

TCKs Come of Age

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) come from all countries and live in all parts of the world; They are children who live outside their passport country because of their parent's work in another country; in other words they spend part or all of their formative years in a third culture.¹

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ABSTRACT

With the increase in number of “third culture kids,” the need for further study in this area demands our attention. To that end, this paper explores the emerging trends and research needs of TCKs for the benefit of the intercultural community of academics, practitioners and consultants as they serve the expatriate community.

For a glimpse of what the future of TCK research may hold, six intercultural professionals recognized in the TCK arena were interviewed about the state of research and current trends. Their interests and needs form the basis for this article.

Among those interviewed were: Ruth Van Reken, Ann Baker Cottrell, Barbara Schaetti, Gary Wederspahn, Matthew Neigh, and Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich. Their insights provide an overview of the key issues that are having a significant impact on the changing realities of these children.

*This article is based on interviews and research conducted by **Vicki Lambiri**, intercultural consultant and trainer based in the United Kingdom.*

*I choose to live a long way from
the place where I was born,
the country in which I work,
and the land to which my face and blood assign me-
on a distant island
where I can't read any of the signs and
will never be accepted as even a partial native.*

*Pico Iyer
The Global Soul*

* * *

Global Children Today, Future Voices Tomorrow

A whole generation of adult TCKs is taking center stage as authors, journalists, academics, and trainers. From Malaysia to Canada, from Kuwait to Oklahoma, in the most unexpected places the realm of *Third Culture Kids* is being discussed about extensively whether it's on the Internet, in newspapers or in scholarly journals.² Not only are they being written about more and more, but increasingly adult third culture kids (ATCKs) themselves are the ones responsible for the evolution of the TCK term as it gradually enters the consciousness of the internationally mobile populations and those who work and live with them. Evidence that TCKs are coming of age is all around us. It can be found in their personal stories and in the rapid growth of the field itself.

So what exactly is the “*third culture*” that these kids experience? It is simply the world expatriates develop that is “rooted in the home culture, lived out in the host culture, but in the end, neither fully one nor the other.”³

This notion of living in a “world between worlds” is often experienced by many children even those remaining in the same country all their lives. When one considers the increasing numbers of children born to immigrants and refugees, it is not difficult to understand the prevalence of this “between worlds” identity among many TCKs and cross-cultural kids (CCKs). Though the trends and needs of CCKs are worth study, it is the task of this paper to focus on the TCK community.

Understanding Current Trends

The first question we should ask is why we should study current trends. Aside from stimulating the mind or merely piquing one's curiosity, an examination of such trends can give us a snapshot of today's most recent perspectives. Such a study can also be used as a roadmap for understanding the changing world we are entering and give us a glimpse toward the future.

At first glance, these trends mirror the major themes shaping the way TCKs are growing up. Upon closer examination they reveal the need for more information, specifically for more research to gain a deeper understanding of the impact these trends are having. Hence, the focus of this paper is to summarize the “**Top Eight Research Needs**” for the purpose of gaining that deeper understanding.

Two major themes dominate the TCK landscape today. The first is the increasingly visible and important role that adult TCKs are playing in the public and private sectors, specifically in the areas of education, politics, and business. The second is the exponential growth of research and resources being produced in universities and by those working directly with these children, whether they are teachers of TCKs or consultants who prepare them for their transition abroad.

One shortcoming to this growth of research, however, is the separation that often exists among intercultural researchers. At present, the data and investigations of those in academia and those who work in the field might be seen as separate dots on a map as yet unconnected by roads. It is hoped that by building roads of communication, we can discover what data is available, clarify where gaps exist, and then outline what the present research needs are. Following such a method, we will be in a better position to coordinate and direct research that is most needed now. Dealing effectively with the research needs of the present, we will also be better prepared to deal with the needs of the future.

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Top Eight Research Needs

Imagine that a group of leading professors and cross-cultural consultants are assembled to discuss the kinds of research they would like to see in the next decade.

That meeting of the minds may very well develop into a “wish list” – posed in the form of questions- of the kinds of topics that will be high on researchers’ minds as they carry out research on TCKs in the future.

