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Critical aspects to Third Culture Kid terminology and research

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With globalization and growing numbers of migration, an increasing number of children have transnational lifestyles and are spending parts of their developmental years in multiple cities and countries. Research about the benefits and downsides of a cross-cultural lifestyle has been around since the 1960s and developed under the name of Third Culture Kids (TCK). The research and term however, are not acknowledged in wider academia. This literature review follows a critical approach with autoethnographic qualities and answers the following research questions: what are the challenges in TCK terminology and what are the challenges in TCK research?

The literature review determines that the challenges in TCK terminology are the lack of coherence and unity in the terminology, and the literature and research not defining its main concept of culture nor explaining the theorists the viewpoint is informed by. The challenges in TCK research are determined to be the omission of differentiating factors between the participants in the research and the contradiction between results of TCK studies with the results of studies of similar topics in other fields of research. Based on the literature review, the suggestion is made for TCK research to use theories and models from other fields of research to further develop and clarify the term and literature. The suggestion is made for TCK research to expand on its quantitative research with a focus on the components of reliability, validity, and generalizability while maintaining and growing upon its strong foundation of qualitative research.

Keywords: Third Culture Kid, Third culture individual, expatriate children, culture

Oulun Yliopisto

Kasvatustieteiden tiedekunta

Third Culture Kids (Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapsiin) liittyvän tutkimuksen ja terminologian tarkastelu kriittisestä näkökulmasta (Roosa Lindholm)

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Globalisaation ja maahanmuuttajien kasvavien määrien myötä yhä useammat lapset elävät monikansalaisittain viettäen heidän kehitysvuosiensa eri kaupungeissa ja eri maissa. Tutkimusta monikulttuurisen elämäntyylin positiivisista ja negatiivisista vaikutuksista on tehty 1960-luvulta lähtien “Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset” nimellä. Suomen kontekstissa Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapsia nimitetään usein matkalaukkulapsiksi. Tutkimusta Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapsista ei kuitenkaan tunnisteta laajemmin akateemisessa maailmassa. Tämä autoetnografisia piirteitä sisältävä kirjallisuuskatsaus ottaa kriittisen näkökulman ja vastaa seuraaviin tutkimuskysymyksiin: mitkä ovat haasteet Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset terminologiassa ja mitkä ovat haasteet Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset tutkimuksissa?

Kirjallisuuskatsauksessa selviää, että haasteet Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset terminologiassa ovat yhtenäisyyden ja johdonmukaisuuden puute, sekä kirjallisuuden tärkeimmän käsitteen-kulttuurin- määrittelemättä jättäminen. Haasteet tutkimuksessa ovat tutkimuksiin osallitujien eriyttävien osatekijöiden huomiotta jättäminen ja ristiriidat Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset-tutkimustulosten ja muiden aihealueiden samankaltaisten tutkimustulosten välillä. Kirjallisuuskatsauksen perusteella ehdotan, että Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset- tutkimus hyödyntäisi muiden tutkimusalueiden teorioita ja malleja syventääkseen ja selkeyttääkseen tutkimusta. Ehdotan myös, että Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset- tutkimus kasvaisi ja rakentuisi vahvan laadulliseen tutkimukseen perustuvan pohjansa päälle. Sen rinnalle olisi tärkeää saada määrällistä tutkimusta, joka keskittyisi validiteetin, reliabiliteetin ja yleistyksen komponentteihin.

Avainsanat: Kolmannen Kulttuurin Lapset, matkalaukkulapsi, ekspatriaattiperheiden lapset, kulttuuri

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## 1. Introduction

Third culture kids or TCKs for short is a term I first heard at a summer camp in Finland organized for teenage children who had lived/ were living abroad due to their parents' work. At the camp the instructor told us that we were all TCKs: we neither fully felt at home in our home country nor the country we were living in, instead we had an identity combining elements from both cultures. This essentially summarizes what a Third Culture Kid is. The term was popularized by Pollock and Van Reeken's book *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds* that describes children who have spent a significant amount of time during their developmental years outside of their parents' culture (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001). The sessions at the summer camp and the discussions the instructors led us participants into were also based on this book. This camp familiarized me with the topic and left me curious to explore it further and to have a better understanding of it.

Third Culture Kids are a topic worth exploring even if one does not personally fit into the definition. Globalization and the large scale of migration around the world are bringing more scholarly interest in the changes caused by the mixing and blending of cultures (Dillon & Ali, 2019). An increasing number of individuals are touched by disrupted education, adjustment, and cultural displacement- qualities that TCK research and literature deals with (Fannings & Burns, 2017). It is important to reflect on and to understand the effects a multi-migratory lifestyle has on an individual, and especially as an educator, know where special attention or help might be needed and what a student with this type of background brings into a classroom.

Initially, this is what I wanted the focus of my thesis to be: what are the effects of a multi-migratory background on a child, and how can a teacher support them in the processes of acculturation. However, upon familiarizing myself with the literature, I started to notice matters that made understanding the literature challenging, such as the research and literature all using different terminology for the same concept or researchers leaving terminology undefined. In my opinion exploring the reasons for these challenges made a more interesting and important topic to examine, because such challenges could undermine the important research done under the topic of TCK.

This thesis will therefore follow a critical literature review and have some autoethnographic characteristics since I will also be reflecting on my own experiences through the literature. As a literature review with a critical point of view, the research questions to be answered are **what are the challenges in TCK terminology?** and **what are the challenges in TCK research?** In order to answer these questions, the thesis will begin with a short overview of TCK theory and then move on to the first section which discusses the challenges related to terminology: the different terms in use and the third culture. After that, the challenges related to the research will be explored: debates regarding the research as well as the common conclusions TCK research makes.

From the main sources this literature review uses, two come from a critical perspective whereas one is a collection of the significant authors in the field. Benjamin and Derwin (2015) lean into their fields of profession and research in mobility and intercultural education to question whether the label TCK is too simple. Fannings and Burns (2017) who also come from a critical perspective use an autoethnographic approach to examine a TCK's educational experience. Eidse et. al (2011)'s *Writing Out of Limbo* is a collection of chapters written by the "foundational thinkers" (Van Reeken, Norma McCaig, and Ruth Hill Useem in Eidse et. al, 2011) as well as TCKs.

