



# The Mk's Advantage: *Three Cultural Contexts*<sup>1</sup>

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I hold a positive view of intercultural experience as foundational in the development of fulfilled personhood in the modern complex world. Consequently, I view the Missionary Kid [MK] growing-up experience as very positive and very valuable, in comparison with the experiences available to their cousins who are stuck back home.

## Advantages of Growing Up Overseas

Growing up overseas represents at least three kinds of head start: First, one of the most predictably difficult problems in every Western society is the problem of coping with interpersonal relations. More jobs are lost, more people drop out of school, and more people seek psychiatric help over that issue than any other. I submit that the intercultural experience carries with it the kind of flexibility and the kind of rolling shift that allows well-balanced young people to get a head start in coping with interpersonal relations.

Beyond that, the overseas experience provides a concrete awareness of what the world is really like. Much tension and conflict in this world arise out of an ethnocentrism that is totally unaware of, and unconcerned about, the rest of the world.

There's another kind of head start, which is so dear even to many American missionaries. That is, "What will my kid do to make money in life?" There is an absolutely overwhelming trend toward an increased demand for internationally experienced young people to go into international careers, if they have broken the language barrier. International experience and multilingual capability are more valuable than degrees in today's marketplace.

## Scars from Growing Up Interculturally

Growing up leaves damage. Growing up leaves scars and it leaves hurts. Let us not be maudlin about this. Life is like that. But there is nothing wrong with us getting together to talk about those scars and about ways to offset them. I refer to what I think of as the two key scars predictable in the intercultural growing-up experience, whether missionary or other. I think they are inevitable, and to some extent, they are painful and damaging, but so is life in any society.

## Disorientation

I refer to the scars that are left by disorientation. There's a lot more that we can do about that than we're currently doing. Take a moment to conceptualize an experience that you and I could have together. We are both together in a large city. Neither one of us knows the city. You stand on one street corner, and out of sight of you I stand on another street corner. We each decide that we will just stand on those street corners for four hours and see how we feel at the end of the experience. Everyone walking by is a stranger, with the exception of one friend who walks by your

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Ward. The MK's Advantage: Three Cultural Contexts. In Joyce Bowers (ed.) *Raising Resilient MKs: Resources for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers*. Association of Christian Schools International, 1998, pp. 50-61. This book (which includes The MK's Advantage, chapter 8) is available as a full text eBook at [http://www.missionarycare.com/ebooks/Raising\\_Resilient\\_MKs.pdf](http://www.missionarycare.com/ebooks/Raising_Resilient_MKs.pdf)

street corner every thirty minutes and winks. At the end of those four hours, I will be miserable; you will be comfortable. What made the difference? The re-orienting experience that comes from involvement with other people, no matter how slight, through which we re-affirm our identity and re-establish our sense of who we are, and even, if you please, where we are.

We can do far more than we do today if we really come to understand what disorientation is and take more seriously the need for periodic orientation. When we were traveling a lot with our small children, we would wake up in a strange place and say, “Where is it today?” We knew jolly well our kids were going through a whole day of wondering where they were and why. Periodically, we would sit at breakfast in a strange place and say, “Let’s go through this. Here’s where we are. Here’s why we’re here. And here’s what’s likely to happen.” So far as my wife and I could make out, our kids never really suffered much from disorientation.

## **Racism**

The other scar that is perhaps inevitable is the scar left by racism. Much that we do as expatriates is ultimately ethnocentric and racist. We need to name it. We need to work on it because it’s part of the sinful tendency of human beings.

These scars are worth the price, but we should do what we can to reduce them and to reduce their negative effects.

## **Our Goals for MKs**

However, we’re after something far more significant than simply the reduction of scars. We’re after the power in life that comes from *disciplined resourcefulness*. I will give you three to one any time on a missionary kid over anybody else in terms of disciplined resourcefulness. American kids today sometimes don’t even know how to change the tire on a car.

