spirituality embraces more individualized expressions of the search of the sacred. Both practices might play a role in moments of crisis, when religion may bring alleviating interpretations of the situation.

What emerged from my interviews is the relation: parents’ spirituality – TCKs’ spiritual coping strategies. When their parents cherished their spiritual core, i.e. they practiced the rituals of their religious formation and they were a source of consolation in difficult moments for them, children seemed to have inherited those needs and attitudes toward religion (this result is in accordance with model of social correspondence, Granquist & Kirkpatrick 2008). However, it refers only to one interviewee, who seemed to present a relatively secure attachment style.

In case of the anxious and ambivalent attachment styles, a big confusion in the spiritual sphere appeared. Those persons were very instable in their faith and possessed a very unstable image of God. They very often reported experiencing strong doubts and being confused whether they believed or not. Hence, their spiritual basis to deal with a cross-cultural transition seemed to be very fragile.

To sum up, the main conclusions from my paper are the following: being a Third Culture Kid might have disturbing influence on personality and style of attachment, but it does not have to when a person has two “good enough” parents who are able to create a secure base for their children. Learning how to use

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⁴ Which is defined, simplifying C. Roger’s view, as a self-awareness, self-acceptance and feeling of inner-congruence (Rogers, 1959; 2004).
religion as a coping resource also seems to give a solid foundation in dealing with crises of all kinds. However, it seems to be the rule that the experiences of TCKs implicate some confusion with respect to their identity. A patchwork identity, which they seem to represent, is not a problem in itself, providing they have an adequate insight and accept the cross-cultural elements. A critical problem, which stems from the previous issue, is missing one’s sense of belonging. Being in constant search for the idealized “Ithaca” seems to impede TCKs’ ability to live “here and now” with acceptance of pros and cons of the reality which surrounds them.

REFERENCES
