THE INTRICACIES OF A MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE

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ABOVE:
CEMS students at work at Ivey

T hird culture kids are people who spent a large part of their childhood outside their parents' culture[1], typically having led a globally nomadic lifestyle. Children of business expats, diplomats, the military, or the missionary are good examples. Third culture kids develop ties with each culture they're exposed to, but their cultural identity is complex, dynamic, and even confused at times: they don't fully identify with the first culture (i.e., the parent's culture), nor the second culture (i.e., the host culture or set of host cultures), but they identify with a unique "third culture" that's the personally negotiated result of all cultures combined. Home, an emotional place of belonging, is no longer so much about a place for them but about connection to other third culture kids who can effortlessly understand the complexity and dynamic of their inner selves.

Not all of my CEMS students are third culture kids, technically. Some are biculturals who permanently immigrated to a new country with their families, others are curious individuals who became avid travelers as adults. Regardless, I do see similar characteristics and I think one word that sums it all up is complexity. It's really interesting to hear CEMS students talk during case discussion in my courses, because of how they talk. CEMS students have what psychologists call "integrative complexity," or the capacity to acknowledge the reasonableness of competing perspectives while being able to draw conceptual links among the different perspectives and integrate them into a coherent whole[2]. When CEMS students talk about culture specifically, they clearly understand that clashing cultural perspectives and worldviews exist, that each perspective is reasonable in their own right, and they understand how the competing perspectives fit as pieces of the puzzle into a larger whole[3].

Based on research on third culture kids[4] and biculturals[5], I would say the key strengths are having an expanded worldview, creativity, adaptability, being non-judgmental, and fast relationship-building; the key challenges come from the flip side of the same coin on these strengths, including value conflict and confused loyalties, difficulty in repatriation, rootlessness, and frequent loss of relationships[6].

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Strengths

Expanded Worldview & Creativity:. Having an expanded worldview[7] means that you can "see" things from multiple cultural perspectives, and have an understanding of how those perspectives fit into a bigger picture—this is the integrative complexity I mentioned before, specifically when it comes to how you think about culture[8]. Having integrative complexity about culture is important not only because you have a more complex understanding of the world, but because it leads to creativity. Research has shown that when you have integrative complexity about culture as a function of being bicultural (i.e., you identify with both your home and host cultures), you're more likely to be creative than if you're completely assimilated (i.e., you identify with the host culture only) or if you are separated (i.e., you identify with the home culture only)[9].

Adaptability & Non-Judgment: If you've been exposed to multiple cultures at an early age, your adaptability[10] to cultures you've been exposed to is almost like that of a chameleon – you quickly observe the environment and immediately switch language and behaviours to match the local environment. I also think that if you've spent many years of your life having to figure out why people behave the way they do as a means for survival, you habitually focus on understanding the true intent of another's behaviour rather than quickly judging their behaviour.

Fast Relationship-Building: When your assumption is that you're not going to stay in the host country for the long-term, you get pretty fast at developing relationships[11]. With a sense of urgency, third culture kids often speed through the initial stages of small talk and being polite, and fast forward to connecting at a deeper level through personal disclosure.

PHOTOS FROM RIGHT:
Dr Lynn Imai
Ivey School of Business Campus

Challenges

Value Conflict & Confused Loyalties: It takes a long time for third culture kids who've internalised conflicting values like individualism and collectivism to find a personal identity. In some ways they're very mature because of their broad cultural knowledge and ability to relate and communicate well with others, but in other ways, they have this "delayed adolescence" quality about them. Typically, in adolescence, you rebel and test what you know—the rules, values, and beliefs you've learned in childhood and you decide what is and what isn't you, on your way to becoming an independent adult. With third culture kids though, the rules, values, and beliefs changed all the time during childhood, so it's a longer developmental process. It leads to confused loyalties too: who or what am I loyal to? Which values? Which politics? Patriotism to whom? Third culture kids are so good at seeing things from multiple perspectives that often, it leads others to question whether you have true convictions[12].