1. How is technology impacting the TCK experience?

TCKs Connect

One undisputed trend in this rapidly changing world is the growing impact of globalization and technology. In an era of immediate communication – email, instant messenger, mobile phones and Skype (Internet telephony) – “global nomads” no longer need to lose track of each other, or of friends and family. So what does this mean for TCKs?

Except for anecdotal accounts, there appears to be little or no research in this area. Does technology increase continuity in a TCK childhood? Does it make building long-lasting relationships easier? Does it impede some from fully immersing themselves in the new culture they’ve just started calling home? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

TCK specialist and retired Sociology professor Dr. Ann Cottrell recalls her days as a foreign exchange student at the University of Edinburgh in the 1950s and how technology limitations affected her life abroad. Back then she needed to first arrange an appointment to make her monthly phone call back home. It was such a hassle, she rarely bothered. Today, friends and family are only fingertips or a click away. It’s mind boggling how far we’ve come.

Re-entry Dynamics

Just as mobile phones keep TCKs in touch with friends and family, modern technology can keep them in touch with their changing culture back home. TCKs in the past were essentially cut off from the pop culture of their passport country- music, favorite T V programs, and fashion- making re-entry more challenging. Now, as a result of the Internet, MTV and global marketing “fitting in” is less of a problem. Kids today are able to, in effect, stay tuned, stay in touch, and stay ahead of the cultural curve at home.

Or so they think. Matthew Neigh, Executive Director of *Interaction International*,⁴ observes how some kids don't think they need any help for their transition back home. "They are looking at the top part of the iceberg model and saying I know all there is to know." Neigh cautions that what they don't see are the parts underneath the iceberg. They go back with certain assumptions and are surprised to find things different than how they had perceived them.

Internet and Identity Formation

Another area worth exploring is the impact of the web. The Internet can empower parents, educators, and youngsters by making an almost limitless amount of information easily accessible. Parents can use a number of search engines to find the resources they are looking for whether it is educational materials or information on their new environment.

How the Internet is shaping youth in general is a provocative question, one worthy of serious investigation. A more intriguing question for us to ask and one germane to this paper is: What influence is the Internet having on the shaping of TCK identity? How will the use of the web help third culture kids understand the multiple cultures that connect them to their identity?

It is interesting to note that the young today are among the first to grow up with the popularizing of the web. We will see its effects as the future emerges. One thing we can be almost certain of is that those effects will be significant for TCKs as well as other types of cross-cultural kids.

Sasha Zeidman is an example of a cross-cultural child growing up with computers. Not yet three years old, this child of a bi-cultural marriage (Turkish mother, American father) was born in an era where the Internet existed before she did. She is indeed a precocious child already playing learning development games on-line with her father. Sasha was born outside of London and now lives in San Francisco where her family recently moved. One wonders how the Internet will help her to learn about and explore her bi-culturalism. How old will she be before she starts looking up information about her mother's hometown of Ankara? Or uses Internet telephony to practice Turkish with her grandmother?

2. What happens to TCKs during cultural adjustment?

Transition Issues

TCKs know personally the emotional and psychological challenges experienced during the upheavals of a move to a strange new land. What strategies work best for coping with those challenges? How adaptable is cultural identity?

Those who have worked closely with TCKs understand first-hand their concerns about transitioning into a new or different setting. Few situations can be more challenging for TCKs than going back to their passport country for university study, especially if their experience of that country amounts to little more than a few trips back and forth during school breaks.

Norma McCaig, founder of *Global Nomads International (GNI)*, conducted a workshop with TCK students from Lewis and Clark University. These students gained a number of insights on some of the benefits and hardships of growing up as TCKs.⁵ Their discussions and brainstorming sessions revealed a wide range of feelings and reactions such as, the seeming naturalness of abrupt endings, the necessity for quick changes, the almost endless sense of restlessness, and the feeling that "everything seems so temporary."

Following this workshop, students decided to share their personal experiences by becoming cultural interpreters for incoming TCKs. Such a commitment will surely make a positive difference in the lives of future students. The question now is how do those of us in the field continue to help TCKs help each other? How do we create innovative ways for sharing?

