



## ***Growing Up A Third Culture Kid*** **A Sociological Self-Exploration**

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**Abstract:** Throughout my childhood and adolescence relocating was a common event for my family and me. Moving around influenced my perceptions of the world around me and views of myself in numerous ways. The fact that my family and I lived predominantly outside of the United States added an additional layer to my experiences. Eventually, I learned that there was a term for my nomadic lifestyle and that people all over the world shared relatively similar experiences. These experiences included culture shock in one's own county and only relative notions of home. "Third culture kids" are individuals who have spent a significant portion of their lives outside of their country of origin. In this paper, using previous research on Third Culture Kids (TCKs), my own experiences transitioning up overseas and moving back to the United States, and micro and macro sociological theories, I explore my perceptions of self and my relationships, as well as my broad view of the world.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Growing up overseas and mainly outside of mainstream American culture has shaped me in ways that I am still discovering. Relocating every few years forced me to constantly reassess my surroundings, my identity, and my roles. My upbringing not only shaped me, but triggered my interest in the social world and interactions at both micro as well as macro levels, from how we present ourselves in every life, to stepping back and viewing broader social interactions as infectious patterns of learned behaviors shaped by roles and norms.

C. Wright Mills' (1959) notion of the **sociological imagination** allows me to articulate how my experiences growing up in a transitory environment, exposed to many cultures and ways of life, and viewing American culture from afar ignited my interest in public problems through the lens of personal experience. Mills (1959) describes the sociological imagination as that which enables individuals to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society (p. 349). On a micro-sociological level, having had to frequently enter new social groups, I became acutely aware of the practice of presentation of self and how it relates to

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identity. From a macro-sociological perspective, experiencing a frequently changing **lifeworld** has allowed me to see how, while many aspects of interaction and expectations change from group to group, many behaviors or **rituals** remain the same and are universally understood. Edmund Husserl used the term 'lifeworld' to refer to the world of existing assumptions as they are experienced and made meaningful in consciousness (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:539). Emile Durkheim (1912) explored the concept of rituals, or highly routinized acts, and described social life as inherently religious.

Throughout my life, like many others, I have been very aware of how I present myself and highly attuned to my social surroundings. While I understand this is not necessarily uncommon, as I reflect more on my past and how I have arrived at my current situation, I believe these traits are in large part a result of my unique upbringing. At times I have thought of this hypersensitivity as stemming from insecurity or anxiety. However, viewing my experiences through a sociological lens, I have come to an alternative conclusion which I investigate in this sociological self-research paper.

## II. MICRO-EXPLORATION

I have always known that growing up in a culture outside of one's own is an experience I share with many others; however I was unfamiliar with the breadth of research on the phenomena. The definition of a **third culture kid** (TCK) fits my nomadic lifestyle and, for me, has reinforced the notion that we are all products of our experience. A third culture kid is defined as

... an individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents' culture, develops a

sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience. (Pollock 1988)

Individuals who fit the description of third culture kids, such as me, tend to develop diverse **stocks of knowledge**. Alfred Schutz introduced the concept of stocks of knowledge as that which provides us with rules for interpreting the world around us, whether it is social relationships or institutions. TCKs are likely to acquire diverse stocks of knowledge due to the necessity to change **recipes**, or implicit instructions, for behavior from culture to culture or group to group and the necessity to adapt to the expectations of each (Schutz 1967).

In the documentary, *Multiple Personalities*, each of the three, featured individuals struggled with the inability to control the multiple personalities that made up their **self**. Though multiple personality disorder (nowadays referred to as "dissociative disorder") is an extreme and, at times, dangerous condition, it demonstrates the possibility of how each of us can have many selves that arise in different contexts. One of the patients, Gretchen, suffered from multiple personalities, some of whom were very dangerous. One of them describes how "we are so good at hiding ourselves and appearing normal." Here, Gretchen is referring to what Erving Goffman calls **impression management**. Gretchen tries to suppress her multiple personalities whom she calls 'the others,' because they tend not to be able or willing to manage their verbal and non-verbal behaviors to present an acceptable image of self to others. While most people assess a situation they enter in order to establish what sort of **demeanor** is appropriate, indi-

viduals with multiple personality disorder often lose control of the selves who may have ulterior motives. Demeanor, according to Erving Goffman, is a concept that refers to one's manner of conduct and dress.

