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Dirk Jonathan Rodricks

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A Fish Out of Water? Unpacking Access and Privilege Through the Lens of International Intersectionality

Dirk Jonathan Rodricks

Access and privilege, although universally applicable, are not nearly as universally familiar. The author shares his experience as a gay, Catholic, Portuguese-Indian, first-generation Third Culture Kid (TCK) from India and his journey to a higher education and student affairs administration program. First the author recalls his experience of being forced to check a series of boxes upon his arrival to the United States and the inherent assumptions and perceptions that ensued. Next, he shares his process of identity development as an international student and the challenges contained in reconciling those multiple identities within the predominantly White context of access and privilege in the United States. Implications for higher education and student affairs professionals conclude this scholarly personal narrative (SPN) by providing recommendations on how student affairs educators can give greater voice and support for people representing intersecting identities within the TCK context.

Internationalization is today's new buzzword dominating higher education discourse about the future of student enrollment. Economic imperatives force higher education to embrace global initiatives that not only export education through programs like study abroad, but also generate income from overseas students (Jiang, 2008). The renewed focus on growing the number of international students in the United States poses an interesting challenge for its colleges and universities. Given the complexity of international identity abroad and the context of increasing intersecting identities at home, are higher education and student affairs professionals adequately prepared to support international students in the way they need us?

I arrived in the United States from India in 2001, shortly before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and over the past decade have had experiences that prompted me to ask my own questions: why do I culturally identify one way, but present as another? Why does that matter? Where do I belong? The past ten years have brought

Dirk Jonathan Rodricks is a first-year HESA student. He holds a M.S. in Applied Psychology from Northeastern University and a B.A. in Theatre (Magna Cum Laude) from UVM. Drawing from his own experience of multiple identities, Dirk's research interests lie in exploring the complex issues of those intersectionalities as they relate to access to and success in higher education. He plans to pursue a Ph.D. and somehow integrate his love for theatre into his pedagogy and research as a future member of the faculty.

more questions and some answers. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) define this phenomenon as a “neither/nor world” and presents the following concept of Third Culture Kids (TCKs). TCKs have been described as people who have spent a significant part of their developmental years in a passport culture outside their home (or host) and move back and forth between the two (Useem, 1993; Langford, 1998; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Zilber, 2005). When placed in a third culture, these TCKs or Adult TCKs (ATCKs) “frequently build relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13). This phenomenon is similar to Kramsch’s (1993) concept of “third place identities,” which portrays a more positive view of the international student experience. He proposes that students may feel that their values and practices do not conform to their home culture but find more comfort in occupying a “third place.” The third place lies between the cultural practices of the home culture and the abroad culture in which they find themselves. In such a *place*, the individuals can develop self-affirming identities unencumbered by the ties and group memberships (e.g. nationality and ethnicity) (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). Simply put, viewing international students as coming from one culture into another is an outdated view of not only the culture but also identity development. Both have very distinct terms and processes. This SPN will discuss the process of unpacking access and privilege in this third culture, while personally navigating a *hybrid* form of identity and its implications to student affairs research and practice.

My “Mayflower”

I am an Adult Third Culture Kid of Indian origin. I have spent my life not being enough for the world in which I was raised or for the world in which I belong to now. I grew up in a cosmopolitan urban metropolis in a country where ethnic identity is not defined exclusively by ancestral heritage or simply by religious affiliation, but a combination of both. This ethno-religious way of life (Laumann, 1969) dictates cultural and identity development for both the home (host) and passport (nationality) cultures respectively. For the majority, the cultural and identity development would be interchangeable where the family structure at home would mirror society at large. However, my home culture was defined by one religion whereby another dominated the national landscape (i.e., passport culture). I was born and raised in a blue-collar, Catholic family where my parents fought hard for the life they had come to make for our family; whereas, Hinduism dominates the Indian subcontinent permeating almost every aspect of society (Flood, 1996).

Growing up, life revolved around school, church, and family – we were to live for these three aspects. I remember growing up confused, constantly feeling something was not right, but failed to define what was actually missing. Academically, I was a straight-A student and that pleased my proud parents. The academically rigorous school system would become one escape as I began to use my talents

to deflect outwardly every day my inner confusion. On the other hand, I over-extended myself (albeit successfully) in music and drama where I did incredibly well to the delight of my family and friends. I represented the local parish at the city and state competitions, seizing every opportunity. In doing so, I suffered from a victim mentality. Braiker (2004) describes a self-image of victimization as a “pervasive sense of helplessness, passivity, loss of control, pessimism, negative thinking, and strong feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame, and depression leading to hopelessness and despair” (p. 2). Pollock and Van Reken (2001) further explain victim mentality as a limiting delusion of choice where “an option to act is offered, but circumstance arbitrarily eliminates that choice” (p. 107). I knew what I needed to do, but my predicament made it difficult to make the right choices and decisions. My success itself became fodder for the bullies at school and in the neighborhood. Upper-class students ragged me repeatedly: “Pansy!” “Nerd!” “Geek!” “Fag!” Their taunting baffled me. I knew I was raised differently, but was my success a direct product of my turmoil? Was my deviance from the heteronormative master narrative substantially visible and significant?