The Role of International Schools

Now more than ever, especially as international schools are increasing the support they give to their mobile students, it makes sense to harness existing knowledge to the development of future research. International schools are continually dealing with kids in transition. Some experts estimate that an average of 30% of students move every year.⁶ To support students in transition, the *European Council of International Schools* (ECIS) created a cross-cultural committee in 2001 that organizes a yearly conference to discuss relevant issues such as, "How culturally aware is your school?"⁷

While TCKs are often accustomed to abrupt changes, the adjustment period for some however is getting even shorter. One trainer, such as Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich based in Germany, recently observed a change: "Five years ago, assignments lasted for 3 years, today I see more and more shortened assignments." Part of the reason is the depressed economy and the global retrenching that has followed. In any event, shorter assignments are increasing and some families are getting notified with less time to prepare for their upcoming move. The result is often turmoil, overwhelmed parents and a narrow focus on the logistical aspects of moving.

In response to the transition challenges of mobile students, one educator, Debra Rader, has developed "A Model of Transition Education."⁸ This model gives students strategies for successfully managing transitions, thereby helping them to approach change with confidence. For transition education to be effective Rader points out, it should be continuous. She concludes with the observation, "If teachers and administrators value and respect transition issues, students will see them as important as well."

3. How do TCKs apply their experience overseas to their future lives?

Career Choices

Whether they become writers, educators, entrepreneurs or politicians, to name a few paths, adult TCKs have an untold impact on society. Is this impact measurable and how do we assess the benefits for businesses and communities?

The great variety of jobs and professions TCKs choose in life reflects their inherent versatility and creativity. Learning more about the occupations this group excels in could prove helpful for both TCKs, especially those in the midst of making career decisions, as well as for career counselors working with international students. Younger TCKs can also learn from and be inspired by older TCKs who have already been successful in their career paths. The study of these role models should prove quite valuable whether it's examining what turns an adult TCK into an excellent diversity manager or how a public health worker uses his or her cultural knowledge to help minorities.

The above-mentioned choices in the careers of TCKs, as well as the questions they inspire, are far from a complete list. There are many career variables that merit further analysis. The often-cited research of Useem and Cottrell comes to mind.⁹ Their findings from a 1993 study revealed how some adult TCKs felt that it was important to stay close to the hearth, while others could not imagine life without being overseas.

Also, despite the fact that over 90 percent reported having more understanding of other cultures than most Americans, more than two-thirds felt they have more cross-cultural knowledge and skills than an opportunity to use them.¹⁰ This could be taken as a sign, perhaps, that the TCK skill set is being underutilized in professional settings.

We are beginning to understand these behaviors based on current data, but the research is limited. What more could we learn from a wider sample, and one that is longitudinal, that tracks this population over many years?

Communicating Achievements

Going further, once we gain a bigger picture of the talents, decision-making processes and career behaviors of these TCKs, what do we do with that information? How do we make that information available to others, both lay and professional? A wider availability and dissemination of this data could be very beneficial to society in general. For instance, global headhunters for corporations would be more likely to be informed on the value of recruiting adult TCKs, thereby helping both groups.

This career-related information could also prove beneficial when consulting with expatriated parents as Gary Wederspahn does. Wederspahn, author of *Intercultural Services: A Worldwide Buyer's Guide and Sourcebook*, believes more research may help parents who are weighing how much attention to give to the cultural adjustment process. "It would certainly add value to adjustment in their minds and might help them give it a higher priority," he said.

Greater recognition of the richness of a TCK childhood may very well increase their opportunities. It might also improve and enrich the lives of others. Research highlighting the collective achievements of TCKs would also be a valuable gift to the community of TCKs who are questioning their childhood and pondering their futures.

Famous TCKs and the Media's Lens

They appear quite often in the media. Interviews with well-known TCKs abound, but the general public doesn't know it. While awareness of the meaning of the acronym TCK is on the rise, understanding its significance has not quite penetrated into the consciousness of mainstream American society or for that matter any society.¹¹

With the rise in the number of TCKs in the world and the number of them being profiled in the news, should we examine the credentials of the media? Do reporters understand how to interpret the significance of a TCK childhood and its influence on adult behaviors?

