Mental health challenges in cross cultural and expat life: practitioner insights

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Table of contents

Statement of the use of generative AI....3
Authors' notes....6
Introduction....7
Methodology and data....9
Practitioner recruitment strategy....9
Procedure....9
Sample description....9
Results....11
Theme 1: Identity disruption across life stages....11
Theme description....11
Initial interpretation....12
Theme 2: Cultural humility and attunement....13
Theme description....13
Initial interpretation....14
Theme 3: Delayed processing and hidden costs....15
Theme description....15
Initial Interpretation....16
Theme description....17
Initial Interpretation....18
Conclusion....20
Practical implications....22
At a practitioner level....22
Beyond the practitioner level....23
Research limitations....23
References....24

Statement of the use of generative AI

Generative artificial intelligence was used for two main purposes in the preparation of this document. First, because English is not the first language of three of the authors, it was used to support clarity and readability. Second, it was used as an assistant during the analysis of the qualitative material. All AI-generated outputs were critically reviewed and checked against the original data where relevant. The authors remained responsible for the analysis, the interpretation of the findings, and the final wording of the white paper. Generative AI was not treated as an author or as an independent source of evidence.

Executive summary

Global mobility is an increasingly common feature of contemporary personal and professional life. Expatriates, Third Culture Kids (TCKs), and Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) may spend significant periods of their lives navigating different countries, cultures, schools, workplaces, and social environments. These experiences can offer important opportunities. However, the literature also suggests that they can shape identity, relationships, belonging, and emotional wellbeing in often unrecognized ways (e.g., Adam et al., 2018; Sterle et al., 2018). This paper examines the concerns that most often lead globally mobile individuals and families to seek professional support, as perceived by practitioners who work with these populations. It also identifies practitioner-recommended practices for providing effective and culturally responsive care.

Twenty-three practitioners completed an initial survey, and subsequently participated in an onboarding round of focus groups organized by age group and specialty (e.g., child and adolescent specialists, adulthood specialists), with seventeen of them participating in individual interviews after that. Transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach which yielded four interconnected themes: identity disruption across life stages, cultural humility and attunement, delayed processing and hidden costs, and taking a systemic lens.

Practitioners viewed transition, cultural code switching, and lack of consistent community during various life-stages, as significant factors shaping identity and role formation. They also perceived the effects of global mobility as cumulative, with losses associated with repeated departures, disrupted relationships, and difficulties establishing stable belonging often remaining unprocessed over time. Rapid assimilation and self-sufficiency, though temporarily adaptive, were seen as potentially delaying emotional processing and help-seeking. Unresolved concerns could then resurface during later life transitions.

Practitioners emphasized that these concerns cannot be understood at the individual level alone. They pointed to the ways in which family, schools, workplaces, organizations, and societal narratives (including ones centered on privilege) shape how mobility is experienced, at times masking grief, loneliness, and disconnection. As a result, some clients were left feeling that their distress was not fully recognized or taken seriously.

Together, the findings suggest global mobility functions as an ongoing developmental and relational context. Practitioners may benefit from exploring clients' mobility histories, cumulative

transitions and losses, and considering how family, cultural, organizational, and broader social systems shape their experiences. The study also emphasizes the value of avoiding assumptions and approaching globally mobile clients with cultural humility, openness, and curiosity, recognizing that adapting to different cultural environments can create additional stress and that mobility itself may be associated with broader emotional distress. Rather than assuming the worst or the best, practitioners can work with clients to explore how repeated transitions, shifting cultural contexts, and changing relationships have shaped their lives and current concerns.

Authors' notes

The authors would like to sincerely thank all practitioners who contributed their time, experiences, and professional insights to this project.

Karina Lagarrigue and Jennie Linton co-founded this research project and worked at equal levels of involvement throughout, jointly holding the vision and mission of the paper. Together, they conceptualized the project, designed the online survey, developed the interview protocol, led the practitioner interviews, and oversaw the recording process. Both contributed to the triangulated analysis and the writing of the final paper. Ivana Mrgan contributed to the project both as an interviewed practitioner and by collaborating in the thematic analysis and writing of the paper. Mathieu Gagnon contributed to the thematic analysis and writing of the paper.