Another of the great positives we’re after is *culture-learning skills* themselves—the capacity to learn culture. Just as surely as you can learn how to do other things in life, you can learn how to learn culture. That’s a tremendously powerful skill. It makes a person much more able to cope with the range and variety of situations that life holds.

The third kind of these great bottom lines is *flexibility*—the capacity to identify with the great figures of history who were able to move internationally and interculturally and influence the world. Our young people have this benefit.

## **Negative Stereotype**

There’s a terrible negative stereotype that has developed around this whole business of growing up overseas. It is partly because of the misunderstandings of some of our novelists, James Michener, for example.

James Michener doesn’t understand the missionary community, and he understands MKs even less. His book *Hawaii* is deeply resented by the native Hawaiian population. I happen to know this because I am involved with them. His premises are that the missionaries did damage, and he makes even more of the fact that the MKs went bad. One of the first great missionary activities, sponsored by a church in the United States, Park Street Church, the Sandwich Island Mission, began as a response to a very practical request from a ship captain’s cabin boy who had jumped ship in Boston in the 1820s. Cold and disheveled, he found himself in the basement of Park Street Church. The people of Park Street became interested in him, and through him became interested in his people. They sent out several waves of missionaries.

These missionaries took their families. That is an old American habit. Once they got the kids out there and they started growing up, they got kind of a second thought that said, “Oh, oh. What are we supposed to do now?”

You know what they did? That first group of Sandwich Island missionaries built a high school for their kids in order that they would have social interaction with nationals—there’s a word! They quickly reduced the Hawaiian language to print, put together enough Hawaiian-language books to get a number of other kids ready, and within the fourth year of that mission, in an illiterate society, they had some native kids ready to go with their kids to the first MK school ever established overseas. That school stands today in Maui and is called Lahai High School. It is a public high school and has been in continuous use since it was first built. The MKs didn’t go home to Boston, because the families thought that the very people that Jesus Christ had called them to were worthy to be lived with and worthy to be included in the humanity that is the whole of God’s universe.

Many of those MKs made the dreadful mistake, according to Michener, of intermarrying with Hawaiians. Do you know that the great first families of Hawaii have missionary grandmothers? Yes, indeed, the MKs became involved in commerce, in shipping, and in agriculture. They transformed that group of islands. They haven’t done half the damage that the tourists have done, and the Hawaiians know it. They entered into society as the co-parents of the emerging culture in the turbulent overflowing nature of human change.

I think even as Michener misunderstood missionaries sometimes missionaries misunderstand culture. I’ve heard the word *culture* used in some very strange ways, mostly as a static term to mean a kind of a thing that sits there. Look folks, culture, whatever else it is, is not static. Competent people in the world move with competency among shifting patterns of culture. The issue is not trading in one culture for another, like you’d trade in one car for another. It’s not a thing. It’s not sitting over here and then sitting over there. It’s being human and moving in and out from here to there, and being able to competently function in varieties of situations. Human cultures are not to be abandoned so that we can become third culture or anything else. Our cultures always profit from being expanded and blended. Would that the missionary community could accept the validity of expanding and blending their cultural ways with others.

### **Cultural Contexts of the MK**

The MK is especially benefited by having three cultural contexts. Let me point out that I am talking about three cultural contexts, not three cultures.

Now, the originator of the term TCK (third-culture kid) was a colleague of mine in the same department. We worked together for many years. In her original paper when she coined the term, Ruth Useem was talking technically, about the cultural variables that are not definable in terms of *ours* and *theirs*. She was talking about the dynamic of that which is different because people from outside settings residing in an inside setting do not take their primary identities ultimately from either, but they take it from the commonness that they have with others who are doing the same thing. Now we have popularized and seriously misused the term TCK.

