

Maria Gavrina Ysabel de Mesa Yaneza

Sadaf Ferdowsi

Writing & Rhetoric II ENG 52-1152-23

Brief Statement

May 2, 2016

The paper centers on Third Culture Kids (TCK) in college and the thesis of 'being a Third Culture Kid affects their choices and experiences in higher education and in the future'. The purpose of the paper is to explore the phenomena of Third Culture Kids and break down stereotypes of the term. I have been coming across many people from all walks of life while in college, and a number of them have been teenagers and young adults who were born in one country but grew up in another. Building a strong connection to them because of my similar background, I decided to do my research paper to find out if our choices and decisions at this time of our lives are affected by our past. The stories of people have always been riveting and exciting to know. Many of my classmates have never heard of the TCK term and some TCKs in the classroom did not know there was a word to describe them. Therefore, I hope to bring more awareness to something that has always been here but never acknowledged.

Maria Gavrina Ysabel de Mesa Yaneza

Sadaf Ferdowsi

Writing & Rhetoric II ENG 52-1152-23

Final Draft

May 2, 2016

On the first day of primary school in Singapore, I walked into the main foyer and noticed similar-attired girls grasping the hand of an adult as they entered the premises. We were asked to form a line behind the signs indicating our classes and sit in order of our index numbers. To find the class we were allocated to, we had to look at a list on a board. I searched for my name and finally found it at the bottom of class '1C'. Next to our names was our identification (ID) number. The names on top of the list had an 'S' at the beginning of their identification number, while the last three names had other letters, making me realize that we were sorted by the type of ID we were carrying. I walked down to the back of the line and sat behind two other girls. I asked the girls what countries they were from and both said, "Philippines!" In my weirdly-fused Filipino-but-slightly-Singaporean accent, I said, "Me too!" At age 7, being placed separately from the local students made me aware of my cultural differences for the first time.

"Third Culture Kids" (TCK) are defined as "children who grew up in a country different from their parents". I never knew the existence of the term until a family friend had shared an article about growing up in different cultures. I also realized that I was not alone. However, it made me ponder if all Third Culture Kids felt the same way about their childhood. Having been born in the Philippines but raised in Singapore by two parents who had lived in the Philippines all their life, I

experienced highs and lows being a foreigner in my supposed hometown. Moving to Chicago reminded me of the time I migrated to Singapore, except that this time, it was a smoother transition, and it is probable that my past experiences affected the way I adapt to new environments. As an international student coming into Columbia College Chicago, I had so many students from various parts of the world. I had an instant connection with some of the students because of their multicultural upbringing. (To avoid confusion, not all international students are “third culture” children. Some of the students’ move to Chicago was their first time living in another country.) It got me thinking whether our shared past has an effect on our choices and experiences in college and other future endeavors.

Before I elaborate on the stories of individuals, there are some factors that affect the growth of a “third culture kid”. First and foremost, there are four subgroups under the TCK umbrella, differentiated by their parents’ career; business, government diplomacy, military, and missionary or nonprofit work (Davis et al. 129). Children from each subgroup may possibly share the same attributes with one another. In Antonio Morales’ article, “Factors Affecting Third Culture Kids’ (TCKs) Transition”, he states that there are two main factors that influence a TCK’s transition into a new place – programs and counselors (51). The context was discussed mainly from a school perspective, such that there are five stages in the transition experience – involvement, leaving, transition, entering and involvement (52). There are both challenges and benefits from having a unique lifestyle. From the short film documentary, *So Where’s Home?*, directed by Adrian Bautista, all of the interviewees had a difficulty in identifying their hometown due to constant migration every now and then, or due to the feeling of not being enough, culturally or ethnically. Despite

the setbacks, there are advantages to being a TCK; mainly being multilingual, being able to pull off different accents and having a multicultural background. These traits can be an asset in the long run, especially in college and in the workforce (Bonebright 351). College is the period of time when you are just one step away from entering the real world and having some knowledge of the world and the skill to adapt and socialize are some essentials to make the best out of your college experience. I felt that as much as I stressed on facts about TCKs, it would not satisfy in explaining an authentic overview of being a TCK. Therefore, I went to interview a few parents and college-aged teenagers and adults to get their subjective insights on the TCK life.

There were four college students I had interviewed; Chris Bréal, 19, Malhaar Gupte, 18, Nabil Aouad, 18 and Janae Iloreta, 20. Chris was born in Singapore and raised by a father from France and a mother from Switzerland. Since his birth, he was been moving around all over the world, from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to Paris, France and to London, England. As for Malhaar, his parents from India moved to Hong Kong even before he was born, which made it his home country from the time of his birth. In a similar situation, Nabil's Lebanese father and half-Lebanese, half-Brazilian mother moved to Portugal before he was born, making him call Lisbon, Portugal his home. Janae, the only non-international student out of the bunch, was born in Louisiana and brought up by two Filipino parents who travelled in between the United States and Germany due to her father's military commitments, and eventually decided to reside in Hawaii.

