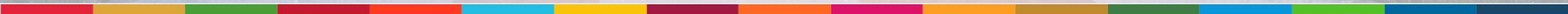




What remains when everything changes

Insights from Third Culture Kids (TCKs) and Global Nomads Research

Inter-Agency Career Week 2026: Day 4/Session 4 (OPCW)



Today's presenter



Elisabetta Ibernì

Staff Relations and Welfare Officer (OPCW)

Zoom Support Team



Siddhartha Jyoti Kansakar

Senior Advisor
Human Resources (OPCW)



Damla Taskin

Associate Organizational
Design Officer (OPCW)

House Keeping Rules

You are muted by default. The chat function is disabled.

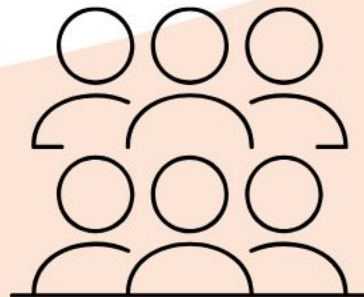
If you have any questions, please submit them through **Zoom Q&A button**.

The session will be **recorded**. The recording and presentation will be available on: [Inter-Agency Career Week 2026 webpage](#)



Due to the large number of participants in this session, we might not be able to respond to all of your questions.

Thank you for you understanding.





1. During your childhood, have you relocated outside of the country of nationality of (one of) your parents, due to their work?

1) Yes

2) No



2. Are you a parent who relocated with their children at least one time due to your work?

1) Yes

2) No

3) Maybe, in the future



3. Overall, how often did you relocate in your life?

1) Never

2) Less than 3 times

3) More than 3 times

Lights and shadow of the ‘movable career’

- Mobility is framed as an opportunity and development;
- Implies resilience and adaptability in navigating change and new environments;
- This narrative overlooks the full spectrum of experiences of **uncertainty, precariousness, mobility fatigue** ;
- It’s a powerful story, yet incomplete.



Mobility as job-related psychosocial risk



Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory (1967): **Changes in residence (20)**
When relocations accumulate, we may need to understand the deeper impact that these experiences have, in particular, on children and adolescents.

Mok, P. L. H., Webb, R. T., Appleby, L. & Pedersen, C. B. (2016). Full spectrum of mental disorders linked with childhood residential mobility. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 78, 57-64.

Mobility fatigue

It is the psychological wear derived from repeated cycles of adaptation, detachment, and reorientation **without sufficient recovery**.

It is subtle, often invisible, form of clinical attire, distinct from burnout.

Bonanno GA, Westphal M, Mancini AD. Resilience to loss and potential trauma. *Annu Rev Clin Psychol.* 2011;7:511-35. doi: 10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-032210-104526. PMID: 21091190.