## **2. Who is a TCK?**

As stated in the introduction, Third Culture Kids are children who have spent a significant amount of time during their developmental years outside of their parents' culture (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001). The developmental years in the case of Third Culture Kids are defined as the age range 0-18, during which a child is forming relationships, building their identity, and developing their worldview (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2011). An important part of TCK is, as the name indicates, the individual's relationship to culture. Like the instructor of the camp explained, TCKs build relationships to both their parent culture, the first culture (or the home culture) as well as the culture of the country they live in, the second or the host culture, while

not having full ownership of either of them (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001). The third culture is the mixed identity that the child develops, which is influenced by both the home and host country (Dillion & Ali, 2019).

TCK literature, such as Pollock and Van Reeken's book, deal with the downsides as well as the benefits of a cross-cultural lifestyle. Common feelings that TCKs might experience are cultural rootlessness (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, Useem & Cottrell, 1996); confusion over one's cultural identity due to the different/contradicting values of the home and host culture (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001); loneliness upon return to their home country and the feeling of loss over relationships or environments of the host culture (Sorti, 1997). Furthermore, a feeling of being different from those who only lived in their home country is a feeling that resonates with more than 75% of TCKs until adulthood (Useem, 1993). At the summer camp, we went over similar themes: how we felt different, how we did not know all the pop songs or music videos the other children of our age talked about, what we missed from our host country, etc. We drew outlines of ourselves on big brown paper and painted in what we considered important to us and who we were. Most participants painted a heart split into two: one half was the flag of their host country and the other half was the flag of their home country.

The benefits of a cross-cultural lifestyle that TCK literature highlights are cultural sensitivity and adaptability (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001), feeling at home in different places and with different people (Kim, 2008), an understanding that cultures have rules to follow (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001), readily adopting other cultural frames of reference (Viviero & Jenkins, 1999) and a higher interest in learning other languages (Viviero & Jenkins, 1999).

Although there are benefits of a cross-cultural lifestyle, for TCKs themselves, it is the literature's discussion of the downsides that makes it resonate. The feeling of being different from others and not feeling completely at home neither in the host nor the home country is given a label through Third Culture Kid literature, which helps to normalize it by connecting it to other similar experiences (Tajfel, 1982). To me, the term gave a sense of relief- I was not a strange one for having these types of rootless feelings, for not feeling patriotism towards my country nor any country. By the end of the camp, many participants had the letters TCK and a globe symbol on their social media profiles.

### **3. CHALLENGES OF THE TCK CONCEPT**

Encounters with the term TCK are often resonating ones, like the introductory chapter highlighted. The literature and research present and deal with the important topics of adjustment, cultural displacement, and qualities of disrupted education (Fannings & Burns, 2017). Literature on acculturation has already gained special interest due to these topics, but although it is based on similar themes, it may not offer a complete understanding of those who experience frequent geographical moves (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011). Therefore, TCK research and literature deals with a growing number of individuals who are not specifically addressed in other related fields of research. In spite of there being no question of the topic's importance, the literature under the name TCK has been subject to questioning and criticism in recent past years. In the following section, I will discuss the main challenges and aim to answer the question of what criticism does TCK research face and how reflective is TCK research of its main concepts and origins?

#### **3.1 TCKs, expatriate children or strangers?**

Although my first encounter with the term TCK was in 2013, the term originates from the 1960s and was created by Ruth Hill Useem studying American expatriate communities in a newly independent India (Eidse et. al, 2011). Despite the term's long history, it was the release of Pollock and Van Reeken's book as well as a website called tckid.com that increased the popularity of the concept (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015, p. 187). Since then, the number of research using the term TCK has been growing (Fanning & Burns, 2017).

However, TCK is not the only term used as a label for individuals who fit Pollock and Van Reeken's description of a Third Culture Kid. Pollock and Van Reeken themselves alternate between the terms TCK and Cross-Cultural Kid: CCK. Dillon and Ali (2019) have explored the TCK terminology and the research around it, based on which they make the following list of terminology, that also describes a TCK:

- expatriate children
- globally mobile expatriates
- lifestyle migrants
- internationally mobile children



- cross-culturally mobile children
- sojourners
- cultural hybrids
- transmigrants
- global nomads
- cultural chameleons
- transculturals
- intersectional selves
- strangers

(Dillon & Ali, 2019)

Simply from scanning through this list, one might understand why TCK research gets criticized for not being unified (Szkudlarek, 2010). These terms could be divided into three categories: those that emphasize child's relation to the parents' occupation (e.g expatriate children, globally mobile expatriates, lifestyle migrants); those that similarly to TCK describe the children themselves (e.g internationally mobile children, cross-culturally mobile children) and those that relate to the child's position in society (e. g strangers, cultural chameleons, global nomads) (Dillion & Ali, 2019).

The reason why there is not one term for this phenomenon is arguably the fact that it is not acknowledged in literature around the topics of identity and migration, at least not as an analytical concept (Peterson, 2011). Therefore, at the moment the TCK research remains quite niche as it lacks the acknowledgment in the rest of academia and is, according to Benjamin and Derwin (2015), approached hesitantly by researchers outside of the US or South East Asia. This results in each researcher naming the concept as they prefer, according to the sources they have or the focus of their research.

### **3.2 West vs. Rest**

Even though the Third Culture in TCK refers to the mix of a home and host culture, researchers have felt that an unintentional association of the third culture is the developing world, or third world (Gerner & Perry, 2000). For example, the term internationally mobile children was specifically created to avoid this association (Dillon & Ali, 2019). Although the

idea of the developing world is not an intentional association in the term TCK, Fanning and Burns argue that it is still framed within the idea of “West vs rest” (Fanning & Burns, 2017, p.148). They make the argument that TCK literature remains unaware of this geopolitical centrism (Fanning & Burns, 2017). To better understand this the origins of the research will be discussed next.

