

## Theological and Psychological Perspectives of TCK Development as a Reciprocating Self in Relation to God, People, Creation, Places and Objects

Dr. Alvin Dueck (2006) views Theology and Psychology as “different cultures and linguistic systems” with their own symbols, rituals, customs, lingo, and metaphors (p. 320). I embrace his metaphor of integration across disciplines as a cross-cultural dialogue between two cultures. An integrative dialogue between these two disciplines will be valuable to better understand human condition and growth with the teleological perspective that psychology often lacks. Psychology typically contributes by explaining disorders and maladaptive human functioning. In my attempt to understand human development in psychology, I seek to integrate my learning in theologies with my prior and developing understanding of psychology in reciprocal engagement.

To begin, I would like to introduce the book— *The Reciprocating Self* by Balswick, King, & Reimer (2016), which seeks to weave together understanding of human development with Christian theological perspective. It proposes the reciprocating self as a developmental teleology by utilizing the theologies of particularity, relationism, triune God, and the *imago Dei*. Firstly, I agree with the concept of the reciprocating self as a view of human developmental processes and teleology in relation to our relationality with people, God, and within ourselves as reflections of the social Trinity. Since we are created to reflect the image of a relational God, we naturally have the deep desire to connect and form relationships. I agree that through our dynamic, reciprocal interactions with God and others, we develop our self-concept through various differentiation and maturation processes.

However, on the other hand, as I research highly-mobile populations of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) or Cross-cultural Kids (CCKs) who have moved multiple times across geographical locations and cultures and developed bonds to these places (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), I wonder about the **reciprocity of human development and one’s connections to places, creation, and inanimate objects**. Therefore, it is with this curiosity that I have developed a research question about this integrative view: I wonder if

reciprocity also includes one's connections to places, creation and inanimate objects. I sought to examine this question via a multi-perspective approach, namely, through the doctrines of social Trinity, general and specific revelation, developmental psychology, and place identity. But for the purpose of this reflection, I will share I believe that though inanimate objects were not assumed to be directly created by God, the memories of experiences with these objects or symbols generate significant interactivity and meaning for TCKs, just like other reciprocating experiences with other human beings. This emulates the reciprocity of how we relate to and experience a transcendent God in both tangible and intangible ways, and reflect the *imago Dei* as a reciprocating self.

### **Social Trinity**

The social trinity refers to God as the triune God consisting of three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit, three different persons but yet in union as one. This is explained by John Zizioulas' concept of the communion of diverse elements (Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, 2010). The relationship of the triune (three-in-unity) God could be described by the metaphor of the divine dance, where the three Godheads are spinning as three persons tightly holding together, but the spin is so fast and tight that it can be observed as one whirlwind. This is *perichoresis* ("rotation"), describing the mutual indwelling of the Trinity (Davis, 2006).

Irenaeus elaborates the Godhead roles in the divine "economy" (*oikonomia*): "Economy" (the law [*nomos*] of the household [*oikos*]) describes administration or ordering of affairs, and hence, the way God administers creation and salvation through the Son and the Spirit. Therefore, "economic Trinity" refers to the Trinity as the Father, Son, and Spirit in their dynamic movement in creation and redemption (Plantinga et al., 2010). This is mediated and actualized through the Holy Spirit's participation in bringing the living God into intimate and abiding relationship with us to participate in grace, salvation and eschatological glory (Davis, Kendall, & O'Collins, 2001). This is distinct from the "immanent Trinity," which

refers to the 'intra-persons-of-God' relationship, the Trinity as it is eternally in itself, the mutual indwelling scenario between Father, Son, and Spirit.

### **The Reciprocating Self—An Integrative View**

The authors of *The Reciprocating Self*, Balswick, King, and Reimer (2004) purposed to provide an integrated lens to look at human development psychology with theological underpinnings. They first propose “the reciprocating self” as the human development teleology and define the *reciprocating self* as “the self that in its uniqueness and fullness of being, *engages fully in relationship with another* in all its particularity” (p. 21, Balswick, King, and Reimer, 2004). They drew upon the doctrines of the Trinity and the *imago Dei*, to explain how human beings reflect the communion of the Godhead without compromising the uniqueness of the three Persons. They suggested that *particularity* and *relatedness* can co-occur through perfect reciprocal interrelations, illustrating *perichoresis*. They also explained briefly Martin Buber’s theory of relatedness and how individuals unite with God and others like the *I-Thou* relationships posited by Barth (1961).

