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### **Marriage Patterns of American ATCKs**

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The topic of intimate relationships frequently comes up at Global Nomads' gatherings. I often hear questions such as "do we ever get married?" "If we do marry, do we stay married?" "Who do we marry?" Some of these questions can be answered from data gathered for a large study (603 respondents) of adult American Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) I am doing with Ruth Hill Useem and with the help of Kathy Jordan and John Useem. These ATCKs lived abroad in a particular historical period -- between the end of WWII and the end of the Cold War.

Presently our knowledge about ATCKs is largely based on three types of material: 1) wonderfully rich anecdotal and autobiographical materials, 2) usually small studies of single sponsor groups, e.g. missionary kids (MKs), and 3) studies of reverse culture shock, identity, adjustment which are disproportionately about the re-entry period. The present study of American ATCKs, is the first large scale study which includes TCKs representing a variety of parental sponsors. It was designed to provide a broad description of the adult choices TCKs make, to map the territory, so to speak. It seeks to understand where and in what ways ATCKs participate in local and global communities, where they make their homes and with whom, and to get some indications of how they evaluate the impact of a third culture childhood on their adult lives. Because this is a broadly descriptive survey there is relatively little in-depth information on interpersonal and psychological dimensions of marriage. I welcome comments, interpretations, explanations, personal experiences which will aid in filling in the details on this map.

Respondents in this study lived abroad from one to 19 years (none in preschool years only). Their parents were in government service (23%), military (30%), religious organizations (17%), business (15%), and other--mainly education but also international agencies, media etc (14%). All were at least 25 years old. Although a sample this large, representing a great diversity of TCK experiences, is likely to be fairly representative, no claim can be made that it is entirely representative of all American ATCKs. The data are, therefore, suggestive and provide a fertile base for raising questions.

Here, then, are answers to commonly asked questions as represented by this sample of 603 American ATCKs. Where possible these ATCKs are compared to the American population, using census data for whites or metropolitan whites because they are closer to TCKs in terms of socio-economic characteristics than the population as a whole. To be even more accurate TCKs should be compared to other highly educated Americans.

### **Do we ever get married?**

Do people like us ever get married? Getting married impedes your ability to just pick up and travel. I think we also have a problem with commitment. You always look elsewhere for answers, like the end of the rainbow. It comes from when you were a kid. (government, male)

I see this delayed maturity, in my family. I'm 35 and never married. My brother never married... [but] my sister, she married young in London -- to a non-American. (business, female)

The subtext of this question is, reflected in these quotes is: "Our crazy mobile background makes us afraid of commitments; , we are so out of synch with other Americans we may not find suitable partners." In this sample at least, the answer is yes, most do marry. At the time of the study 84% had been in a marriage type relationship (77% married ; 7% identified a partner in answer to the marriage questions) If we look only at those who formally married, in order to compare with census data for the same year, it appears that TCKs may be less likely to marry than white metropolitan

Americans. The difference in proportion ever married is greatest in the 25-29 age group, and greater for ATCK men (U.S. 54%, ATCKs 22%) than women. (US 69%, ATCKs 46%). This difference, however, decreases until they are in their 40s when the ATCK marriage rate approximates that of white metropolitan Americans at around 90% ever married ,

### **How long does it take us to get married?**

"I'd estimate that 1/3 of the girls in my class married instantly, (mission, female)

"I was advanced academically and retarded socially. I didn't want to date. The boys would be older and American teens were so much more active sexually in 1962 when I came back. I wasn't ready for that" (government, female)

Opinions expressed in this study suggest that TCKs either marry very young or very late. Many explanations are offered: a need to fit in, difficulty fitting in or finding compatible partners, and delayed adolescence are the most common. Although both extremes are represented in this sample -- the two youngest to marry were 16, the oldest was 44 -- TCKs' average (median) age at first marriage, 24, is virtually the same as that for US whites. However, the fact that the gap between ever married TCKs and Americans is greatest among 25-29 year olds and equalizes with age strongly suggests that TCKs do marry later.

