

# Comparative study of Third Culture Individuals (TCI) and non-Third Culture Individuals in relation to Cultural Intelligence

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**Abstract:** Third Culture Individuals (TCIs) are individuals who spent a significant part of their developmental years outside of their passport country, often associated with having cultural intelligence and intercultural communication competence. While TCIs are naturally exposed to various cultures as a result of their mobility, non-TCIs do not necessarily share the same traits and experiences growing up. However due to globalization this may no longer be the case and may perhaps be the reason why despite the differences, TCI and non-TCIs are similar in some way. TCIs are known for their ability to be accepting of different cultures; a characteristic often associated with cultural intelligence, from this it can be assumed that TCIs have a higher level of Cultural Intelligence than non-TCIs.

So far there hasn't been sufficient research regarding TCIs in general, which also applies in the Indonesian context. This study compares the level of Cultural Intelligence of both Indonesian TCIs and non-TCIs through a quantitative research using the Cultural Intelligence (CQ) scale that measures four dimensions; metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral. Data in this research were gathered from an online survey, from a total of 140 Indonesian TCI and non-TCI respondents that are currently living in Indonesia. Results showed that TCI samples have a higher level of Cultural Intelligence than non-TCIs, with motivational CQ being the dimension scored highest for both TCI and non-TCI samples.

**Keywords:** third culture individuals, cultural intelligence, comparative study

## 1. Background

In a research done by Finaccord in 2013 titled "Global Expatriates: Size, Segmentation and Forecast for the Worldwide Market", there were roughly 50.5 million expats worldwide which comprise about 3.2% of the world population, the figure was expected to reach 56.8 million by 2014. Among that population the number of young migrants reached 34.8 million in 2013, this is an important piece of evidence regarding the general population of third culture kids in the world. In terms of the largest number of expats living in a country, Qatar had the highest proportion of expats compared to its total population at 70.9%. Children who are living or have lived in countries like Qatar are most likely exposed with various kinds of cultures from people of different countries as well as their host country culture. To compete in the global world, an individual must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to behave in a manner that is suitable to a specific culture. Without doubt, cultural diversity will manifest within the global marketplace, making intercultural competence a very important skill. The ability to manage the interconnectedness of the diversity is a major skill employers look for (Bremer, 2006).

Pew Research Center estimated that the total population of Indonesians living in the U.S. reached up to 113,000 in 2015. The increase in the number of Indonesian living as expats shows that more people are moving to pursue an international career, usually to earn more than they do in their home country. Among the total number of Indonesian expats the majority age demographic are adults aged 30 to 49 with being 38% from 113,000 inhabitants. Around 21% are children under 18 years old, this population can be referred as to Indonesian Third Culture Kids, since they are living outside of their passport country during their developmental years.

### *1.1. Research Objectives*

- To explore the differences and similarities in Cultural Intelligence between Indonesian TCIs and non-TCIs
- To compare the different dimensions of Cultural Intelligence between TCIs and non-TCIs
- To identify the highest Cultural Intelligence dimension scored among TCIs and non-TCIs

### *1.2. Significance of Study*

Many literature reviews assumes that Third Culture Individuals have better intercommunication skills than their counterpart, however there is a lack of quantitative research about Third Culture Individuals and their intercultural communication skills or cultural intelligence. Due to globalization, the significance of third culture individuals has increased. Growing up among different cultures will soon become the norm – even for those who have never left their home country. With the presence TCIs everywhere in the world, citizens of the host country will have to live, interact and socialize with people with different cultural backgrounds.

### *1.3. Hypotheses*

H1: TCIs have a higher level of Cultural Intelligence than non-TCIs

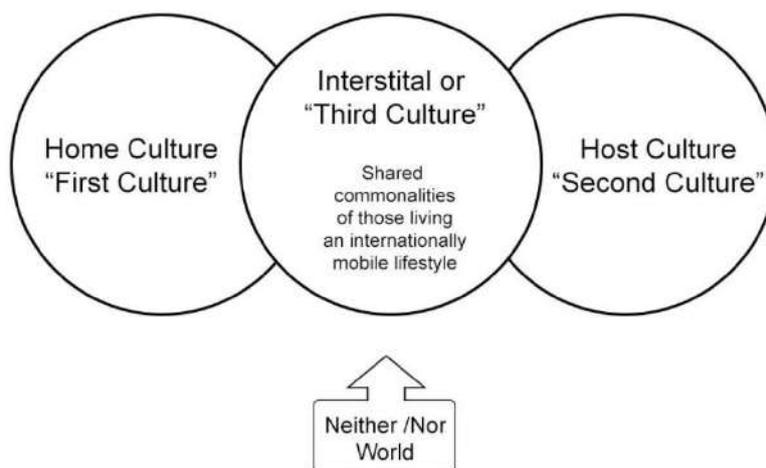
H2: TCIs score higher in the behavioral CQ than non-TCIs