Introduction

Cross-border mobility is an increasingly common feature of contemporary social and professional life worldwide. Individuals and families may relocate temporarily across national and cultural borders for diverse reasons, including employment, education, diplomacy, military, humanitarian work, or international service. The International Organization for Migration (2011) notes that there is no universally accepted definition of a migrant, and the term covers a heterogeneous population.

Within this broad category, the present paper focuses specifically on expatriates and Third Culture Kids/Adult Third Culture Kids. Expatriate is a general term for a person living outside their country of origin, usually more than 6 months and less than 5 years (Spielberger, 2024). Children, by contrast, are frequently described as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Pollock and Van Reken (2017) define TCKs as those who spend a significant portion of their first 18 years accompanying one or both parents into a country that differs from at least one parent's passport country, typically due to a parent's work or advanced training. Far from a series of discrete relocation events, global mobility is an ongoing process that unfolds across life stages and domains. These adults and youth repeatedly navigate shifting cultural codes, language barriers, and unfamiliar institutional expectations, all of which can accumulate into cognitive and emotional fatigue over time (American Psychological Association, 2017).

At the same time, such mobility intersects with contextual and personal factors, producing markedly different experiences. Among adults, these include assignment type and duration, workload demands, the availability of institutional support, language proficiency, socioeconomic resources, family strain, and health. Among TCKs, they include number and timing of moves, patterns of language acquisition, and schooling pathways (e.g., international, national, boarding, or homeschooling contexts). Across both groups, experiences are also shaped by differences in personality, coping styles, values, family history, and cultural background (Donohue, 2024). This interplay means that globally mobile people share a core set of struggles while also facing additional challenges that vary by person and circumstance.

Their lives often involve a shifting mix of gains and losses. Many describe benefits such as a broadened perspective, greater tolerance for ambiguity, and increased cognitive and emotional flexibility (Adam et al., 2018), while simultaneously struggling with disruptions to identity coherence and relational continuity. Families may experience strengthened bonds and adaptability (Sterle et al., 2018), yet also face repeated interruptions to roles, routines, and expectations. Importantly, many of these challenges remain invisible as mobility is frequently socially framed as enriching or aspirational.

A growing number of globally mobile people and families seek support from professionals including therapists, counselors, social workers, educators, and coaches. Systematic review (Doki et al., 2018) on stress factors affecting foreign-born workers resulted in six themes: communication, cultural differences in the workplace, daily life, relationships with family and colleagues, financial problems and social inequality. Although there is a great deal of focus on organizational support (van der Laken et al., 2016) and outcomes related to integration and adjustment (Sousa et al., 2017), newer models of expatriate adjustment propose that expatriate mental health is an antecedent to psychological adjustment (Derksen et al., 2024). In some cases, those seeking support are motivated by a broader desire to make sense of their experiences, relationships, or sense of self, particularly when their life histories do not align easily with dominant cultural narratives (Platanitis, 2018).

Many professionals are not attuned to the ways repeated mobility can shape clients' histories, needs, and presenting concerns (Sterle et al., 2018). As a result, they may rely on implicit assumptions, personal experience, or frameworks that were not designed to account for the specific realities of globally mobile populations. Systematic public evidence on globally mobile clients' concerns and their implications for practice remains limited. However, the available literature, together with the work of practitioners specialising in globally mobile individuals and families, provides some indication of how existing approaches can be adapted to this context (Thornberry, 2015). Practice in this area is integrative, including trauma-informed care (Perry, 2006; Cloitre et al., 2018), intercultural approaches (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2011; Nguyen, 2023), narrative and systemic frameworks (White & Epston, 1990). These approaches are frequently supplemented by practitioner-led adaptations that reflect the lived experiences of expatriates and TCKs (Bushong, 2013; Crossman & Wells, 2022).

