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Transnational Student Identity Development through the Cosmopolite Lens: Benefits and Challenges of Straddling Cultures

Jennifer “J.J.” Jang

Have you ever felt like you are completely alone, or stuck between worlds? In this age of globalization, there is an increasing number of students who were raised in multiple countries and cultures. Why do these students find it so difficult to answer the question, “Where are you from?” How do childhood experiences influence one’s sense of identity, social interaction patterns, relationship attachment styles, and worldview? This moral conversation explores the characteristics of transnational students, identifies benefits of their experiences, examines their unique challenges, and uncovers their associated life patterns from straddling cultures. Through my personal narrative as a self-defined “cosmopolite,” (koz-mop-uh-lahyt) I will shine light onto the silent struggles of this often invisible student population.

“Home”: a word and concept very concrete and familiar to some, yet abstract and foreign to many. The meaning of home could vary drastically depending on the interpretation of the individual. Home could refer to one’s “homeland” indicated by a legal document, or a place where one “feels at home” (Storti, 2001, p. 3-4). As the world becomes more internationalized, many individuals do not feel a distinct link to any one place or set of traditions. The concept of home is often described more as an emotional location rather than geographical one (Pascoe, 2000). For many, having a community and home during childhood can be a source of stability and strength. However, for those straddling cultures, the concept of home may be very unclear. For these students, myself included, defining and finding home can be a lifelong journey.

Twelve years ago in Taipei, Taiwan, a father made a quick announcement of his decision to move the whole family to Saipan. In less than a month, a devastated ten-year-old girl was ripped away from the only life she had ever known. Everything that she called home forever vanished with one airplane ride. Without

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knowing a single letter of the alphabet except for A, B, and C, she was thrown into an English-speaking environment two months later. My name is Jennifer Jang, and I was that girl.

My experience as a first generation, ethnic minority, female international student on a predominantly white campus has greatly impacted my college career. Coming alone to the United States as an international student in pursuit of higher education was not an easy task. I struggled with a complete change of language, culture, traditions, values, societal standards, and a way of life, all during the difficult developmental transition into college. Through this transition, I realized that I possess a much different life paradigm than those around me. From this, I began to identify my life experiences that have contributed to my present perspective.

According to Pollock and Reken (2001):

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background, other TCKs. (p. 19)

Although TCKs, also known by the terms "Global Nomads" (McCaig, 1992) and "Transcultural" (Willis, Enloe, & Monoura, 1994) come from all walks of life, there is something about living the transnational lifestyle that is shared. "Sometimes we bond based on who we are, but more times we bond based on what we know and what we have experienced" (Dr. Mary Childers, personal communication, November 4, 2009). Chinese students that I have interacted with in the past claim that I do not look fully Chinese, speak unaccented English, have more "American" friends, dress differently, and walk differently; therefore, I am not Chinese enough for them. I tend to find solidarity with other TCKs because my peers who have not been overseas rarely understand my experience (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004). There is an intrinsic understanding and acknowledgement of the transnational lifestyle such that explanations are not necessary.

Transnational students live a cross cultural and highly mobile lifestyle. We interact deeply with various cultures and relocate frequently between countries and cultural environments (Shields, 2009). For many, college may be the first time we explore our identity. How does one's childhood experience impact one's social interaction patterns, communication styles, and adult life?

“Where Are You From?”

There is a pause that strikes in my mind after this question, which inevitably causes me a lot of internal conflict. How does a person who is on her second passport and has been to more than ten countries before the age of 18 answer this question? Every time I am asked this question, I am forced to choose which part of my past to share, then decide the level of vulnerability I will share with this person, and finally examine the cultural context in which the question is asked to determine the socially acceptable answer. I get anxious thinking that I may be taking airtime from others, dominating the conversation, or preventing others from engaging in the conversation when I am in a group setting.

It also appears to me that when individuals ask this question, they are not genuinely interested in where I am from. They want to know what they can expect from me, what my values and beliefs are, and how they should interact with me. It is social sense making and a simple label they are after. Moreover, the question, “Where are you from?” comes with the assumption that my values and standards directly correlate with and are shaped entirely by one single geographic location, which is not necessarily the case.

