

# ***Applying Ambiguous Loss Theory to the Unresolved Grief of Third-Culture Kids: Psychological Mechanisms and Possible Interventions***

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**Abstract.** This paper examines how the theory of ambiguous loss offers a more comprehensive explanation to the unresolved grief experienced by Third Culture Kids (TCK). While existing literature focuses on mobility, multicultural identity, and cultural adaptation, it often fails to address the reoccurring, unprocessed losses produced by repeated migrations. Boss's two forms of ambiguous loss, physical absence with psychological presence and psychological absence with physical presence, demonstrates TCKs' uncertainty in grief processing for their separated interpersonal, cultural, social and emotional connections. These losses are often overlooked by the TCK themselves, creating boundary ambiguity, and uncertainty in loss and grief processing. The paper proposes Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) as an empirically grounded intervention cultivating psychological flexibility, value-based behavior that is continuous regardless of physical location, fostering active transition for TCKs and stronger emotional support system within their family. By integrating ambiguous loss theory with TCKs' psychological research, this paper reframes TCKs' distress not as individual failures, but as a predictable reaction to chronic, unaddressed loss, offering implications for therapeutic paradigm, and supports offered by international schools and business to TCK families.

**Keywords:** Third Culture Kids, Ambiguous Loss Theory, Acceptance Commitment Therapy

## **1. Introduction**

As global mobility expands, an increasing number of children are having the privilege of an international lifestyle. They grow up across borders, accompanying their parents international work. According to the United Nations, 272 million international immigrants live abroad, with 31 million depends on accompany their parents abroad worldwide [1]. These cross-cultural childhoods often raise open-minded, culturally competent individuals; however, their psychological challenges are overlooked by traditional psychological models. The phonology Third Culture Kids (TCK) captures the population of children who grow up in many cultures. Although TCKs have been getting increasing attention in academia the number of programmatic TCK research is still lacking [2]. TCKs often struggle with their identity as their multicultural experiences provides different lenses to

self-perception [3]. Moreover, loss and grief is also an inseparable component to their experiences [4].

It is imperative to understand the unexpressed and unprocessed grief experienced by TCKs in their frequent migrations, so that international schools, businesses and therapists can provide evidence-based supports to this population with a smooth transition into new cultures. This paper applies the Ambiguous Loss Theory to the experiences of TCKs to clarify the psychological mechanisms behind unresolved grief and culture transition difficulties and propose Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) as a clinically applicable intervention for TCK's ambiguous loss.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Third culture kids

As the world is becoming more mobile, kids started having the privilege of traveling and experiences different cultures due to their parent's work, they often change schools across continents and form relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds. Third Culture Kids are children "accompanying one's parent(s) into a country that is different from at least one parent's passport country(ies) due to a parent's choice of work or advanced training" [4]. Usually, TCKs' parents are working for business, military or missionary where the employer requires them to move across the globe. Third Culture Model helps clarify how repeated cross-cultural transitions shape hybrid identities. This model consists of the (1) home culture, which is the first culture people interact with; the (2) host culture, the second culture the family moves to; and the (3) third culture, which is the common experience of the expatriate community, and the integration of the host and second culture [4]. TCKs are children raised on the third culture, which then becomes the lexicon characterizing this unique international group.

TCKs exhibit varied adjustment patterns depending on how individual resources interact with cross-cultural stressors. The mediating factors are divided into four domains: environmental, familial, psychological and socio-cultural. In the environmental domain, the time TCKs had spent abroad and their personal contact with diverse culture predicts a smoother transition. In the familial domain, when TCKs were included in the moving decision, then that contributes to their openness to the change. Moreover, stronger and closer family connection fosters a sense of home cross continents, replacing the physical home concept. In the psychological domain, the personality traits of agreeableness and openness were crucial for acceptance of the host culture. In the socio-cultural domain, finding friends that TCKs can identify with, having a supportive school environment and an easy access to learning about the new culture all improves TCKs' experience in their transition [5].

