

TCKS: PRIVILEGED BUT NOT MIGRANTS  
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This presentation on Third Culture kids

- Puts TCKs in context of themes introduced in the panel description....  
Privileged TCKs as different from disadvantaged child migrants
- Provides background to give understanding of where term TCK comes from
- Briefly describes the history of TCK research
- Considers the question of who is a TCK

### MIGRATION AND PRIVILEGE

The panel description contrasts privileged TCKs with disadvantaged child migrants. I agree that the research has focused on these two general populations, but want to remind everyone that these are not the whole picture.

	MIGRANTS	TCK/EPATS
PRIVILEGED	Educated elite migrants World wide “brain drain”	Research Focus
DISADVANTAGED	Research focus	short term migrant labor

I’ve seen the term migrant used broadly to describe anyone who moves (internationally), for example calling TCKs privileged migrants, and expat sometimes used to describe anyone living outside their country of origin. I prefer to a more restricted use of these terms, as indicated by the title of this presentation “TCKs: privileged, not migrants.”

#### Migrant vs. Expat

Migrants make a permanent move from a home country to new home country. They expect to stay and are expected to assimilate (at least by 2<sup>nd</sup> generation). There is general agreement on status and expectations.

Expatriates move abroad temporarily and expect to return to their home country. They don’t intend to and are not expected to stay or assimilate. The problem for expat children abroad for many child/teen years is that they are expected to feel at home in their parental home country and don’t.

Third Culture adults and kids <sup>1</sup> (classic definition) are a specific kind of expat. Their move is sponsored; the parent is a representative of and doing the work of:  
Home nation: diplomats, military, AID workers

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<sup>1</sup> TCK is generally used to refer to TCK children and to adult TCKs “once a TCK always a TCK,” a bit like a national identity. Sometimes ATCK is used in reference to these adults.

Religious organization: missionaries

“Foreign” business: Shell, Pfizer,

Other: Foreign/International media, multinational organizations

### Privileged vs. Disadvantaged

American/ Western Third Culture families are privileged in several ways.

People sent abroad as representatives are highly educated and in high level positions.

Third Culture communities are elite in terms of educational and occupational status.<sup>2</sup>

And, depending on where sent, even the less well paid (e.g. missionaries) are wealthy by local standards. Western nationality also is generally assigned high status.<sup>3</sup>

### THIRD CULTURE: THE TERM’S ORIGIN & MEANING

The term Third Culture<sup>4</sup> was introduced by John and Ruth Hill Useem in 1958 when doing research on Americans working in India as technical aid advisors, diplomats, missionaries, businessmen.<sup>5</sup> This research grew out of an interest in understanding the new post colonial patterns of relationships as Americans, especially, were being sent abroad in an increasing variety of roles to work with host national counterparts in newly evolving relationships. They described Third Cultures 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)

Although they were studying a particular third culture at a particular time in history, Useem noted that these communities and networks are embedded in nearly every country of our increasingly interdependent world. They further argued that one can speak of world encompassing types of international communities, and later broadened their Third Culture research to the Third Culture patterns of scientific communities bridging national boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

Third Culture is an umbrella term encompassing a great variety of Third Cultures which, although having a great deal in common, change with time and differ on a number of dimensions such as:

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<sup>2</sup> The elite nature of Third Culture communities is widely noted. In Useem and Cottrell’s study of 604 ATCKs who lived abroad between the end of WWII and the end of the Cold War, at least one parent in 80 % of these families had at least a bachelor's degree; nearly half the fathers (46%) and nearly one in five mothers (18%) had a graduate degree. (Cottrell 2002:233-4)

<sup>3</sup> The question of high status for diplomats from non-white less developed countries in Europe or North America raises interesting questions about what constitutes status or privilege.