H3: Non-TCIs score the highest in cognitive CQ out of the Cultural Intelligence dimensions

## **2. Defining Third Culture Individuals**

Third Culture Kids are defined as a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents' culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2010). However in this research TCK will be referred as TCIs (Third Culture Individuals) since this study looks at former third culture kids or adult third culture kids. Useem first articulated the term in the 1950s to describe "children who accompany their parents into another culture". Third Culture Kids (TCK) frequently build relationships to all of the cultures while not having full ownership of any and feel a sense of belonging to others of similar background. As the number of TCKs who become adults are increasing they are becoming more vocal through blogs, online communities and scholarly articles in various online and print magazines.

Due to the ability to adapt to not only the cultures TCIs are exposed to firsthand but also to new people and situation, TCIs are sometimes considered to be better at adapting to new cultures since intercultural communication skills have been developed early. Therefore it is deeply rooted in their frames of reference. Keen observations are needed to make accurate perceptions about social cues and behavioral norms as TCIs have been found to score higher social sensitivity than monoculture individuals (Lyttle, 2011). The Third Culture Model which explains the term 'third culture' wherein 'first culture' refers to the home or passport culture of the parents. The term 'second culture' refers to the host culture in which the family lives or moved. Therefore third culture can be referred to as a way of life that is neither like those in their home and host culture; but a lifestyle with many common experiences shared by others living in a similar way.



**Figure 1.** Third Culture Model (Ruth E. Van Reken, 1996)

Despite and because of the difficulties with living abroad “people do and must change some of their old ways in order to carry out their daily activities and achieve an improved quality life in the new environment” (Kim, 1995). Having experienced cultural differences directly during their developmental years and adopted features from various cultures, TCIs are often described as hybrids or cultural composites, which make them more open-minded and have greater perspectives than the general population. Cultural hybridity and expanded worldview allows TCIs to broaden their vision beyond national boundaries. Less prejudiced than monoculture individuals and tend to be more comfortable with diversity, this attribute can be referred to as cognitive flexibility (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013).

### 3. Cultural Intelligence

Earley and Ang (2003) theorized that cultural intelligence is a multidimensional concept based on Sternberg and Detterman’s framework of the multiple foci of intelligence. Sternberg’s framework suggests that intelligence has different “loci” in one person, meaning that metacognition, cognition and motivation are mental capabilities that exists inside a person’s head, whereas overt actions are behavioral capabilities (Sternberg & Detterman, 1986). It can be defined as an individual’s ability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse situations.

#### 3.1. Dimensions of Cultural Intelligence

Metacognitive CQ refers to an individual’s cultural consciousness and awareness when interacting with those from different cultural backgrounds which reflect an individual’s mental process to gain and understand cultural knowledge, including knowledge of and control over thought process related to culture (Flavell, 1979). It encourages active thinking on people and situations when cultural backgrounds are different which generates critical thinking about assumptions, traditions and culturally bound thinking. Allowing individuals to evaluate and review their strategies to be more culturally appropriate and more likely to accomplish desired outcomes in cross-cultural circumstances.

Cognitive CQ concerns an individual’s level of cultural knowledge (norms, practices and principles that has been acquired from educational and personal experiences) or knowledge of the cultural environment. Knowledge of culture influence people’s thoughts and behaviors, hence understanding a society’s culture and its elements allow individuals to better appreciate the system that shape and cause certain patterns of social interaction within a culture (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008).

Motivational CQ is an individual’s capability to target attention and energy toward cultural differences. It is conceptualized that the motivational CQ is a distinct type of self-efficacy and fundamental motivation in cross-cultural settings which plays an important part in successful intercultural interaction as it requires confidence and interest in narrative settings. As a source of drive, motivational CQ initiates effort and energy directed toward functioning in a cultural setting.