TCKs' international experiences bring benefits and consequences: expended worldview vs. confused loyalties, three-dimensional view of the world vs. painful awareness of reality and cross-cultural enrichment vs. ignorance of home culture [4]. The inconsistency of their cultural upbringing reflects a form of marginal identity often described as understanding everywhere but belonging nowhere, leading to identity and social confusion, making it difficult for TCKs to determine where home is and where they belong. Mainly, TCKs' experiences evolve around the theme of cosmopolitanism and identity confusion. "Where is home" is a difficult question for TCKs to answer. Their highly mobile life fuels psychological consequences such as identity confusion, a lack of belonging, and mental health challenges including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder [6].

## 2.2. Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous Loss is a term used on the world of grief and mourning; it is a type of that lacks closure and often goes unresolved. There are two types of ambiguous loss: physical loss and psychological loss. Physical ambiguous loss is when a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present for the people doing the grieving. Examples include a missing parent or migrants separated from their homeland. Even though parents and home are no longer physically present, they remain psychologically relevant for the kids or the migrants. Psychological ambiguous loss occurs when the loved one is physically present but psychologically absent. Some examples are dementia or addiction. The patients or the addicts are physically beside their loved ones but couldn't be fully psychologically present with them [7].

Psychological mechanisms involved in Ambiguous loss include intolerance to uncertainty and boundary ambiguity. Ambiguous is a type of loss that brings uncertainty to the griever, not knowing whether to grieve or to wait takes a toll on their mental health. The helplessness family members felt with the persistent uncertainty causes emotional distress. For family members experiences ambiguous loss, psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, posttraumatic disorder and prolonged grief disorder are prevalent [8]. Boss argues that this type of loss consists of prolonged ambiguity, this prolonged ambiguity can impair long-term psychological functioning and hinder recovery. Moreover, a clear boundary for knowing who is in or out of my family, and who is in or out of my life is crucial for one's outlook on life. However, ambiguous loss blurs that boundary when a loved one could be both in and out of one's [7].

## 3. Theological application of Ambiguous Loss to TCK's unresolved grief

### 3.1. Physical absence with psychological presence

For TCKs, frequent relocations create cumulative layers of loss across social, cultural and emotional dimensions. Not knowing of their long-distance friendship will last, or unable to see their grandparents for years are all physical losses to TCKs. For TCKs, the constant loss of four P's: person, place, pets and possessions are an inseparable part of their international experiences [3]. TCKs carry their friends, their extended family, their first culture as part of their identity while navigating into a new culture; these aspects are no longer physically available but are strongly emotionally attached. The ambiguity creeps in when TCKs often lack the entitlement to grieve due to their ambivalence toward their new journey. For many TCKs, the loss of the present culture often marks the beginning of a new exciting journey in another country. Therefore, the grief for the past culture often goes unprocessed and unresolved. TCKs don't end their past connections, instead, they carry those connections with them as they move to a new location. Such boundary ambiguity complicates the development of a coherent identity, where TCKs struggle to determine whether their past relationships are still relevant to their new life chapter. For example, the precious memories with former friends still remain vivid, while it is hard to maintain the same level of intimacy as people all get occupied with their course of life; extended family members still makeup of most childhood memories, but are unable to meet in the foreseeable future; holidays and traditions that marked the experience of home can no longer be replicated in the new environment. All these people and culture remains psychological present for TCKs but are physically unavailable, creating persons questions: "Are they still mine?" "Am I still connected to them?" Most of the time, the type of loss TCKs experience are often uncategorized since there is no apparent loss as compared to the death of a loved one. However, that lack of acknowledgment intensifies ambiguity as TCKs themselves don't

even recognize the bitterness they experience when departing is grief. Since these grieves never get recognized and processed, it becomes Boss's concept of frozen grief (disenfranchised grief, since the social norm only permits grief after death), which TCKs carries as they transition into adulthood. This frozen grief may further contribute to emotional suppression and identity conflict. Thus, the physical absence component to ambiguity loss plays a critical role in TCK's experiences, as their grieving process is not only about missing what's left behind, but the impossibility of fully recognizing and resolving that loss, a burden they carry in their interpretation of home, self, and belonging.