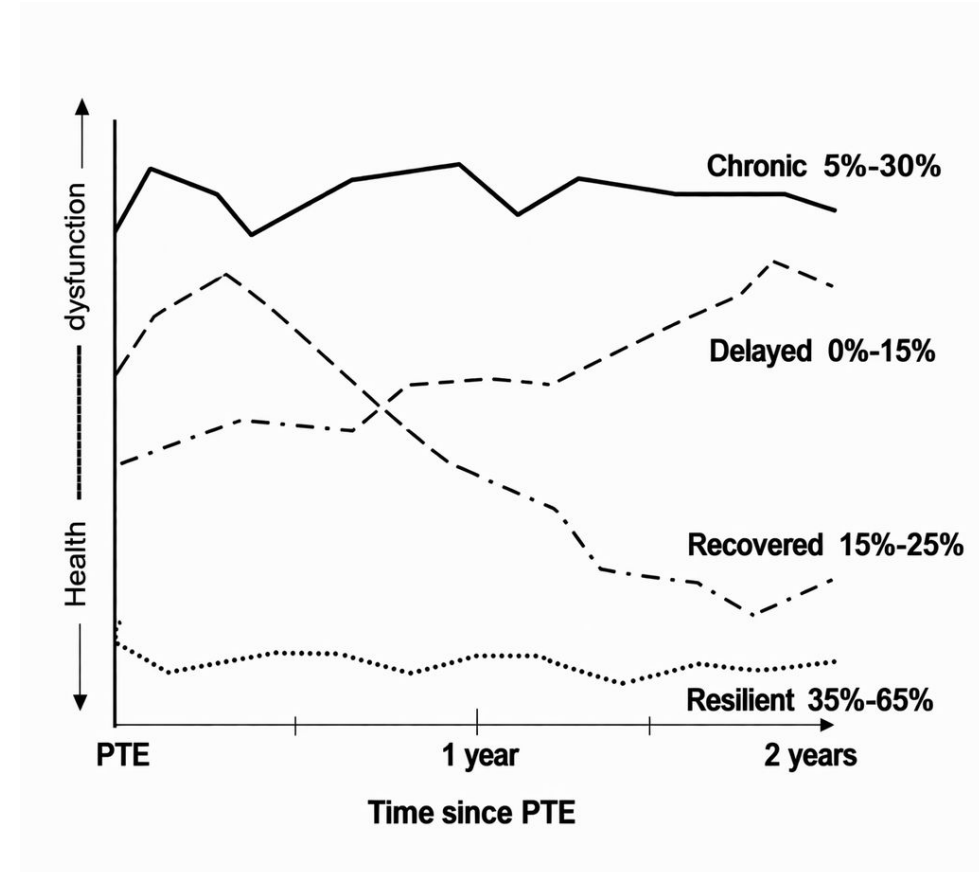


Figure 1. Prototypical trajectories of adjustment following a Potentially Traumatic Experience (PTE) (adapted from Bonanno 2004).



The cost of mobile life

Insights from research on Third Culture Kids (TCKs) and global nomads

- Adaptation has a cost;
- Repetitive cycle of attachment;
- Re-attachment is not neutral and mediated by the experience of loss;
- Adaptations lead to identity shifts;
- Thin the capacity to create relationships.

Definitions *A hierarchy of lexicon*

Third Culture Kid (TCK): Coined by Ruth Hill Useem, a TCK is a person who spends a significant part of their developmental years (usually before age 18) outside their parents' passport country/culture. They blend their parents' culture with the host culture(s) to create a new "third culture".

Third Culture Adult (ACTK): An individual who spent their childhood as a TCK and is now an adult. They navigate the long-term, lasting effects of a rootless upbringing, often feeling a lack of belonging in their "passport country" and experiencing ongoing "reverse culture shock".



Definitions *A hierarchy of lexicon*

Global Nomad (GN): A term often used interchangeably with TCKs, coined by Norma McCaig to describe people who, due to their parents' occupation (military, diplomatic, corporate, missionary), move between countries frequently.

Distinction: *While TCK focuses on the cultural development of a child, "Global Nomad" is often used to emphasize the mobile, transient, and, sometimes, lifelong international lifestyle.*

Refugee: Forced to flee for survival due to war, persecution, or violence; often have specific legal protections.

Migrant: A broader, often neutral term for anyone moving across borders for various, often, but not always, voluntary reasons.

Expat: A person living outside their native country, frequently associated with professionals, skilled workers, or artists, often with an intention to return home.



An overview of the key findings of the empirical research on TCKs/ACTKs




International Journal of Intercultural Relations
Volume 82, May 2021, Pages 81-98




Review

A systematic review of third culture kids empirical research

Esther C. Tan ^a  , Kenneth T. Wang ^a  , Ann Baker Cottrell ^b  

Show more 

+ Add to Mendeley  Share  Cite

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.03.002> [Get rights and content](#) 