TCK research dates back to the 1960s to India where Dr. Ruth Hill Useem was studying the expatriate community. In the time period, most third culture kids and their families that were studied appear to be either expatriate families or those of religious organizations. Useem describes the third culture in the following way: “The non-Western cultures gave local color, embellishments, artifacts, additional languages and uniqueness to those coming from the West- but altogether these various third cultures formed an ecumenical bridge between the East and West” (Useem, 1973, p.122). It seems to me that Useem views the host culture as something exotic that made the Westerners “unique”. She and the Westerners are at the center with everything being given to them. With their acquired uniqueness and third culture, they now form a bridge between the West and the East. Useem does not reflect on her position of privilege to view the host culture this way and to call herself a bridge between the cultures. It is interesting to think, whether the description of a TCK coming to America from India would be the same. Could they call themselves the bridge between the East and the West? Calhoun (2008) notes that it is those in the position of privilege who are able to engage easily in cosmopolitan interactions in a way that demotes the host culture into a backdrop. Even though this example of Useem is from the 1960s and the idea of “West vs Rest” could be arguably said to be a part of that time period, TCK literature is still framed within this idea of “West vs Rest” by remaining unaware of its geopolitical centrism (Fanning & Burns, 2017).

In her research of lifestyle migrants (another term for TCK) Korpela interviewed both parents and children living in Goa, India, during the winters, and in their home countries during summers. She found that many of the TCKs (in this case actual children) were not interacting with the local culture, and had rather negative associations of it (Korpela, 2016). A child gave away a Barbie with a sari because she did not like it and a group of children commented that it was disgusting to eat food with fingers (Korpela, 2016). The children had no local friends and their interactions with locals were with their housemaid, a taxi driver, or a cashier (Korpela, 2016). When Korpela (2016) interviewed the parents, they praised Goa and told her how lovely it was. As examples of the loveliness, they listed activities such as riding

elephants, snorkeling, visiting the beaches among others (Korpela, 2016). The common factor among their examples was that none of them were typical pastimes to the locals of Goa, since these activities were usually done by the wealthy or the tourists (Korpela, 2016). The expatriate families seldomly attended local events or festivals (Korpela, 2016). Despite this, the parents were convinced that as a result of their time abroad, the children would become open-minded global citizens as they got to live in a culture different from their home culture (Korpela, 2016). However, instead of the actual local culture, the host culture with which the families were interacting was the subculture of all the expatriate families in Goa (Korpela, 2016). Korpela analyzed the interviews by saying that the expatriate families of Goa were “trying to live outside of local cultures or at least choosing what suits them and when” (Korpela, 2016, p. 97). In other words, the families were in a position of privilege and could similarly to Useem in India in the 1960s demote the host culture into a backdrop (Calhoun, 2008).

The type of subculture that had formed in Goa is not atypical or specific to Goa. At the summer camp for TCKs, I discussed my experiences with the other participants. Most of us had attended international schools with a British or American curriculum and only a few had attended local schools. In the discussions, it appeared that our friends were also rather exclusively from the schools. In addition, the hobbies we had attended were after-school activities organized by the schools. One participant whose parents were missionaries told that he had had the most amazing time living in an East Asian country because he had been living in a community with many other missionary families. This community existed on a physical level as well: perhaps a compound where the houses were located next to each other because the participant described that in their community, they had their own shop with foreign snacks and treats that they missed from their home countries, and the school they attended was also located in the community. The international school I had attended in Turkey was only for foreigners- only those with foreign passports were allowed to be a student there. Unlike my school in Turkey before which had been half local curriculum and half international, in this new city and new school I had no local friends and no lessons in the Turkish language, as I had chosen to take Spanish lessons instead. Some students in the school who lived in the country for a longer time would join local sports clubs because the hobby opportunities of the international school were quite limited. However, some were only there for a few years because their parents would constantly get relocated in their work. They lived in clusters and did not learn the Turkish language and therefore did not even have the

opportunity of attending a local team/club. Therefore, many of us TCKs have lived abroad but similarly to Useem or the Goan expatriates, demoted the host culture into a backdrop.

Similar findings and thoughts on international schools were made by Karen O'Reilly (2012), who has studied TCKs (she uses the term lifestyle migrant children and teenagers) in an international school in Spain. She observed a similar pattern of children not being socialized into the local cultures around them and instead thought that they were socialized into a Western lifestyle (O'Reilly, 2012). Based on her observations she claims that the aim of the international school is to "preserve the continuity of a Western lifestyle" (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 121). This is not necessarily bad, as this type of continuity might be the goal of some parents and children who know that they will sooner or later return to their home country and want to ease the re-entry, which can be and in most cases is distressing (Hoerstring & Jenkins, 2011). However, if the third culture of TCKs forms from parts of both the host culture and home culture, we might start to question to what extent does it form from the actual host culture and home culture? Is it more common for the third culture to form from the expatriate culture/international school culture and the home culture? To examine these thoughts more thoroughly, the idea of the third culture and what it means to TCK researchers and authors need to be examined.

### **3.3 Culture and Identity in TCK research**

Before looking at the understandings of culture TCK literature brings forward, it is important to acknowledge the perspective on culture on which the understandings and definitions are based on. Although one might have a clear definition of culture in their mind, it is very likely to be different from another person's understanding of culture, since in academia there are over 300 definitions of culture, which Baldwin et. al (2006) have helpfully collected and grouped into seven categories. The framework of categorization includes the following themes:

- *Structure/patterns*. This refers to definitions that view culture as a system or a framework.

- *Function*. This refers to those definitions in which culture is seen as a tool to achieve something.
- *Process*. This theme focuses on definitions that examine the ongoing social construction of culture.
- *Product*, which refers to defining culture in terms of artifacts.
- *Refinement*. This theme has a focus on culture as a sense of cultivation to a higher morality.
- *Power or ideology* theme focuses on group-based power.
- *Group-membership*. This refers to definitions that discuss culture in terms of belonging to a place or group of people.

