

Ferguson, T.L. (1997, March). Reflection: My Cultural Identity. S. Hamilton, MA: Center for Youth Studies.

OVERVIEW

I have recently begun to define my cultural identity as both Filipino and American. I am proud to be of mixed cultural background; I am able exude the best qualities from both.

My father is American and my mother is a Filipina. I was born in the United States and my parents raised me as an American. While we sometimes ate Filipino food, and my mother taught me about her culture, I never really identified with it. My elementary school friends were primarily American and Vietnamese; I suppose that we all sensed our differences, but for the most part, we were all just Americans with similar likes and dislikes and common experiences with friends and family.

Since my parents wanted me to better understand my Filipino heritage, we often traveled to the Philippines. Yet, I never could relate to my Filipino relatives. I felt so different from them—so American. I remember arguing with my brother and my parents a lot during those overseas visits, and I recall despising the native food; I wanted McDonald's and pizza.

During my younger years, my immediate family and my friends primarily influenced my cultural identity. I was forbidden to watch television and I wasn't too interested in magazines. Still, I enjoyed reading. I read the "Ramona" series, among others, and I never perceived myself as different from the characters in the book.

After my seventh grade year, my parents returned to the mission field. Our family moved to the Philippines, because my parents wanted to experience a different type of ministry. This move rocked the foundation of my cultural identity. Suddenly, I lived in a country where my skin matched everyone else's. I attended a school for missionary kids, so I looked different from all my classmates. My different skin color didn't make a difference with my friends in the United States, but these new missionary peers assumed I was practically a native. While I was categorized as Filipino, I clearly didn't mesh into the Filipino culture. I couldn't speak the language, I didn't know how to motor around on the public transportation, and I still didn't like the food. I behaved as an American, but I still wasn't accepted by or treated as the other Americans at my school—I was ignored. It is ironic that I had to move to a country where I physically matched to actually notice that I was culturally unique.

Throughout high school, I wrestled with my identity. I was one of the only missionary kids who actually had relatives in the country where my parents were based, and yet, they didn't feel like my family. Upon spending more time in the Philippines, I learned more about the culture. I started learning the language, I began my own ministry to Filipinos, and I became better acquainted with my Filipino family. One continuing problem was with my mother. When we moved to the Philippines, she seemed to expect me to instinctively know how to behave as a Filipino child. I remember frequent arguments with her; she couldn't understand that the reason I was so American was because she had raised me that way. We both had a lot to learn.

During my high school years, my family was less influential in shaping my cultural identity; friends and the media assumed larger roles in my life. While my friends constantly reminded me that I was Filipino, I read lots of American magazines and tried to be as American as possible. I

still preferred American food, but I was becoming more accepting of Filipino cuisine. My parents' advice often confused me, so I sought my cultural identity on my own. During my senior year, my school held a seminar. Seniors were required to attend, because it was about missionary kids and their culture. In this seminar, we (missionary kids) were labeled as third culture kids (TCKs). The discussion leaders explained that being raised in two (or more) cultures can be confusing and frustrating. They explained that we students probably felt misplaced in any culture. This seminar enlightened me. I began accept my feelings and understand that I didn't have to fit in anywhere—because to do so implies that I had to sacrifice one of my cultures.

Upon returning to America for college, I endured the emotions that TCK seminar suggested I might experienced. Now, I viewed myself as a Filipino, because I didn't fit into the American culture. It was as if my elementary years in the U.S. had meant nothing. After my first year of college, I returned to the Philippines for a short missionary trip. During that summer, that I realized that my American traits were obvious when I was in the Philippines and my Filipino characteristics were reflected when I was among Americans.

Today, when people inquire about my cultural identity, I usually tell them that it depends in which country I happen to be residing or visiting. I've learned to nurture the best cultural traits from both. For example, Americans are individualistic, while Filipinos are family oriented and dependent. I've combined the two, learning to be independent while still highly esteeming my family. Also, Filipinos have a relaxed attitude—almost too relaxed—but Americans tend to be too stressed about work, school, and family. I am able to balance between those two extremes.

The development of my cultural identity has not easily evolved. There were many times I was confused, even rejecting parts of my inherited culture. However, I have learned that my cultural identity is a blessing. Now, I love both of my cultures. I can view life situations from two different perspectives, giving me a broader scope of the "big picture."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you have any kids in your group who are "third culture kids"? What similar or different characteristics have you seen in such students?
2. How can you nurture kids who struggle between two cultures?
3. What are other cultural struggles beyond nationality? What other competing cultures do young people wrestle with?
4. How can you use "third culture kids" constructively within your group? How can they be served?
5. For young people
6. Have you or do you know someone who has lived in two or more different cultures? What is it like to have that experience? Does this author reflect the same types of feelings and insights that you or your friends have had? Explain.
7. Would you like to live in several different cultures? Why or why not?

8. How can you learn from others who have lived in other countries? What can you teach them about your culture?

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