Static and Nomadic Third Culture Adult (TCA) Pathways

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Abstract: Third-culture scholarship has largely explained identity development through international mobility and repeated geographical relocation (Tan et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022). This theory-building paper questions whether mobility is necessary for Third Culture Adult (TCA) identity formation. It develops a dual-pathway account distinguishing Nomadic and Static TCAs. The Nomadic pathway involves recurrent adaptation as individuals move across geographical and cultural settings. The Static pathway involves cumulative cultural negotiation as individuals remain geographically anchored while experiencing sustained cultural plurality. The distinction separates geographical movement from cultural boundary-crossing and shifts attention towards how cultural encounters are organised and accumulated over time. Mobility is therefore positioned as one pathway to TCA identity rather than a necessary condition, from which propositions for subsequent empirical examination are developed.

Keywords: Third culture adults, Nomadic TCA, Static TCA, Expatriate identity, Cultural identity

1. Introduction

International mobility has long occupied a prominent position in explanations of third-culture identity. From the early conceptualisation of Third Culture Kids (TCKs), movement between national and cultural environments has been treated as an important condition through which individuals encounter multiple cultures and develop identities not located exclusively within either home or host culture (Useem et al., 1963; Pollock et al., 2017). Subsequent research similarly associates third-culture experience with international relocation, cultural adaptation and the negotiation of belonging (Fail et al., 2004; Grimshaw & Sears, 2008; Moore & Barker, 2012; Tan et al., 2021). The related idea of the 'global nomad' further reflects the close association between mobility and third-culture experience (Colomer, 2020).

Yet geographical movement and cultural boundary-crossing are not equivalent in practice or theory. Individuals may cross national borders 'physically', while remaining within relatively bounded expatriate, organisational or social environments; others may remain geographically anchored while repeatedly navigating different cultural communities, norms and interpretive frames. The emerging Third Culture Adult (TCA) concept makes this distinction particularly important because it extends third-culture identity beyond childhood mobility to include long-term expatriates and adult immigrants whose culturally plural experiences may develop through prolonged settlement (Benuyenah & Mustafa, 2024). This raises the possibility that third-culture identity may emerge not only across places, but also '*within place*'.

This paper therefore distinguishes geographical mobility, denoting physical relocation across national settings, from cultural boundary-crossing, denoting sustained or recurrent engagement across different cultural frames, practices and social environments.

Third-culture research has largely developed from populations whose experiences are characterised by international relocation, leaving comparatively limited explanatory space for adults exposed to multiple cultures through long-term geographical anchoring (Tan et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Benuyenah & Mustafa, 2024). What remains under-theorised is whether these different configurations of cultural exposure constitute distinct pathways towards TCA identity.

Addressing this gap requires attention not simply to who experiences cultural plurality, but to how different spatial and temporal formations of such experience may contribute to a similar identity outcome (Whetten, 1989). The paper therefore asks: *How can Third Culture Adult identity be theorised beyond the conventional emphasis on repeated geographical mobility?* In response, two analytically distinct pathways are developed: a Nomadic TCA pathway, in which cultural experience accumulates substantially through recurrent relocation, and a Static TCA pathway, in which it accumulates through sustained cultural plurality under relative geographical anchoring.

2. Reconsidering the Pathways to Third Culture Adult Identity

The dual-pathway account distinguishes the spatial and temporal organisation of culturally consequential experience. The Nomadic TCA pathway locates third-culture identity in repeated international relocation and the cultural transitions accompanying movement between national settings. The Static TCA pathway locates it

in prolonged exposure to cultural plurality while an individual remains substantially anchored in a single host country. The pathways therefore distinguish geographical movement from cultural boundary-crossing: the two may coincide, but need not.

Third-culture identity may consequently depend less exclusively on relocation frequency than on the duration, intensity and diversity of cultural encounters through which identity is negotiated. This is consistent with acculturation and bicultural identity research showing that sustained engagement with multiple cultural systems can reshape cultural identification and the incorporation of multiple cultural identities within the self (Berry, 1997; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

Table 1: Conceptual Foundations of Nomadic and Static Third Culture Adult Pathways