Baldwin et. al (2006)

Most TCK literature discusses belonging, belonging or not belonging to the home/host country, and belonging to the TCK “tribe” (Van Reeken in Edise, Faith, et al., 2011, p. 29). Therefore, a lot of TCK research falls under the theme of culture as group-membership: belonging to a place or a group of people. However, this is never explicitly stated in any of the research, and in fact, it is very unclear whose definitions and ideas of a culture are used to define the third culture in TCK research (Holliday, 2010). In their book, when discussing the third culture Pollock and Van Reeken assign clear and definable features that members of the third culture community share, such as being raised in a cross-cultural world, being raised in a highly mobile world, being physically different from those around them, having different perspectives than the ones around them, expected repatriation, privileged lifestyle and a system identity (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001). Through these features, one can self-identify as a TCK and hence belong to the so-called tribe. The issue that some researchers have with this idea of a third culture comes from highlighting the diversity of TCKs: they all come from different countries, have different ethnic origins, speak different languages which all affect their life and their TCK experience – how can one point out distinguishing features from such a diverse pool? (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015, p.187). This relates to the issue of TCK literature being very American-centric as it originates from the US (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015). Diversity seems to be unacknowledged. A pair of researchers call this approach to culture a straitjacket approach as the definition and idea of culture in TCK research is very rigid whereas in their opinion it is more of a constant flux (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015). This argument can be observed to come from a different idea of culture than the one of a group

membership. It comes from the viewpoint of culture being a process of differentiating one group from another. From the culture as a process viewpoint, culture is socially constructed. In TCK research this translates into the whole group of TCKs and the meaning of what it is to be a TCK being constructed through the research and through who the research includes. Benjamin and Derwin have an issue with the lack of diversity among TCK researchers – or at least the acknowledgment of such a lack – because it is what keeps TCK research America-centered.

It is interesting to read Van Reeken's (who together with Pollock wrote the so-called TCK bible *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*) reflections as she considers the meaning of a third culture, home culture and host culture, and who can claim that they have experienced the three simultaneously. Van Reeken compares her experience of being born in Nigeria and living between Nigeria and the US to an African American woman living in Louisiana and attending an all-white school there in another area. Van Reeken acknowledges that the two share many similarities of a TCK experience (Van Reeken in Eidse et al, 2011) When they discuss the part of a TCK's life of returning to the home culture or the passport culture, Van Reeken remarks that this is where their experiences definitely differ, as Paulette, the other woman, never left Louisiana (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011). Paulette then replies that in fact, she repatriated every single night as she shifted from speaking white-English' at her school to dropping that accent at home (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011) She shifted from looking physically different from everyone at school to looking the same as everyone at home, but yet being different on the inside as the result of different schooling than other family members (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011). From the tone of Van Reeken's reflections, it is apparent that she had not considered culture in such a way. Perhaps her initial idea had been about culture in relation to nationality only, but her conversation challenged her to change the understanding of culture into a more wholesome picture including ethnicity, behavior, and patterns. Van Reeken then shifts her understanding of culture into culture being a process and understands that she as a TCK researcher is creating a group and the criteria for it. She re-considers the TCK framework in order for it to be more inclusive. Van Reeken calls her new framework CCKs- cross-cultural kids- and says that this includes TCKs who physically have moved between borders and countries but are not exclusive to them (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011). In addition, CCKs can also be children of bi/multi-cultural homes, children of bi/multi-racial homes, educational CCKs, children of minorities & domestic TCKs – those who have moved and shifted between

cultures but not between borders (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011). For Van Reeken, it is not important whether the third culture is then constructed from an expat culture, subculture or school culture, or two different national cultures (Eidse et. al, 2011). In any case, having two or more cultures mix leads to an identity different from those around and hence to the exploration of many identity-related questions. This for Van Reeken is the most important part of TCK research and literature and the reason why she would like to “let anyone who strongly relates to the research and findings into the TCK club” (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011, p. 30)

Benjamin and Derwin, whose argument about TCK literature's rigid understanding of culture was presented earlier, believe that the third culture of each TCK is more or less different from one another (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015). Van Reeken could be understood to have a similar viewpoint, as she thinks TCKs construct third cultures from various different cultures, and due to this variety within the cultures that get combined into a third culture, the third culture is likely to be different for each individual. Benjamin and Derwin however, arrive at this conclusion from a different viewpoint. They highlight the idea of culture being a tool kit, which consists of symbols, values, and worldviews, that people use to construct their actions and identity (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015). This can explain the diversity among people who identify as a part of a certain culture because each one is able to choose their own preferred components from the tool kit to use (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015). Pollock and Van Reeken’s book’s characteristics of a Third Culture could be viewed as tools in a tool kit, and each TCK chooses the components they want to include in their identity and in their actions. As a result, the third culture each TCK relates to is more or less different from each other. The argument Benjamin and Derwin proceed to make is that based on this tool kit understanding of a culture, TCKs’ identities are not based on certain cultural patterns (as these patterns are different for each individual with different tools) but rather on their similar experiences (Benjamin & Derwin, 2015).

In contrast to Van Reeken, another pair of researchers who approach TCK literature with a critical attitude, do not have an issue with who the third culture includes or excludes, but instead point out that the idea of three cultures- home, host, and third- is too rigid and does not reflect the reality of a TCK’s experience which is anything but rigid (Fanning & Burns, 2017). In Van Reeken’s reflections, she recalls young adults remarking that they must be at least 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> culture kids- their parents had different nationalities or perhaps one or both of

them were biracial; the families lived in a country foreign to them all but occasionally visited their countries of origin (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011). To them, the home-host-third culture model was too limited and did not reflect their reality. Furthermore, Fanning and Burns argue that the third culture is not really a mix of cultures, since it is something between the home and host culture and thus nothing concrete (Fanning & Burns, 2017). They agree with Benjamin and Derwin's argument that the identity TCKs develop is not voiced by the TCKs as a mix of two cultures, or cultural patterns, but instead as a feeling of not here but not there instead (Fanning & Burns, 2017). Fannings and Burns turn to anthropology for a term for this feeling: liminal belonging. Liminal refers to a disorientation felt in the middle of the passage when one no longer has their initial status but has not yet begun the transition into the post-passage status (Turner, 1967). For TCKs, liminal would hence be the sort of ambiguity felt when they have left their home culture and no longer fit their status there but have not quite settled into the host culture either. According to Fanning and Burns, this better reflects a TCKs experience as it describes the time spent adapting to new places, new groups and new customs (Fanning & Burns, 2017).