Behavioral CQ reflects an individual’s ability to display appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior when interacting with people from different cultures. It is often the most noticeable trait of social interactions, in cross-cultural situations nonverbal behaviors are vital because they act as a “silent language” and communicate meaning in subtle and concealed ways.

**4. Methodology**

*4.1. Sampling Method*

Data collection in this research is limited to Indonesian citizens who are currently living in Indonesia. This comparative study explored two different groups; TCIs and non-TCIs. Survey was distributed through Google Forms sent electronically to chat groups (ex. Facebook) and personally to respondents.

Convenience sampling method was used to collect data from the non-TCI sample population which involved in approaching non-TCIs living in South Tangerang and Jakarta area. Samples were also taken from university students and working adults to avoid sampling bias, since this study is not limited to students and adults aged 21-30 years. Given that the TCI population is a hidden social group and is hard to reach, snowball sampling was used to collect data from TCI respondents. Respondents were asked to help identify other TCIs that may be willing to take part in the study.

*4.2. Measurement of Variables*

The independent variables in this study are TCI and non-TCI samples. To measure the independent variable, statements based on the TCI characteristics are generated which includes; length of stay in host countries, number of languages spoken, educational background, number of countries travelled and their relationship with Indonesia (Pol/Van cultural identity model). The dependent variable in this study is cultural intelligence, measured with the Cultural Intelligence scale (CQ) developed by Ang & Van Dyne (2007) that consists of 20 items with four dimensions; metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral.

**Table 7: Respondent Demographic**

	TCIs	Non-TCIs
Age	21-30 years old	21-30 years old
Nationality	Indonesian	Indonesian
Location	South Tangerang & Jakarta	South Tangerang & Jakarta
Language	Fluent in two languages or more	Fluent in at least one language
Abroad Experience	Has lived abroad for at least 3 years during their developmental years (<18)	Has never lived abroad during their developmental years (<18) but may have travelled abroad

Given that this study looks at former Third Culture Kids who are now adults, respondents from age 21-30 years old is the focus age group, mainly university or working adults residing in South Tangerang and Jakarta area, as the survey was distributed in said areas. TCI respondents must have lived outside Indonesia for at least one year, travelling experience also applies. Non-TCI samples include respondents who have never lived outside Indonesia during their developmental years, however travelling experiences are included. Since the questionnaire is in English non-TCI respondents must have an adequate knowledge in English in order to understand and answer the survey.

5. Results

5.1. Comparing the level of Cultural Intelligence

**Table 2:** Average score per dimension for TCI and non-TCI

	Level of Cultural Intelligence				Mean Difference	t-test Sig. (2-tailed)
	TCI		Non-TCI			
	M	SD	M	SD		
MC	5.110	.616	4.910	.931	.200	.136
COG	4.964	.651	4.192	.985	.772	.000*
MOT	5.251	.527	5.137	.932	.224	.374
BEH	4.942	.601	4.737	1.081	.206	.166

Note. \*p= < .0001

M= mean

SD= standard deviation

Sig= p value

IV= TCIs & non-TCIs

DV= level of Cultural Intelligence (7= highest; 4= moderate; 1= lowest)

Generally, TCI samples score a higher mean in all Cultural Intelligence dimensions compared to non-TCIs with cognitive CQ showing the biggest differences in means ( $d=.77$ ). We can see that motivational CQ has the highest mean for both TCIs ( $M= 5.25, SD= .53$ ) and non-TCIs ( $M= 5.14, SD= .93$ ). A high score in the motivational CQ suggests that individuals have the ability to channel positive energy in regards to cultural differences, as motivation is the source of drive for successful intercultural interactions. This also shows that both TCIs and non-TCIs are interculturally sensitive, exhibiting an individual’s willingness to learn, appreciate and to accept cultural differences to achieve a positive and successful interaction. In contrast, TCIs score the lowest in behavioral CQ ( $M= 4.94, SD= .60$ ) while non-TCIs score the lowest in cognitive CQ ( $M= 4.19, SD= .99$ ).

5.2. Hypothesis 1: TCIs have a higher level of Cultural Intelligence than non-TCIs

Based on the group statistics below, TCIs ( $M= 5.06, SD= .36$ ) score a higher level of Cultural Intelligence than non-TCIs ( $M= 4.71, SD= .89$ ). This test was found to be statistically significant,  $t(100.32) = 3.55, p < .05; d = .60$ .