<sup>4</sup> Third Culture was not intended to be a permanent term. The Useems used it as short hand to distinguish cultural patterns they observed which were Indian, American and then a different set of norms and behaviors they observed in the interaction of Indians and Americans. This was definitely NOT a blended culture.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Useem, Useem & Donoghue (1963); Useem (1966); Useem & Useem (1967)

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Useem et al (1981)

- Historical period. Patterns and norms of colonial Third Cultures differ from those of post-colonial period and from new ones continually evolving as the world changes.<sup>7</sup>
- National/cultural setting. German-Nigerian, Japanese-Brazilian, Thai-Canadian Third Cultures will differ in specifics as will the increasingly common multinational Third Cultures.
- Organizational setting. Missionary Third Cultures differ from diplomatic and from business based Third Cultures, for example.

Sponsorship has been a defining characteristic of Third culture communities, and TCKs. It distinguishes them from other kinds of expats, with whom a great deal is shared, because being sponsored makes a difference.<sup>8</sup>

- Employee and family have primary responsibility to the sponsor; they may not openly disagree.<sup>9</sup>
- Behavior of employee and family is restricted; TCKs are often told “you must behave because you are a little ambassador,” “you represent the church here.” Families have been sent home because of a child’s misbehavior.
- Sponsor, not family, determines where it will live (country and locale), and for how long.
- Sponsor arranges and supports moves and life abroad.
- Employee’s job is working with host nation counterparts, in contrast to many other expats.<sup>10</sup> Families are not so closely connected to host nationals.
- International moves are within specific sponsor Third Cultures, thus greatly reducing culture shock in a new country; Thai diplomatic communities, AARAMCO oil camps, Methodist Mission compounds anywhere in the world will be very familiar.

### THIRD CULTURE KIDS

TCKs are children who spend all or part of childhood outside their country of citizenship with parents working abroad in representational roles, i.e., in sponsored Third Cultures.

#### Foundations of the Concept

The Useem’s Indian research was on Third Culture adults -- the American employees, their working relations with host country counterparts and the Third Culture communities they created. Ruth was, herself, an expat wife and mother as well as a researcher. She was also a

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<sup>7</sup> For discussions of broad historical changes see: Useem, J. (1971) and Useem, R.H. (1973). Their writing about the Americans in India details changes within that specific Third Culture, identifying for example, various generations of participants. Condrill identifies “generations” of American military brats based on significantly different experiences in four periods since WWII.

<sup>8</sup> Current research on Third Culture communities makes clear that while there have been specific changes, much, especially the role of the sponsor, remains broadly the same. See for example: Coles, Fechter, Hindman, Moore (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Taber’s account of her CIA father’s difficulties as he increasingly disagreed with US Policy is just one illustration.

<sup>10</sup> Research on “lifestyle migrants” illustrates their greater isolation from host country nationals, though Third Culture wives and children are more similar than the employee. Two edited volumes contain a number of articles on this kind of expatriate lifestyle: Benson & O’Reilly and Korpela & Devin.

feminist, thus was interested in what living abroad in such communities meant for wives and children. She wrote about the wives <sup>11</sup> but nothing about the children. <sup>12</sup>

Later, she later traveled throughout the world consulting with overseas schools and sponsor organizations, meeting endlessly with TCKs and their parents, spreading the idea of TCK. David Pollock, who had worked with TCKs, picked up on the term; he also traveled throughout the world meeting TCKs and doing seminars and workshops on the TCK experience. He brought his observations together in a “TCK Profile” identifying traits largely shared by TCKs. This was the basis of the hugely influential book *Third Culture Kids* written with Ruth Van Reken. <sup>13</sup> These three TCK pioneers all traveled widely pursuing their TCK passions. Together they have undoubtedly met and interviewed more TCKs than all the academic TCK researchers combined. Although they did not engage in scholarly research as generally understood, they were participant observers doing exploratory, heuristic research on TCKs and their lives. All three, brilliant synthesizers of complex patterns, created summaries which can be said to have been “peer reviewed” by TCKs themselves and judged, overall, accurate.