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach to social interaction can be used to illustrate the existence of multiple selves. During my childhood, entering a new school proved to be the most worrisome part of relocating for me. Entering a new school meant meeting many new people and potential friends all at once. Even though I attended schools in many countries, the basic format of the schools I attended remained the same and therefore began to **habitualize** my behavior within the context of school. Habitualization is the process, according to Peter Berger, by which flexibility in our behavior becomes limited as a result of repeated actions. Basic components remain the same: classes, lunch period, classes; peers are fellow students and professionals you address as Mr. or Mrs., etc. Therefore my behavior became uniform as I internalized the rules of school and the expectations of my behavior within the school environment.

However, it was the **face-to-face interaction** with so many new people that proved anxiety producing. Face-to-face interactions are highly intimate, for the involved individuals are in each other's immediate presence (Appelrouth and Eldes 2008). My thoughts were often overwhelming in these situations: *What group do I fit into? What is considered 'cool'? What do I wear!?* Goffman equates these social interactions to theater. With these questions and related uncertainties, I was establishing which **front** to display to new people I met. Goffman defines the front as "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman 1959:22). In many ways, I selected a front after entering a school and assessing

the **definition of the situation**. Conceived by William Thomas, the definition of the situation implies that "preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and action" (Thomas 1923:41). Eventually, as I found a group of friends and felt more comfortable, the **frontstage** and the **backstage** became less disparate and I became more and more able to truly be myself. Goffman calls this true inner self, the **performer**, who is free of the weight of impression management (Appelrouth and Eldes 2008). The performer is in contrast to the **character**, which abides more by the impression management requirements of the situation. The character is the most present when meeting new people. Just as in a job interview or on a date, for me, the first day of school and the few days following it are times calling for exaggerated impression management on my part.

I have come to realize that the hypersensitivity to my surroundings that I experience is due, in large part, to the defining and redefining of the self I have experienced moving from place to place. According to Fail et al. (2004), an ever-changing environment can alter third culture kids' perceptions of belonging and identity. While I would, perhaps, like to think that I have a strong sense of self that remains consistent no matter my surrounding, it is simply not the case. I am, as Goffman's theory of **symbolic interactionism** posits, a product of social interaction in which, through an internal conversation, I interpret others' responses to me and respond accordingly. The classic example of this that I have often experienced is the assumption that I am shy. People have often interpreted my initially taciturn nature as shyness and have reacted to me in ways that make me feel like a fragile creature. My quietness is often a result of assessing my new surrounding and, in turn, assigning meaning to the objects that I take in. However, having constantly experienced people's

assumption that I am shy, I cannot deny that I have **internalized** a part of this self-perception as an attribute of my character. According to Berger and Luckmann, internalization happens when “the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization” (1966:61). When I look back at my childhood, I often think of myself as a shy child. However, now, as I integrate micro-sociological theories into my perspective, and with the benefit of hindsight, I can see how my quiet uncertainty was less of a personality trait and more of a reaction to the need to define the new situation and establish my identity in my new surroundings.

Moving back to the United States for college proved to be one of the more difficult transitions for me. Moving out of the house and beginning a new stage of life is an exciting and challenging time for many. However, for me moving back to my country of citizenship proved extremely off-putting. Living abroad I became accustomed to feeling like an outsider or visitor living in another country. When I returned to Florida to begin university education, I initially expected to feel ‘at home.’ Instead, for the first time in my memory, I was leaving the military community, which had been my home. Though many aspects of my ‘self’ underwent reassessment during a move to a military community, the notion of home as well as reasons for moving were assumed. These may be moot points in many respects, for it was assumed that as a military brat you have moved often, do not have one place to call home, and that the reason for moving is your parents’ job. Upon arrival in Florida, however, the most common question among students at school was ‘where are you from?’ Just as in the past, the ‘shy’ version of me surfaced as I desperately tried to assess the situation. I quickly learned to **bracket** information that I would share with others. In the field of phenomenology, bracketing refers to the suspension of certain information about

ourselves in order to fit the typified role we are seeking to fill. In this case, I wanted a simplified answer to where I was from in order to not stand out or sound completely foreign. I, therefore, would bracket what I thought to be the irrelevant information and would answer that I grew up moving around often and do not call one particular place home. In situations such as these, I seem to illustrate what the literature on third culture kids portray as the common generic reactions TCKs have to their experiences.