What the reflections and criticism of these researchers tell, is that the reality of TCKs' experiences with culture and identity is not as simple as adding a host culture to a home culture and the sum being a third culture which TCKs identify with. Van Reeken's reflections show that although they are termed host and home culture and associated with a country, culture is more complex than a passport nationality. A host culture, in reality, could consist of family culture, an expat subculture, school culture, the local culture of worldviews, values, traditions, and customs, or all of the above in different ratios. One does not need to even leave the country in order to experience a home and host culture, like Van Reeken's friend's story illustrated. Benjamin and Derwin's arguments of culture consisting of a multitude of ideas, beliefs, values, languages from which individuals pick and choose also challenges the idea of *a culture* versus *the cultures*. Together with Fannings and Burns, they come to the opinion that it is the process of traveling between, settling, and resettling into different cultures that create a TCKs identity – not the combination of cultures or cultural elements.



## 4. TENSIONS AND DEBATES IN TCK RESEARCH

So far, this thesis has discussed, that although being significant and resonating to TCKs, the literature around the topic is not unified, it is not acknowledged in the broader literature on migration, it does not address questions of privilege, remains framed in a west vs. rest way and discusses culture and identity more rigidly than the actual experiences account for. To understand the causes for these areas of criticism and to better understand the field of study of Third Culture Kids, the following section will discuss TCK research: what research is done and how is it done, how has the research evolved and how do TCKs' voices compare with the conclusions of the research? The section aims to answer the second research question of this thesis: what are the challenges in TCK research?

### 4.1 What type of research?

As mentioned earlier in this paper, despite the vast amount of research on the topic of TCK, it is not acknowledged in the broader studies of migration and identity as an analytical concept (Peterson, 2011). The reason for this possibly arises from the fact that most of the main literature has not been empirically tested (Lyttle, Barker, and Cornwell, 2011). Instead, they lean more on personal life experiences, which may or may not be supported by interviews and questionnaires. For example, in Pollock and Van Reeken's *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds* the models and concepts were first created by Pollock based on the themes he frequently encountered in conversations with children in an international school in Kenya and then refined together with Van Reeken who also leaned into her personal background of living in Nigeria as a child and moving back to the States from there (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011). Pollock and Van Reeken further refined their concepts by comparing and contrasting them to interview and survey answers and created models and terms, whereas others of a TCK background have written reflections (see e.g. the collection of reflections by TCKs in *Writing out of Limbo*, 2011) or expressed their stories in more creative ways such as poetry (Eidse et. al, 2011). TCK literature also includes articles and studies done in both quantitative and qualitative manners – interviews, ethnographic studies, questionnaires, naturalistic inquiries to name a few (see e.g. Eidse et. al, 2011; Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). Out of these research methods, questionnaires and interviews of different forms seem

to be the most common ones. As a majority of TCK literature focuses on children of international schools, a majority of the TCK research has been conducted in international schools examining differences in international students or between international students and a group of students with a non-migratory lifestyle (e.g Devens, 2005; Sandhu & Asrabi, 1994; Konno, 2005). Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven comment that looking at the studies that have been conducted, the expectation and focus have been on the things which the TCK group is expected to be deficient in (Deweale & Van Oudenhoven, 2009) – for example, sense of belonging, grief, homesickness, suicide rates, feeling of discrimination, ethnic identity (Deweale & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). TCKs upon first hearing about the research and theory have noticed the same area of focus. For example, one TCK comments that with the focus being heavily on the negative aspects he felt like he had “just been diagnosed with this terminal TCK disease” (“From the Innate to the Intellectual”, 2020). On the other hand, a focus of research is also TCKs as adaptable cosmopolitans.

#### **4.2 Tensions in TCK research**

Danau Tanu gives a good overview of the way the research has evolved regarding diversity and the meaning of culture – specifically the third culture. His overview is informed by a critical literature review in combination with an ethnographic study (Tanu, 2015). Tanu observes that the third culture originates from Ruth Hill Useem's study of expatriates in India, where she used this to describe how the American expatriate workers and local Indian workers were interacting with each other in a shared social space (Useem, 1967). The definition of the third culture was accordingly “the behavior patterns created, shared, and learned by men of different societies who are in the process of relating their societies or sections thereof to each other” (Useem, 1967, p. 169). Tanu remarks that in the very initial study Useem conducted, the attention given to the expatriates and the Indian host nationals was close to equal (Tanu, 2015). This, in his opinion, is important, as the study was therefore giving equal attention to all participants of the third culture, not just one side (Tanu, 2015). After the initial study, in 1973, the focus of Useem shifted to the expatriate community and on their children, growing up in this third culture and in this new study the definition of the third culture changed from behavior patterns shared by all who were interacting and engaging with each other as the different societies met one another, into being a subculture shared only by the expatriates and their children, who, in Tanu's words, “experience a relatively privileged

form of international mobility” (Tanu, 2015, p.15). Tanu perceives this focus on American children in the foundational literature (mostly written and conducted by American researchers) to be an influence on how the TCK field has developed, what topics are explored, and what is missing from the picture (Tanu, 2015). He remarks that because this original literature discusses only American children living abroad in their childhood, the research that followed has taken the assumption that these findings apply to all children who grow up under similar conditions (Tanu, 2015). He makes the comparison to the Japanese words *kaigaishijo* or *kikokushijo*, which refer to children of Japanese expatriate workers who have returned to Japan. This term, unlike TCK, has not been applied to a wider range of individuals (Tanu, 2015).