To exacerbate my state of confusion about who I was, at age 17 I lost the one person who taught me almost everything I knew as my values system: my mother. Her passing introduced me to loneliness for the first time in my life. I firmly believed that all my potential opportunity ‘died’ with her, yet another *delusion of choice*. I expended my energies on ensuring that my family (particularly my younger sister) was coping well, but I did little work to pull myself out of loneliness. I would go to bed at night recreating each day as if she were in it, and I would wake up each morning feeling lonely and stuck on auto-repeat—this was my coping mechanism. This pattern continued for a year. By age 19, I was suffocating because I had no idea who I was. I was angry and disillusioned with my Catholic faith. My loneliness had disconnected me emotionally from the rest of my family. I was angry with my father for being in a constant state of mourning. I resented my siblings for being similar in personality to the bullies I had encountered at school. I invested in superficial relationships over anything deep just to blend in—a coping mechanism for self-preservation. I needed to get out.

I was an “it is what it is” person (Nash & Murray, 2010) tacitly accepting life on society’s terms. Upon turning 20, I realized that it did not have to be that way. “It is what we name it to be; it is who we are and what we believe and perceive” (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. 41). No singular event was responsible for this change. As I reflect back, it was more out of desperation. I could either succumb, or do something. I chose to do something. Leveraging the years of family pride I had banked for outstanding performance inside and outside of the classroom, I tentatively gained my father’s support to pursue studies abroad. By the end of that year, I packed my bags, said my goodbyes, and moved to a different country in five days. This was my “Mayflower” and my chance at that American dream.

Access, and Privilege, and Survival, Oh My!

When I arrived in Boston, it quickly became apparent that I culturally identified one way and presented another. The new/transfer student orientation program seemed to speak to everyone else but me. I was “othered” instantly, a term coined in the context of post-colonial critique by Gayatri Spivak (1985). Spivak, an Indian literary critic and theorist, described it as “a process by which the dominant culture can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes [...] the business of creating the enemy...in order that the empire might define itself by its geographical and racial others” (as cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2000, p. 156). Over the course of the next 18 months, I began to understand that post-9/11, the United States would become a highly sensitized and hyperaware society. September 12th, 2001 would be the first day I discovered that I was actually a color, specifically brown, and that it mattered. I would learn that gradation in shade mattered, that lighter is Whiter, and each choice made irrespective of self-identification could be perceived in a manner beyond control (Patel, 2009).

In my journey to better understand the concepts of access and privilege, it was clear that I would need to unpack and confront them myself. The process would become a struggle that would continue for a decade. Two stark examples come to mind as I reflect on being compelled to reconcile the perceptions of others with my own perceptions of myself. I remember vividly (before 9/11), when I walked to an Indian-owned convenience store with an Indian friend of mine. I presented with lighter skin than he did. Upon entering the store, I was enthusiastically greeted in Spanish (“Hola!”) complete with eye contact and a head acknowledgement by the owner behind the cash register. Having finished our shopping, we proceeded to check out. While at the counter, my friend was ignored and I began to get served first...in Spanish. I gestured to have the owner finish with my friend, which he ignored. Having deciphered a side conversation while shopping, my instinctual reaction resulted in me speaking to the man in Hindi. After the brief shock registered, I was offered an apology that was in fact owed to my friend who was embarrassed by the entire turn of events. Furious for my friend, we left the store without our groceries.

About nine months after 9/11, I was at airport security returning from a national conference in Albuquerque, NM. The middle-aged White male at the ID checkpoint threw my passport back at me with absolute disdain, “Where is your American passport? I want to see that, and not *this!*” Hyper-aware that I presented as a Person of Color, I nervously tried to explain that I was not an American citizen and therefore was not in possession of an American passport, and that this was all I had. I remember the fear of impact from that disclosure while desperately wanting to be American on that day. I felt American: culturally it was the closest

thing I had experienced in almost 20 years to my home culture. The confusion at his question and my response represents the cultural dissonance often experienced by TCKs and international students (Pederson, 1995). Growing up in India, to be American was to be White. If I walked like a duck and quacked like a duck, was I a...? I am not White but I did become an angry Third Culture Kid stuck in limbo – not White enough to be American, not dark enough to be Indian. I spent the next few years “white-washing” myself: trying to blend in while abandoning everything about my home and passport cultures in favor of this new found ‘comfort’ third culture. I spoke only English, had only White friends, shopped at the White stores, and dated only Whites (Pyke & Dang, 2003, p. 156). Victor Frankl (1997) describes this in three stages. First, the period of depersonalization/readjustment, second, the period of deformation (anger), and finally, the period of disillusionment/bitterness. As I reflect, I realize that I was oscillating between those three stages, triggered each time by an event or circumstance. I was getting by, but entrapped, and barely holding on for survival.