Van Reken and Bethel (2007) describe some of these common reactions to ever-changing environments as chameleon, where one tries to find a ‘same as’ identity; screamer, where one tries to find ‘different from’ identity; and wallflowers, those who try to find ‘non-identity.’ The ‘screamers’ that Van Reken and Bethel refer to are easy to identify. They want to stand out and go against the grain of mainstream society. This behavior is not only a result of growing up as a third culture kid. This reminds me of the UMass Boston student Johnny Yu and his self-exploration of geekness in “Looking Inside Out: A Sociology of Knowledge and Ignorance of Geekness.” There, he describes his ‘**deviant**’ behavior and how “years in high school being out of the “in” group have nurtured a sort of disdain for all things mainstream. This may have evolved overtime into a tendency to ‘go against the flow’” (Yu 2007:42). I, on the other hand, have tended to most closely align with the chameleon’s reaction to change. This is reflected in my typical avoidance of questions regarding places of origin or where I consider home, which may make me stand out or seem different. I’ve found that the answer ‘I grew up moving around a lot,’ usually suffices.

In the film, *The Girl in the Café*, the character Gina presents an additional example of one who presents herself more like what Van Reken and Bethel (2007) describe as a ‘screamer.’ I am, perhaps, most aware of

'screamers' because they present the most blatant examples of the presentation of self that I most actively avoid, and often admire. In the film, Gina was very much the outsider in the context of Lawrence's work at the G8 summit. Gina did not conform to her role as an appreciative guest at the summit and, instead, allowed herself to be completely exposed when she confronted the prime minister at a formal reception dinner about his lack of success at the G8 talks. She encouraged the mortified room full of diplomats to "be great rather than be ashamed." While I often wish I could be as bold as Gina, my **internalized** sense-of-self as a shy person tends to inhibit such flagrant reactions.

This notion of an internalized sense of self is articulated in Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the "**looking-glass self**." The components of the looking-glass self includes how we imagine our appearance to be to another person, what we imagine the other person's reaction to be, and the feeling associated with that imagined reaction (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). I can identify with SUNY Oneonta student Sherry Wilson who, in her paper, "'Let Me Introduce Myself': My Struggle with Shyness and Conformity," used the concept of the "looking-glass self" to delve into her relationship with teachers. Sherry's academic experience was shaped by the reactions she received when she respected her teacher's authority and abided by classroom expectations. Sherry writes, "teachers treated me with respect and encouraged my work habits. They made me feel like I was a good student, but I continued to keep quiet in class because I believed teachers respected and wanted this type of behavior from me, including my shyness and classroom conformity" (Wilson 2003:66). Looking back I can also attribute a great deal of my academic success to the mechanism of "the looking-glass self." Classroom behavior is **institutionalized**, even across the six schools in the three countries I attended;

classroom expectations remained largely the same. School, for me, was a stable aspect of my life in which I knew the rules and expectations. I, therefore, consistently put great effort into being a good student and striving to get high marks or grades.

Beyond desired appraisal from teachers and the stability of school across my ever-changing environments, school also acted as a reward system for me. During elementary and middle school I was never very good at sports, I was gawky and did not receive attention from boys; therefore these outlets did not result in positive attention. I soon realized that when I put in effort at school I was rewarded. This illustrates George Homans' exchange theory in which he builds on the well-known psychological principle of **operant conditioning**. With operant conditioning, a particular behavior is reinforced through the use of rewards or punishments, leading to the repetition or avoidance of a given behavior (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). To me the **cost** of putting in extra effort on homework and sometimes being called a teacher's pet, did not outweigh the reward of my parents' and teachers' acknowledgement. Costs are unavoidable punishments that are experienced when a behavior also elicits positive reinforcements (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). My fifth grade teacher took the rewarding of good grades a step further and promised to take the boy and girl with the top grades out to dinner at the end of each quarter. Going out to dinner with my fifth grade teacher certainly increased the likelihood of being labeled the 'teacher's pet'; however, it also increased the positive reactions from my parents and feelings of pride of being good at something and recognized for it. I felt the unfortunate temporary label of 'teacher's pet' (the cost) was worth the reward of dinner and validation from adults who were important to me.