Abstract

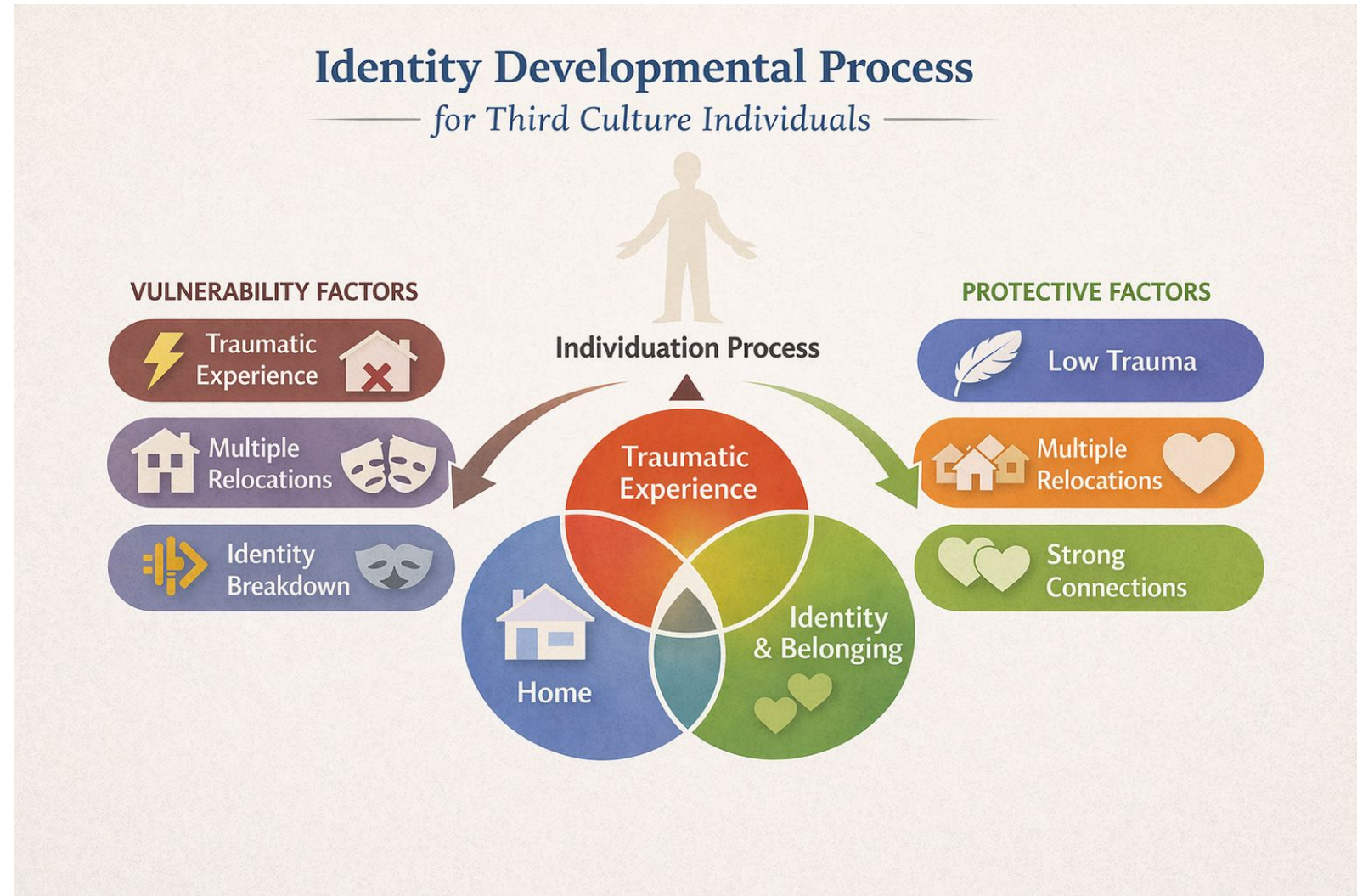
With globalization and technological advances, there has been a sharp increase in the number of people living cross-culturally with mobility. With this, the number of children living mobile cross-national lives, often termed Third Culture Kids (TCKs), is also increasing. TCKs are defined as those who have accompanied their parents for work or study overseas during their significant developmental years, before 18. They are often described as people who build relationships to all of the cultures they have lived in, but not having a full ownership in any. To gain an overall understanding of the current research landscape on this population, a [systematic review](#) was conducted on the literature of empirical research on Third Culture Kids (TCKs). The search utilized the EBSCO PsycINFO database and focused on psychosocial issues. An initial yield of 399 articles were further curated based on inclusion and exclusion criteria with consensus by two psychology researchers, resulting in 31 research publications. The content analysis review included comparisons across years, types of publications, authors, research design and analytical methods, sample age and definition, and frequency of the domains and themes. This [systematic review](#) compiled [descriptive tables](#) of studies and reviewed key findings of the three most-researched domains—emotional, relational, and identity development. The paper also highlighted discussions about the lack of standardization in TCK definition, challenges in TCK research, and suggestions for future directions.