Besides the common attributes of being a TCK, their upbringing varies from each other. For Chris and Janae, they had both grown up in both Western and Asian

cultures. For Nabil, he had only experienced growing up in a Western setting and on the other hand, Malhaar had grown up in a fully Asian culture. Despite the differences, they intersect with one another. Chris felt that home was wherever his family was, which currently is Japan, while Nabil, Malhaar and Janae was quick to say that their countries of residence; Portugal, Hong Kong and Hawaii, were there homes. Basically, it was wherever their loved ones were, except for Chris, for Japan may just be a temporary home. The three boys, Chris, Nabil and Malhaar moved because of employment opportunities, whereas Janae's family was under the moving obligations of the military.

Albeit the differences, some of their backgrounds are quite similar. Nabil and Malhaar never questioned their cultural identity because they grew up in one country and that their parents would remind them of their heritage. Even though his parents were both from Lebanon, Nabil feels strongly about the Portuguese culture, more than the culture of his parents' country of origin. All of his memories were made in Portugal while studying at the same French school and being surrounded by the same group of friends all his life. His classmates never viewed him as a foreigner despite his Lebanese roots; he was merely seen for who he was. Malhaar grew up close to his parents and had attended international school, so his company of friends had similar backgrounds to him. He and his parents would usually travel to India every summer to visit their families and at the same time, Hong Kong had a growing Indian community, where Malhaar met other Indian families who had a shared background with his own family. Chris and Janae lie in the grey area of having the difficulty of recognizing their own culture during their adolescent years. Chris spent his childhood and teenage years in Malaysia, France, England, Germany, Singapore and Japan.

Having been introduced to such a wide range of cultures can be quite the culture shock for most but Chris later found it to be the norm of his lifestyle. Transferring from one school to another became the way of life for him. As sad as it is to think about leaving friends every few years, Chris has learnt how to deal with having to leave people behind. However, he has been able to sustain his friendship with his best friend since they were six years of age. His summers were usually spent in France and Switzerland to visit his extended family. Janae lived in Germany during her earlier years, since her father was working for the military. She and her family lived in the base of the US military, which was segregated from the main cities in Germany. She attended an international school, specially ran for children of military personnel.

Various traditions have been presented to them from an early age, resulting in a greater appreciation for the array of cultures in the world and a strong foundation in understanding differences. The many festivities that they had encountered have made them embrace both the cultures of their country of residence and their heritage. Out of the four, Chris has experienced the most variety. According to him, he wished he had appreciated them since he was a young child but was only aware of the cultural differences later on in his teen years. He has witnessed how each country celebrated their festivities; for example, Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and Deepavali in Singapore, being a multicultural country itself, and how the same festivals were celebrated differently in each country; for example, Christmas in European countries have a different vibe from Christmas in Asian countries. Janae has never been to her parents' native country but she has experienced the Filipino way of celebrating events like Christmas, i.e. a midnight celebration known as "Noche Buena" with karaoke happening all night. Her family from the Philippines would make trips to America to

visit them and celebrate important events. Malhaar regularly experienced both Chinese and Indian traditions, going back and forth between Hong Kong and India, while Nabil mostly celebrated Portuguese holidays having grown up in one place all his life.

Essentially, a child's attitude is highly influenced by the parents' way of raising their child up. Furthermore into the research, I talked to some parents of TCK children to grasp their perspectives on bringing up "third culture" children. Vina Rossuck, a mother of two Filipino-American children who grew up in Singapore, was also a TCK herself. She and her husband, Judd, met while they were studying in an international school in Hong Kong. Judd is also considered a TCK, having been born in America but raised in Hong Kong. When her husband was offered a position in the Singapore branch of the American company he was working for, they had to decide whether they would stay in New Jersey (NJ) or move to Singapore as expatriates. Vina knew the kind of opportunity their children would have if they were to have an international school education like her and her husband. Despite wanting to stay in NJ, she was convinced that such a lifestyle would benefit her children in the future. The transition was initially not an easy one but soon, they found themselves fully immersed in the diverse country of Singapore. Sharing a similar childhood to her children, she understands the obstacles of transitioning. When she went back to study at her old Catholic school in the Philippines for a few years, she repeatedly got into trouble for voicing out her opinions and debating in the classroom; a habit she had gained from the classroom environment in international school. She does agree that being a TCK affects the growth of a child, such that, friends are hard to latch on to because of the constant moving around. But it does teach them to be more resilient

about relationships, and nowadays, social media makes people stay connected in spite of how far they live from each other.