Coming from a multi-racial and multi-ethnic background, I do not feel that I fit easily into one social category constructed by American culture, which makes it difficult to understand how I fit into this culture’s perception of the world. The Greek roots of the word Cosmopolite are *kosmo* and *polites*, which, together, means citizen of the world. I am raised in a neither/nor world, a culture that is neither my parents’ nor the culture I grew up in. Similar to TCKs, I have developed my own life pattern differently from students who are born and raised in the same culture (Pollock & Reken, 2001). This culturally ambiguous background creates its own unique set of challenges and benefits for transnational students.

Advantages and Benefits

These children see the world in all its richness and variety. Theirs is a privileged life, filled with opportunities to extend and enhance their knowledge of the earth and its people. Bilingual or even multilingual at an early age, immersed in an interrelated, interdependent world community, they are able to enjoy a broader and more mature perspective than many of their more rooted peers. Theirs is a global education. (Eidse & Sichel, 2004, p. 21)

As a consequence of their childhood circumstances, many transnational students have grown up speaking multiple languages and have heightened interest and ability to learn new languages. Transnational students are flexible and adaptable to new environments. One student expressed, “I am, by inmost nature, a chame-

leon, a sponge, a being of multiple selves. When I arrive anywhere I observe the mores and values of the place then seek to mimic them, becoming in a sense, each time, someone new” (Taber, 1994, p. 46). Food is a good example of this: I grew up eating seaweed ties and congee, fried squid and raw octopus, duck tongue and gizzards, tripe and pig liver. Chicken feet are popular movie-munchies. I am from a culture where dark meat is better than white meat, leafy greens are better cooked than not; and fish eyes and pigs’ feet are delicacies. There was no place for salad or cheese. I have learned to eat cold raw vegetables with dressing on top.

Transnational students often have a multi-dimensional worldview, and are able to see the world from many aspects due to extensive contact with various culture characteristics. These students may be more mature than their mono-culture counterparts (Useem & Cottrell, 1999) due to routinely dealing with international travel, foreign currency, formal functions, and sometimes international crisis as part of their normal lifestyle (Kebshull & Pozo, 2006). TCKs are life-long learners, and the world is their classroom. During a time in which “global vision is imperative, where skills in intercultural communication, linguistic ability, mediation, diplomacy and the ability to manage diversity are critical, global nomads are probably better equipped than others” (McCaig, 1994, p. 33). While this transnational lifestyle can bring many benefits, rewards, and advantages, it also comes with struggles and challenges unique to TCKs as they struggle with their sense of identity and belonging in the world.

Challenges and Issues

While the transnational lifestyle may seem like a glamorous childhood to some, many experience hardships that are overwhelming and seem to cancel out the benefits of their unique life journey (Pollock & Reken, 2001, p. 8). Not only do questions like “Where are you from?” place the nomads at a disadvantage in cultural situations (Smith, 1994), they are also “not permitted by their mobile parents to sink roots, their lives are adventures lived moment by moment, built place by place” (Elidse & Sichel, 2004, p. 23). Transnational students experience the sense of rootlessness, insecurity, and emotional instability just as “When a tree is transplanted too often, its roots can never grow deep” (Pollock & Reken, p. 71). TCKs may struggle with a mixed sense of identity, interrupted development, and navigating relationships. Compared to their mono-culture peers, they must alternate between various cultures and incorporate an array of values and standards from each (Useem & Cottrell, 1999).

Identity Crisis

Who am I? What is my name? A person’s name can provide significant identity to who one is; I do not know how that feels. I have two legal names; one Taiwan-

ese, one English. The name I use now was picked out of a list of English names when I first moved out of Taiwan – I did not realize that by losing my first name I erased the first decade of my life and part of my identity. My name was simplified and changed again when I went to Japan to better fit Japanese culture. Now in the United States, my current name fails to encompass all of me. Each name that I have portrays only a part of me, not the whole me. There is a sense of comfort and security that comes with knowing one’s name and confidently sharing that with others—a significant aspect of one’s identity that I lack.