In relation to the lifespan development psychology perspective, the authors selected human development theories that contributed to the understanding of reciprocity, including: Klein’s Object-relations theory<sup>1</sup> about the *cohesive self* (emergence of the reciprocal true self—comfortable with his own uniqueness yet permeable to the influence of others in a healthy way); Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (“*reciprocal determinism*”); Symbolic Interaction Theory (*self in symbolic interaction* as the sum total of self-concepts developed through communication via language and symbols, and one’s belief of self from perceptions of what others think); and Piaget’s cognitive development (ability to view self as an object during childhood).

Across lifespan stages, the authors explained how infants first develop the capacity for a reciprocal self by learning to have a sense of self as an object different another, which then expands through close interactions with care-givers and with other stimuli in the world. The feedback responses

they receive allow them to mature as they learn about the world, but most importantly, also about who they are in relation to the world, and what these aspects generate within them. Though the authors of *The Reciprocating Self* include some discussion on how the environment affects the development of the *reciprocating self* via Bronfenbrenneur's ecological model, there was not an extensive discussion about reciprocity with one's connections to places, nature, and inanimate objects.

### **Weaving Thoughts and Questions**

As I explored the interweaving of theological and psychology perspectives, I realized we begin our developmental growth as infants by first growing the *capacity* for relational reciprocity (Stern's infant self-development theory) and that this capacity originated from *the image of God* that we are created in. This foundational image from God is a relational one that seeks relationship with an economic triune God, but also, like an immanent God. The difference in our human essence that is substantially different from God is that we need to develop and grow over time and space, and our development is affected by who we reciprocally interact with as we grow up, limited by our biological developmental stages. The closer we get to experience good and safe reciprocal relationships, the healthier we develop in ways that move us towards developmental teleology, but the more we experience negative relationships, the more challenging it is to develop healthy developmental trajectories. The authors posited a beautiful alignment with John Calvin's statement on how "we are most human when jointly united to Christ through the Holy Spirit, enabling us to participate in the Son's union with and glorification of the Father" (quoted in *The Reciprocating Self*, p. 39); hence, we reflect the ultimate expression of the *imago Dei* and the ultimate telos for human creation.

However, the developmental trajectories of TCKs and CCKs do not follow the same developmental staged trends, as they have navigated multiple cross-cultural transitions whether by choice for work or missions or from a lack of choice as children following their parents. Hence, whether they were ready for the formative development or not, they are plugged into significant reciprocating

relationships with people, systems, living environment, and very different ones in recurring fashion. It is therefore common for highly-mobile populations to experience grief in relation to the loss of a home that was once theirs, possessions like toys and bedding, memories of flowers and plants particular to the places they've lived in, sights and scenes of bustling cities or of mountains, all of which are not merely grief from loss of human relationships.

Exploring the Symbolic Interaction theory that posits that a holistic self-concept is derived synergistically through the sum of symbolic interactions with languages, symbols, and human feedback (Balswick, 2016), I thought this concept of *self in symbolic interaction* would be a useful context for expanding the interactions of the self beyond humans. The self can interact with nature, places and inanimate objects in symbolic ways that creates meaning to shape the self, and the self-concept in relation to the world.

To continue my exploration of human development of TCKs from the perspectives of other theological bases, I would use the term, "created order" to refer to created beings (humans), living things and creatures (plants and animals), but also nature, like the mountains, seas, sun and even rocks; these parts of nature have a regularity that are governed by scientific principles, which comes from a creator God. Finally, in terms of places and inanimate objects that are not directly created by God, I define these as part of culture created by humans. Hence, I would consider these aspects of culture part of the created order.