This technical vocabulary may indeed have drawn us off the trail, but let me take a moment to deal with it. The first culture is one’s own native base culture. The second culture is the culture into which one is knowingly adapting by virtue of being somewhere else—though in many cases rejecting particulars of that culture, nevertheless living willingly within it. The third culture, and this was Ruth’s insight, is that different little culture that’s created by a whole bunch of people who are doing that second culture thing. When the whole bunch of people is doing it at the same place, same time, same space, they create their own community. She had, in her original paper, no reference to anything like what we would call the MK.

You may be interested in knowing that she and her husband, John, spent most of their lives in Asia studying the overseas intellectual communities of Western European and American people in the sciences and technology. Those transplanted technologists and scientists in Singapore would seek their friendships not among Singaporeans, but among others from Germany, from Sweden, from Denmark, from Brazil—who were also technologists in Singapore. That was what she described as the third culture. I think we've seriously misused that term, and in the process, we've created a static term. Then we've given it some standard values, and made generalizations about it which lead us to the wrong questions.

What are some of the wrong questions? They are nonsense questions. "Is it OK to be an MK?" "What are the problems of being an MK?" They're dumb questions, but they're the questions that a static view of culture leads you to.

Then you get preoccupied by rootlessness. Oh, come on. Millions of people in the world are rootless. Don't get paranoid about 30,000 kids when 10% of them are rootless.

Separation. Look, if you want to see separation do some real damage, go back to your home churches and take a look at the kids of the divorced Christians. They have a separation problem.

It used to be that the American family moved once every seven years. It's down to once every 2.7 years. You're from a society in the West of moving people. That's what urbanization is all about. All the kids of Americans are moving too much. In fact, missionary families typically move less than American families move.

### **First Cultural Context**

We should understand the cultural contexts in which we operate. First of all, every one of us operates as a child of some kind of community. For the MK, this is as a child of the missionary community. What is the culture base culture, or starting place culture, of that child? It's the culture of that base community. Now if you believe that the starting place culture of the missionary community of Quito, Ecuador, is exactly like the starting place community of White middle-class Americans of Toledo, Ohio, you are wrong. It is not exactly like it. It has a lot in common, however.

Think of it in terms of communities, not cultures. We all can understand *community*. The goal of that community is to produce an aware citizen with a sense of identity. But, we have a problem. Many people in American society today, and to some extent in some of the other Western societies, are not learning enough about the distinctives of their own culture. They don't even know what they are. If I were to ask someone on the street in the United States, "Name five values that are distinctly American values," he would give me a very quick one-word response, and it would be "Huh?"

One of the problems that the overseas family has is the need to really comprehend, at a fairly specific level, what makes that base culture coherent. For example, we need to understand and be ready to help our children understand our rituals. You have to come to grips with the rituals that give your culture texture. What is the Fourth of July? What does it stand for? Why are there holidays on Presidents' birthdays? What was the Thanksgiving idea? Where did it come from? Why do Americans celebrate Christmas differently? Why is Christmas so mercantile? We need to understand that that's part of our value system.

Now you say, "Well, I'm not proud of part of it." Well, that's all right. That's known as maturity, and people in any culture can come to a level of maturity that says, "Not everything about the way we are is glorious, but we understand it. We appreciate it. We value it, and sometimes we even defend it irrationally." That's part of a base culture.

What is it that we pick out to pass on to our kids? It's possible, as a critical Christian, to come to grips with the positive side of our culture and our history. What are the events that have shaped us?

A crucial issue in missionary kid education at this conference is the willy-nilly application of American propositions, American values, American notions, without even understanding what they are.

We must be in our society in order to help develop the culture of that society. That's part of the business of the gospel. And the business of the gospel involves Americans in being in the American culture, and it involves Canadians in being in the Canadian culture, etc.

In every society, you can find some values that have their origin in some Biblical premise. There's one that I find interesting. Americans tend to derive their identity and draw their self-awareness from a contemporary "who we are," rather than, as true in many other Western societies, "who our family has been and where our family came from."