Documenting how these practitioners conceptualize and describe the concerns they encounter is an important first step toward making this practice-based knowledge more visible and accessible. Accordingly, this white paper asks: What presenting issues most commonly bring globally mobile individuals and families into professional support, as perceived by practitioners who work with this population? This paper will also note how practitioners are addressing these unique issues in this population. To explore these questions, we conducted an initial online survey followed by interviews with practitioners involved in mental health and mobility work worldwide.

Methodology and data

Practitioner recruitment strategy

Practitioners were recruited from the broader global mobility and mental health community using open online calls for participation. A link to the study was disseminated through multiple channels, including social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as through private messages and informal word-of-mouth. Recruitment efforts specifically targeted communities and professional spaces focused on Third Culture Kids, expatriate life, and expatriate coaching, allowing the study to reach practitioners engaged in supporting globally mobile individuals and families.

Procedure

Data collection began with an initial online survey programmed using Google Forms that gathered descriptive information about practitioners' professional backgrounds and practice profiles, including their roles and credentials, personal experiences with global mobility, primary client populations served, and theoretical orientations. It also collected information about whether they had engaged in formal or informal research related to globally mobile families and, if so, the general topics of that work. As part of this survey, practitioners could also indicate their interest in taking part in individual interviews.

These interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and were scheduled across multiple time zones to facilitate participation from those located in different regions. Each followed a semi-structured format and was audio-recorded with practitioners' consent for subsequent transcription and analysis. In this paper, we focus on qualitative data generated in response to the following prompts: *What are the most common presenting issues your globally mobile clients present with? What have you found works best for clients from this population?*

Sample description

Twenty-three practitioners completed the initial online survey. Nearly half self-identified as coaches (48%), while close to one third identified as psychologists (30.4%). Smaller proportions identified as licensed therapists (17%) or as other mental health professionals (17%). These categories should be understood as descriptive and overlapping rather than mutually exclusive, as practitioners could endorse more than one professional identity. In addition, just over one fifth of practitioners (22%) reported personal experience with global mobility, identifying themselves as Third Culture Kids (TCKs),

Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs), or adult expatriates. With respect to client populations, the majority reported working primarily with adults (48%). Smaller and equal proportions indicated working with children (26%) or with families (26%). Fewer reported working with adolescents (17%), and only a small proportion indicated working with couples (4%).

Practitioners reported a wide range of theoretical orientations, though some approaches were more prominent than others. Cognitive Behavioral Therapies were the most frequently endorsed orientations, collectively reported by 26%. Integrative and Holistic therapy orientations were each endorsed by 22%, followed by Humanistic therapy (13%) and Psychoanalysis and Psychodynamic therapies (4%). A further 35% described their approach as 'other' or as a type of work that doesn't qualify as a distinct psychotherapy modality (Kazdin, 2000). Moreover, just over half of practitioners (52%) reported having engaged in formal or informal research related to globally mobile families. These research activities spanned a range of topics, including repatriation, identity development, parental support, grief, expatriation, and immigration.

In total, 17 practitioners indicated interest in a follow-up interview. All individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Initial topics and preliminary themes were identified inductively during data collection and were subsequently reviewed and refined through collaborative discussion within the research team. This iterative process allowed themes to emerge from the data while also drawing on the team's prior conceptual understanding and familiarity with relevant literature, supporting both data-driven analysis and theoretical sensitivity. To provide context where needed, explanatory information has been inserted into quotations and is indicated using bold-italicized text. Moreover, to maintain consistency and inclusive language throughout the report, all individuals included in the study are referred to as practitioners and assigned a number (e.g., practitioner 2), regardless of their training backgrounds or levels of expertise.

Results

Theme 1: Identity disruption across life stages

Theme description

This theme captures the psychological and social transitions experienced by globally mobile people as they move through different life stages and roles. Practitioners reflected on how cross-cultural mobility intersects with identity formation, close relationships, and mental health. This is particularly true during critical life transitions such as repatriation, adolescence, empty nesting, and emerging adulthood.