Mobility and mental health

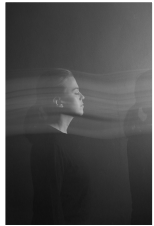
Study	Core Concept	Findings	Population	Method
Davis et al. (2010)	Adjustment, relocation stress	TCKs experience repeated disruption but also develop adaptive coping strategies	Military TCKs	Quantitative psychological measures
Davis et al. (2013)	Deployment, family separation	Mobility and parental deployment linked to stress and adjustment issues	Military TCKs	Longitudinal psychological research
Pollock et al. (2017)	Anchors and mirrors, identity model	Identity shaped by family, culture, and community; mobility disrupts two of these anchors	TCKs	Conceptual + qualitative
Gilbert (2008)	Existential identity loss	Lack of a stable “home” leads to identity ambiguity	Adult TCKs	Interviews
Grimshaw & Sears (2008)	Identity development	Frequent moves interfere with continuity of self-concept	Mobile youth	Survey research

“Global nomad identity development is a search for identity congruence. It typically is initiated by an oppressively marginalizing event but may instead begin with an event which highlights the values and fabric of the expatriate life. In either case, often interwoven with experiences of nationality and plurality, the effect is to make individuals conscious of the fact that they are in some way different from others.”

Schaetti (2000)



Dominant discourses on mental health of ‘people on the move’