#### Academic Research History

The first academic TCK research I’ve located were MA theses (1936, 1940, 1949) and a PhD dissertation (1947) all on Missionary Kids (MKs). <sup>14</sup> All the (limited) academic TCK research I have located prior to 1960 is on MKs. In 1960 we began to see studies of military kids (not necessarily having lived overseas). And in the 1960s research on foreign service employee began, although not the families.

Ruth Hill Useem provided the major impetus to academic research on TCKs by recruiting graduate students to Michigan State University and encouraging this line of research. She supervised 11 dissertations from 1969 to 1985 (two on TCK characteristics, five on identity/reentry adjustment, four on overseas school experiences). <sup>15</sup> Initially this population was called “overseas-experienced youth,” then “Third Culture experienced dependent American youth.” The term Third Culture Children did not appear in a dissertation title until 1978.

Early TCK research was research largely exploratory, seeking a basic understanding of the phenomenon; virtually all was on Americans because, in the pre-internet era, these were accessible subjects at American universities. American research on TCKs, and the TCK experience has disproportionately focused on identity and adjustment. In part this is a very American concern, and in part this focus reflects the fact that most of research has been done by ATCKs interested in understanding their own life experiences and helping others in this journey. Two other broad categories of scholarly research concerning TCKs are devoted to educational issues, in particular international schools, and to counseling support programs /paradigms for TCKs.

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<sup>11</sup> Useem, R.H. (1966),

<sup>12</sup> She wrote several general articles about Third Culture in the context of education and a short general description of TCKs. Useem, R.H. (1967, 1973)); Useem, R.H. & Downie, R.D. She did no formal TCK research until the study on American Adult Third Culture Kids with Cottrell in the early 1990s: Useem & Cottrell, Cottrell (2002, 2008, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> See Van Reken for an account of the development of thinking leading to this book.

<sup>14</sup> Like much of subsequent American TCK research, these focused on problems (health, schooling, adjustment) and personality characteristics. The dissertation was by Fleming.

<sup>15</sup> A complete list of TCK dissertations and theses Useem supervised is on Cottrell’s web page.

The only other country with a body of research about TCKs is Japan. Research on *kikokushijos* (Japanese term for TCKs) began in the late 1970s reflecting Japan's growing involvement in international endeavors. Japanese research has a very different focus from the American research. It comes more from a social systems perspective and asks how *kikokushijos* fit (or don't fit) into the larger traditional Japanese culture.<sup>16</sup> This body of research is not well known outside of Japan in part because much is in Japanese.

#### TCK Research Critiques

A commonly heard criticism of TCK research is that it appears to suggest that the American experience is the universal TCK experience and that Third Cultures and the TCK experience appear to be static. I believe that anyone doing research on, or working with, TCKs understands that while a British Colonial TCK in India, a mid-20c Nigerian diplomatic kid in Paris and a 21<sup>st</sup> c. Korean missionary kid in Brazil will recognize a bond based on their Third Culture childhood experiences, they will also have quite different experiences due to differences in national origin, sponsor and time in history.

That Third Culture and TCKs can appear so essentialist and static is an accident of research history. That the American experience can appear to be represented as universal is due to factors described above. Some research samples include TCKs from a variety of parent countries but treat them as an undifferentiated population.<sup>17</sup> Only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are we beginning to see research on TCKs from other national backgrounds which can question the universality of the American research findings.<sup>18</sup> There is little research which specifically looks at sponsor as an important independent variable.<sup>19</sup> I know of no research explicitly exploring historical changes, although with over half a century of research it is now possible to compare contemporary research with these older studies.

Explicitly comparative research (country of origin, time in history, sponsor, characteristics of TCK childhood experience) will go a long way in addressing the general concerns raised above.

#### Finally, Who / What is a TCK?

TCK as a concept has caught on. In contrast to the mid 20c when few TCKs or ATCKs had that language to help them put their lives and identities in context, it is now quite widely, if not universally, known among TCKs and many expats. Others who have had cross-national childhoods increasingly want to adopt the label; immigrants, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants, children of cross-national marriages etc.<sup>20</sup> And the term TCK is increasingly recognized in academia.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For discussion of Japanese TCK research and good bibliographies see Cottrell (2011) and Goodman.