"We know who we are." Americans like to say that. It's important we know who we are—not who we were, but who we are. There are Europeans who like to keep pointing back and saying, "Here is where we came from." They look back. Americans always look in the present, and that is strangely a Christian view. The core of that idea is that we are, as Christians, what we are because of what God is doing.

So there is a strangely Christian root in that cultural value. But in a fallen world it goes sour. It turns into a kind of repression of our consciousness of our worldly heritage, the denial of our past. It turns into an excessive preoccupation with "me" and "here and now" and "my thing." Very American. We even turn around and coin pejorative language to desecrate some aspects of our cultural past, especially our willingness to blend. I'm particularly sensitive to some language like "half-breeds." In rejecting our unique sources, White Americans have formed a Whites-only thing they call a melting pot. They became self-satisfied over time with that "now" identity and, in the process, became racist. Good news and bad news.

The core of many of our value ideas are sound, if we can help our kids peel them apart like the banana and find the good inside. We could do our culture a great deal of good if we knew how to do that, and if our kids were doing that competently. Americans overseas are typically more concerned about those things than their cousins in the States. That's good. That's a benefit of a first, or base culture, context of the overseas growing-up experience.

## **Second Cultural Context**

But there's a second cultural context, and this gets even better, because our second context is carved out of being friendly, voluntary participants in a host society. The goal of this process is becoming sojourners who learn. In any culture, we gain perspective on our own base culture as we see it from outside. Even a tourist can get this. The only problem is that tourists too often don't know how to do it.

The Biblical models that are outstanding to me are Abraham in the Old Testament, who through his sojourning experience, came to know what God was; Jesus as a focal person in the whole of God's plan, a tremendous example of a sojourner; and of course; Paul, who was the nomad of nomads. The great model missionary, don't forget, was an itinerant. These people were conforming to culture, but being transformed by that which is greater than culture, and using cultural experience as part of that transforming process. It really does work.

One of the greatest goals that I see in experiencing culture two is perspective. That perspective helps us see our own base culture more clearly. In the context of the culture of the other, we have the experience that is unavailable to the fish. The fish is never asked in as a consultant on how it feels to live in the water, for the simple reason that the fish has absolutely no way of comparing living in the water with living anywhere else. One reason that Americans can't tell you what it means to be American is because so few Americans have ever experienced it from a second cultural context.

I find more MKs understanding the nature of American society than people who are raised wholly within it. Would that we could get that message across to parents. Paranoid parents have got to be helped.

They think they've hurt their kids. They think God goofed. They think somehow God has to separately call everybody at every minute at every hour to every altitude, latitude, longitude, and attitude. That has got to be a lot of bunk. Our God has called all of us into this world to be ministering persons in cultures. Whether I'm locked into some gosh awful sub-cultural context in North America or some other in the world, what's the difference?

Notice the frequency of the word *survive* in reference to other-culture living. "How do you survive?" Every time you hear the word *survive*, replace it with the word *thrive*. It will at least rhyme, and it sure does a lot for your spirits. Words like *culture shock*—good grief! Talk about popularization of some bad research! Culture shock—for the most part largely exaggerated poop! Incompetency, yes, but incompetency comes in all kinds of forms. Don't talk about survival kids. Anxieties for parents and children are far less if we use our second cultural context to better understand our first cultural context.

### **Third Cultural Context**

The beauty of growing up overseas is that there is a third cultural context that can come into clarity, and is actually looking forward into what I see as twenty-first century Christianity. Today's Christian has the possibility of being called by God into service as a member of the international community of the body of Christ. *World Christians*, a common, almost cliché term, really has a lot of substance underneath it. The problem is we haven't gotten serious enough to get together to talk about what we mean by *world Christian*. There are a lot of things that could happen if we were to take a conference such as this and just focus it on some of the distinctively evident characteristics of being a world Christian in the missionary kid community. Let me just give you a couple of examples.