### **3.2. Psychological absence with physical presence**

For TCKs, the second type of ambiguous loss occurs as they transition into a new environment, when their emotional world and cultural schemas lag their new physical environment. The ambiguity component explains their inability to recognize overtly their psychological absence. Many TCKs appears to be functioning and engaging, yet their internal world may be disconnected to the present environment. This form of ambiguous loss is manifested into two ways, (1) the psychological absence of the TCKs in the physical presence of the new environment and (2) the psychological absence of TCKs' parents while they are physically present.

#### **3.2.1. The psychological absence of the TCKs in the physical presence of the new environment**

For example, a TCK who just relocated from Shanghai and sitting in an American classroom, may be physically present but remains psychologically detached with the new culture. He may still be anchored to the older social script, longing their old friends, thinking in another language and feels misaligned with the present environment [9]. This misalignment may withdraw TCKs from socializing and adapting, making them to be perceived as distant, detached disengaged, and as an outsider by the host community. This will withhold the host community from creating an effort to accepting the newcomer, ultimately forming a vicious cycle for TCK's adaptation: TCK's emotional detachment discourages social engagement, further straying them away from becoming part of the new group, pushing them deeper into their ambiguous loss.

#### **3.2.2. The psychological absence of TCKs' parents while they are physically present**

A similar type of ambiguous loss occurs as parents take their kids into a new culture and are similarly overwhelmed and preoccupied with work or culture related transitions. As adults, transitioning into a new culture is as challenging, they are faced with new job pressures, relocation logistics, cultural adjustments and their own ambiguous losses. Their adjustment challenges exhaust of lot of cognitive loads of the parents, making them emotionally unavailable to the needs of their children [4]. Even worse, for TCKs, they don't only have to deal with their own ambiguous losses, but also the psychological absence of their parents. The adjustment challenges of parents were reported to negatively affect TCKs' own [9]. Many times, parents recognize the adjustment challenges their children are facing, however, they may not recognize it due to the assumptions that these challenges will go away eventually or simply because they are too mentally exhausted in supporting the children in that process [10]. The uncertainty the child has about their parents' emotional availability can be stressful, and that loss of support is covert since the parents are providing financially and academically. Therefore, the sense of absence for TCKs may be hard to label or interpret, disrupting their security and contributing further to emotional isolation.

## 4. Proposed interventions & applications

Although the TCK population remains under-addressed in psychological research, existing therapeutic frameworks offer meaningful insights into ways of addressing ambiguous loss in TCKs and their families. One relevant framework is Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), which also aligns with the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation that many TCKs face.

### 4.1. Acceptance Commitment Therapy

Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a psychotherapeutic framework proposed by Steven Hayes. This framework focuses on accepting negative thought and feelings while living a life aligning with one's value. Therefore, in this paradigm, instead of treating the maladaptive psychological events, ACT focuses on the patients' relationship to these events, grounded in developing psychological flexibility. ACT is recognized by numerous health organizations to be empirically proven intervention that is applicable to a wide range of conditions (e.g. depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorder). Moreover, ACT extends its influence from psychopathology to social domain, such as improving work performance, reducing stigma and decreasing domestic violence [11].

ACT consists of six processes: (1) acceptance, the openness patients have to aversive experiences, instead of defending or repressing against negative feelings and arousal, the patients are encouraged to experience the emotional distress. (2) cognitive defusion, when clients treat their negative thoughts as passing events instead of letting them to define themselves. (3) being present in the moment, instead of worrying about the uncertainties in the future. (4) noticing self or self-as context, to have patients see themselves holistically, containing the positive and negative affects instead of fixating their attention on the intrusive thoughts. (5) values, helping the clients to realize the persisting virtues they want to embody in life, and (6) committed actions, the actions taken toward helping the patients living to their values (e.g. exposure, skill-development, goal setting). If the commitments failed, the therapist encourage the patients to view it with nonjudgment and curiosity [12].

