

TCK –THE HISTORY OF A CONCEPT

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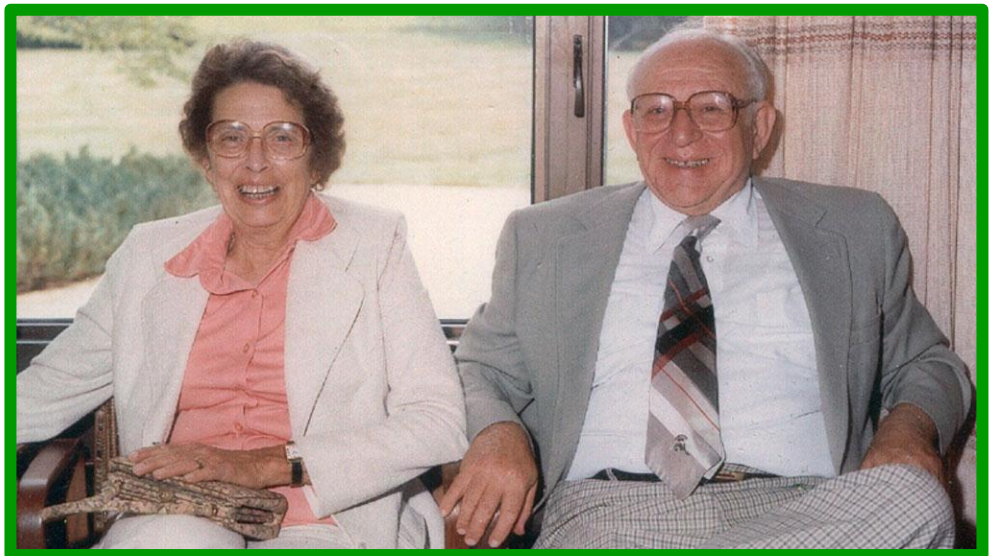
Third culture, and especially third culture kid (TCK) are terms well known by now (at least to FIGT researchers). But there is some confusion as the term TCK has taken on different meanings with time, and why the odd term, third culture kid, anyway?

To understand the origin and meaning of these terms one must begin with Professors John and Ruth Hill Useem, sociologists at Michigan State University from 1949- 81 and 1952-85 and active in research until their deaths in 2000 and 2003. Most of the Useems' research involved other cultures / culture contacts (John's early work was on Micronesia contributing to Post WWII nation building there; Ruth's was on the Rosebud Sioux.) Their best known works were efforts to understand relationships between first and third world peoples the globalizing world. In 1952-3 they studied "The Western Educated Man" in India. This was followed by 1958 research on Americans working in India in foreign service, technical aid projects, missions, and business, i.e. representing the US or US based institutions in India. This is where they first conceptualized "Third Culture." Their final major research 1968-75, was on science as a Third Culture, studying scientists in the Philippines.

Third culture was initially their own shorthand term to describe what they observed in the interaction of Americans in India and their Indian colleagues, In addition to the two national cultures they saw different culture in the interaction which reflected both but was definitely not a blended culture. They intended to create a more sociologically meaningful term but before that happened, the State Department got hold of "Third Culture" and the rest is history.

The Useems defined Third Culture as:

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. (Useem, Useem and Donoghue, 1963:169)



Ruth & John Useem

Ruth and John were equal partners in this research, but Ruth, as an expat wife and feminist, associated with and took interest in the wives of the men they were studying. Many of the wives were involved in establishing an American School for their children, thus Ruth took a special interest in their children. She dubbed these children, who were growing up in the third cultures established by their parents and Indian counterparts, Third Culture Kids. It is important to note that as originally defined TCK is a child of parents working outside their passport countries in *representative* roles, i.e. they are sponsored.

The term TCK has more contemporary prominence than third culture, largely because of Ruth's continuing activity. She widely recruited doctoral students, many of whom she met in international schools, and supervised ten dissertations on TCKs (1969-86), as well as dissertations on third culture adults (e.g. American professors abroad, international school administrators, Asian scientists, accompanying spouses,) and on international schools and international education. As a professor of International Education (due to nepotism rules she was never fully a part of the sociology faculty) she did field observations on expat communities, overseas schools and TCKs in 40 nations. As a consultant, speaker, workshops presenter with the State Department's office of overseas schools she continued learning about third culture schools, families and TCKs while spreading awareness of the TCK concept.

Ruth continued to be actively engaged in TCK issues after retirement, launching a large study of adult American TCKs with her former graduate student, Ann Baker Cottrell, and help from John and from Kathleen Jordan (another former PhD student) This reflects her interest in TCKs' life experiences (most of the literature to date had been on TCKs' child and teen years, especially re-entry in young adulthood.) In her CV she describes her intellectual focus as asking "over the life course, how do individuals construct and reconstruct their complex self-identities in relations to changing social identities with special emphasis on those whose lives are characterized by social and physical mobility. In 1999 she revised her 200+ page TCK bibliography.

Editor's note – Both Dr. Ann Baker Cottrell and Dr. Richard D. Downie were students of and recruited to be graduate students at Michigan State University by Ruth Hill Useem.

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Dr. Ann Baker Cottrell

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Adult Third Culture Kids: Conceptualizing and Measuring Transculturation
 Debbie Miller,