Dimension	Nomadic Third Culture Adult (Nomadic TCA) pathway	Static Third Culture Adult (Static TCA) pathway	Conceptual anchor
Geographical mobility	Repeated international relocation	Limited international relocation; sustained geographical anchoring	TCK/ATCK literature strongly associates third-culture experience with international mobility (Tan et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022).
Cultural exposure	Exposure across successive national and cultural settings	Sustained exposure to cultural plurality within one host setting	Existing TCK/ATCK research highlights the importance of exposure to multiple cultural settings; the Static TCA pathway extends the TCA conceptualisation to long-term adult settlement (Hartman, 2022; Benuyenah & Mustafa, 2024)
Temporal pattern of exposure	Episodic/recurrent, associated with relocation	Cumulative/prolonged within the same geographical setting	Mobility and transition literature provides the basis for the nomadic pattern; the cumulative static pattern is theoretically developed here (Kwon, 2019; Jones et al., 2022).
Cultural boundary-crossing mechanism	Cultural boundaries crossed substantially through relocation and adaptation	Cultural boundaries crossed substantially through repeated intercultural interaction while geographically anchored	Mobility research distinguishes physical movement from associated subjective processes, providing a conceptual precedent for separating geographical movement from cultural boundary-crossing (Zikic et al., 2010).
Identity-development mechanism	Repeated transition and adaptation contribute to continuing identity negotiation and reconstruction	Accumulated intercultural encounters are theorised to contribute to continuing identity negotiation and reconstruction	Existing TCK/ATCK identity literature provides the basis for the nomadic mechanism; the static mechanism constitutes the theoretical extension advanced here.

Note: The pathways are analytically distinct but not necessarily mutually exclusive over time. The Static TCA pathway is proposed as a theoretical extension; its empirical equivalence to the Nomadic pathway remains to be established.

As summarised in Table 1, the pathways consequently differ in how cultural difference is encountered over time. Nomadic exposure is principally episodic and relocation-linked, whereas Static exposure is cumulative and embedded within place. This distinction matters because geographical relocation does not necessarily indicate the depth of cultural boundary-crossing. Lauring et al. (2019), for example, found that deeper interaction with host-country nationals was associated with personal development among ATCKs, suggesting that international presence alone does not capture the quality of cultural engagement. Similarly, broader migrant research treats integration and acculturation as processes shaped by interaction across individual, organisational and societal contexts rather than by international movement alone (Hajro et al., 2019).

Prolonged residence in a culturally plural setting may therefore provide an alternative context for identity negotiation. It is evident, therefore, that duration alone is insufficient; geographical continuity must be accompanied by sustained and sufficiently intensive intercultural engagement. Building on the recognition of long-term adult settlement within the TCA concept (Benuyenah & Mustafa, 2024), the Static pathway specifies how cultural encounters may accumulate within place, rather than principally through movement across places. Static therefore denotes geographical anchoring, not cultural immobility.

3. Theorising Nomadic and Static Third Culture Adults

3.1 The Nomadic Third Culture Adult

The Nomadic Third Culture Adult represents the pathway most closely aligned with established third-culture literature (Thomas et al., 2021; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). Its defining feature is not international experience itself, but recurrent geographical relocation through which encounters with different cultural settings become recurring features of the life course. Kwon (2019), for example, found that repeated shifts in location, culture and language remained closely connected to adult identity, while Colomer (2020) describes international mobility during childhood as both a recurrent way of life and an identity marker. The Nomadic TCA retains this established association but treats repeated mobility as one pathway, rather than an implicit requirement, for third-culture identity.

Cultural exposure within this pathway is episodic and substantially renewed as the individual moves between settings (Hisano, 2015). Relocation itself, however, does not necessarily produce identity development. Lauring et al. (2019), studying 424 business expatriates, found that deeper interaction with host-country nationals was important for ATCK personal development. The Nomadic pathway should therefore not be reduced to a count of countries or relocations: movement provides the spatial structure within which cultural encounters occur, while their identity consequences depend on engagement with the cultural environments through which the individual moves. The mechanism proposed here is consequently recurrent adaptation, through which successive cultural transitions repeatedly occasion identity negotiation (Sussman, 2002; Kwon, 2019).

3.2 The Static Third Culture Adult

By contrast, the Static Third Culture Adult represents a different pathway (See Table 1 & Figure 1). Static does not imply cultural immobility or the complete absence of international movement. Rather, it denotes relative geographical continuity in which an individual remains substantially anchored in one host country while experiencing sustained cultural plurality. Benuyenah and Mustafa (2024) provide the conceptual starting point by extending third-culture identity to long-term expatriates and adult immigrants whose experiences develop through prolonged residence outside their country of origin. The Static TCA develops this further by requiring not simply residence, but recurring and sufficiently meaningful engagement with cultural difference such that identity is negotiated beyond an individual's first culture and any singular conception of the host culture.

