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# Adult Third Culture Kids\*

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Adult Third Culture Kids\*  
Ruth Hill Useem and Ann Baker Cottrell

In Carolyn D. Smith (Ed)  
*Strangers at Home: Essays on the Effects of Living  
Overseas and Coming "home" to a Strange Land.*  
Aletheia Publication 1996 pgs. 22-35

Many people have asked the origin and meaning of the term *third culture* as we use it in *third culture kids*, or TCKs, and, by extrapolation, in adult TCKs. To clear up one confusion, "third culture" is not synonymous with "third world" or with C. P. Snow's Third Culture. However, they are all related in that they were early attempts to describe a major shift in the relationships among the peoples of the globe in the mid-twentieth century.

The ending of colonialism, the dramatic increase in science and technology, and the rise of two relatively new world powers -- the United States and the Soviet Union -- all combined to produce major changes in the patterns of movement of human beings around the world and the purposes for which they were entering other societies.

It was some forty years ago, in 1952, that I [Ruth Hill Useem] had my first cross-cultural encounter outside the United States. My husband and I, accompanied by our three sons (aged four, five, and two), went to India for a year to study the roles of Indians who had been abroad for higher education. Five years later we returned to India (again with our children) for a year's field study of Americans living and working there, primarily as foreign service officers, missionaries, technical aid workers, business people, educators, and media representatives. We also looked at the schools that were set up to educate minor dependents accompanying their parents abroad.

In summarizing our observations, we began to use *third culture* as a generic term to cover the lifestyles created, shared, and learned by people who are in the process of relating their societies, or aspects thereof, to each other. The term *third culture kids*, or TCKs, was coined to refer to the children who accompany their parents into another society.

What we had observed in India was happening all over the world. In 1960 the U.S. Census published its first-ever census of Americans overseas. There was scarcely a country without a contingent of Americans. Some of the more than 200,000 American children of school age living overseas were attending newly established Department of Defense schools. Others were enrolled in makeshift schools assisted by the Department of State. Missionary groups tended to set up their own schools, and oil companies set up their "camp schools."

As early as the 1960s, and with increasing frequency, changes were occurring in the overseas schools and the American communities abroad that foreshadowed the major restructuring of the world's political economy in the 1990s. Two illustrations will suffice. The first was the United States' recognition of China, which meant that in a short span of time American military personnel and their dependents were withdrawn from Taiwan. The second, one of the most dramatic and far-reaching changes ever, was the Vietnam War and its disastrous close. How do TCKs experience these world changes, in which their parents are often intimately involved? How are these experiences reassessed? How do adults who spent their early years abroad ("adult TCKs") in a country in which they had a happy and rewarding childhood reassess that nation-state when it becomes the enemy? There also have been major shifts in American life. Do adult TCKs evaluate them differently than Americans reared within the United States?

To explore these and other related questions, we undertook a research project on adult TCKs who are at least twenty-five, who currently reside in the United States, and who spent at least one school age year abroad as the minor dependent of an American parent. We distributed a twenty-four page questionnaire to these adult TCKs.

Over 700 individuals ranging in age from 25 to 90 returned the questionnaire. The following analysis is based on the responses of 604 of them, all of whom had lived abroad as children in the post-World War II period. Some of these TCKs spent most of their childhood and teen years overseas, while others were abroad only one year, usually with parents who were on academic sabbaticals. The majority of the participants in this study, however, spent a significant part of their early years outside the United States. Nearly three-quarters lived abroad both as preteens and as teenagers; half spent nine or more school years abroad. While the majority lived in one or two countries, some moved a great deal and one lived in eight different countries while growing up.

From previous research, we had concluded that the sponsor -- that is, the organization for which their parents worked abroad -- made a difference in the type of family life and schooling that minor dependents experienced abroad. The third culture of the diplomatic community differs from that found on a military base. The third culture of business people abroad impinges differently on the daily lives of their children than does that of missionaries on their offspring. Segments of the host nation who interact with some foreigners may not even be aware of others. What we did not know was whether or not these somewhat different third culture experiences resulted in different trajectories in the TCKs' adult lives.