### **Characteristics of the MK as World Christian**

A characteristic of the overseas missionary child is this extended family that even goes beyond blood lines. You've experienced it—Uncle Pete, Aunt Mary. It is representative of a third cultural context that I think we haven't named properly, partly because we've been hung up on this notion of the third culture. We live in a culture of the Christian in the internationalizing world, and that is a cultural context. Think about it.

Another characteristic is the loyalty to Christian values, even above the social pragmatics that we deal with in any society. There are characteristics of the internationalizing community of Christ that may very well, in this increasingly shrunken world, become characteristic of the church, in general, in the twenty-first century. One of my propositions is that the missionary kid of the '90s will be the prototype of the Christian of the twenty-first century.

We're coming to understand now that people don't just move out of their nation in order to get education and then come back home again. Missionaries haven't quite come to grips with this. You may be interested in knowing that the term *brain drain* has almost disappeared from professional literature, because we know very well that people who get higher levels of education generally don't go home again in the old-fashioned, maudlin sense of going back to their own community and their own people. They become part of an internationalizing set of people.

Many of the people in this room originally may have gone into missions for a three- to five-year stint. However, now, even if they were to leave missions, they would probably remain in some kind of international community in some kind of international work. This is a very important transformation occurring in modern societies.

The Peace Corps veterans who were so much in demand in the late '60s and '70s have largely disappeared because of the de-emphasis of the present administration of the Peace Corps. Therefore, the MK community, once again, may become the popular source for internationalists to take responsibilities overseas.

It's an old notion and is probably true in historical perspective, that the missionary community has produced a number of illustrious people. That was back in the days when the missionary community was raising up kids who had their eyes on the national or international societies in which they were serving. Today's paranoia among American parents overseas causes them to fix their eyes and their kids' eyes back home on re-entry without asking the question, "Why re-entry?"

Now I think the reason for re-entry is valid. Don't get me wrong. But why should we predispose ourselves to direct our kids? I heard at least one of the MKs on this platform say, "Don't push us into your models of our future." And I heard a mature, experienced, MK mother of MKs say a very comparable thing about her childhood.

There's a vacuum in the world that can be filled by MKs who are freed by their parents and by their communities to be whatever it is that God wants them to be. More important, the world Christian, as a cultural model, can be founded and grounded in Romans 12. I would strongly urge you to understand all that Romans 12 holds. We see the image there of the living sacrifice, yes. But then we see the qualitative descriptions: not egocentric; not ethnocentric; transformed, not conformed; and committed to a body-life concept of community.

Now I ask you, "Could that be characteristic of the community of Christianity on the world scene in the twenty-first century? I believe so. The problem is that missions are in transformation. Mission strategies are changing. Missionary deployment patterns are changing. The nature of the missionary vocation is changing. A career missionary today does not get buried in China at age 47 under great mounds of Chinese soil. He gets buried at age 47 at a North American mission office desk under mounds of paper. That's called a career missionary.

The problem is that we see the cracks. We see the flaws. We see the lumps. We see the bumps. We're aware that there are real problems in the missionary community today. Let's back off and look at the bigger picture as God sees it. Sure there are problems. Sure there are cracks; there are flaws, there are lumps; there are bumps—but God is in control. God is doing his thing. The trouble is that it is our stubbornness sometimes that insists on being able to see exactly every step. Again, that is a value that is very Western. "I gotta know where I'm goin' or I don't wanna go."

The sad fact is that most North American churches, your supporting churches, are painfully monocultural. They need your help to get out of that. Wow! What thirty thousand MKs could do by just going home, to help transform those churches that just don't see anything beyond the back fence.

Once upon a time, a very marvelously learned man who was culturally flexible, who knew how to work in that second context and third context, said these words, "For though I am free with respect to all [sounds like an American, doesn't it?], I have made myself a slave to all [begin to know who I'm reading from?], so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 9: 19-22

Here's the ultimate statement of the third context flexibility: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."<sup>3</sup>

That's what I mean—the MK as the prototype of the twenty-first century Christian. Would that we would integrate our Christianity in the whole of our experience. Being a Christian, you see, ultimately is a cultural matter, not just another-worldly experience. We need to synchronize our families, our communities, and our schools to this culture three, the context of Christian internationalism.