From Entrapment to Empowerment

As I encountered more experiences and was guided by mentors who cared about my acculturation, I began to understand the language of difference. The lack of a vocabulary to frame my experiences and my responses (or lack thereof) was a stumbling block. The academic and co-curricular contexts at two private institutions of higher education, both with large international student populations, failed to meet my need. Fueled by these nagging questions of who I am, I naturally turned to my home culture for answers. Access and privilege may be universally applicable, but they are not universally familiar. Such was the case when I began to ask my father to weigh in on race and ethnicity so I could unpack my own access and privilege. It was clear that he could not fathom the reasoning for engaging in this kind of dialogue. On my own, I began to research as much as I could about my family, our history, and our origins as far back as I could. I discovered that I am (as far as basic name records go) eighth generation Mangalorean Catholic (an ethnoreligious group) that has origins in both the Portuguese (Goan) and the Pancha Gauda Saraswat Brahmin lineage (Prabhu, 1999).

The research revealed more questions than answers: why was I given a Dutch-Germanic name rather than an Indian one? How and why was English my first language? Why were Portuguese and Konkani (an ethnic dialect), which my parents spoke, ignored? Why focus on education, especially the arts—learning the piano at the age of six and taking speech and drama extracurricular classes? As I engaged in deeper understanding of race and culture in the United States, and met people like myself, the answers soon became apparent. It was my parents’ decision to focus on social class upliftment as they embraced the culture that would provide a better means to the end. It meant persevering with the home culture against the

passport culture, and hoping that at some point a third culture would emerge with success and achievement attained. I realized that each intentional decision made by my parents to raise me as a TCK afforded me privilege and provided me with access to opportunity that I would never have otherwise received.

Today, I identify as a bi-racial, bi-cultural, bi-ethnic proud ATCK and I am aware of my privilege that my informed understanding of that status affords me. I realize that I do not need to make apologies for who I am and how I was raised.

Implications for Educators

One size does not fit all: ATCKs have very different experiences, making it critical to develop support services strategically. According to Hill Useem and Baker Cotrell (1993), the average ATCK transfers colleges twice during an academic career, takes longer to complete a degree, or drops out to pursue other opportunities. While ATCKs are more likely to be multilingual, mature, and hold a broader multicultural worldview than their domestic counterparts, they may be less apt to engage their peers effectively (Shames, 1997; Kohls, 2001). Like many ATCKs, I needed support in creating a positive self-image and developing a sense of connection (Harrell, 1986). This is the essence of student development, and educators are therefore well-positioned to help provide this support. If it were not for my student affairs mentors, who realized I had a narrative distinct from other international students and encouraged me to be an involved student leader, I would have failed to develop a sense of belonging and quit within six months.

One recommendation for student affairs practice informed by my experience is to start at the point of application for admission. According to McCaig (1991), many individuals are unaware that they may fit the profile of an ATCK, but are able to identify with the feelings and challenges associated with the experience. Training admissions staff to recognize indicators in applications could be beneficial (Stultz, 2003). Admitted students should have year-round access to peer mentoring and academic advising to facilitate transition issues. Other support structures include encouraging student organization involvement, curriculum reflecting global perspectives, and programs focused on cultural identity development (Pollock 1996; Schaetti, 1996). Institutions can benefit through word-of-mouth recruitment and retention of this high-risk group by providing choices appropriate to their experience (Hill Useem & Baker Cotrell, 1993).

Ultimately, visibility is key. Increasing awareness will allow educators to better understand and be better understood by ATCKs. As educators become more familiar with the ATCK experience, the campus will likely begin to show respect for a different kind of diversity (Stultz, 2003). Research on this subject is still limited as it relates to access to and success in higher education. Educators need

to learn with ATCKs rather than about them. Educators can encourage and foster environments that educate, engage, and empower this unique student population. As I prepare to be one such educator, I am cognizant of what might have been had I never received these support services. I am heartened by the fact that my own personal narrative will enable me (and others) to open more doors and provide greater voice to TCK experiences.

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