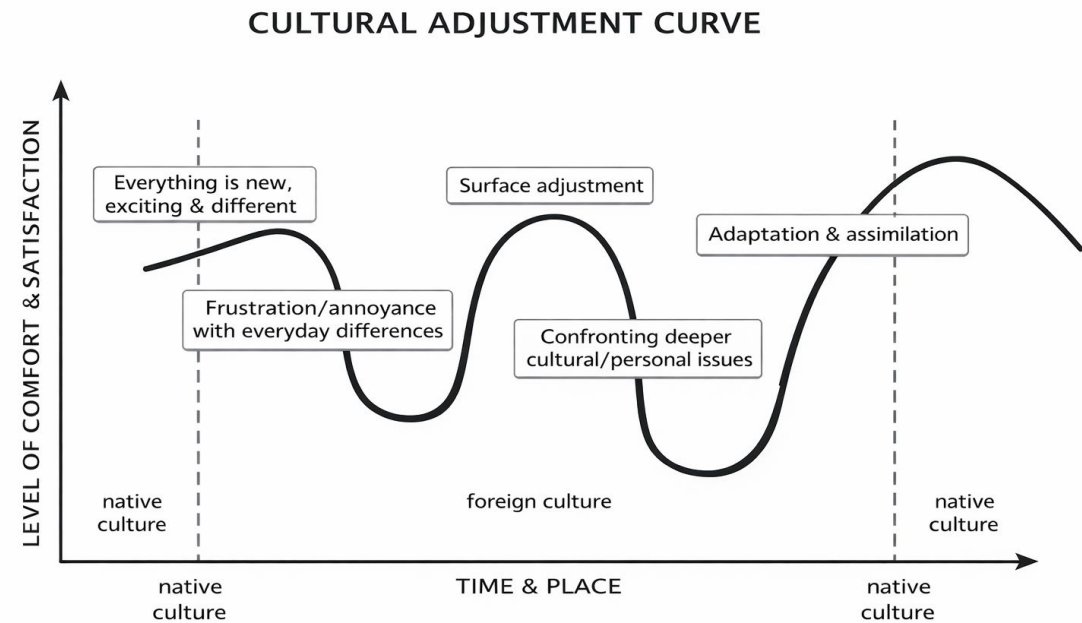
Refugees/asylum seekers



Migrants



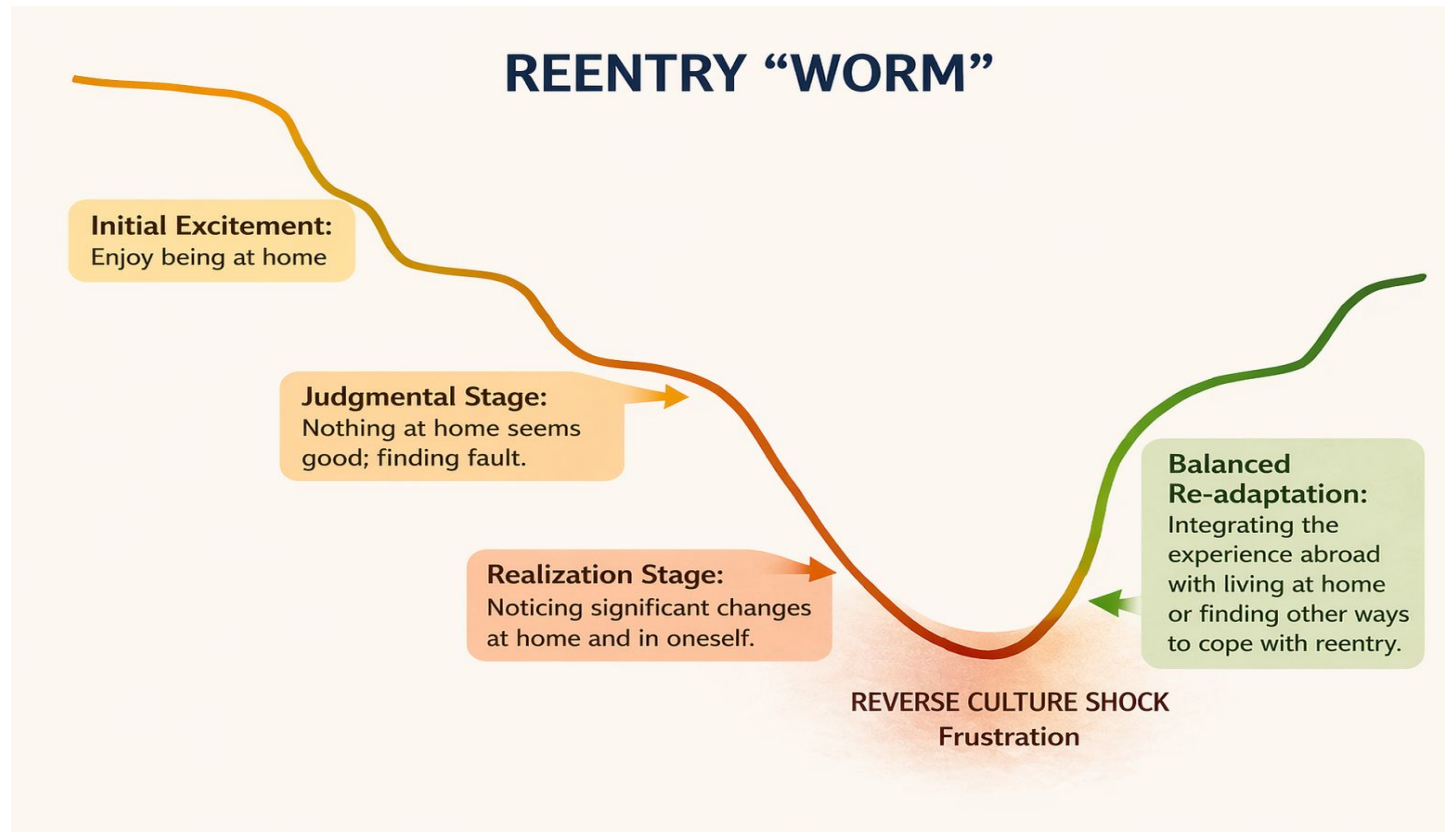
Expats, TCKs, global nomads



Source: University of Cincinnati

Culture shock and reverse culture shock

The risks of repatriation



Margaret D. Pusch, 1997- University of Maastricht



INVISIBLE LOSSES & HIDDEN GAINS

Key Themes Emerging from the Empirical Research

Challenges

- Mobility-stress
- Frequent relocation disrupts peer networks and social continuity
- TCKs often experience transient friendships and repeated cultural adaptation
- Identity Formation shaped by multiple cultural frames
- Gilbert & Gilbert (2008): TCKs experience ambiguous losses and **grief is often disenfranchised**;
- Rootlessness, diffusion, delay, loss of identity