Not only do I not know where I am from, I do not know what I am. When I am in my passport country, I am too international. When I am abroad, I am still too foreign. I never feel “enough” for any particular culture. One may have a split sense of identity from their experience with the belief that they belong to and can easily navigate several cultures but own none—belonging simultaneously everywhere and nowhere (Pollock & Reken, 2001). Like a language, when not used or heard in a while, one tends to forget how to speak; my multiple identities often get jumbled and confused. With 99% of the people that I encounter every day looking racially different from me, I struggled to find a sense of self. There are days the only time I get to see a person that looks like me is when I look in the mirror. Over time, I feel I am forgetting what it means to be Asian, Taiwanese, and Saipanese. In order to succeed in this culture, I had to set aside certain aspects of myself to integrate, amalgamate, and adapt to the “American way.” In doing so, I have lost touch with my own culture and traditions – something that is very close to my heart and very painful to push away, but I do.

Interrupted Development

Culture can provide a strong sense of identity, confidence, and belonging. Living in a culture long enough allows one to be able to interpret behaviors and understand their connotations. One has almost an intuitive notion about what is appropriate, humorous, and offensive in different settings (Kebshull & Pozo, 2006). Culture shock is natural when transitioning into a different culture. However, adults go through this adjustment period with all of their core values, relationships, and beliefs solidly established; I was thrown into a new culture before I had formed my own personal and cultural identity (Pollock & Reken, 2001, p. 39). As I transition in and out of cultures, instead of learning and practicing the essential social interaction skills between peers, I was learning how to understand and communicate in a new language. Even after my fifth year in the United States, I still have a hard time translating sarcasm.

Being in-the-know, on the contrary, provides a deep sense of security and stability. My sense of identity and self are challenged every time I transition cross-culturally where learned behaviors may no longer be appropriate or acceptable.

I have to adapt and adjust again and again to the basic rules of how the world around me operates (Fail et al., 2004). My energy is spent “surviving rather than thriving, struggling to understand what is happening rather than fully participating,” (Kebshull & Pozo, 2006) and hesitating to interact out of fear of making social mistakes that would jeopardize relationships.

Family Ties

Unlike many of my peers, I am unable to return home on weekends and holidays. It took me 28 hours to travel to the States in 2005, and I have not been home since. Home is where family is, but because of time and distance, I am unable to visit or celebrate national holidays and religious festivals with my family. To succeed as a first-generation international student in this country, I have to work extra hard and I certainly cannot return home whenever I desire. I have never even looked up the price of a plane ticket home. On my back lies not only the standards I hold for myself, but a tremendous amount of pressure from cultural backgrounds, societal principles, and family values.

Immigration Status

A harsh reality of my transnational lifestyle that I have discovered is the high possibility that I will not be able to go home, to Saipan, after graduation. Due to my visa and citizenship status, if I do not find a job that will sponsor my visa application, I will not be allowed there. My parents will have been living with work visas in Saipan for 15 years when I complete my master's degree. However, when I lived with them, I was there on dependant status.

Just as I do not have the privilege to take time between my degrees due to my visa status, I also get shipped off the North American continent when I graduate. Usually when this happens, international students return to their home country to be with family. My situation is different as my citizenship is in Taiwan and my family lives in Saipan. When I graduate and my visa expires, without sponsored employment, I will be sent to Taiwan instead of Saipan, where my family is. The possibility that I may not be able to go home has become a heavy burden that I am constantly aware of in my mind.

Relationship Attachment Styles

Having been unplugged from the only world I knew, I define my home and roots in terms of relationships rather than location. I immediately trust certain individuals, but hold back confiding in others. I go to great lengths to nurture relational ties, but keep an emotional margin of safety and a sense of detachment. I worry about getting too close, or becoming vulnerable due to repeated shocks

of separation, transition, and broken trust in relationships. I may be able to navigate conferences, strike up conversations with strangers, and form quick initial connections with folks, but with deep, long term connections, the more attached I am the more I fear I will be hurt by the inevitable goodbye that always comes. I am not alone in this. Approximately 40% of TCKs struggle with creating close friendships or intimacy (Pollock & Reken, 2001).