### 4.2. Application of ACT to TCK's Ambiguous Loss

Given that coping with Ambiguous Loss for TCKs involve tolerating uncertainty and being present with the new environment, ACT provides useful guidance for developing psychological flexibilities for TCKs to cope with their ambiguous loss.

#### 4.2.1. Physical absence with psychological presence Ambiguous Loss application

TCKs often experience ambiguous loss when their physically absent values, families and cultures remain an essential part of their identity after relocation. Since there was never a clear end to these meaningful connections, TCKs struggle with the ambiguity of whether the past connections will continue, fade or evolve.

ACT helps to address this issue through multiple domains: (1) acceptance allows TCKs to acknowledge that loss/grief is a critical component to their international journey. Keeping an open mind of this difficult experience instead of repressing it is the first step to resolving it. (2) cognitive defusion allows them to observe their thoughts objectively as they battle through the uncertainty of the continuity of past experiences. Instead of fusing to the idea that "My friends from the past will probably forget me" or "I should probably stop prioritizing my family since I am in an



individualistic culture”, TCKs can observe this interpersonal and intrapersonal ambiguity at a distance, recognizing them as temporary, developing tolerance to these ambiguity. Through practicing cognitive defusion, ambiguity tolerance can be developed to help cope the psychological stress caused by the losses, as uncertainty intolerance is a risk factor to psychological distress [8]. Identifying (3) values they want to embrace throughout life regardless of the different cultures help create consistency in their behavior. Whether it is “I want to be an attentive daughter” or “I want to be kind and positive”, these stable values provide continuity across transitions and help TCKs maintain a coherent sense of identity. The stability of values help guide TCKs’ interpersonal interactions throughout context instead of reinforcing their differentiated behavior between cultures/environments.

#### **4.2.2. Psychological absence with physical presence Ambiguous Loss application**

The second form of ambiguous loss TCKs experience is manifested into two ways: TCKs being physically present in the new environment while being psychological withdrawn and TCKs’ parents lacking psychological support for their kids while being physically present.

When transitioning into a new culture, TCKs may experience a form of psychological absence in the new environment, as they sometimes refrain from interacting with their surroundings while remaining emotionally fused with their previous home. ACT addresses this type of ambiguous loss by encourage TCKs to (1) be present with their surroundings. Even though it is a challenging feeling to not feel belong an nostalgic about the past, sitting with both their emotions and the new environment opens flexibility in their behavior: the ability to engage with the host culture actively during times of distress. (2) noticing-self is also helpful TCKs to contextualize their diverse identity, integrating their multicultural experiences into a coherent sense of self. By noticing the different pieces of their identity (the different cultural experiences), TCKs are able to prevent any single culture from defining themselves and have their identity to be applicable and fluid across cultures.

Moreover, TCKs experiences another form of ambiguous loss parents’ psychological absence despite physical presence. As parents of TCKs are dealing with their own ambiguous loss upon new relocation, the importance of care to their kids are often overlooked. Thus, it is common for parents to be physically accompanying their kids in the new environment but remain emotionally unavailable for their children. ACT can be helpful in repairing that psychological absence by reminding the parents of their (1) values, if being a present and responsive parent a crucial component of their identity. By having their values to be vividly in mind, it encourages the parents (2) committed action in acting aligning with that value. This for TCKs’ parents would be to be more curious about their children’s perspective and actively listening and acknowledging the child’s migration-related stress. recognizing the gap between their own migration narratives and their children, and acknowledging the unique challenges their children are facing when transitioning into a new culture [3].

Moreover, providing more access to mental health services or social work to TCK families in general is helpful for parents dealing with their own ambiguous loss to feel prepared for continue caring for their children, and be mentally present with their kids [13].

### **5. Discussion and suggestion**

This paper examines how the ambiguous loss theory is applicable to TCKs’ psychological challenge when migrating across different cultures. The analysis shows that both forms of ambiguous loss,

physical absence with psychological presence and psychological absence with physical presence, captures the mechanism of TCKs' ineffable grief that the current TCK literatures fails to capture.