## Role of the Schools

Schools need to carefully articulate what it is that parents are and who it is that parents are becoming. There is no excuse for any institution allegedly serving missions making things harder for missionaries or for missions.

I do know my repertoire of horror stories pretty well. I could elect to use this hour to do some muckraking, but I promised myself and the good Lord I wouldn't. But he allowed me to put this one line in here, and I'm going to read it so I won't embellish it:

"I am sick of the stories of last-minute teachers arriving in a state of real shock within cultural enclaves attempting to teach children and projecting racist overtones. MKs deserve better. Missionaries must demand better. And God's name must be better served." We need to put "Christianity" in our Christian schools in something other than the required course in Bible.

### Defaults in "Christian" Education

There are four defaults in much that passes as Christian education that a truly Christian education would come to grips with:

**Ethnocentrism** is a kind of learning impairment. If you knew you were doing something to kids that was making it harder for them to read, you would do something about it. Ethnocentrism makes it harder for kids to learn from the environments in which they live. It's a learning impairment. We ought to recognize it and put our heads together on it.

**Fear of the unknown** produces hostility and anger and a lot of other non-glorifying fruits that are hardly fruits of the Spirit. We need to help people with fear.

**Superiority syndrome** is the notion that might makes right, and our way is the best way. These are not the ways of Christ. Simply helping children see how much better they are than their fellows and their siblings is no way to encourage them. Most of us as parents know that, but we turn around and do that in our communities.

**Social distance and isolation.** We can learn to accept culture as an encounter, a walk of life, dynamic and changing; to learn and to teach the skills of learning culture; and not to fret over whether or not I want my kid to marry a national. That's a secondary question, and if it becomes a haunting obsession early in life, it guarantees all negative outcomes. Furthermore, it guarantees to put children into schooling environments that are totally abstracted from the societies in which you're living. The Christian community, in addition to our schools, needs to be helped to develop the support structures that make real this community of Christ. The Christian community needs to acknowledge its cultural difference.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 9: 22-23



We need, at the same time, to relate acceptingly in the spirit of the gospel to people to whom we are ministering even though their ways are culturally alien from ours. Our good Lord was criticized for keeping company with people of a culture that was unfitting in the eyes even of the Pharisees. “You hang around with these publicans and sinners and fallen women and all the rest of the rabble.” He said, “I have come for that purpose.” Do we need research in this field? Yes, I think we do. We need a better understanding of our context, and a clearer understanding of ourselves and the dynamics that are impacting MKs because of who we are. Do we need analysis? Yes, I think so, because to see more clearly is to be better in touch with realities and better able to cope. Respect and perspective are the keys to Christian development.

Having said all that, I am very much afraid that a preoccupation with diagnostics and with therapies can get us into a great deal of trouble. We need to think bigger than the MK as our unit of analysis in the first place. There is nothing wrong with having two or three conferences focusing on the MK. I am thankful for the way the good Lord has raised this consciousness at this time. But we need a bigger unit of analysis. We need to look beyond our schools and our families. We need to look at the whole nature of the Christian community in a given context and all that it can be for the glory of God. Anxious parents, defensive schools, isolated communities—these are remediable to the glory of God.

We are the people of hope. I Corinthians 13:13 is still there, and our major strength lies in that word *hope*. It sits between faith and love. The greatest of these is love. Indeed, in the genius of the gospel, that’s the crux of it. But in the serving of the community of Christ, we must be careful to keep the centerpiece, hope, in its place. Growing up as an MK should always be approached by any of us—parents, professionals, community members—in terms of its positive values, especially in light of the needs of a world in which Christians with global interests, concerns, and competencies will serve well their Lord and Master who reigns.