**Table 3:** Cultural Intelligence of TCI & non-TCI

	N	M	SD	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
CQ					
TCI	70	5.060	.362	.043	.00*
Non-TCI	70	4.708	.743	.089	

Note. \*= p < 0.05  
N= number of samples

M= mean  
SD= standard deviation  
DV= level of Cultural Intelligence (7= highest; 4=moderate; 1= lowest)  
IV= TCIs and non-TCI

Naturally, the time TCIs spent living abroad and experience as children plays a major role in shaping their individual self and who they become as adults. TCIs were already exposed to an environment they're unfamiliar with, which forced them to adapt to it firsthand. Since they developed intercultural skills at an early age it is deeply embedded in their conscious. Non-TCIs do not have the experience of living abroad as children so they develop intercultural skills later than TCIs. However, just because they develop this set of skills later it they can develop intercultural skills by learning foreign language(s), reading books, articles and news about current global events, watching movies or TV shows and travelling abroad.

5.3. Hypothesis 2: TCIs score higher in behavioral CQ than non-TCIs.

Comparing the level of behavioral CQ of TCIs and non-TCIs, the group statistics below displays that TCIs (M= 4.94, SD= .601) have a higher mean of behavioral CQ than non-TCIs (M= 4.74, SD= 1.08).

**Table 4:** Behavioral CQ of TCI & non-TCI

TCI or non-TCI		N	M	SD	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
BEH	TCI	70	4.942	.601	.071	.167
	Non-TCI	70	4.737	1.081	.129	

**Note.** N= number of samples  
M= mean  
SD= standard deviation  
DV= level of behavioral CQ (7= highest; 4=moderate; 1= lowest)  
IV= TCIs and non-TCIs

From the result of hypothesis 1 we already have an idea that TCIs have a higher level of Cultural Intelligence than non-TCIs. Based on their experience living abroad TCIs adopt intercultural skills earlier in their life than non-TCIs. In contrast, non-TCIs are more likely to engage in cross cultural interactions while travelling or during an abroad study program. Hence they are not as knowledgeable as TCIs in expressing verbal and non-verbal cues during intercultural communication, the reason for this is because they can they only stay for a short period of time compared to TCIs who spent years getting accustomed to the culture.

5.4. Hypothesis 3: Non-TCIs score the highest in cognitive CQ out of the Cultural Intelligence dimensions

Based on the results below, motivational CQ (M= 5.14, SD= .93) has the highest mean compared to the other three dimensions; metacognitive (M= 4.91, SD= .931), cognitive (M= 4.19, SD= .93) and behavioral (M= 4.74, SD= 1.08). Instead, cognitive CQ is the dimension scored the lowest (M= 4.19, SD= .932).

**Table 5:** Cultural Intelligence means per dimension

		Metacognitive	Cognitive	Motivational	Behavioral
Non-TCI	M	4.910	4.192	5.137	4.737
	N	70	70	70	70
	SD	.931	.985	.932	1.081

Note. M= mean  
N= number of sample  
SD = standard deviation

DV= level of Cultural Intelligence (7= highest; 4=moderate; 1= lowest)  
IV= non-TCIs

According to this result, non-TCIs are least familiar with cultural knowledge and its systems. Cognitive CQ represents the ability to comprehend cultural knowledge through personal or educational experience. Non-TCIs do not have the same experiences as TCIs in interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds in cross cultural interactions as well as living abroad as children. But they can gain intercultural knowledge by travelling abroad, joining an abroad study program or simply by grasping what they learned in school. Since knowledge – in this context- is the basis of decision making and performance in cross cultural settings, understanding a society’s culture allow individuals to better grasp the system that shape and cause certain forms of social interactions.

**Table 6:** Cognitive CQ items frequency

Cognitive CQ items	Mean	Median	Mode
COG_1: I know the legal and economic systems of other cultures	3.44	4	4
COG_2: I know the rules (e.g. vocabulary, grammar) of other languages	4.37	3	3
COG_3: I know the cultural values and religious belief of other cultures	4.49	5	5
COG_4: I know the marriage systems of other cultures	4.20	4	5
COG_5: I know the arts and crafts of other cultures	4.53	5	6
COG_6: I know the rules for expressing non-verbal behaviors in other cultures	4.13	4	5

Non-TCIs score the lowest on item COG\_1 ( $M= 3.44$ ), on average non-TCIs answered with “somewhat disagree” to the statement; I know the legal and economic systems of other culture. Economic and legal systems can be considered a complex topic to grasp for individuals who has no interest in said subject, unless it is their field of expertise (ex. Government officials). Non-TCI who are not interested in the economic and legal systems may refrain choose not to be exposed to such information, hence they have limited knowledge as opposed to individuals who show interest or who’s experienced in that particular field.