This pathway becomes particularly plausible in culturally heterogeneous environments where geographical continuity does not imply cultural continuity. Research on super-diversity demonstrates that migrant-receiving societies may contain complex configurations of national origin, language, migration status and other forms of difference within the same geographical space (Vertovec, 2007). Doucerain et al. (2024) similarly show that migrants in super-diverse settings form relationships not only with a host majority but with individuals from multiple other cultural backgrounds, with implications for acculturation and identification. A geographically anchored adult may therefore experience considerable cultural heterogeneity through work, friendship, family and other social environments without successive international relocation.

The Static TCA should consequently not be equated with long-term expatriation. What distinguishes the pathway is the combination of geographical anchoring, prolonged cultural plurality and repeated intercultural engagement through which cultural difference becomes consequential for identity. Unlike Nomadic TCAs, whose encounters are substantially organised around successive relocations, Static TCAs encounter cultural plurality cumulatively within a relatively continuous geographical setting. Its proposed mechanism is therefore cumulative cultural negotiation. Accordingly, two contrasting biographies can be used illustrate the distinction between the two pathways.

Illustrative biographies

> ***(A) Nomadic TCA.*** *Ana has lived and worked in four countries over 18 years. Each relocation has brought different social expectations, workplace practices and cultural relationships, requiring adjustment in how she relates to each setting. Her third-culture experience has accumulated largely across places.*
>
> ***(B) Static TCA.*** *Samir has lived in the UAE for 20 years. Although geographically anchored, his work and social life routinely bring him into close contact with people from different national, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. His third-culture experience has accumulated largely within place.*

The pathways are analytically distinct rather than mutually exclusive across the life course. Their principal distinction lies in how culturally consequential exposure is configured: across places through recurrent relocation for the Nomadic TCA, and within place through cumulative cultural exposure for the Static TCA.

4. Mechanisms of Nomadic and Static TCA Identity Development

The preceding distinction establishes two pathways through which culturally consequential experience may accumulate: across places through recurrent relocation, or within place through sustained cultural plurality under geographical anchoring. **The theoretical distinction, however, rests not simply on where cultural encounters occur, but on how those encounters become consequential for identity.** For the Nomadic TCA, the proposed mechanism is recurrent adaptation. Successive relocations interrupt geographical and cultural continuity and expose individuals to changing social expectations, relationships and cultural environments. TCK and ATCK research provides a basis for this mechanism through its emphasis on cross-cultural transition, adaptation and continuing identity negotiation (Kwon, 2019; Hartman, 2022).

For the Static TCA, the proposed mechanism is cumulative cultural negotiation. In this scenario, geographical interruption is unnecessary. Culturally different encounters accumulate within place and may progressively require negotiation of different cultural expectations and orientations. This draws on research showing that cultural and identity adaptation may develop through sustained engagement within a host environment (Berry, 1997; Hajro et al., 2019) and that multiple cultural orientations may become incorporated within the self in different ways (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). The distinction is therefore one of process: recurrent adaptation across places versus cumulative cultural negotiation within place.

Figure 1 brings these pathways and their respective mechanisms together within the proposed dual-pathway theory of TCA identity.

NOMADIC TCA PATHWAY		**STATIC TCA PATHWAY**
Repeated international relocation		Sustained geographical anchoring + Prolonged/intensive exposure to cultural plurality
↓		↓
Episodic/recurrent cultural exposure		Cumulative/prolonged cultural exposure
↓		↓
Recurrent adaptation		Cumulative cultural negotiation
↓		↓
Identity negotiation		Identity negotiation
↘	THIRD CULTURE ADULT IDENTITY	↙

(Boundary condition: Cultural encounters must be sufficiently recurrent or sustained, and consequential for identity negotiation (see Benuyenah & Mustafa, 2024).)

Figure 1: Dual-Pathway Theory of Third Culture Adult Identity

Geographical mobility is thus treated as a context for culturally consequential encounters rather than the underlying mechanism of TCA identity formation.