One salient subtheme is **identity disruption during life transitions**, particularly for vulnerable groups such as financially dependent spouses (Practitioner 7) or children and adolescents for whom formative years are crucial in shaping identity and coping patterns (Practitioner 8). Practitioners stressed how major moves at any life stage disrupt role stability and emotional processing (Practitioner 10b).

> *"There are also repatriation costs, especially with empty nesters. You need to adapt to your home country. Financially dependent spouses are especially at risk." (Practitioner 7)*

> *"It is a real developmental loss for TCKs, they learn some of the life skills late in the day. Trying to learn coping skills… without long-term connections and friends." (Practitioner 8)*

> *"There is delayed emotion processing with TCKs, with all the instability when growing up, you need a certain amount of stability before you can start to sift through." (Practitioner 10b)*

Carrying grief through life emerged as another subtheme, with practitioners highlighting the accumulation of loss over years of mobility (Practitioner 3). Importantly, the type of losses experienced by expats could be more subtle than those typically thought of by the general population: loss of friendships due to distance, the guilt of not living closer when a loved one is sick, the loss of a consistent community, having to code switch, or no longer speaking a beloved language. Practitioners noted the importance of attending to and processing such losses and interpersonal strains (Practitioner 11). Practitioners also noted they see loss resurfacing later in adulthood when not attended to earlier. (Practitioner 4):

"A lot of grief and loss. When you are an expat, it is kind of go, go, go and you do not stop and reflect and this goes unattended." (Practitioner 3)

"I can see a child, but the symptom it shows indicates how the family is doing. Frequently, it is trauma processing that is needed." (Practitioner 11)

"Expats will take longer than the average client to seek help, possibly showing up with complex problems." (Practitioner 4)

Lastly, practitioners pointed out **unrecognized cultural complexity** intensified by frequent moves and cultural disconnection, which employers and organizations often failed to address. (Practitioner 5). Feelings of being "outside and between spaces" (Practitioner 1) reflect a chronic sense of cultural otherness, exacerbated by multiple unacknowledged cultural identities (Practitioner 5):

"Most organizations are still looking for band-aid fixes… 200 slides in a deck for a 2-hour presentation around implicit bias and that is it." (Practitioner 5)

"This whole, like, jumping between being poor, acquiring wealth, being poor, being wealthy again, going to war zones, from one war zone to another (making sense of all of it). Um, it's just a lot of things that are added to a TCK life." (Practitioner 1)

"There are industries where global mobility is just a part of it. There is no awareness of the impact of it, business structures are very rigid and don't leave room for adjustment period… both to comment and maybe share their vulnerabilities, like, Hey, I'm still adjusting!" (Practitioner 5)

Initial interpretation

This theme highlights how mobility shapes identities and life roles across the lifespan, affecting children, adolescents, midlife and older adults in an ongoing process. The unique intersection of life-stage transitions, cumulative losses, and high mobility may produce layered, often invisible emotional burdens and cultural stress (Meca & Schwartz, 2024). Practitioners described how people often wait a long time to reach out for support, with old struggles sometimes resurfacing during repatriation, parenting, divorce, or the empty-nest years. This highlights the value of being attentive to the intersection of both life-stage, losses, and cultural context. Adapted support for this population could help clients explore their own story and layers of complexity, as well as the impact of these various factors on their identities and mental health.

Theme 2: Cultural humility and attunement

Theme description

Several practitioners noted that it is common for globally mobile clients to arrive after prior experiences of support marked by misunderstanding or oversimplification of their lived experience. They also highlighted that this history often led clients to compartmentalize their experiences and minimize their complexity. It also added the burden of having to explain themselves from the beginning every time. This theme captures practitioners' view that effective work with globally mobile people calls for humility, reflexive openness, and a culturally attuned presence that actively counters the recurring sense of being unseen or reduced

Practitioners consistently emphasized the need for **cultural humility and openness**, describing it as a commitment to bracket their assumptions and meet the client's story with curiosity (Practitioner 3). They stressed asking for clarification, noticing their own biases, and staying open to cultural meaning as the client defines it (Practitioner 4). In this case, they viewed the practitioner's openness as a correction that restored safety and credibility in the relationship (Practitioner 7). They also spoke of drawing on cultural moments as they arise and adapting their approach to the client's migratory experience. Crucially, they viewed "culture" as an ongoing co-constructed narrative. Therefore, cultural responsiveness was understood to be both a stance and a set of practices that unfold from intake through formulation to intervention.