Eidse et. al, who collected studies, reflections, and commentaries from TCKs and researchers of the field into one compact whole, disagree with Tanu. To the criticism of Useem writing from a largely American perspective in her founding research, they state that of course, she was! (Eidse et. al, 2011). In their opinion, however, this does not signify that the term Third Culture Kids was by any means intended to be only US specific (Edise et. al, 2011). To support their argument, they comment on the data and testimonies the editors and contributors of their volume have been collected from “Finnish, Brazilian, Danish, Monegasque, and Iranian TCKs—and others, not covered here.” (Edise et. al, 2011, p. 5). The fact that TCKs from all nations relate to the research and literature strongly indicates that it is not specific to the US only. They comment that all these TCKs have shared issues but acknowledge that they also have their own ones (Edise et. al, 2011).

Tanu claims that this is where the problem lies. He finds that the literature of TCKs often assumes that “mutual intelligibility signifies the inconsequentiality of differences” (Tanu, 2015, p. 25). What he means by this is that in exploring all that is the same in TCKs around the world and TCKs themselves feeling incredibly understood by other TCKs because of similarities in their experiences, the differences and their own issues that Edise et. al brought up, are forgotten. Tanu (2015) observes that the literature on TCKs assumes that mobility is experienced the same way by everyone. For example, in many studies of TCKs experiences (e.g Fredstad, 2002; Fail, 2002; Fail et. al., 2004), the results often are that TCKs experiences of a third culture are very similar, but the questions do not include those that would allow for the interviewees to discuss the impact language, nationality, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, class or culture have had on the experiences (Tanu, 2015). He argues that as a result, those

who do not fit the stereotypical TCK profile are often omitted and not acknowledged as TCKs. For TCK literature to become an analytical concept and to be placed within the broader studies of migration and identity, the literature needs to acknowledge the complexity in what can influence one's transnational experience; to treat the third culture as dynamic and subjective to the socio-historical context; and to be aware how the researchers' background can impact the analysis (Tanu, 2015).

### **4.3 The extent of the debate**

Tanu's argument, although not quite to its full extent, can be seen in the debate among the TCK practitioners and researchers on whether or not immigrants are Third Culture Kids as well. Pollock and Van Reeken's definition of a Third Culture Kid arguably includes children of all social classes by being broad enough to include a child of a privileged expatriate family, as well as a child who is forced to migrate for economic or political reasons (Dillon & Ali, 2019). Although the current research is mostly done in international schools and the focus of it is on the privileged and temporary migrants, this does not automatically signify that the term cannot be applied to lower social classes (Deweale & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). Van Reeken comments that immigrant children and/or refugees experience similar feelings to those of traditional TCKs (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011) and believed that they should be included under TCKs. Yet she, too, admits that making meaningful comparisons of children at refugee camps to those of multinational company workers was a challenge (Van Reeken in Eidse et. al, 2011). Others find it almost appalling to derive so far from the researches origins and focus, and as Fanning and Burns sharply put it "the needs driving immigration or the 'sorry history' of first people's displacement in their own land are obscured by TCK, and of course are far bigger culturally and politically than the term "kids" can encompass" (Fannings & Burns, 2017, p.159). Norma McCaig is one TCK practitioner who agrees that if all types of cross-cultural experiences are mixed under the name of TCK, then there would be too many differentiating factors to study any of them (Eidse et. al, 2011). Here there is discussion and consideration of to whom is the label TCK applicable and more importantly to who should it be applied, resembling Tanu's comparison of TCK and kaigaishijo – the latter of which has stayed very rigid with whom it applies to. Furthermore, there is the questioning of diversity and significant research results/study – an acknowledgment that important factors may be overlooked by research when it diverges too far from its origins. Yet these questions and

reflections were not taken to further examine the Third Culture Kid literature. There was no conclusion to the debate on immigrants, although Norma McCaig did create a new term (Global Nomads) to keep the definition of TCK very clear as “those [not only children] who go overseas with a parent because of an international career” (McCaig, 1996, p. 2).

#### **4.4 TCK’s confused identity**

As mentioned before, one main focus of Third Culture Kid research is the negative effects the cross-cultural experience has had on the TCKs, or in other words, what the TCK group is expected to be deficient in (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). The conclusion often made from this research is that the experiences of moving between cultures leave a TCK puzzled or confused, especially regarding their identity. Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven (2009) have collected a short summary of the research from the past till the present.

In 1994 Sandhu and Asrabi used a questionnaire to measure acculturative stress of international students in the USA who had no previous experience of living abroad. Cockburn (2002) collected case studies and revealed that the most prevailing theme in them was the theme of uncertainty related to identity. Fail, Thompson, and Walker (2004) found out with their qualitative study that many TCKs had no sense of belonging in the community they were living in. Konno in 2005 compared the levels of ethnic identity of TCK students of Asian descent and students of Asian descent who had no experience of living abroad. He found no significant differences in the levels between the two groups, but the time spent abroad did show a negative correlation to the level of ethnic identity (Konno, 2005). Devens (2005) studied the relationship between TCK experiences and depression, discovering that compared to non-TCKs, the majority of scores were on the average range of depression, and 1/5 on the higher scores. In 2007, Poyrazli and Lopez compared a group of American students and a group of international students in America with the results that the international students had a higher level of homesickness and perceived discrimination (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