### **Exploring the Social Trinitarian Basis**

Firstly, since God is omnipotent, the Trinitarian God is in union everywhere and yet, the incarnated Christ can be specifically located like in Nazareth, mediated by the Spirit (economic Trinity). Likewise, I believe that human beings can have an interactive dynamic with God or other relationships which are abstract, but also bond with places, things, or creation, which are more concrete and geographically located. For instance, coming into contact with nature often draws out feelings of awe,

peace, or joy. Secondly, the immanence of the trinitarian God could also explain an intra-relational dynamic, where a person's intrapsychic self-concept development is dependent on how the *self* interacts with other beings and things from the created order within the self.

TCKs have complex identities and often struggle with a conflicting sense of belonging to everywhere and yet, nowhere.<sup>2</sup> Having moved multiple places, they sometimes identify as global citizens since they feel attached to many parts of the world, yet, they do not *fully* belong to any one of them in particular, even their passport country. Hence, TCKs develop a global identity that connects with a multicultural world of many homes, but also identifies specifically with geographically localized homes. The understanding of an omnipresent, social God helps to explain how this is a healthy possibility of human development, since we are created in the image of God.

### **General Revelation and Special Revelation**

From the viewpoint of general revelation with the scriptural bases of Romans 1:18-20 and Psalm 19:1-2, God is revealed via creation and providence, and human beings have intuition to sense the divine, as shared by John Calvin's proposition (Calvin, 1960). Especially when standing in the theatric beauty and magnificence of nature as well as the amazing natural order in the created order, when TCKs connect with creation like nature, trees and mountains easily through human reason, intuition or conscience, and see God through the eyes of creation (Plantinga et al., 2010). However, I also agree with Calvin's view that our sinful nature could block us or lead us to suppress seeing the connection to God from creation (Plantinga et al., 2010). This brings in also the concept of special revelation, which specified a revealed knowledge of God via Christ's incarnation as well as Scripture, and not via creation.<sup>3</sup>

Special revelation has been traditionally conceived in three dominant ways: (a) historical (from God's actions in history that allows human beings to come to know the divine); (b) doctrinal (from deposits of truths through teachings of Scripture or the church; and (c) experiential ("religious experience, existential sense of the divine presence, resulting in a new understanding of God, self, and the world" (p. 56, Plantinga et al., 2010). These three models support a fuller understanding of special revelation, showing that God is the activating agent, of which the record of these divine actions is recorded as truths and taught as doctrine, while these interact to be experienced by humanity in subjective appropriation. Special revelation on this view has to do with religious experience, with an existential sense of divine presence, *resulting in a new understanding of God, self, and the world.*

Applying this understanding of special revelation, it seems very plausible that TCKs interact with the activating God and what God puts along their way in life, to be experienced subjectively and continually in interactive dynamic movements of understanding of God, self and the world. Just as how God could interact with us through creation as specified by general revelation, God could also locate us in specific locations so that we develop relational dynamics with local cultures, artefacts or people, to better know and develop ourselves, and through this process, mediated by the Spirit, to know him more fully.

In interviewing an adult TCK on the multiple connections she had in different countries growing up, she described this well: "Though I feel grateful that I feel like I have two homes that I feel a sense of belonging for (America and India), I also miss one when I am in the other." There is a conflicting sense of loss and missing out wherever she is specifically located. She explained that it is hard for her to say goodbyes, as to her, there is a unique dynamic that is created only when the particular two persons comes together in a relationship—this is reciprocity explained.

This dynamic is helpful in explaining TCKs' relationship with places, things, objects as well. Each place interacts with and brings out a certain part of the TCKs' personhood and

preferences, when they are 'in it'. However, when TCKs leave the place for another, the new place draws out different parts of who they are. These developmental imprints seem to call on a specificity of reciprocity that is located, yet, have become integrated into the core sense of self of a TCK such that they are also carried everywhere the TCK lives.

In another adult TCK interview, a TCK shared how she had a collection of rocks from all the places she has ever lived in. She explained that these rocks represented an avenue for her to have something tangible to hold on to to relate to her intangible memories of moving. Her story perfectly illustrated how inanimate objects generates reciprocal, symbolic meaning that serve as a 'holding space' for TCKs to bridge their high-mobility experiences across time and space. This concrete yet transcendent holding space is especially important for humans, as we have physio-neurological limitations with memory functions that fade over time, especially with multiple interferences of new memories.