> *"I try to avoid judgments and statements and to be very transparent and ask them for clarification." (Practitioner 3)*

> *"...relevant to include early experiences, migratory stressors, culturally specific parenting practices while doing an intake and turning formulation in a team effort." (Practitioner 4)*

> *"I had clients coming to me after seeing multiple therapists that did not understand their stories; we need trained specialists. This is a vulnerable group." (Practitioner 7)*

Practitioners also described a deliberate **relational use of "cultural opportunities"**: moments where they can self-disclose or draw on their own cultural experiences to close the gap and build a stronger connection with the client (Practitioner 8). This was presented as attuned, purposeful sharing that reduces clients' experience of being uniquely complicated or chronically misunderstood (Practitioner 2).

This sharing was viewed as helping normalize complex identities and life stories, by showing that people can embrace and integrate multiple cultural influences over time (Practitioner 5).

> *"My parents didn't know the terminology of TCK, but I did. I learned about it as a teenager. I was familiar with that way of looking at my identity, how I was raised, how it changed me. There was an element of bonding over shared experience." (Practitioner 8)*

> *"I wrote a book and got a lot of messages that were sensitive to expat content, my experience and it resonated with them." (Practitioner 2)*

> *"Strategic self-disclosure, absolutely if focused on the needs of a person. It is a specific setting, and if you are not able to walk the talk, it is very difficult… You should utilize your lived experience." (Practitioner 5)*

Practitioners emphasized the importance of **culturally responsive practices** that tailor language, conceptualization and interventions to the client's stressors and complex identity (Practitioner 4). They described culturally responsive work as going beyond "awareness" and shaping how therapy is structured and delivered. This included integrating clients' life experiences and adjusting treatment planning to fit their current context (Practitioner 2). They also emphasized flexible approaches that can accommodate layered life transitions (Practitioner 10a).

> *"Using culturally sensitive language, noting down early experiences and migratory stressors and belief systems is essential." (Practitioner 4)*

> *"So it's going to make your sessions different. They will face jet lags, natural disasters. They will get a new case. All these things are particular for this mobile life, right? Their life is absolutely not linear, you need to work with that and accept it." **- talking about international NGOs work** (Practitioner 2)*

> *"We are starting with the story first, which is a complete reversal of the typical process, deepening the rapport, which is a gift for many TCKs." (Practitioner 10a)*

Initial interpretation

This theme suggests that in order to avoid inadvertently dismissing or oversimplifying a client's experiences, practitioners might consider (1) a reflexive stance that actively avoids cultural overconfidence; (2) relational skill in using cultural moments, including self-disclosure to reduce distance

and normalize complexity; and (3) responsive practice that integrates the mobility context into formulation and intervention. Together, these elements reflect a way of accompanying clients who routinely feel unseen or misunderstood. This approach might also allow practitioners to avoid cultural stereotypes, while increasing receptivity and strengthening attunement (Hook et al., 2025).

Theme 3: Delayed processing and hidden costs

Theme description

This theme highlights how the psychological impact of mobility sometimes emerges later in life or during major life transitions or other times of stress. Practitioners emphasized that the distress of living abroad is shaped by disrupted belonging in fragile social networks, and is often masked by "successful" adaptations that lead to delayed help-seeking. Together, these insights point to the need for culturally attuned, lifecycle-sensitive work that assesses adversity holistically and supports integration of experiences.