These studies have significance as most of the time the goal of the researchers and especially the practitioners are to help the third culture kids, and studies like these show in what areas they might need support in. The interesting part, however, is the difference between the

studies and the Third Culture Kids' own thoughts. Although the research searched for the negative aspects of TCKs experience (for the purpose of then giving support in those areas), TCKs themselves would not necessarily perceive all those areas as negative. For example, in Wail, Thompson, and Walker's study in which they reached the conclusion that TCKs did not feel a sense of belonging in their community (Wail, Thompson & Walker, 2004) when reading extracts from the interviews, the interviewees do not describe this as something negative. Instead, they view it as something constructive: they can feel equally at home anywhere (see Wail, Thompson and Walker, 2004). Moore and Barker conducted life story interviews where TCKs (who were now in their adulthood) could express themselves with their own words and found out that the TCKs did not express grief or a loss of trust or identity, but instead believed that their experiences had been enriching in their childhood as well as today (Moore & Barker, 2012). Fanning and Burns interviewed a TCK who had lived in multiple countries and based on their interview claim that his experience has not left him confused (Fanning & Burns, 2017). They also state that it has not done the opposite either, it has not enabled their interviewee to somehow automatically become successful in their adult life (Fanning & Burns, 2017). These are the two fates of a TCK the literature presents: the repeated change and loss leaving an individual puzzled in terms of their identity and feeling rootless and homeless or on the very opposite end, a TCK with the ability to speak multiple languages and understanding of different cultures becoming an ideal worker in the globalizing world. If the interviews were done with TCKs who had just repatriated, their answers might be different as they would be in the middle of a difficult phase, but when reflecting back on their experiences and life, TCKs seem to not find themselves as confused individuals.

The studies on bicultural and multiculturalism also contradict this first fate of rootlessness and a confused identity. The research on Biculturalism and Multiculturalism proves that it is possible to feel truly at home in multiple cultures and to possess more than one cultural identity (Adler, 2002; Baker, 2011; Berry, 2008). In the early research on intercultural adaptation, there was an assumption that to assimilate into a 2nd culture, individuals would leave behind and unlearn the 1st culture (Moore & Barker, 2012). Since then, the research has come to the understanding that cultural adaptation is a two-dimensional process and the culture learning of the culture of origin and the host culture are two independent processes (Moore & Barker, 2012). As a result, an individual can be highly acculturated in one, both, or neither of the cultures (Birman, 1994). When TCKs in Moore and Barker's study described

their experiences, they described it as shifting among the different cultural identities (Moore & Barker, 2012). Rather than signifying a confused identity, this shows that TCKs have multiple cultural identities, which based on their clear articulations of each, are explicit to them and the ability to shift between them comes naturally (Moore & Barker, 2012).

Multiculturalism research is discovering more and more benefits of biculturalism and multiculturalism, such as a higher competence of intercultural communication and open-mindedness (Moore & Barker 2012). Kim suggests that an individual who repeatedly experiences acculturation may acquire an intercultural identity and describes it as: “an open-ended, adaptive, and transformative self-other orientation” (Kim, 2008, p.364). This relates to the second alternative TCK literature often presents: the individual will become internationally minded, which will lead to success in their future career and the work field.

#### **4.5 TCKs as cosmopolitan citizens**

The benefits that a TCK may come to acquire due to their multi-migratory lifestyle as discussed earlier in this paper include cultural sensitivity and adaptability, feeling at home in multiple places with different people, cultural sensitivity, a readiness to adopt other cultural frames of reference, and higher interest to (and most of the time also the ability to) speak multiple languages (Pollock & Van Reeken, 2001; Kim, 2008; Viviero and Jenkins, 1999). The website [tkidnow](http://tkidnow.com), which has helped to popularize the term TCK, lists characteristics of TCKs and includes the following statements “80% [of TCKs] believe they can get along with anybody” and “90% report feeling as if they understand other cultures/peoples better than the average American” (What is a Third Culture Kid?, n.d). As employers today often value languages or international sophistication, the idea of being a sort of “cosmopolitan” citizen is quite attractive. As discussed previously with the example of Goan expatriate families, the parents thought the experience was particularly valuable for their children as they would learn to be flexible and could easily adapt to any environment (Korpela, 2016). When not giving the understanding that a TCKs experience leads to a confused identity, the literature often speaks of a TCKs experience enabling them to be in a “faintly post-modern way successful in later life” (Fannings & Burns, 2017, p.153). Benjamin and Derwin (2015) call this idea of TCKs being adaptable cosmopolitans a romanticized idea because it is discussed

as if TCKs had no national affiliations themselves. TCKs national connections are examined further in Elif Shafak's reflections on international schools, and the atmosphere there: "We were like a mini-United Nations, with each of us seen as the representative of the land he or she came from. One implication of this was that whenever something negative occurred in relation to a country, the child associated with that country was held personally responsible-which meant mocked, ridiculed, and bullied" (Shafak, 2011, p.41). This situation is hardly the case in every international school, but it does place the claim of TCKs automatically becoming adaptable cosmopolitans into further questioning.

## **5. Discussion**

This literature review has aimed to explore the challenges in TCK terminology and TCK research. Firstly, the lack of unity in the terminology and definitions was explored. With 13 different terms for Third Culture Kids and each of them having different criteria on who is a "TCK" (Dillon & Ali, 2019), there is reason to see why the lack of unity is a challenge in the field. Furthermore, as later seen in Van Reeken's recollection of Cross-Cultural Kids or Norma McCaig's *Global Nomads*, researchers are creating new terms to fit their understanding of Third Culture Kids and what they think is important in this topic. The Third Culture- a combination of elements of the home and host culture- was brought under criticism through examining the expatriate families in Goa, who interacted with the expatriate community & culture, but not the local culture (Korpela, 2016). The analysis made was that it is those with privilege who can easily engage in cosmopolitan interactions and demote the host culture into a backdrop (Calhoun, 2008). Next, the concept of culture was further examined and argued that it is the experience of repeated settling and resettling into cultures that creates a TCKs identity instead of a combination of home and host culture (Fannings & Burns, 2017; Benjamin & Derwin, 2015). These are the challenges in TCK terminology and theory. In terms of challenges in the research, this thesis examined how TCK research focuses on similarities and often forgets the differences or omits them through the structure and questions in the research (Tanu, 2015). The two fates of TCKs the research and literature present: a confused identity or an adaptable cosmopolitan citizen were questioned through



TCKs experiences: research in the field of biculturalism and multiculturalism showed that having more than one cultural identity is possible and shifting between them can be very natural (Moore & Barker, 2012) whereas Benjamin and Derwin (2015) used the reflections of Elif Shrak to show that not all atmospheres of international schools filled with supposed cosmopolitan citizen are friendly and tolerative of differences.