To look at these dimensions, we included in our sample men and women whose parents were overseas with the military (30 percent of this sample), the State Department (23 percent), religious organizations (17 percent), business enterprises (16 percent), and a miscellany of other sponsors such as colleges and universities, news media, and the United Nations (14 percent). Some of our more striking findings are described here.

### Delayed Adolescence

Only one out of every ten of our adult TCKs say that they feel completely attuned to everyday life in the United States. The other 90 percent say that they are more or less "out of synch" with their age group throughout their lifetime.

Being out of step with those around them is especially noticeable -- and painful -- in the late teens and twenties, when choice of mate, occupation, and lifestyle are being worked out. Some young adult TCKs strike their close peers, parents, and counselors as being self-centered adolescents, as having champagne tastes on beer incomes (or no incomes), as not being able to make up their minds about what they want to do with their lives, where they want to live, and whether or not they want to "settle down, get married, and have children." They have what some call prolonged adolescence.

Others do what those around them are doing. They marry at the appropriate time, get a "good" job, have a child or children, take on a mortgage, and then throw it all over at age forty in order to take a job overseas. Some resign from high-paying positions and return to college to be retrained for a low-paying teaching job. Still others withdraw from all social contact because of extreme depression or because they have come into an inheritance and are quite happy doing

nothing but writing French poetry or traveling to all the places they have never been. This is what some have called delayed adolescence.

How long does it take for TCKs to become adjusted to American life? The majority of our adult TCKs report mild to severe difficulties with what have been called "reentry problems" or "reverse culture shock." Throughout their lifetimes there are subtle differences between them and the American generation that came into adulthood in the same historical period. Not being like their peers is usually of great import to them in their late teens and twenties, but its centrality decreases as they grow older.

The answer to the question of how long it takes them to adjust to American life is: they never adjust. They adapt, they find niches, they take risks, they fail and pick themselves up again. They succeed in jobs they have created to fit their particular talents, they locate friends with whom they can share some of their interests, but they resist being encapsulated. They are loners without being particularly lonely. Their camouflaged exteriors and understated ways of presenting themselves hide rich inner lives, remarkable talents, and, often, strongly held contradictory opinions on the world at large and the world at hand.

### Fitting In

On the surface, most adult TCKs conform to what is going on around them in such a way that attention is not drawn to them. As they meet new people and new situations, they are slow to commit themselves until they have determined what behavior is expected. If what is expected is unacceptable or incomprehensible, they will quietly withdraw rather than make fools of themselves or hurt the feelings of others.

Their bland and unremarkable exteriors, however, belie not only depths of feelings, but also considerable talents and a wealth of memories of other countries and places, including the expatriate communities in which they have lived and in which they continue to take an interest. They also have a fresh perspective on the American scene, which they are learning about throughout their lives.

And of course, they are not callow youths. They are extremely complex people who are weaving together their memories in a rapidly changing present in anticipation of an uncertain future. No two adult TCKs come up with identical ways of putting their lives together, but they are actively creating provisional answers to some of the major and minor problems that face human beings every day in this complex world. Their prolonged or delayed adolescent behavior is usually a marker that adult TCKs are trying to bring order out of the chaotic nature of their lives.

### Education

One characteristic of adult TCKs that stands out is that the overwhelming majority of them are committed to continuing their education beyond high school. Only 21 percent of the American adult population (24 percent of men and 18 percent of women) have graduated from a four-year college. In sharp contrast, 45 percent of adult TCKs have earned at least a bachelor's degree, and half of this group have gone on to earn master's and doctoral degrees, including law and medical degrees. Less than two percent stopped with a high school diploma and took no advanced training. It would seem that teachers and counselors in the overseas schools, as well as parents, must have been doing a lot right over the last fifty years to have such unusual long-term results.