I also interviewed Michelle Belen, who currently resides in Germany with her husband, Jonathan and her three sons; the eldest was born in the Philippines and after making Singapore their adopted home, the two younger sons were born. After spending around 10 years raising their three boys in Asia, they decided to migrate to Europe after a job opportunity was presented to Michelle. Her three boys had to stop their education halfway through the academic year in Singapore, prior to moving to the Netherlands, where Michelle was initially assigned. Living in another country can be rewarding, however, her children had faced some racism back in Singapore. Her second oldest child was once unwelcomed to his friend's house after his older brother found out that he was Filipino. It is upsetting that youngsters apply racial stereotypes to their peers. As a victim of racism growing up, I think it made me aware of differences but also wise and understanding about the matter. One way to prevent such occurrences is by educating the youth about the world. Hence, this is why TCKs are a step ahead with the chance to fully immerse themselves in another culture (Bautista, *So Where's Home?*). Michelle felt that such incidents could open the eyes of children and hopefully make them more mature when dealing with such situations. Their life in Germany is rather unlike from their life in Singapore. Though they were non-natives all over again, adjusting from an Asian environment to a Western environment can be a task and a full 360-degree shift. As a parent of a TCK, Michelle noticed the distinct differences between her childhood and her kids' childhood. In the Filipino culture, it is common courtesy to call the elderly, "aunt" or "uncle". Michelle would remind her children to address the elderly by, "Mr.," "Mrs." or "Ms.," because

their peers in Europe would just call the elderly by name. This ultimately poses the question of whether children should stick to their roots or assimilate into the culture of the place they live in. But then again, the term “third culture” integrates aspects of their birth culture (the first culture) and the new culture (the second culture), creating a unique “third culture”. (field note #3)

College for any teenager is a big stepping-stone in life and having a TCK background can uplift the experience. In general, many Adult TCKs move on to higher institutions (Bonebright 354). An article by Denise A. Bonebright discussed how TCKs’ experiences in international schools affect their higher education and future career choices (354). The factors include the high level of achievement to cultural resources such as parents with high levels of education and high education expectations, access to typically excellent international schools, and breadth of experience gained through living and travelling abroad. It is common to meet TCKs in college due to the student body being from different walks of life. Janae felt prepared to enter college, partly because of the settings she had lived in throughout her life; being in an international school in Germany and a local school in Hawaii. In Germany, there were children of various ethnicities, while in Hawaii, it was concentrated with children of Asian and Polynesian ethnicities. The diversity in college was something she was already accustomed to, thanks to her school life experiences. Malhaar felt the same way as Janae, describing college as a “melting pot” and having not been overwhelmed by the diverse student body. He was also prepared for the independence due to his parents’ regular traveling commitments. However, their absence in the household did not restrain their relationship. In fact, Malhaar feels that the distance does not bring them apart. On the opposite side, Nabil

and Chris both feel that being a TCK had no effect on their lives in college. Chris believed that it was not the moving around that made him independent but rather how his parents had raised him. Frequently moving around did help him in easily making new friends. For Nabil, being exposed to cultures helped him adapt to new places, rather than living independently. The awareness of cultures does not really do much in trying to live by yourself.

Every Third Culture Kid has his or her own individual story and being one does not necessarily affect their choices and decisions in college and in their future. Some say that it is a life-long endeavor (Bautista, *So Where's Home?*) while others view it as a phase in their lives. For those who see it as something that would influence the rest of their lives, they feel that the lessons and experiences they had obtained would eventually be carried on to their children. Being a TCK had built a strong foundation for being able to handle life and its obstacles, like for Janae and Malhaar. For others, it was merely just one part of their lives that helped them in certain aspects like meeting new people and learning traditions but in the long run, it had nothing to do with their ability to live solo. TCKs are in this unique position of being able to bring cultures together, such that they are catalysts of globalization (Bautista, *So Where's Home?*). Adult TCKs can be an advantage to the workforce (Bonebright 351), being well-versed with a variety of cultures which can help build important relations for their company. Most of them are not able to identify their home and neither can they identify where they would move to after college, as with any other college-aged person. The adolescent years were always meant for the period of figuring out oneself. Even if one is no longer in his teens, adults still struggle to find out their place and purpose in their lives. Hence, being a TCK in college does not

exactly make them any different from any other college student, where life seems to have immense possibilities right ahead of them.

### Works Cited

- Bonebright, Denise A. "Adult Third Culture Kids: HRD Challenges and Opportunities." *Human Resource Development International* 13.3 (2010): 351-59. Web.
- Davis, Pamela S., Elisabeth C. Suarez, Nancy A. Crawford, and Mark C. Rehfuss. "Reentry Program Impact on Missionary Kid Depression, Anxiety, and Stress: A Three-Year Study." *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 41.2 (2013): 128-40. Web.
- "Interview with Student, Chris Bréal." Personal interview. 3 Mar. 2016.
- "Interview with Student, Janae Iloreta." Personal interview. 18 Mar. 2016.
- "Interview with Parent, Michelle Belen." E-mail interview. 30 Mar. 2016.
- "Interview with Student, Malhaar Gupte." Personal interview. 7 Mar. 2016.
- "Interview with Student, Nabil Aouad." Personal interview. 4 Mar. 2016.
- "Interview with Parent, Vina Rossuck." E-mail interview. 16 Mar. 2016.
- Morales, Antonio. "Factors Affecting Third Culture Kids' (TCKs) Transition." *Journal of International Education Research* 11.1 (2015): 51-56. Web.
- So Where's Home?* Dir. Adrian Bautista. *Vimeo*. 29 Apr. 2012. Web. 29 Feb. 2016. <<https://vimeo.com/41264088>>.