One salient subtheme relates to **lifespan triggers and delayed processing.** Practitioners noted delaying help-seeking (sometimes for years) even in the face of unresolved adverse experiences (Practitioner 1). They stressed the importance of evaluating clients' experiences holistically while exploring losses and potential traumatic distress (Practitioner 3). Moreover, they suggested that distress can remain dormant until destabilised by life transitions (Practitioner 6):

> *"Globally mobile communities take longer to reach out for help." (Practitioner 1)*

> *"They tend to come later in life, frequently with an expat grief tower or trauma unattended." (Practitioner 3)*

> *"It is often in times of big changes, divorces or relocation, that traumas resurface and press them to really process all the grief and loss." (Practitioner 6)*

Another prominent subtheme was **loneliness and social disconnection**. Practitioners identified the social distress of isolation and emotional invalidation as a frequent pattern in expatriate and TCK family narratives (Practitioner 10b). This distress was often compounded with cultural disconnection and feelings of non-belonging in multiple environments (Practitioner 5).

They also observed this social disconnection as accumulating over time, and this lack of cultural belonging as amplifying other types of distress (Practitioner 7).

> *"Somewhere within the trauma is also isolation; lack of a secure social network always comes into that." (Practitioner 7)*

> *"I'll work with somebody for years because we've done a lot of the processing work and now they're establishing new patterns. They need a witness who gets it and who can cheer them on because maybe their family situation doesn't offer that." (Practitioner 10b)*

> *"I think that it's only people that had this layered existence… I want to look at things more openly across cultural context, as opposed to how this fits into the one culture that I think I am existing in. … Also, people who had come back had, at least for me, a greater reverse culture shock than when they originally left." (Practitioner 5)*

Still another subtheme emerged, emphasizing **adaptation and integration of experiences**. Specifically, the focus was on coping strategies aiding survival in mobility contexts but masking distress and delaying help-seeking (Practitioner 6). Several practitioners highlighted fawning types of reaction and over-adaptation as common distress responses (Practitioner 10a). Finally, they reflected on the restorative role of narrative ownership, supporting clients to regain autonomy over their life stories (Practitioner 10a).

> *"These kids, they can adapt very quickly, they conform extremely fast to environments, to the emotions of adults around them. It is not always a good thing." (Practitioner 6)*

> *"They frequently have this fawning trauma response. We can get good at spotting the authority in the room and making them love us. It is a great survival tip." -* ***referencing TCKs*** *(Practitioner 10a)*

> *"I think that the biggest piece for me is the autonomy, autonomy over their personal story... For TCKs that adapted to it all, they oriented themselves around other people." (Practitioner 10a)*

Initial Interpretation

This theme suggests that globally mobile individuals accumulate unresolved experiences across the lifespan and often delay help-seeking, frequently relying on adaptation strategies that allow them to

keep functioning. Major life transitions may overwhelm these strategies, reactivating earlier experiences and prompting individuals to seek support. At the same time, a heightened sense of loneliness (Wu & Penning, 2015; Salari et al., 2025), repeated disruptions to secure relationships, and an enduring sense of non-belonging may make it more difficult to access and engage with that support. Practitioners may therefore work towards fostering narrative ownership and explore experiences of isolation and non-belonging. They may also build on clients' existing adaptive strategies and psychological flexibility while addressing patterns of over-adaptation.

Theme 4: Taking a systemic lens

Theme description

This theme highlights that personal concerns cannot be understood in isolation from family dynamics, organizational environments and broader societal structures. It points to the importance of adopting a systemic approach in work with globally mobile clients

At the **individual level**, practitioners mentioned patterns such as self-reliance and identity struggles. These can be moderated, created or perpetuated by perceived lack of social support (Practitioner 2). Moreover, they highlighted the need for highly individualized treatment formulations (Practitioner 9). They also hinted that expats and TCKs often present with an ingrained habit of *"solving things by themselves"* (Practitioner 3).