- Psychological Risks: Unresolved grief from repeated losses

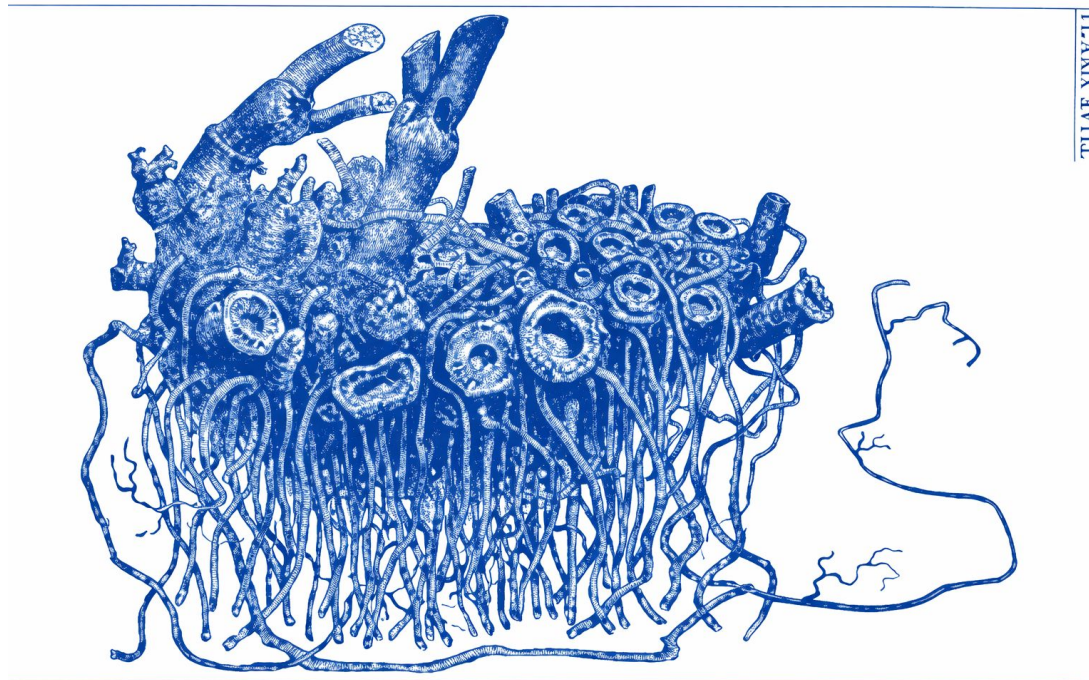
Positive

- Capacity to navigate uncertainty
- Learn how to belong
- High intercultural competence
- Linguistic flexibility
- Adaptability
- Global perspective
- Plasticity
- Creativity

A rhizomatic, nomadic identity

“We are all migrants through time” Mohsin Hamid, 2017 EXIT WEST

Objective of the counselling with TCKs/ACTKs



A FRESH EXAMPLE OF CTENOSTOME BRYOZOA.
Original Size.

Key skills

- Liminality: living in between spaces;
- Reflective function;
- Cosmopolitan attitude;
- Worldliness;
- Intersubjective recognition;
- Multiplicity in one, one in multiplicity;
- Proactive and pluralistic attitude towards the world.