Impact on Education

I constantly feel like I am the outsider in school because of having no shared educational experiences. I attended school where every grade had 18 classes and every class had over 30 students. There were no janitors; instead all students participated in a “cleaning” period. Our playground and physical education class took place on the beach, and we had warnings for tsunamis instead of earthquakes or hurricanes. People cannot comprehend what it was like to have school dismissed because a volcano erupted on a nearby island, causing the air to become pitch black with ash and creating potential health hazards. This inability to relate to my experiences can be very isolating.

Although TCKs are four times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than domestic U.S. mono-culture students, a considerable amount of these students transfer at least twice, take time off before completing a degree or drop out in the middle due to lacking a sense of belonging (Useem & Cottrell, 1999). They come to college with a far greater knowledge of the world than their domestic counterparts (Kohls, 2001), but are also less proficient in interacting with their peers in social situations (Shames, 1997). “In exchanging the security of roots for the diversity of nomadism, their lives are filled with change, their perspectives broadened, their childish souls opened to the wisdom new experience brings” (Eidse & Sichel, 2004, p. 23). However, the emotional stress of being repeatedly uprooted and lacking a sense of belonging may be a greater predictor of depression more so than social support (Shields, 2009).

“TCKs are not a new phenomenon. They’ve been around since the beginning of time, but, until now, they have been largely invisible” (Pollock & Reken, 2001, p. 6). Many TCKs’ first opportunity to live in the United States and experience the U.S. culture for themselves is when they enroll in college (Kohls, 2001). So what does this mean for student affairs professionals?

Relevance to Student Affairs

“Few communities anywhere will remain culturally homogeneous in this age of easy international travel and instant global communication...Growing up among cultural differences is already, or soon will be, the rule rather than the exception”

(Pollock & Reken, 2001, p. 7). When I came to the United States, I was insecure and overwhelmed by being on my own in a completely new social context that I had to learn in order to survive. It is important to acknowledge the unique background of each TCK and support them in their adaptation to the university setting. TCKs benefit greatly by gaining insights into the new culture with institutional support (Ruhter, 2001). Diversity is not just difference in the visible layers of culture (Sanghera, 2005). If we do not expand our definitions and assumptions on diversity and culture, individuals in the student affairs profession may easily falsely categorize our students and end up escalating the negative effects of alienation and stereotyping (Reken & Bethel, 2009). Helping transnational students to name themselves and frame their unique experiences will not only aid them in cherishing many benefits of their cross cultural upbringing, but also enhance the perspective and pedagogy of student affairs professionals as institutions become more diverse and global.

A TCK constantly struggles with these challenges to form their own identity. Questions of origin, culture and ethnicity are hard to define to someone who has grown up in multiple environments. They lack a sense of security in their own identity that their peers may acquire from growing up strongly rooted in the same social background. Stemming from this is a prominent sense of isolation, with the inability to relate to their peers or form close personal relationships because of their transient lifestyles. TCKs also experience problems with immigration, and other legal or cultural structures that many students never have to think about. However, many of these problems can be opportunities for TCKs, their peers, and student affairs personnel to learn and grow within themselves and within different cultures.

The transnational advantages, challenges, and experiences can be universal and applicable to anyone who grew up in a cross cultural context. Foster youth may share the sense of insecurity and a lack of belonging, a friend who identifies as a gay man may feel like “the only one” growing up, or Bi- or Multiracial individuals who drift may never feel able to find that solid identity and foundation. There are some who straddle socio-economic classes and are torn by feeling like they have to choose between their background and their present situation; transfer students who feel alienated from their peers; and the seemingly invisible group of immigrants, individuals with disabilities, and underrepresented racial populations within the United States.

Increasing awareness of the transnational student profile will not only help higher education professionals identify those students who may benefit from understanding more about their own unique background, but institutions will also benefit by the increased diversity, deeper cultural understanding, international knowledge, and linguistic skills that transnational students and individuals

in other group identities bring to campus. In turn, this will allow these students to share their personal narratives, use the gifts of their heritage and qualities to flourish, and shine light onto this silent struggle.

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