> *"Home should be their comfort zone but they end up with no support as the family can't understand them." (Practitioner 2)*

> *"Working on getting them to feel safe, finding landmarks, places, situations they feel at ease with. Consistency of family or vacation home, for example." (Practitioner 9)*

> *"Many expats have self-ideas they cling a lot to, fueled by a modern discourse of self-reliance and individuality." (Practitioner 3)*

The **family system** also emerged as a critical domain, especially for children and adolescents. Practitioners described scenarios where family sometimes fails to provide understanding or emotional validation due either to differences in experiences between parent and child, or parental overwhelm

(Practitioner 6). They also emphasized the necessity of viewing parenting practices and attachment patterns through a cultural lens (Practitioner 10b). Moreover, they mentioned that many parents tend to minimize the strain on their children or focus exclusively on the potential opportunities of life transitions (Practitioner 3). Some expatriated adults mentioned similar experiences with family or friends in their home country.

> *"But a lot of times you hear parents that are in denial, they do not understand this can be a challenge for their kids. This is something you don't get to see in adults who aren't ATCKs in the context of mobility." -* ***referencing relocation*** *(Practitioner 6)*

> *"Termination of the process? That is designed around the TCK experience as well. There have been so many forced losses that they are in charge of the end of work. It is determined by the early family experiences, really, not the age. And another thing is, I don't cut time. A lot of TCKs are working with damaged attachments." (Practitioner 10b)*

> *"And so we want to say things like, it's going to be okay. Don't worry, you're going to make new friends. And even when that is all true, what that is saying to a child is that your feelings at this moment are not something I want to hear. So we need to explain to parents and caregivers, and even role-play it, that shifting to 'this makes you feel better' doesn't actually help the child." (Practitioner 3)*

At the **organizational and societal level**, practitioners discussed the neglect of psychological needs. Organizations may offer logistical or financial relocation support, but they were described as overlooking emotional and relational wellbeing (Practitioner 5). They noted that broader context also exerts influence that can promote stereotypes and expectations, while invalidating genuine struggles. (Practitioner 9 and 10b):

> *"You can see that they were provided with a relocation package but there is no psychological support for this process of adjustment." (Practitioner 5)*

> *"Research and conferences on TCKs were positively biased to TCK experience being perceived as a fantastic contribution to the world. There is pressure about who they should be and how to act." (Practitioner 10b)*

> *"We take it for granted but there is a real cognitive and emotional exhaustion with language and cultural code-switching in both adults and children." -* ***that they are well adjusted*** *(Practitioner 9)*

Initial Interpretation

This theme highlights the limits of individually focused approaches, as practitioners may miss what is contributing to a client's distress when systemic factors are not considered. Normalizing complexity and locating difficulty within its broader context, rather than within the person alone, may allow practitioners to better support clients through major transitions. Practitioners emphasized that challenges are consistently amplified across three levels: within the family system, organizational environments and broader society. In line with multicultural and ecological guidelines, practitioners are urged to integrate developmental, cultural, familial, and institutional factors into their understanding of clients and their work (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This paper set out to document the concerns most commonly brought by globally mobile individuals and families, as described by practitioners across disciplines. It also aimed to consolidate knowledge that is typically dispersed across individuals and settings, offering a more accessible resource for understanding the needs of globally mobile populations.

The findings suggest that practitioners perceive mobility as an ongoing developmental and relational context that shapes how distress is experienced, expressed, and can be addressed. The study also examined how they responded to these challenges, highlighting flexible, context-sensitive adaptations across modalities as well as shared practical implications. This population was consistently described as functioning well for years before seeking support during major transitions. These moments often exposed the limits of previously effective coping strategies. In mobile lives, emotional distress may be postponed rather than resolved, highlighting the need for approaches that consider how experiences accumulate across the lifespan.