These results to the research questions explain why Third Culture Kids is not acknowledged as an analytical concept in the studies of mobility and migration (Peterson, 2011). The criticism towards TCK literature presented in this thesis shows the challenge of researching in a field where the research topic – in this case, the group of TCKs – is constantly becoming larger and more complex as an increasing number of individuals now have migratory lifestyles and/or move between cultures locally. Acknowledging the complexity in culture, identity and the socio-historical background of the research would help it move forwards past these points of challenges. Perhaps a good step for the research to take would be to study differences in TCKs' experiences concerning language, social class, ethnicity, etc., and overall, what makes the TCK experiences different from one another.

In order to study these differences, a possible methodology could be looking into fields of research with similar topics as TCK literature – culture and anthropology, multiculturalism and biculturalism, identity and psychology, language and linguistics- and observing what seem to be some main conclusions and compare and contrast them to TCK research conclusions. I believe that this would result in new perspectives on some concepts that would not otherwise be examined or re-examined. For example, the role of language in the acculturation process has been studied in the context of migrants with conclusions. Some of the conclusions made have been that language mindsets influence the way migrants experience intercultural interactions (Lou & Noels, 2017) and that communication variables mediate the influence interethnic contact has on identity and adjustments (Noels & Clement, 1996). Although language might be one area of discussion in TCKs experiences, I have not encountered any research in the TCK field that has an in-depth focus on the role of language and TCKs experiences. Furthermore, the role of language in the research process itself is another area that is lacking from current research and discussion. By using models and research from the field of linguistics, TCK research could meaningfully examine this topic as well and thus determine the influence it has on TCK. Through systematic and comparative

research of the factors differentiating TCKs from each other, the definition of a TCK would become more clear.

A limitation of this thesis is that within the scope of a literature review, this suggestion could not be tried. Examining the TCKs' perspectives and feelings regarding the diversity of the research, their experiences with culture and identity, and how they think about its effect on them would have given a more meaningful analysis of the challenges and how they reflect in the TCKs experiences. Furthermore, a more detailed analysis of the research methods and tools of researchers could have also deepened the analysis.

The research questions and their findings also open up a discussion about reliability, validity, and generalisability in TCK research. Upon discussing the topic of reliability, validity, and generalizability, Morse et. al remark that a valid theory is one that is well developed and informed, comprehensive, logical, and consistent (2002). Although based on the reception of TCK research or the book *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds* one could argue that TCK theory is a valid one, there are issues with consistency among the researchers and even within one theorists' view: for example, Van Reeken has broadened and adapted her understanding from a Third Culture Kid into a Cross-Culture Kid while the rest of the research continues to be about Third Culture Kids. Furthermore, as long as the impact of language, ethnicity, social class, or age is missing from the discussion of research results, there is an issue with the logicity of the research as well. TCK research has, as pointed out in this thesis, also been criticized for generalizing results obtained from a niche group. It seems to me that most of the researchers of the field want to generalize TCK research and extend the theory and findings to TCKs of all nationalities and relating the findings to immigrants. In order to do this, it is important to have quantitative TCK research that focuses on the components of reliability, validity, and generalizability. However, simultaneously the TCK field needs qualitative research that concentrates on having a deeper understanding of diverse processes. Especially since the TCKs are a diverse group, it is important that the research does not try to fit them into one single mold. A majority of TCK research, as stated earlier in this thesis, is of a qualitative nature and the significance of the research can be seen from its reception: qualitative research that thrives for a deeper understanding is the type of research that individuals have found relatable and appealing. Therefore, TCK research should maintain and grow on its qualitative research as it appears to be the strength of the field, but

at the same time aim at quantitative research with the focus on concepts of reliability, validity, and generalizability in order to make the concept of TCK more generalizable.

Although this thesis has approached Third Culture Kid research from a critical point of view, the purpose has never been to diminish the importance of the topic and research in this field. When I was a Third Culture Kid (within my developmental years, 0-18) the term and research were very significant to me, helped me process my experiences and emotions, and gave me a temporary label of identity to hold on to. Now, I have become a Third Culture Adult and although there is literature specifically about ATCKs- adult Third Culture Kids, I have not explored the literature in this thesis. However, there are overlaps in the Third Culture Kid and ATCK literature and the only difference between the two groups is age. Although it is the only difference, it is a big one. I still cannot answer the question of where I come from and need to summarize my whole background as an answer, but I no longer hold onto Third Culture Kid as a part of my identity. As a teenager I would agonize over questions like which language feels more like a mother tongue to me, English or Finnish, or where do I feel the most home at: Finland, Turkey, or Germany? Or nowhere? Nowadays as a young adult, I do not stress over these questions anymore. Instead of thinking about which is more like a mother tongue, I can say that I speak both quite fluently. Instead of thinking about which place felt the most like home, I can focus on the feeling that I currently feel at home here in Finland with my friends and family.

From the research in the TCK field, we can see how many young individuals struggle with similar questions that I did: questions of identity and belonging. These questions are only getting more complex as there are 5th or 6th culture kids. Therefore it is important for the adults in their lives, for example, the guardians and school staff, to have adequate ways of supporting these children so that studies such as the one made by Devens about the relationship of TCKs and depression rates would not show positive correlation trends (2005). TCK research and books such as Pollock and Van Reeken's *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, offer significant support and understanding for young individuals with cross-cultural backgrounds. If TCK were to become an official analytical concept, knowledge of the topic would grow and more children would be supported. Furthermore, with TCK being an official analytical concept, researchers outside of the US and South East Asia would approach the topic without the current hesitancy. In order to move towards this, the term TCK needs a clear and focused definition. The TCK theory should refine its basis by defining

terms such as culture and explicitly stating the definition and viewpoint in the research. All factors that can influence an individual's transnational experience should be explored in depth. The TCK theory should be further built upon using models and theories from other fields of research with a similar focus. To conclude, I hope to see TCK research grow and expand while overcoming this thesis's points of criticism.

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