### **If we do marry, are we able to stay married?**

I always feel temporary. When I decided to get married ...I made it clear...that I won't be able to settle down. I wonder about the long-term relationship...I wonder if I'll feel trapped. (government, female)

I believe that a lot of MK girls...marry fast and then divorce... poor family dynamics. (mission, female)

I'm still married to the same person. I find that my friends from India are more likely to be on first marriages than my American friends. (mission, female)

Again, these comments represent two conflicting opinions expressed by these respondents. They tend to believe TCKs are either more likely or less likely to stay married than most Americans. Assuming this sample is fairly representative of ATCKs, the majority of those who marry do not divorce their first partner (three quarters of the married men, 70% of the married women have not divorced). As would be expected, the percent of first marriages ending in divorce rises with age, peaking for men among the 50-54 year olds (47%) and for women among the 45-49 year olds (40%). In contrast to comments heard about the strain a TCK background can put on a marriage, most of these married ATCKs (55%) feel that being an ATCK has been mainly beneficial to relations with their spouse. A small minority (8%) feel their background has been mainly detrimental to marital relations. The rest say it was both or irrelevant.

### **Do we marry individuals who are significantly younger or older?**

It is not uncommon for TCKs who return to the US in high school or college to report that they are academically ahead and socially behind their peers. Observers comment that TCKs are unusually poised and comfortable around adults. This leads to the speculation that TCKs marry individuals who are considerably younger or older than themselves. This is definitely not the case for ATCKs in this study. They chose spouses who were quite close in age, 40% no more than a year apart and three-quarters (72%) no more than three years apart.

### **Who do we marry?**

A TCK man I know told me I shouldn't stay [here], that I'll never meet a man with the kind of world view and experience I want. (business, female)

[I need someone who sees things like] I do, from outside of any culture...I'm not coming from any one cultural stand or viewpoint (mission, female)

My husband did not grow up abroad, but he had traveled a lot when I met him, that's what attracted me to him...We are eager to...travel and live abroad. (military, female)

I don't think in these 3 years we've been married he's ever been able to fully comprehend just how much my life in Africa has meant to me. But it's not his fault. ..how can you ever really explain to someone who hasn't been there just what Africa is all about?" (Van Reken, Letters Never Sent, p 62)

I've dated white men, black men, Asian men, and Mexican men... its just the way I was brought up... in Japan and [on] a naval base...with Filipinos, black and whites so there were a lot of different races. (military, female)

As these quotes show, many TCKs would like to marry someone who shares their world view and interests, someone who can understand their experiences. Most (60%) of the married respondents in this sample seem to have done that; they married at least one person who had some international experience when they met; some married other TCKs . Others marry outside their own culture (race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality) either because they feel it will provide a multicultural dimension to their lives, or, as the quote above from a military "brat" who is interracially married points out, because it seems natural to do so. Although the majority in this study married Americans from their own religious and ethnic/racial heritage, it is clear that ATCKs are more open, at least, to marrying out of their inherited membership group than Americans as a whole. Nearly half of the married ATCKs in this study married someone who was of a different religious background (45%), and/or different race/ethnic group (12%, compared to 3% of white Americans), and/or different citizenship or recently naturalized (7%). It is likely that this would be even higher among ATCKs living outside the US. Looking at all these characteristics -- the international experience, race/ethnic, religious and citizenship of

partners -- we find that most (78%) married someone who was either internationally experienced, from a different cultural background or both.

A partner's international experience or different background is, of course, no guarantee of shared outlook or life style preferences. One woman thought marrying a Chinese man would assure a similarly cosmopolitan world view, but found instead that "he's monocultural just like a monocultural American would be." Another found that although a shared TCK childhood provided some similarity it was no guarantee either.

She did live in Peru, but our experiences were so different. Her dad was in business and she wasn't as mobile as we were. .. In a way, we do share some common knowledge of Latin America, especially Peru so there is some understanding there. (military, male)

And, we must remember that lack of exposure to other places and peoples does not mean an individual cannot develop shared interests and outlook. One woman described her husband as "monocultural but learning." Another found, to her surprise, that her untraveled husband was more adventurous than she.