The findings suggest that TCKs' internal struggle are not random forms of adjustment challenges but are predictable reactions to reoccurring separation and chronic uncertainty to relational continuation. Ambiguous loss theory helps the emotional contractions TCKs experiences: feeling connected to people and places which are physically separated, and feeling detached with the places they are currently living in. TCK does not only simply face the problem of frequent adaptation and environmental interruption, but also the psychological tension created from their past identities, relationships and attachments. This interpretation adds onto the existing research on multicultural identity adjustment and development and pushes ambiguous loss as a central theme in TCKs' experience.

ACT was proposed as a therapeutic framework in addressing TCKs' ambiguous loss as it promotes psychological flexibility, tolerance to uncertainty and value-based living. These processes directly address the two types of ambiguous loss experienced by TCKs. For physical absence with psychological presence, ACT helps TCKs to recognize loss as an objective factor of their experiences instead of something unwanted or should be repressed, reducing thoughts that demand closure for past relationships. For psychological absence with physical presence, ACT offers tools to repair/strengthen TCKs' familial relationship when adapting into a new culture and encourage TCKs to be present with their current situation. Although preliminary, these connections raise a possibility of the utility of ACT in serving TCKs in a clinical setting.

Future studies could develop culturally sensitive tools to measure ambiguous loss among TCKs more reliably. First, qualitative studies could analyze specific ways ambiguous loss is manifested in TCKs' experiences. Through interviews, a more consistent and reliable trend could be revealed for future clinical framework creation. Moreover, intervention assessment is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of ACT in reducing psychological stress by ambiguous loss among the TCKs population. Finally, through these research, international schools, universities and international companies will be more informed on effective ways to support international families' adaptation, offering supports in forms of ambiguous loss educational workshop or direct therapy recommendations.

Overall, recognizing ambiguous loss as an inseparable aspect of international experience could reframes TCKs' psychological struggle not as personal shortcomings, but a predictable reaction that could be addressed through therapy. This reframing may guide institutions to design more proactive support systems for globally mobile families. By grounding support and therapy that cultivates value-based living and uncertainty acceptance, institutions and therapists are in better position to support TCKs in coping, resilience, smooth adaptation and a stable sense of identity and belonging across environments.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examines how the ambiguous loss theory provides insight in understanding Third Culture Kids (TCK)'s emotional and psychological experiences. By discussing the two types of ambiguous loss, physical absence with psychological presence and psychological absence with physical presence, its connection suggests that TCK's frequent relocation and cultural transition generates a series of unresolved and unrecognized grief that the current multicultural literature fails to capture.

The research suggest that ambiguous loss is a central psychological mechanism to TCK's cultural transitions, belonging and identity development. Physical absence with psychological presence explains TCKs' uncertainty with handling previous homes, relationships and cultural values, while

psychological absence with physical presence illustrates TCKs' psychological detachment with their current environment and emotional isolation with their family members. Together, these insights suggest that TCKs' struggles to adapt and psychological challenges are signs of individual incompetence but predictable outcomes of cultural discontinuity.

Based on these connections, this paper proposed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as an empirically proven intervention for addressing the ambiguous loss experience of TCKs. ACT cultivates psychological flexibility and value-driven action that is applicable for TCKs regardless of the cultural context, helping them to cope with ambiguous loss in an adaptive way. International schools and businesses should recognize ambiguous loss as part of the TCK experience and provide targeted supports as TCK families transition into a new culture.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of integrating ambiguous loss theory into TCK research, expanding the therapy paradigm to address ambiguous as part of TCK experience. By positioning TCK experiences into a grief-based framework, this paper cultivates a unique lens into understanding the relationship between cultural mobility, invisible losses and psychological well-being. The implications suggest the need for more empirical research on TCKs' loss experience to design more comprehensive therapeutic framework targeting the TCK population.

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