Grades are symbols, letters that represent levels of comprehension and ability to

follow directions properly in the school context. Grades also represent **extrinsic rewards**, rewards that are detachable from the assignments and behavior that merited the symbolic letter grade. My ever-changing environment and identity seeking behavior, in part, caused me to latch onto grades as rewards or validation of self-worth. Eventually, over time, I have become more intrinsically motivated in regards to school work. This mostly came about in college as I began to choose classes based on my interests rather than pure necessity. I now like to think that I am not purely seeking validation and clinging to stability as I strive for good grades, but that I am seeking the more **intrinsic rewards** of finding pleasure in the process of learning and the potential to put knowledge to use in positive ways.

While college allowed me to pursue intrinsic academic interests, moving back to the United States to begin college presented me with a new set of challenges in regards to the negotiation of my own identity. Research on third culture kids, such as myself, has often revolved around the ideas of belonging and identity (Fail et al. 2004; Grimshaw and Sears 2008). I see this most reflected in my experience of hypersensitivity to my surroundings, quickly formed attachments, and in my interest in social cohesion. I desired to succeed at being 'American' when I moved back to the United States. In Germany, where I spent most of my school-aged life, I was always the 'American' in the town, on the train, or at the restaurant. While I never personally experienced any animosity because of this label, I never quite felt at home or that I belonged in Germany. However, after a nine-year break from living in the United States, I was not sure how 'American' I really was either! I wanted to give this idea of being truly American and concerted effort when I began school in Florida. This meant not always talking about Germany or living in

Europe. Not only was this distracting in my pursuit of being 'American,' I also feared that it sounded snobby.

The theme of socialization is key to my experiences as a third culture kid and repercussion of the lifestyles associated with it. A discussion of socialization also triggers the classic question of nature verses nature in regards to myself and my experiences. When I read Nicole Jones', another UMass Boston student's, take on self-exploration through social theories, I feel as though I come to an alternative conclusion as to what I considered to be my permanent temperament. In her article titled, "4.0: Self-Doubt, the Fear of Failure, and the Power of Symbols," Jones stated, "it is interesting to see that as I wrote this paper, my reasons as to why I am afraid to fail and where exactly it stemmed from are more complex than the simple answer I usually give people" (Jones 2008:153). Here Jones was referring to a constant sense of failure that she experienced which she traced back to her primary socialization by her working class parents who accepted her fate as similar to their own. Jones reached into her past to analyze the social forces that invisibly and overtime shaped her perspective and insecurities. By contrast, I have traditionally attributed many of my habits, insecurities, and heightened awareness to an unavoidable, predetermined temperament that I was simply born with. However, this contrasts with my deeply held belief, and sociological insight, that we are all unavoidably shaped by our social experiences and interactions. Firstly, I am, and we all are, a product of **socialization**, the process by which we learn to be members of society. Pete Berger and Thomas Luckmann, proponents of phenomenological sociology, divide socialization into two types: primary and secondary socialization. In their view, **primary socialization** occurs during childhood when the child internalizes "the world, the only existent and only conceiv-

able world, the world tout court” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:134). Though I was not aware of it, my primary socialization occurred around the world. By the time I was three years old, I had lived in three different countries. While I still acquired the knowledge I needed to become a member of society through the mediation of my primary parental environment, at times I feel as though a fragmented primary socialization may have confounded my concept of identity and stability, given the changing context in which my parents themselves lived while transitioning from place to place. **Secondary socialization** is the subsequent process in which already socialized individuals adopt new or altered version of his or her society (Appelrouth and Eldes 2008). I continued to experience this secondary socialization each time I moved and acclimated to a new place. So, although I tended to actively avoid the subject of hometowns, my cultural confusion and unique upbringing were precisely what led me to who would become my best friends in college and to this day. Social marginalization, my fear of what would result from my fake Americanism, is a common fear of third culture kids. Helen Fail and her colleagues Jeff Thompson and George Walker (2004) warn that third culture kids often become socially marginalized “if [they are] not able to manage their social identity and relate to mono-cultured people” (2004:323). I luckily avoided this situation by meeting and becoming quick friends with Dana and Becca. Dana I met on a tour of campus that started from our dorm. I overheard someone ask her where she was from and was elated when I heard a response other than another city or town in Florida that I did not recognize. Dana’s father had previously worked in the oil business and had spent six of her school-aged years in three different countries in Africa. Our experiences were very different, but equally different and we were

instant friends. Becca, like me, had spent a significant amount of time in Europe and clearly felt more at home there than in the small Floridian town she was from. Dana and Becca, unintentionally, helped me cope with being different by acting as my allies and giving me a forum in which to feel comfortable talking about my experiences. Additionally, Dana and Becca were sensitive to the fact that I had missed out on a great deal of American culture and was completely clueless about most things relating to music or television. They both eased me through a process of **secondary socialization** into American teenage-hood that I am still catching up on today.