5.5. Discussion

Even though literatures on TCIs states that the two groups have distinctive abilities in regards to studies about cultural intelligence, results of this study prove that despite having experienced different upbringings the two groups are not so different. While they generally score lower in all CQ dimensions than their counterpart, the difference in means is not significantly big. It is no doubt that the future generations of Indonesian non-TCIs are more likely to be able adapt and integrate in the vast growth of globalization.

Respondents aged 21-30 are active mostly on social media where being connected to the internet has become a necessity as part of communication means and a platform to obtain information. When globalization is put into context it could be one of the reasons why despite having raised in a different environment, non-TCIs are similar in regards to their set of intercultural skills with TCIs. The emergence of the new media not only enhances interconnectedness but it also creates challenges to the traditional way of interacting with each other. It is also now very common for many Indonesian universities to offer an abroad study program or internship, allowing students to have the experience living in a culture they’re unfamiliar with as well as give them the opportunity to seek international careers in the future. While studies about TCIs in Indonesia may not have been done before, this research could be a base for future studies, given that the topic of Third Culture Individuals is very broad and covers many aspects

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, there is a difference in the level of Cultural Intelligence between TCIs and non-TCIs samples in this study, results confirm that TCIs have a higher level of Cultural Intelligence than non-TCI samples. This means that Third Culture Individuals are more knowledgeable and understanding in regards to cultural differences, cultivating positive emotions that concerns how they function in cultural settings. On top of that, their experience abroad as children allows them to adapt to a new environment easily. This advantage makes TCIs more proficient than non-TCIs when interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds, given that TCIs possess a higher level of behavioral CQ than non-TCIs.

Apart from comparing the overall level of Cultural Intelligence for the two groups, a comparison of the dimensions proves that both TCIs and non-TCIs samples in this study share a similarity in which they both possess the highest level of motivational CQ out of metacognitive, cognitive and behavioral CQ. In general, TCIs develop Cultural Intelligence skills based on their experiences firsthand growing up while non-TCIs develop theirs when growing up in a globalized world where technological advances are rapidly growing and has changed the way we communicate and access information.

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Appendix – Questionnaire Survey

1. Please select your gender:
  - Female
  - Male
  
2. Please state your age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Please tick your current state of employment:
  - Student
  - Employed
  - Unemployed
  
4. Have you lived outside your passport country for at least 3 years, during your childhood years (<18 years old)? (Note: if you have **NEVER** lived outside your passport country during your childhood years please tick “No”)
  - Yes
  - No

**Cultural Intelligence (CO) scale**

Please read each statement carefully and select the response that best describes your capabilities. Select the answer that **BEST** describes you **AS YOU REALLY ARE**.

(1 = strongly disagree; 2 = mostly disagree; 3 = somewhat disagree; 4 = neither; 5 = somewhat agree; 6 = mostly agree; 7 = strongly agree).

	Strongly disagree	Mostly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither	Somewhat agree	Mostly agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds							

I adjust my cultural knowledge as I interact with people from a culture that is unfamiliar to me.							
I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I apply to cross-cultural interactions.							
I check the accuracy of my cultural knowledge as I interact with people from different cultures.							
I know the legal and economic systems of other cultures.							
I know the rules (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) of other languages.							
I know the cultural values and religious beliefs of other cultures.							
I know the marriage systems of other cultures.							
I know the arts and crafts of other cultures.							
I know the rules for expressing non-verbal behaviors in other cultures.							
I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.							
I am confident that I can socialize with locals in a culture that is unfamiliar to me.							
I am sure I can deal with the stresses of adjusting to a culture that is new to me.							
I enjoy living in cultures that are unfamiliar to me.							
I enjoy living in cultures that are unfamiliar to me.							
I change my verbal behavior (e.g., accent, tone) when a cross-cultural interaction							

requires it.							
I use pause and silence differently to suit different cross-cultural situations.							
I vary the rate of my speaking when a cross-cultural situation requires it.							
I change my non-verbal behavior when a cross-cultural situation requires it.							
I alter my facial expressions when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.							