Most respondents say that their third culture childhood experiences affected their college choices and experiences; 43 percent say greatly, 28 percent say somewhat. Most commonly, the experience influenced what they studied. A quarter of the sample chose majors that were obviously international in content (e.g., foreign languages, anthropology, international relations). For many others the choice of a major was influenced by their overseas experiences. For example, some who chose biology had been captivated by early exposure to African wildlife; historians and artists cited their exposure to European art and historical sites as influences; pre-med, nursing, and economics majors wanted to help people they had known in less developed nations. Still others sought mainly to "get abroad again" and so majored in teaching, international relations, or international business. In addition to studying many subjects connected to international interests, over a quarter have studied abroad since high school. For some, a study-abroad program was a factor in the choice of a college.

A considerable proportion of the young adult TCKs change colleges and/or majors two or three times. Others drop out, as they put it, to "take advantage of opportunities" that happen to come up. Occasionally they drop out because a course of study is beyond their capacity, but more often they feel that their overseas schooling and experience put them ahead of their peers (and even their teachers).

### Career Achievements

One of the most notable characteristics of ATCKs is their high occupational achievement; this reflects their high educational achievement. The majority -- over 80 percent -- are professionals, executives, or managers. Their occupational choices reflect a continued love of learning, interest in helping, and desire for independence and flexibility. The most common occupational field reported by these ATCKs is education -- many are teachers, professors, or administrators -- followed by those working in professional settings such as medical or legal fields and those who are self-employed; many of the latter are presidents of their own companies. One won't find many ATCKs in large corporations or government. The small number in this sample who have government jobs are in the Foreign Service or AID, or in branches such as the Bureau of Wildlife and Fisheries or the national parks. Although they may have been influenced by their parents' work overseas, they generally have not followed in their parents' footsteps. Only a small percentage of these respondents, for example, have chosen careers in the military or as missionaries.

Regardless of their career choice, most have incorporated an international dimension in their work lives. For some, jobs have been highly international, such as working overseas, collaborating with international colleagues, or advising international students. Others weave an international dimension into their work; a teacher, for example, enlivens her social studies class with tales and photos of her Brazilian childhood.

### A Portrait of ATCKs

To explore feelings of connection, alienation, and/ or rootlessness and to assess cross-culturally relevant skills and behaviors, respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a list of statements. Because globally mobile individuals are often able to understand and appreciate more than one point of view, and because such individuals are more comfortable with ambiguity than most, we also gave them the opportunity to check "both." A general portrait of ATCKs may be drawn by looking at the statements with which over half agreed. (The percent agreeing, at least in part, with each statement would be higher if we included those who answered "both.")

*1. ATCKs are internationally experienced and continue their international involvement.*

ATCKs build on a foundation of international awareness, having been socialized in a third culture for all or part of their pre-adult lives. Nine out of ten report having more understanding and awareness of other peoples and cultures than most Americans, but most also report that their international skills and knowledge are underutilized. More than two-thirds say that maintaining an international dimension in their lives is important to them. They work toward that goal in numerous ways in addition to the international dimensions of their education and careers mentioned above. Most keep informed about the places they have lived abroad. Most would like to revisit the countries they lived in and most would like to live abroad again, although not necessarily in the places where they lived as children. Consistent with their general interest in going abroad, most keep a current passport.

Their behavior supports this stated interest in maintaining an international dimension in their lives. The great majority have traveled abroad as adults. Most say they welcome opportunities to meet foreigners, and they do; over 90 percent have at least yearly contact with people from other countries. For nearly a quarter, such association occurs at least once a month-daily for some. A majority also report some, although often infrequent, contact with people they knew as children abroad. Increasingly popular are school reunions that validate the third culture and TCK identity. Some also report that in their interaction with Americans they are seen as knowledgeable about countries where they have lived and that they may be called upon to give talks or interviews or to write articles. They also share elements of overseas cultures through home decor.

A characteristic that distinguishes ATCKs from most Americans and facilitates their interaction with foreigners is their ability to communicate in other languages. Fully three-quarters of the respondents use a language other than English at least occasionally, and one in five do so regularly. Some are bilingual and work daily in a language other than English. In fact, a little over half of those who can communicate in another language use two or more.