Difficulty in Repatriation: While having so much cultural knowledge about other cultures, ironically, third culture kids can have little knowledge about their home culture from being away for a long time. Upon repatriation, you might not get the cultural references being made, such as when someone makes a joke, and people are surprised by that. It's also difficult going back to your home country if that culture is more homogenous than the host countries you visited abroad – the new ideas and perspectives you've acquired may not be appreciated, which can lead to a feeling of isolation[13].

Rootlessness: A hallmark characteristic of third culture kids is that it's very hard for them to answer, "where are you from?" or "where is home?" because they feel they're from everywhere but nowhere at the same time—they are rootless[14].

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Frequent Loss of Relationships: We live in the day and age of Facebook, but at the end of the day, there are a lot of goodbyes in the life of a third culture kid, which never gets easier. An accumulation of loss of relationships, and unresolved grief is a common theme among third culture kids[15].

How this translates to business

Multinational Corporations nowadays operate in extremely complex and ambiguous environments – the sheer amount of information, the multiple cultures and their meanings and attributions, the interconnectedness of everything, the fact that everything is changing all the time—it's overwhelming. While it's important to have the skills to make this kind of world manageable through simplification and right answers, it's also important not to be deluded into thinking the world is a simpler place than it actually is, and see it for its full complexity. Being exposed to ambiguity that comes from multiple cultural truths and developing a tolerance for it, being used to rapid change of environments, learning to see things from multiple perspectives and thinking in complex ways—these are things you've already had training—through life—when you've been exposed early to multiple cultures.

In this kind of environment, the kind of leader you need to be is one with a truly global perspective. Simply operating in X number of countries doesn't make you truly global; what I mean is much deeper than that. For example, do you have self-awareness on how and when your cultural upbringing shapes your implicit assumptions about how you communicate, negotiate, motivate and inspire your workforce, consider what is unethical, etc.? Similarly, do you have knowledge and perspective about these things in other cultures? Can you comfortably switch back and forth different approaches depending on the cultural context? Having had early exposure to multiple cultures makes you perfectly suited to quickly develop into a true global leader possessing these skills.

While I do think cultures are converging in some respects as they come into contact, I think cultural barriers are going up as economic borders come down, and recent events like the Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy, the Charlie Hebdo shootings

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etc., are extremist examples of cultural barriers going up. Whenever these events happen, it makes me think of the prediction Sam Huntington made in his Clash of Civilizations[7] in the mid-90s. He hypothesised that the primary source of conflict in the post-cold war era will mainly be cultural, rather than economic or ideological, and that the faultlines will be drawn among different groups of civilisations.

We're living in a world today where businesses can easily get caught in the middle of this kind of "clash of civilisation," through no fault of their own. For example, after the controversial Jyllands-Posten cartoons were published in Denmark, and the Danish government refused to apologise for the cartoons, a boycott of all Danish products was organised across the Middle East. A company like Arla Foods, just by the virtue of being a Danish company and exporting to Saudi Arabia suddenly faced a near stop in their sales in the Middle East, with their own stakeholders on opposite sides of a global conflict, divided by fundamental values and stances for issues like freedom of speech vs. censorship, gender quality vs. traditional gender roles, secular law vs. religious law, which civilisation adapts to whom, etc.

In class, I challenge my students to take a global managerial perspective, and grapple with how to deal with extremely difficult situations like this. Of course, the discussion can get controversial, but I've been impressed with CEMS students' capacity to discuss such sensitive issues by balancing respect and honesty, which is something I believe they can do because they are so strongly bonded by their shared CEMS identity – this is the power of the CEMS network. Students who've had life experiences across political and religious systems educate us all to see (and feel) things from multiple perspectives and they are natural bridges for connecting different social groups in business contexts.

People with extremely high levels of meaningful cross-cultural experience understand that in situations where there's a fundamental value clash (e.g., morals, ethics, religion, etc.), effective adaptation can mean knowing when not to adapt. So I would give this advice to CEMS students: know thyself. Self-awareness not only allows you to be an effective global leader, but it's the key to so many other things, like having objectivity, communicating well with others, being resilient, being adaptive, and ultimately, being happy and fulfilled – all of which I would want for my students.

PHOTOS FROM RIGHT:
Students at Ivey Business School and campus

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