### III. MACRO-EXPLORATION

Viewing my experience growing up as a third culture kid from a purely micro-sociological perspective does allow me to view my experiences in the context of the social structures in which I found myself. Many of the micro-sociological views of the lives of TCKs focus on identity conflicts and constant resocializations which are not, at first glance, necessarily positive experiences. In a recent New York Times article summing up the burden of relocations on children, researchers found that “introverts and those scored as “neurotic” (moody, nervous or high strung, according to a series of questions that determine such labels) were adversely affected, while extroverts remained blissfully unmoved” (Paul 2010). However, as an introvert, adverse affects do not characterize my experiences moving around often. Quite the opposite in fact, as my upbringing provided me with a unique view of the world that I continue to attempt to build upon into adulthood. While psychologists and micro-sociology focuses on the individual, the greater context is often excluded from theories and concepts. **Macro-sociology** should also be used to explore how my

experiences led me to my current state. But the micro and macro dimensions of my self-exploration are both closely linked, and for this reason, I begin this macro dimension of my sociological self-exploration with Dorothy Smith's **standpoint theory**, the idea that "what one knows is affected by where one stands in society" and that "we begin from the world as we actually experience it, and what we know of the world and of the 'other' is conditional upon that location" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:585). Only by assessing how my perspective and experiences shape what I know and how I approach my everyday experiences can I accurately analyze the theories of the social world.

My standpoint as an American living in Europe allowed me a unique and direct experience with **globalization**. Globalization refers to "the rapidly developing and ever-densening network or interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern life" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 789). As a teenager living overseas, I experienced the cultural flow that Arjun Appadurai describes as mediascapes, one of five 'scapes' that "form the basis of the fluidity of today's world and the multiple perspectives, images, and meanings that inform the worldviews of social actors" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:790). **Mediascapes**, the transmission of information on a global scale via television, the web, newspapers and magazines, allowed me to keep up to date on what was popular and stylish in the US while living overseas. Not only were clothing styles, musical preferences and trendy catch phrases transmitted, in a cultural flow of information, to my American classmates and me overseas, this information was also transmitted and absorbed by my German peers. As I spent time overseas, it became increasingly more difficult to distinguish Europeans from Americans, based solely on appearance. As multinational corporations such as Levi, Nike, and Gap, as well as American media such as

MTV, began reaching Europe and beyond, the cultures of the regions began to look very similar. Though there appeared to be a stronger transmission of American products and styles to Europe, this transmission proved to be multidirectional in nature. On my trips back to the US, I began to hear about how popular the clothing store H&M had become and I began to see that many of my peers now had T-Mobile cell phones. This demonstrated not only a two-way transmission, but also a world of cultures brought closer together with the exchange of products.

This melding of culture and style that I observed can be explained by **homogeneity**, the idea that globalization leads to a unified, interconnected 'world society' (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:792). This melding could be viewed as both a **weak** and a **strong version of homogeneity**. The optimist in me would call this cultural exchange a weak version, or a melding of cultural tastes and meanings that may help to form a more tolerant and accepting world. My more cynical self can see how these cultural interactions can lead to the destruction of local culture with the influence of mega-corporations that are primarily driven by profit-making. An example of this weak version of homogeneity I experienced included the fact that common styles and entertainment acted as a stepping stone for the friendships I formed with some of my German neighbors who often came over to play my sister's Nintendo and practice their English. Contrastingly, I also observed the negative results of the strong version of homogeneity resulting from globalizations when a Wal-Mart opened up not far from where I lived in Germany. Specialty stores are a tradition in German culture. It is not unusual to go to a different, family-owned store for each of your shopping needs. However, with the rise of a multinational, and all service and department store such as Wal-Mart, business was drained from

locally-owned and specialty stores and profits were taken out of the community and into the hands of Wal-Mart executives.