*2. ATCKs are adaptable and relate easily to a diversity of people.*

These respondents are comfortable in a variety of settings, as indicated by their previously noted interest in travel and living abroad and their eagerness to meet people from other countries who are in the United States. This is the "everywhere" aspect of the statement I feel at home everywhere and nowhere, with which most agree. More than eight out of ten say that they can relate to anyone, regardless of differences such as race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Most establish relationships easily in new situations and have hobbies or interests that help connect them to people wherever they go.

*3. ATCKs are helpers and problem solvers.*

Drawing on their own experiences in new situations, 85 percent of ATCKs say that they reach out to help those who appear unsure of themselves, especially foreigners and non-English-speaking minorities. As one respondent put it, "we know what it is like to be confused in a country where we cannot speak the language well." Moreover, most report that in situations where there is a conflict or misunderstanding, they are the ones who step in to mediate. When they themselves are facing new situations, the majority claim that they can establish relationships easily; and when confronted with unexpected or difficult situations, nearly 90 percent agree that they can usually figure out a way to handle them.

*4. ATCKs feel different but not isolated.*

These respondents feel different from people who have not been overseas, and nearly half do not feel central to any group. For some, especially the recently returned, such feelings are painful and create a profound sense of isolation; this is the "nowhere" side of feeling at home everywhere and nowhere. For a few this feeling lasts a lifetime. A more common interpretation of these feelings is that ATCKs differ from other Americans not in feeling isolated but in having a broader, more global identity.

That ATCKs are not isolated and alienated, as much of the literature on the reentry period suggests, is indicated by the fact that most *disagree* with statements such as "I often feel lonely," "I am hesitant to make commitments to others," and "I feel adrift." On the contrary, most feel that America is the best place for them to be living and that they are more appreciative of this country than most Americans precisely because they have lived abroad. Their feeling of fitting in, of finding a home, is indicated by the fact that most would find it somewhat or very difficult to leave their present community. For some this is a matter of obligations, but for most it is because they are integrated into community or friendship groups and, as a number of those who had an especially mobile childhood pointed out, "I've lived here longer than any place in my life." While saying that they would hate to leave, the TCK background surfaces in many who added that they could move easily and would, in fact, enjoy meeting new people and new challenges.

### An Assessment

Any assessment of the adult lives of American TCKs currently living in the United States must include three important points. First, in contrast to the reentry literature that reports TCKs feeling adrift, isolated, and alienated, these respondents as a whole do not express alienation. Their feeling of difference from other Americans stems from their awareness of, interest in, and desire to be connected to the larger world community. Second, ATCKs feel enriched by their third culture childhood. A majority agree that, overall, such a childhood has been beneficial in their relations with parents, siblings, spouse, and children, as well as in social relationships, work, and higher education. Finally, and perhaps most important, these ATCKs, who have been geographically mobile and have been socialized to participate in a diversity of cultural settings, give us insights into the lifestyle and world view most appropriate to the next century -- one that not only tolerates but celebrates diversity, one that is flexible and tolerant of ambiguity.

\* This is a revision of five short articles that appeared in *Newslinks, The Newspaper of the International Schools Services*, Vols. 7 and 8.

*RUTH HILL USEEM is professor emeritus of sociology and education at Michigan State University. She and her husband, John, originated the term third culture kids, and they have conducted extensive research on adults who spent many of their childhood years in cultures other than that of their "home" or passport country. She has published numerous articles in sociological and anthropological journals and has served as a consultant, keynote speaker, and workshop presenter at overseas schools operated by the State Department and the Department of Defense.*

*ANN BAKER COTTRELL is a professor of sociology and assistant director of the office for international Programs at San Diego State University. Her fascination with internationally mobile lifestyles began with her own first overseas experience, a junior year abroad in Scotland. Her research focus on transnational families eventually grew into a study of South Asians married to Westerners living in India, the United States, and Britain. Her advisors and mentors were John and Ruth Hill Useem, with whom she has collaborated in the study of third culture*

*kids described in this article. She has also conducted a comparative study of the reentry experiences of women students attending U.S. and Italian universities.*