From: Robert Hooke, *Micrographia* (1665) PLATE XXIII

Relocation affects:



Identity coherence

- Cultural self-concept
- Identity displacement



Mental health and productivity

- Vulnerability amplified
- Higher work-stress/burnout risk



Social belonging

- Isolation
- Networks
- Connectivity and connection



Attachment security

- Trauma
- Loss
- Vulnerability and protective factors



Couple and family dynamics

- Challenges for intercultural couples



Professional self-worth

- Diversity and Inclusion at work

When the organizational container...

HOLDS



- Organizations provide continuity
- The psychological contract with the organization represents a foundation for personal identity
- Psychological safety and supported transitions (also for the dependants)
- Perspectives

BREAKS



- Abrupt endings trigger unexpected instability and have high emotional impact
- Organizational restructuring forces unplanned and distressing changes
- Forced relocation –little agency
- Repatriation: complex transition back home
- Non-renewals
- Disconnection
- Silence from organization internalize the cost onto the individual

Thriving through a movable life



1

Mapping mobility history

- Understand the unique relocation journey
- Patterns of attachment
- Mental health problems
- Losses and traumatic experiences (**vulnerability**)

2

Naming cumulative impact

- Verbalizing and validating invisible losses
- Acknowledging inner tears and wounds
- **Restoring identity coherence and continuity through integration**

3

Supporting endings

- Provide resources for closure (not just new starts)
- Bi/Multilingual brain: therapy language(s)
- **Be aware of relational dynamics in the therapeutic rapport**

Thriving Through a Movable Life

Practical tips to protect your wellbeing—wherever life takes you



1 Raise your self-awareness: know your peaks and cliffs



Movable life has highs (peaks) and challenges (cliffs) that impact your health and wellbeing.

Naming your journey helps you understand your patterns and prepare.

ACTION TIPS

- Map your journey: list key moves, transitions, losses and wins.
- Reflect on how each has affected your mood, energy, relationships and sense of identity.
- Identify your personal patterns and triggers.

2 Monitor your need for more self-care

Check in regularly on these key areas:



Energy & Sleep



Emotions & Stress



Relationships & Connection



Purpose & Identity



Physical Health

ACTION TIPS

- Do a quick weekly check-in: rate each area 1–10.
- Watch for warning signs: persistent fatigue, irritability, feeling flat, withdrawing, frequent headaches, changes in sleep or appetite.
- When several areas dip for 2+ weeks, increase self-care.
- Adjust what you can: rest, routines, movement, nutrition, connection, time outdoors.

3 Know when to ask for support



You don't have to do it all alone.

Reach out when challenges feel bigger than your usual coping tools.

ACTION TIPS

- Seek support if you feel overwhelmed, stuck, anxious, depressed, or if daily life feels hard to manage.
- Talk to someone you trust, a coach or mentor, or a mental health professional.
- Ask for specific help—practical or emotional.

4 How organisations can provide meaningful support



Support from organisations makes all the difference—for individuals and their families.

ACTION TIPS FOR ORGANISATIONS

- Provide relocation support that includes individuals and dependants.
- Offer mental health resources and coaching.
- Train leaders to have supportive conversations.
- Foster connection: communities, peer networks, buddy systems.
- Allow flexibility, time to settle and cultural integration support.
- Check in regularly and adapt support to individual needs.



THANK YOU!

The presentation, recording and other resources will be shared on our dedicated [Inter-Agency Career Week Page](#).

Please fill out the [Evaluation Survey](#). Your feedback matters to us!