As I look back on my experiences overseas, I see many examples of globalization that I experienced unknowingly as a child and teenager. The most basic point of why my family lived and worked abroad demonstrated one example of this inherent experience with globalization. US Military bases, such as the ones I grew up around, arose in Europe after WWII. The eruption of WWII was partly a result of Hitler's control of Germany and the authority that Hitler was granted that allowed him to rise to power is an example of **charismatic authority**, though in a negative sense of the term. Max Weber describes authority on the grounds of charisma as "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:179). With the end of WWII, Germany, lacked leadership and stability, and as a result, was divided and occupied by the Allied Nations. The **manifest function** of this occupation was to maintain order in Germany and diminish the likelihood of another war breaking out, while simultaneously rewarding the allied countries with authority, land and resources in Germany. The **latent functions** of the occupation included the cultural exchanges between native Germans and allied country troops.

Eventually, US military bases became permanent structures and grew to the size of small American towns as military personnel began bringing their families to each of their overseas assignments. My parents both moved overseas to serve in support roles for the military and their families. Completely missed to me as a child was what I can now partially explain using Immanuel Wallerstein's **world systems perspective**. Wallerstein describes a world system as a "social system, one that

has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence" whose "life is made up of conflicting forces which hold it together by tension, and tear it apart as each group seeks eternally to remold it to its advantage" (Wallerstein 1979:229). In the case of post WWII occupations, the US sought to demonstrate and maintain its status as a world power, while Germany had no choice but to accept the occupation as a stabilizing force during a time of recovery.

The United States demonstrated its rising power as a **core region** with its initial and continued presence through military bases. A core region is a concept in Wallerstein's world system theory which describes a region that controls a majority of the world's wealth and its relatively higher skilled and paid workforce (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:802). After WWII, lacking power and resources, Germany for a while represented a declining core region bordering on **semiperipheral** status, an area that is economically and politically weaker than core regions and that plays a critical role in maintaining the stability in the economic and political spheres as it is both exploited (as with the occupations) and the exploiter (as it maintained strength and power over developing countries) (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:802). Over time, however, Germany quickly regained its core region status in the post-WWII era. Growing up in Germany in more recent years, I never experienced Germany as a semiperipheral country or anything but equal to the United States, as Germany has grown to become an economic power in Europe and throughout the world. At the same time, I never questioned the reasoning behind the presence of multiple military bases throughout Europe; however now with a sociological lens I can see this presence as both a product and process of globalization.

The American military presence I grew up in overseas may be regarded by some as

representing, in terms of its latent function, as the widening sway of large corporations in post-WWII era as described in the documentary, *The Corporation*. Corporations are regarded as profit-making enterprises, solely responsible to their stakeholders and with limited liability in regards to the consequences of their operations worldwide. The advent of US-based global corporations has contributed not only to the poor impressions of the United States as a heartless, profit-driven nation, but also to the exploitation of the cheap labor of workers across the world who are defenseless in the face of unfair or inhumane treatment in domestic conditions perpetuated by Western support to repressive local regimes. However, the US military and international corporations portray their missions and operations worldwide by highlighting their manifest functions of seeking their national and international defense and security rooted in the ideology of **laissez-faire capitalism**, an economic system of open competition in a free market. It is this form of capitalism that Karl Marx critiqued in his major work *Capital* and further described in *The Communist Manifesto*. In Marx's view, free-market capitalism, as demonstrated nowadays by those corporations mentioned in the documentary *Corporations*, allows owners of the business and property to benefit, while workers are denied the opportunity to take part in creative work, leading to their **alienation** from their work, their selves, their products, and their social lives.

In my own experiences and observations growing up with the military, alienation appears to be surprisingly absent in the structure of the military. This may seem as unexpected since, first, as Emile Durkheim described, we live in an increasing individualistic world; and second, as Max Weber would put it, military life constitutes highly routinized behavior that, in other contexts, may increase the likelihood of alienation from the process of work.

However, the military as a **social system** is characterized by social cohesion involving the shared ideals of such abstract notions as patriotism, loyalty, and brotherhood. A social system as defined by Talcott Parsons, involves a level of integrated interaction between two or more actors who are cognizant of the other actors' ideas, expectations, as well as shared norms and interdependence (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:352).

#### IV. FORGING A SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND CAREER

Reflecting on my experiences living abroad and with the military, both my micro and macro sociological lenses allow me to see that we are all products of globalization and that as a third culture kid, I was able to experience two sides of globalization: the spread of American culture abroad through political, economic and cultural mechanisms, as well as the influx of international products, ideas, and citizens into the US. This, in turn, shaped my choice of friends, academic interests, future plans and numerous other parts of my life I am still discovering today.