One task is clear. It's time for interculturalists to highlight the number of TCK personalities that we have come to recognize on the public airwaves and to pose some questions. Why is it significant that a politician has lived part of his childhood overseas and how does that fact shape that person's political views? Consider US Senator John Kerry who attended boarding school in Switzerland. Through what kind of prism does a famous foreign correspondent perceive the world? Does it make a difference in the news? Think about adult TCK Christiane Amanpour of CNN. Born in London to a British mother and an Iranian father, she spent her early childhood in Iran before attending boarding school in England.

Another example is Mexico's best-known living novelist and essayist Carlos Fuentes. Recognized as one of the most important contemporary voices in Latin American literature, Fuentes spent his early years moving from one country to another. The son of a Mexican diplomat, Fuentes spent his childhood in Washington, D.C. and as a teen lived in Argentina, Chile, as well as his native Mexico.

What influence did the experience of childhood relocation have on the contributions to society that these famous people have made? Certainly the number and influence of adult TCKs is growing. Where will it lead?

In 1989, Ted Ward, a retired professor of sociology from Michigan State University claimed that one day TCKs would become the proto-type citizens of the world.¹² To what extent is Ward's prediction coming true?

It's possible to conclude that adult TCKs are in a position to have a profound impact on society as their positive contributions to society keep increasing. Their future, it seems, will only get brighter, as will the future of intercultural research, especially if we work to make it so.

4. What about TCKs who choose to make their lives overseas as adults?

A Place to Call Home

Many who practice in the intercultural field have personally met adult TCKs who have either remained in or returned to the country where they spent a part of their childhood. Some even decide to reside in a different country altogether, one that belongs neither to their passport country nor to the place where they spent their formative years.

Oliver Landreth is one such case. An American living in London, Oliver started his cultural exploration at the tender age of two when his family moved to the Ivory Coast. From there they continued their lives as expats in Paris, Hong Kong, Holland and Bangkok. Raised on four different continents, he continued the pattern of expatriation as an adult moving from one continent to the next, from Europe to North America, to Asia and then back to Europe.

Oliver's reasons for continually moving are complex and, like other TCKs, the issue of identity persists into adulthood. Never feeling at home anywhere, especially in the US, Oliver jumped at the chance of moving from the States when a job offer came up in Singapore.

Today Oliver believes his career has suffered because he couldn't plan for the long-term. Now in his 40's, he longs to plant some roots. Knowing that he could never comfortably call the US his home, he has finally chosen London.

There are still other TCKs who meet a local citizen, fall in love, get married (or not) and live in the same place they grew up. So, what happens to these adults who decide to stay in their adopted country? Do they integrate? How much? What transpires when they have children? Do their kids see themselves as bi-cultural or as locals?

From a research perspective, this population might be one of the hardest to reach. Studies that span multiple countries run into several challenges. Finding a large enough sample size overseas in a systematic way, budget limitations, and the time it takes to conduct such a study, are but a few of the obstacles that researchers would need to overcome. How can we get academics working in different countries to collaborate on these projects? And once a study is in place, how do we increase the response rates to produce the most accurate results possible?

5. What about Non-American Third Culture Kids?

Different Countries, Different Cultures, Different Issues

Currently, much of the research and many of the books written about TCKs appear to have an American emphasis.¹³ That may be due to America's large migratory, multinational population. Nevertheless, there should be and indeed there is a growing interest and need for data from other countries. Of particular interest are nations where the re-entry issues are radically different. For instance, children from Korea and Japan often face persecution from peers for being different.

Some groups are trying to reduce this information disparity by focusing on the regional and national differences of these children. One such organization is *Interaction International*, an advocacy group for TCKs and internationally mobile families. This organization is doing important work by helping cultural groups tailor their efforts to the needs of non-Anglo children.

In February 2005 *Interaction International's* Director of Services, Libby Stephens, went to Madrid to train staff members from various missionary organizations on understanding the TCK profile

and issues of transition. These groups plan to host a camp this summer for Latino missionary kids (MKs), and use their training to work with these kids. This initial step is vital to increasing awareness and understanding of issues specific to TCKs from that region. It is hoped that their efforts will increase the interest and effectiveness of others working with internationally mobile families from Latin America.