### **Place-identity**

Unbeknownst to TCKs, the located-reciprocal parts of their core selves can be buried or hidden when they adapt to new places. In order to fit in and be understood, they often engage in the process of deliberate code-switching (e.g., languages or cultural norms) that they lose those parts of who they are 'reciprocated' in the previous contexts they lived in. This naturally leads to identity confusion for TCKs when they do not feel a sense of connectedness to particular places or cultures that they are expected to feel connected to. I would propose an explanation of identity confusion using *the reciprocating self* concept, as confusion due to the loss of an identity inspired by parts of the created order. Somehow, TCKs have difficulty accessing certain parts of their core selves, which could be consciously or unconsciously suppressed, when they are no longer in those physical spaces.

Papers on TCKs have recently been published on the concept of place-identity. One paper (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2017) referred to place-identity is a salient component of identity, where people develop their sense of belonging in relation to where they live and

fosters an emotional connection (Proshansky et al., 1983), and which is crucial for maintaining psychological well-being as it contributes to their personal and social identities (Lengen and Kistemann, 2012). Even indigenous American populations have shared this same sense of loss when they lose their land in governmental relocations, having alluded to the sacredness of their land that is tied to their religion, identity and culture (Baumgardner, 2017). Baumgardner (2017) discussed that it was a difficult task for the legal systems to understand a new belief of how religion can be tied to nature than to a church. Even in many modern religions today such as in Japanese culture, Mount Fuji is also considered a sacred place and shrine, where the divine spirits dwell; and where people feel a sense of connectedness to the universe (Hughes, 1986).

For TCKs, these frequent relocation processes can create significant hidden losses and unresolved grief, which were concepts discussed in Pollock and Van Reken (2000). The grief of TCKs is complex and remains unresolved for years mainly because they were hidden, and difficult to articulate. I would add on to propose that hidden losses are intangible losses which could stem from losing the ability to access to who they are when TCKs are no longer in those locations of their significant memories. That is why, when TCKs meet other third culture individuals, they connect so well via a shared third culture-ness. In the same way, TCKs find that they could be in touch with who they are again, when they meet people or see places or objects that resembles what they miss, helping them recover and relive those intangible parts of their core selves again.

Interestingly, this loss seems to reflect the realities explained in the theological concept of contemporary kenotic, pneumatological Christology, and the situation experienced by Jesus where he said, “but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (NIV, Luke 9:58). This could also be explored through the concept of liminality of God.

### **Conclusion**

As to conclude, based on the theological concepts that I have presented, along with the concepts from *The Reciprocating Self*, I have shown that there is reciprocity with places, nature, and inanimate objects, besides the relationships among the human, the self, and God. This reciprocity happens through the interaction of tangibles (such as land, food, plants, buildings, which are all part of the created order) and intangibles (such as culture, values, memories, and even our theological reflection on God) to create symbolic meaning for the unique self. Reciprocity with the created order inspires deeper understanding to construct a cohesive sense of core self that is also permeable to all kinds of reciprocity: with self, others, and God.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a possible area of discussion. I find the Klein's Object-relations theory especially helpful in that it synchronized well with the concepts of the economic and immanent Trinity—there could be union in one-ness yet interactions as three-ness in uniqueness; a person can be a cohesive self, yet unique and permeable to interactions that continue to form a cohesive self in a dynamic process.

<sup>2</sup>The concept of liminality could be explored here about TCKs' in-between-ness between cultures, and how they always often feel unsettled. The concept of a liminal God being at risk of fragmentation with the incarnation plan could be valuable in helping TCKs think about how they could be partial and whole at the same time. Therefore, TCKs do not have to feel that there is a problem with them when they feel in-between cultures, belonging partially to multiple places, as our God is liminal.

<sup>3</sup> For further development, there could be more discussion on *panentheism* which is a related theological concept to explore about how the created order could be so closely linked to God that one can speak of them as being 'within' God, or God being within the created order, without being identified with or identical to God.

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