If you have any questions, please reach out to elisabetta.iberni@opcw.org

Inter- Agency Career Week 2026 Agenda

04 - 08 May

	Monday, 04 May	Tuesday, 05 May	Wednesday, 06 May	Thursday, 07 May	Friday, 08 May
03:00-04:00 (New York) 09:00-10:00 (Europe) 10:00-11:00 (Nairobi) 14:00-15:00 (Bangkok)	Pres (E) - From the UN to the Private Sector: Skills that enable Career Transition	Pres (E) Thriving in Uncertainty	Pres (E) - Career Trend Coaching: Preparing for What's Next	Pres (E) - Habits under Pressure: working more intentionally	Pres (E) Behavioural Science for Career Development: Evidence-Based Steps for Action
04:30-05:30 (New York) 10:30-11:30 (Europe) 11:30-12:30 (Nairobi) 15:30-16:30 (Bangkok)	PD (E) - Inside the Recruiter's Mind: How Hiring Really Works in the UN and Beyond	Pres (E) - From Sat Nav to Compass: Navigating Your Career in a Changing UN System	Pres (E) - Upskilling for the Future: How to Stay Marketable Inside and Beyond the UN	Pres (E) - Becoming a UN Volunteer; What is in it for you? The Hidden Benefits of Volunteering.	PD (E) - Beyond the UN Blue: Navigating Your Career Transition to Other IGOs
06:00-07:00 (New York) 12:00-13:00 (Europe) 13:00-14:00 (Nairobi) 17:00-18:00 (Bangkok)	PD (E) - Talent on the Move: Growing your career through mobility	Clinic (F) - Recherche d'emploi optimisée par l'IA : éthique, sécurisée et tournée vers l'avenir	Clinic (E) - AI for Your Career: Practical Tools and Prompts for Career Management	Pres (E) - Leading from Within	Pres (F) - Réussir les entretiens basés sur les compétences : un guide avec des conseils pratiques pour se préparer
07:30-08:30 (New York) 13:30-14:30 (Europe) 14:30-15:30 (Nairobi) 18:30-19:30 (Bangkok)	Clinic (E) - Mapping Your Motivators for Career Choices	Pres (E) - Mapping Professional Achievements to Job Application and Interview	Pres (E) - Breaking Down Job Descriptions	Pres (E) - What remains when everything changes: A Counselling Framework for global nomad staff facing adversity and transition	Pres (E) - The skills shift: What skills-based hiring and AI agents might mean for a UN career
09:00-10:00 (New York) 15:00-16:00 (Europe) 16:00-17:00 (Nairobi) 20:00-21:00 (Bangkok)	Pres (E) - Your Career, Your Conversation	Pres (E) - Strengthening Your Adaptability Muscles - AQ: The Adaptability Quotient	Pres (E) - Managing Your Saboteurs: Removing Barriers to Your Career Growth	Pres (E) - Use Your Strengths to Boost Your Career	Pres (E) - Activating Inner Resources in Uncertain Times
10:30-11:30 (New York) 16:30-17:30 (Europe) 17:30-18:30 (Nairobi) 21:30-22:30 (Bangkok)	Pres (E) - A Mind-Blowing Tour of AI Tools to Accelerate Your Career	Pres (E) - From Sat Nav to Compass: Navigating Your Career in a Changing UN System	Pres (S) - Construye tu Asistente de Carrera con IA	Pres (E) - Building a winning profile from application to interview	Pres (E) - Mentoring 2.0: From Top-Down to All-Around
13:00-14:00 (New York) 19:00-20:00 (Europe) 20:00-21:00 (Nairobi) 00:00-01:00 ⁻¹ (Bangkok)	Pres (F) - Opportunités de carrière aux Nations Unies pour les jeunes professionnels et conseils pour réussir sa candidature.	PD (E) - Thriving Globally - The human side of relocation	Pres (E) - Career Development: How you can turn a Psychosocial Hazard into a Thriving Strategy	Pres (E) - Youth Engagement: Put in Practice! (Young Talents in the UN System)	Pres (E) - Working for Justice
14:30-15:30 (New York) 20:30-21:30 (Europe) 21:30-22:30 (Nairobi) 01:30 ⁻¹ -02:30 ⁻¹ (Bangkok)	Pres (E) - Navigating Competency-Based Interviews: A Practical Preparation Guide	Pres (S) - Entrevistas basadas en competencias: guía práctica de preparación	Clinic (S) - Desarrollo de habilidades y redes profesionales a través de la mentoría		