Because it is such a large and important community the desire for more information about TCKs outside the US is growing and raises the question: What research -- be it from Peru, Bangladesh or Nigeria -- already exists? In an era where technology is connecting people across the globe, how do we connect the Anglo and non-English speaking communities so data can be shared more easily? Is there a need to translate study highlights and paper abstracts into English or other languages making the results accessible to a larger population?

6. What kinds of similarities and differences would we see in TCKs from different countries?

Comparative Studies

A comparative analysis contrasting two distinct nationalities might be a useful method for gathering information. For example, understanding how TCKs from Germany differ from Brazilian TCKs could yield greater insight into both groups. Or one could delve deeper into the study of other variables such as the differences among various age groups and whether or not TCKs from certain countries transition more easily while abroad and if so, why?

A researcher might also decide to study the characteristics of TCKs in one country and compare them to the local population, as was done in one paper found using an Internet search engine.¹⁴ In their paper, Jan Selmer and Hon Lam of Hong Kong Baptist University studied the traits of a group of British expatriates in Hong Kong. They then compared their results with local Hong Kong adolescents and also to those of British adolescents living in Britain. Their purpose was to prove empirically the value of hiring TCKs to meet the rising demands of global businesses. This study was an inventive approach to understanding how TCKs add value to an organization's growth overseas. It also underlines what TCKs have to offer our changing world.

Nor do comparisons have to be limited to children or adolescents. What about parents and their kids? Parents' expectations and the values they would like to instill in their children are continually changing. When do their preferences clash and when does living overseas help them bond as a family. Are there countries or cities that tend to bring families together? Are there others that tend to pull them apart? It is sometimes said that the French have an easier time adapting to life in the USA compared to Americans who move to France. Is that true? Why? What about their children? Can a similar pattern be seen in their kids?

7. How can we test the theories that make up the TCK profile?

Assessments

According to a recent survey, assessments are used in approximately one-third of intercultural trainings today.¹⁵ With the number of profiling and readiness tools on the rise, assessments, it seems, are here to stay. The question is whether they can be used to validate the TCK profile.

Three of the widely accepted traits of TCKs are their openness to other cultures, their cross-cultural sensitivity and their comfort with diversity. If TCKs took one of these tests would the results match the expected patterns? In other words, would those tests be reliable? Are TCKs in fact more culturally sensitive? If so, which ones and why?

Barbara Schaetti, an adult TCK herself, is Transition Dynamics' principal consultant working with the expatriate community. Barbara maintains that "current research regarding the development of world mindedness shows how the more time TCKs spend abroad and the more in-depth exposure to multiple cultural traditions, the more likely they are to be ethnorelative, especially so for TCKs whose countries or cultures of origin are not globally dominant." So, how many years of living overseas are required before one notices a positive correlation? And, what other factors influence a TCK's outlook?

One tool that measures an individual's intercultural sensitivity is the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). This instrument supports the tendency for a more ethnorelative development among people with TCK experiences. The IDI is based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Milton Bennett, whose underlying assumption suggests that the more complex and deeper one's experience is with cultural differences, the more likely one's greater competence at intercultural relations. Bennett states that according to the DMIS we should see more "Integration" of TCKs and at least anecdotally we do.¹⁶

IDI trained Schaetti is now encouraging others to use this instrument in their TCK research. "It would be interesting to see what is discovered." Schaetti states, but goes on to caution that researchers need to look at their methodology and the person's developmental stage. "What one's score is while still expatriated, and what it is as adults once they've experienced repatriation could be two very different scores."

Perhaps there is another reason for TCKs to take these assessments. The results might provide them with insights on how to deal with unresolved issues. Satu Kreula, a Finish born intercultural coach and facilitator who grew up in Brazil and the USA, took the training seminar for the IDI and learned that her score revealed she was similar to others with TCK-like experiences. She was left wondering, wanting to know more, "are the results a given and or do they vary?" Good question: How would TCKs compare to other cross-cultural kids?