I was afraid that my husband would be an outsider when we went back... that he'd be bored. But he jumped in, even though he doesn't speak Spanish... He loves to travel and is more adventurous than I am.... I've traveled a lot, but my travel was always taken care of by the embassy, I had a diplomatic passport etc so I don't know how to travel. (government, female)

Most who marry Americans of the same race/ethnic group and religion do so because that is who they are most likely to meet, especially those who marry later, after some years in the US. Some TCKs, however, consciously choose to marry "homegrown" Americans, perhaps as part of their effort to fit in, to be part of the American scene, to have "roots-in-law," as one put it.

I wanted to fit in, and it was hard. That was what was most important to me. I just kept trying...I did not want to deal with [the past. So] I married a very American girl. (other, male)

I was very idealistic and I was getting into the civil rights movement. I wanted to be involved but I was only just beginning to understand the American system and American politics and here was this guy who was involved, knew it all because he came from this very politically active family. (mission, female)

### **Are differences among ATCKs related to marriage choices?**

One might expect that sex, parents' sponsor, length of time and age abroad as a TCK, number of countries or number of moves would influence ATCKs' marriage choices. Parent sponsor is the most important variable related to marriage pattern. This is significantly related to all the aspects of marriage discussed above except partner's international experience. The "others" have the highest proportion of never married, probably because, in this sample, they are the youngest group. Military dependents marry youngest (33% before age 22); business dependents are least likely to marry that young (11%). The "others" marry latest -- half (49%) at 26 or older. Military (27%) and business (26%) are most likely to marry more than once. Military dependents are in many ways somewhat different from the other ATCKs, in part because, as a group, they are most representative of the American population as a whole.

Although the rate of interracial/ethnic marriage is about the same for all sponsor groups, the groups do differ in frequency of interfaith and international marriages. Missionaries have the lowest out-group marriage rate. They are, not surprisingly, least likely to have interfaith marriages, although 19% do. And they are least likely marry a citizen from a different country (3%). Business dependents have the highest level of interfaith marriage (56%) and are most likely to marry citizens of another country or recently naturalized Americans (11%).

Gender is not significantly related to any of the marriage dimensions discussed above, with one exception. Women are significantly more likely to marry someone who

has some international experience prior to marriage. One likely explanation is that, because the husband's work still is most likely to determine where a couple lives, women who want to travel or live abroad are more likely than men to feel the need for a partner who may provide such opportunities. A diplomat's daughter appreciated this:

I want to be moving. My husband is more mobile than I am... I have a great itch to get overseas again, to live overseas. WE are trying to get my husband assigned to Okinawa. I've never been there. As long as it is overseas, I don't care where it is. I want to go.

Another explanation may be that women are more likely to place a value on communication in marriage and therefore seek someone with whom they can talk about international experiences and interests and about their past.

Among other variables considered, (number of years living outside the US, number of transitions, number of teen years abroad, age last at school abroad) only number of nations a TCK lived in is related to marriage patterns. Those who had lived in four to eight different countries are more likely than those who lived in only one to have married someone of different religion, (61% vs 35%) and/or a different ethnicity or race (24% vs 11%) . Less notable is the proportion marrying someone who had at least some international experience when they met (70% vs. 60%). One obvious explanation for this is that exposure to multiple cultures makes an individual receptive to the idea of marrying someone from another background, if not to actively seek such a partner. Additional explanations, however, come from looking at those most likely to have lived in only one country: missionaries who are most likely to have in-group marriages, especially within their religion, and those who were only overseas for a single one or two year assignment.

As I stated in the beginning, this data contributes to understanding one aspect of American ATCKs' adult lives, their marriage patterns. It provides a picture of those choices, but the data alone cannot explain them. I welcome observations, explanations, comments which will help fill in the details. I can be reached at: [acottrell@eternal.net](mailto:acottrell@eternal.net) or Department of Sociology, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182.



