

## TCK Research Network News

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### **HAPPY 40<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY Third Culture Kids!**

#### **TCK RESEARCH: A BRIEF LOOK BACK AND AHEAD**

Ann Cottrell, Ph.D.



2009 is the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first research on TCKs as an identified population.<sup>1</sup> It is thus an opportune time to take a personal look back and ahead at TCK research.

1969 saw the first research on Third Culture Kids conceptualized as such, though the term TCK was not used at first. Ruth Hill Useem came up with the term and directed the first research. Her interest TCKs began in 1958 when she and her husband, John, studied Americans working in India as diplomats, missionaries, businessmen and technical aid personnel, all representing a home country or a home country based institution. It was in this research they coined the term Third Culture, to describe...

The behavior patterns created, shared, and learned by men (sic) of different societies who are in the process of relating their societies, or sections thereof, to each other ...<sup>2</sup>

As an early feminist scholar, Ruth took an interest in those whose lives were defined or changed by the fact that a spouse or parent “dragged” them abroad. Her interest in these wives and children was unprecedented. She dubbed the children Third Culture Kids because their upbringing within the third cultures created by their parents gave them experiences, identities and world views which put them at odds with their non-mobile passport country

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<sup>1</sup> There were autobiographies and the very limited research before this time was generally sponsor specific (missionary and military children) and did not have the broader conceptual framework Ruth Useem introduced.

<sup>2</sup> John Useem, Ruth Useem and John Donoghue (1963) “Men in the Middle of the Third culture: The Roles of American and Non-Western People in Cross-Cultural Administration” Human Organization 2 (3), pgs 169-179

peers. She recognized that this childhood experience had both enriching and confusing elements. Ruth conceptualized TCKs in ways which resonate today. Among other observations, she described TCKs as feeling at home everywhere and nowhere, having a prolonged adolescence and/or delayed adolescence.<sup>3</sup>

As a lecturer at Michigan State University (although a productive PhD she was not eligible for a tenured position in her husband's department) she was allowed to supervise dissertations (her husband had to be chair). In the 1960s she began recruiting graduate students with third culture experiences. The nine dissertations they produced are the first research to focus on a population conceptualized as Third Culture Kids, though the first dissertations identified them as Overseas-experienced children rather than TCKs. In the late 1970s Third Culture-experienced or dependent children showed up in titles. Third Culture Children was not used in a dissertation title until 1978.

Initially the TCK literature was dominated by insightful essays and autobiographies by ATCKs who generally did not have a label to identify themselves other than perhaps MK or Brat. These essays and the early formal research were dominated by an effort to understand and help others understand particular TCK stresses, especially at re-entry to one's passport country. For this reason Ruth Useem and I designed our exploratory study of ATCKs to broaden our understanding of the long term implications of a TCK childhood. Rather than focus on problems (which we do not deny), we wanted to learn about life choices and identities of ATCKs who were no longer in the initial reentry phase (ages 25 up) and to make sponsor an important independent variable.<sup>14</sup>

The body of TCK research has certainly grown and diversified in these 40 years. A few of the important changes I've noticed include:

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Hill Useem and Ann Baker Cottrell, p. 26 in Carolyn D. Smith (Ed) *Strangers at Home: Essays on the Effects of Living Overseas and Coming "Home" to a Strange Land*. 1996 Aletheia Press,

<sup>4</sup> See for example Useem & Cottrell, Op.Cit. (1996), Cottrell, "Educational and Occupational Choices of American ATCKs" Chapt 13 in *Military Brats and Other Global Nomads: Growing up in Organizaiton Families*. Morten G. Ender (ed) (2002) Cottrell, "TCKs and Other Cross-Cultural Kids" *Japanese Journal of Family Sociolgy* 18 (2):151-69 (2007)

- Greater recognition of the positives as well as the challenges in this life story.
- Exploring different TCK experiences, such as TCKs of color (not discussed in early research because American Third Culture families in the early days were overwhelmingly white)
- Conceptualizing TCKs as one of many variations of multicultural individuals with the introduction of the broader term Cross Cultural Kid. These similarities are important to acknowledge and are important in making TCKs aware that their perspectives and experiences are not entirely unique and marginalizing. Another reason that the CCK concept is useful is that many TCKs are cross cultural in more than one way e.g. many have interracial or international parents, multiple passports; some are also refugees etc.

Without a presenting a formal survey of contemporary TCK literature, I offer my thoughts about needed research directions. Given my orientation as a sociologist here are three aspects of TCK research I would, personally, like to see developed more fully.

- ATCKs who live in a country other than childhood passport country as compared to those who live in their childhood passport country as adults.
- TCKs / ATCKs from countries other than the US.
- Research that looks specifically at variables such as length of time abroad as a TCK, amount of mobility and sponsor.

And please publish your research. It appears that a high percentage of TCK research continues to be theses or dissertations, but is not further published. We need to publish to make this important and interesting population better known to the larger world, to sensitize others to TCKs challenges and their strengths .....(Word is getting out, a few journalists referred to Obama as a TCK)

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