<sup>17</sup> Sometimes the research aims to compare individuals who have had multinational experiences with those who have not and national origin is unlikely to be important. However in an analysis of TCK experiences and outcomes national origin would seem to be of interest.

<sup>18</sup> Some primarily explore the experience and its meaning for non-American TCKs, e.g. Moore (2008). Others explicitly compare their population to the Pollock/Van Reken paradigm, e.g. Cameron, Kano Podolsky, while others use national origin as a basis for comparison, e.g. Tanu, Trebka, Uehara, Warinoski.

<sup>19</sup> Useem & Cottrell's research was designed to explore the impact of sponsor on TCK experience. Cottrell (2008) uses sponsor as the major independent variable looking at ATCKs' occupational choices.

<sup>20</sup> Because so many identify with the label while others insist on the "purity" of distinctions between TCKs and migrants, for example, Ruth Van Reken has coined the term "CCK" (Cross

Yet, while the term is embraced, misconceptions and questions about it abound. There are questions about who “qualifies” as a “real” TCK even when sticking to the original definition of one whose childhood TCK experience was sponsored.

- Is there a minimum time abroad? Most research, including mine with Ruth Hill Useem, includes anyone who has lived abroad for one or more child / teen years, but among TCKs a longer period is thought to be necessary; short termers can be said to have had a TCK experience. There have been no suggestions about establishing a minimum.
- Is serial mobility (i.e. residence in at least three different countries) a requirement? While many, perhaps a majority, of contemporary sponsored families do experience serial migration, it is not a condition. Many still reside in a single host country and among TCKs up to the mid 20c , e.g. missionaries, a long stay in a single country was the norm.
- Is it necessary to live in a very different culture or on a different continent from the home country? This has never been part of a definition, but apparently is conveyed as an important criterion in some TCK gatherings.<sup>22</sup>
- Is it necessary to be sponsored, or is any expat kid a TCK. Traditionally a TCK is sponsored, and sponsor does affect the nature of the experience, but increasingly, privileged expats are included.<sup>23</sup>
- Is privilege or parents’ professional status a necessary characteristic? Increasingly disadvantaged migrants are temporary workers who may be serial migrants in three or more countries, intending to return to country of origin. And some are employed by organizations that are identified as sponsors of TCKs. Technically they are expats but in many ways they do not fit the profile of privileged/professional migrants, even if they are employed by sponsor organizations.
- What about host nationals who share much of the expatriate life, e.g. it is increasingly common for host country children to be enrolled in international schools along with TCKs.<sup>24</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARK

The once clear distinction between migrants and expats is growing fuzzy, especially with the number of serial disadvantaged migrants intending to return “home,” and expats who decide to stay in a new homeland. Add to this the fact that with growing mobility and kinds of cross-national contact at all levels, the number and variety of ways individuals can experience a cross-cultural childhood is growing exponentially. Given these changes, and the growing awareness of TCKs, it is important to clarify our thinking about the meaning of all these concepts.

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Cultural kid). This term highlights the fact that many seemingly different experiences and people have a great deal in common while permitting distinctions to be recognized. It also is a tool for pointing out that many individuals are cross-cultural in a number of different ways. (Van Reken)

<sup>21</sup> The preponderance of TCK research is from the social sciences, psychology/counseling, education, but two recent works come out of literature/comparative literature. Bell-Villada & Sichel’s edited book grew out of a Modern Language Association Conference Panel and Rauweda’s analysis defines TCK literature as a new field, distinct from Post-Colonial literature.

<sup>22</sup> See Limacher-Riebold’s blog.

<sup>23</sup> See Korpela, O’Reilly,

<sup>24</sup> See Tanu.

We need to refine our understanding of who is a TCK, understand variations in the population and how it is similar to and different from other Cross-cultural/cosmopolitan/globalized populations. We need more research!

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