Even though practitioners differed in training, they all described the need to tailor interventions to each client's cultural background, mobility history, and current circumstances. Cultural humility, reflexive openness, and flexibility were seen as essential, particularly for clients whose struggles with mobility had been dismissed by others. Practitioners emphasized adjusting pacing, using culturally resonant moments to build trust, strategic self-disclosures, and supporting clients in developing ownership over their life stories. The prevalence of exclusion and loneliness was also highlighted. Distress was often described as shaped by disrupted belonging and fragile social networks, as well as masked by "successful" adaptation and delayed help-seeking. Practitioners detailed how they explore isolation and identity shifts, as well as attend to clients' adaptive strategies to counter over-adaptation and avoidance.

The findings point to globally mobile clients' distress as deeply social and cultural, thus stressing the limits of a purely individual-focused approach. Practitioners described how mental health concerns are intertwined with family systems, organizational environments, and institutional practices. This highlighted the need to attend to broader systemic influences and cultural stress.

In closing, those who aim to support globally mobile clients can benefit from understanding the complexities and nuances of this population. As mobility becomes an increasingly common way of life, understanding its psychological impact becomes essential.

Practical implications

At a practitioner level

First, practitioners are encouraged to routinely explore clients' mobility histories and treat them as an organizing context rather than background information. Inviting clients to map their experiences as a narrative or timeline may help identify patterns, accumulated transitions, and links to current difficulties.

Second, rather than treating each relocation as an independent life event, this paper supports conceptualizing mobility as an ongoing developmental context. Mapping a client's mobility history, including key transitions, changes in significant relationships, separations, and meaningful losses, can help distinguish isolated stressors from experiences that have accumulated over time. Such an approach may be particularly valuable when emotional processing has been repeatedly postponed by the demands of adaptation.

Third, practitioners are invited to adapt their assessment and intervention to reflect the client's mobility context. This means looking beyond presenting symptoms to consider the influence of family, educational, organizational, and cultural systems. In practice, assessment may require more time than usual to develop a sufficiently complete understanding of the client's mobility history and the factors shaping their current difficulties.

Fourth, practitioners should avoid assuming that outward functioning or successful adaptation reflects absence of adversity. Exploring both adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and positive childhood experiences (PCEs), alongside later mobility-related experiences, can help identify culturally or population-specific sources of vulnerability and protection.

Fifth, this paper suggests the value of careful and purposeful self-disclosure as a means of establishing rapport, normalizing migratory stressors and introducing population-specific coping skills. Although this practice is typically discouraged, briefly acknowledging one's own international experience, or lack of it, while showing genuine curiosity can reduce the client's need to justify or explain their lifestyle.

Sixth, helping clients expand their emotional vocabulary to better identify, understand, and express the emotional complexity of globally mobile lives, is encouraged. When working with children and adolescents, involving parents and caregivers may strengthen family communication and resilience.

This may be particularly important when different generations have experienced mobility in different ways and therefore attach different meanings to the same experiences.

Beyond the practitioner level

Trainers, educators and supervisors should prepare practitioners to understand mobility as a developmental and systemic context. They should also equip them with skills in mobility-informed assessment and support them in adapting evidence-based interventions.

Organizations employing internationally mobile staff have an important opportunity to move from reactive to preventive mental health care. A first step involves recruiting practitioners with interpersonal qualities such as approachability, curiosity, cultural humility, flexibility, and tolerance for ambiguity. A second involves complementing logistical relocation support with psychologically informed preparation and ongoing support for identity transitions, relationship changes, cumulative loss, and cultural adaptation.

Research limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Second, practitioners came from diverse professional backgrounds, including clinical and non-clinical ones. On the one hand, this reflects the reality that mental health support for globally mobile populations is often provided across a broad range of professionals. On the other hand, it also introduces variability in how practitioners interpret the questions, perhaps limiting comparability across responses.

Finally, the study relied solely on practitioners' perspectives and did not include client's accounts. While this provides valuable insight into how challenges are observed and addressed in practice, it may not fully capture clients' lived experiences. In addition, this study did not evaluate the effectiveness of the various interventions or therapeutic modalities identified by practitioners.

Further research should examine how specific approaches are adapted across different needs and groups, and incorporate the voices of globally mobile clients alongside practitioners.

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