8. How can new approaches to intercultural research be developed?

Crossing Academic Disciplines

Intercultural research has a long history of contributions from multiple disciplines. While nascent investigations found their origins in anthropology, the intercultural field eventually made its home in the communications discipline. Over the years, however, many other disciplines made significant contributions to intercultural studies. A few of them include: psychology, sociology, and linguistics as well as global management programs at business schools around the world.

Given this academic cross-pollination over the decades, a natural evolution in research development might be for universities to develop specialized centers for cross-disciplinary research with practical applications. In fact, one timely proposal for such a center is already in the works.

Fran Colley and Christine Dowdeswell, two independent researchers in the field of transnational studies, are hoping to establish the world's first research center devoted to international assignees at IUPUI (Indiana University - Purdue University, Indianapolis). Its goal is to achieve recognition as the leading "Center for Research on International Expatriation and Repatriation." The center proposes to embrace a coordinated multi-disciplinary approach spanning a broad spectrum of subjects including, but not limited to: schools of business, law, political science, economics, anthropology, sociology, education, religious studies, and medicine.

One of the more challenging activities proposed by the center is to commission and promote research related to expatriation and repatriation in multiple settings across the world. Coordinating these efforts will obligate the center to face up to doing the very things it helps

others do- overcome the inherent difficulties of working across different languages barriers, cultures and time zones. The proposal's aims are ambitious, but first there is an even greater challenge, getting approval from the University's executive board.

Connecting Cross-Cultural Kid's Research

Cross-cultural kids can not only connect, they can relate. As an adult missionary kid and grandmother of an international adoptee from Russia, Ruth Van Reken is convinced that there are many more similarities among the groups of children of immigrants, refugees and TCKs than have been studied in the past. Van Reken would like to see a new forum created to encourage sharing among the groups to discuss the various factors involved in a cross-cultural childhood such as loss of place and normalization of identity.

Comparing and contrasting these groups may provide insight and clarity into their respective similarities and differences, as well as their nuances. Van Reken goes on to say how, "In a rapidly globalizing world, by looking closely at the TCK experience, we can learn many lessons and principles to apply to all cross-cultural kids."¹⁷

By crossing disciplines and connecting the various communities of cross-cultural children around the globe we will no doubt gain deeper insights into the nuances of each while at the same time reducing the gaps that often separate these diverse sectors. In the process we will become smarter over time about the way research ideas are developed, nurtured and seen through to fruition.

Making the "Search" in Research Easier

Searching for information in today's digitized world should be easier. One of the important lessons learned in this study is the lack of access to research data. Even though the amount of TCK literature, particularly graduate theses and dissertations, is increasing, it doesn't mean that access is.

In fact, there is a "desperate need for a databank" attests Cottrell, who confessed that people email her every week and ask – "How do I get access to data?" Has any information been done on this in my country?" A perpetual target for questions like these by budding researchers, Cottrell wishes she had the answers.

Certainly some search systems already exist, but few of them meet the criterion of an easy search that is universally accessible and useful. Even the most comprehensive source to date, a "Third Culture Kids bibliography" with almost 1,500 citations, is only as current as 1999.¹⁸ Although it is a good start, researchers may be challenged in finding exactly what they need, since the list is categorized by media type (e.g. books, journal articles, dissertations, audiovisual, etc.) rather than by title or topic.

Given the state of search technology today, having instant access to global research seems within the realm of possibilities. One promising prospect is Google's search engine for scholarly literature (www.scholar.google.com). As long as research findings are on-line and can be crawled by "robot software"- a program that automatically finds web pages and feeds them to search engines – the information can be indexed and easily found.¹⁹

Furthermore, if universities help put TCK data within the reach of anyone with access to the web, the impact on future research could be profound. One would think that collaboration between researchers and practitioners should increase, especially if they have access to the same information. A caveat comes to mind however and that is the need for creating and experimenting with new communication platforms. As technology evolves and new means for communicating are developed, linking research to future practices will hopefully get easier.

As TCKs continue to come of age, share more of their personal experiences and even contribute their insights to the intercultural field, it will be interesting to follow the creative role they will play in developing new approaches to intercultural research and cross-cultural ways of thinking.

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