5. Boundary Conditions and Theoretical Propositions

From the theorisation so far, neither repeated international relocation nor prolonged residence in a culturally plural setting is sufficient to produce TCA identity. In either pathway, cultural encounters must become sufficiently recurrent or sustained, and sufficiently consequential, to occasion continuing identity negotiation.

International relocation can occur with limited engagement beyond bounded expatriate or organisational communities, just as long-term anchoring may involve little meaningful cultural boundary-crossing. The pathways are therefore conditional rather than deterministic (Berry, 1997; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Moore & Barker, 2012).

Proposition 1. TCA identity is more likely to develop when exposure to cultural difference is sufficiently recurrent or sustained to become consequential for identity negotiation, irrespective of whether such exposure accumulates across or within geographical settings. For Nomadic TCAs, repeated relocation creates recurrent cultural transitions, making adaptation and identity negotiation recurring features of the pathway (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013; Kwon, 2019; Sussman, 2002).

Proposition 2. Nomadic TCA identity is more likely to develop when repeated international relocation creates recurrent cultural transitions that require adaptation and identity renegotiation. For Static TCAs, geographical continuity must instead be accompanied by prolonged and sufficiently intensive engagement with cultural plurality. Cultural difference must become a recurring and consequential feature of work, social or relational life (Hajro et al., 2019).

Proposition 3. Static TCA identity is more likely to develop when sustained geographical anchoring is accompanied by prolonged, intensive engagement with cultural plurality that requires ongoing identity negotiation. The proposition therefore locates the Static pathway not in geographical stability itself, but in the cumulative cultural negotiation that may occur within it.

6. Discussion and Theoretical Contributions

The dual-pathway theory makes three contributions. First, it reconsiders the explanatory status of geographical mobility. TCK and ATCK research has generated substantial insight into internationally mobile lives (Tan et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022), but has also positioned repeated movement near the conceptual centre of third-culture experience. The present theory retains international relocation as an important pathway while treating it as one spatial-temporal configuration through which culturally consequential encounters may arise rather than as a necessary condition.

Second, the theory introduces pathway heterogeneity. Building on the broader TCA construct (Benuyenah & Mustafa, 2024), it distinguishes a Nomadic route shaped by recurrent relocation and cultural transition from a Static route in which prolonged cultural plurality accumulates under geographical anchoring. This moves TCA theory from identifying who may develop third-culture identity towards explaining how different configurations of cultural experience may contribute to its development.

Third, the theory shifts explanation from mobility status towards process. Recurrent adaptation and cumulative cultural negotiation locate the distinction in how cultural experience is organised over time and across geographical settings rather than simply in movement or stability. TCA theorising is thereby moved towards a process-centred explanation concerned with how culturally consequential encounters are organised, accumulated and incorporated into identity.

7. Research Agenda

The dual-pathway theory requires empirical examination across populations with different mobility histories. Research should test whether Nomadic and Static TCAs can be distinguished by the spatial and temporal organisation of cultural exposure rather than simply by countries lived in or duration of residence. For Static TCAs, duration should be distinguished from the intensity and diversity of intercultural engagement; for Nomadic TCAs, relocation frequency should be distinguished from the depth of engagement within each setting. Longitudinal and life-history designs would be particularly useful, including comparisons between individuals with different mobility histories but similar levels of sustained cultural engagement.

The pathways may also change across the life course. Future research should examine transitions between Nomadic and Static pathways, including whether mechanisms associated with earlier mobility persist after geographical settlement. Such research would establish whether the pathways operate independently, sequentially or in combination.

8. Conclusion

This paper develops a dual-pathway account of TCA identity in which culturally consequential experience may accumulate across places, through recurrent relocation and adaptation, or within place, through geographical

anchoring and cumulative cultural negotiation. Its central theoretical move is to separate geographical movement from cultural boundary-crossing. Mobility remains an important context for third-culture experience but is repositioned as one pathway rather than its defining condition. This allows TCA theory to account for individuals whose identities are shaped through sustained cultural plurality without repeated international relocation, while preserving the significance of mobility established within TCK and ATCK scholarship.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for this study as the paper is conceptual and did not involve human participants or the collection of primary data.

AI Declaration: Except for limited editorial assistance and preliminary drafting using ChatGPT (OpenAI), the manuscript was independently developed by the author. All AI-assisted text was critically reviewed and substantially revised, with no reliance on AI for the scholarly arguments, analysis or conclusions. The author takes full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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