Making a leap from my experiences with the military and my college experiences is jarring in nature and reflective of the feelings of culture shock and disjointedness I experienced as I transitioned to Florida to begin my university education. One of the major adjustments I experienced, like many first year college students, was a lack of the structure and accountability throughout college life. If I did not go to class, no one would tell me I had to. However, more jarring to me was the large gaps I experienced in my days. Even with a full course load, I found myself with unaccounted for gaps of time that made me feel oddly uncomfortable. I, initially, thought this unease could be attributed to the fact that I enjoy being busy; however, now I see that this feeling I still, infrequently, experi-

ence may be a manifestation of a more deeply and broadly internalized **Protestant ethic**. As studied by Max Weber, the Protestant ethic is an attitude and an emphasis on the necessity of hard work as a component of one's calling and the notion that worldly success would lead to personal salvation (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:151). While I did not grow up in a particularly religious household, the Protestant ethic is so pervasive in American culture, particularly in the military, that I easily internalized a desire to work.

As a remedy to these feelings of unease, I began to get involved in extracurricular activities on campus that I thought would be a good way to occupy my time between classes and school work. I began volunteering at an after-school program for low-income youth and helped by tutoring and mentoring elementary school students. For, probably, the first time in my life I saw extreme inequities at a personal level. The children rarely had proper clothing, were unkempt and were performing far below their grade levels in school. Growing up with the military, in large part a **total institution**, I had never experienced such obvious class disparities. A total institution is one Erving Goffman uses to refer to an institution all activities, including eating, sleeping, playing and working, are regulated, and individuals are cut off from wider society (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:506). While the military does not exhibit all of the characteristics of a total institution such as an asylum which Goffman studied, it is a self-sustained institution in which individuals lose much of their individuality with uniforms and routinized behavior and in which most aspects of life are highly structured. As a quasi-total institution, the military provides all its members and their families with basic necessities such as housing, proper schooling, health insurance, daycare, enough money for food and additional services. **Status groups** certainly exist in the military,

and are mainly two, enlisted and officers, their differences being relatively negligible in comparison to the class inequities I saw at the after school program. Classes, in Marxist perspective, are made of "individuals who share a common position in relation to the means or 'forces' of production" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:25). All of the children I worked with were minorities, mostly African American, and many of the children's mothers, I learned from the after-school director, worked in the service industry at fast food restaurants or in hotels. These women were wage-laborers, members of what Marx called the **proletariat**, who do not own land or property and therefore sell their labor-power for a wage. Often single mothers, these women worked long and hard hours and still had trouble making ends meet. However, my observations pointed to what W.E.B. DuBois called the **color line** when it comes to the capitalist class system, which reiterates the hierarchical social roles that blacks and whites play through the exploitation of labor. DuBois refers to the historic marginalization that blacks have experienced through both colonization in Africa and slavery in the United State. While the military has been criticized for targeting recruitment efforts in low income and minority neighborhoods, individuals start off on equal footing in the military and therefore, **color line**—that is, the line that divides races, representing cultural structure and internalized attitudes (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:289)—has increasingly diminished within the military according to some observers. Still, the fact that contextual racial factors and issues still affect the proportion and nature of recruitment of blacks and minorities into the military, and the continued debates and controversies regarding the role of women and people of diverse sexual preference in the army, indicate continued need to tackle the nature of symbolic, if not physical, segregation lines in the military. I stayed with the organiza-

tion for four years and my experience there was a significant part of my rationale to study sociology and unearth the causes of such great disparities.

As I approached graduation, I knew I was coming to a crossroad in which I would be shifting roles from a student to something else. At this point I experienced what Dorothy Smith called a **bifurcation of consciousness**, a discrepancy between how I experienced the world and the dominant view to which one must adapt (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:586). Smith uses the notion of bifurcation of consciousness in a gendered context to explain how women's increasing involvement in the workforce does not necessarily diminish the traditional role assigned to them at home as far as the dominant view is concerned, leading to a split or bifurcation of consciousness between their social and local/home lives. In my experience, a different—i.e., not necessarily gendered, though it may have this dimension as well—bifurcation of consciousness reflected my departure from the thinking of the dominant group in terms of what I as a graduating student was supposed and wanted to do. The dominant view of our society is that after one graduates from college or university the next logical step is to get a job, preferably within one's course of study, work hard and move up the ranks. My view, however, was that in order to solidify my role as a sociologist I needed to gain experiences beyond purely work and school. As sociologist Anthony Giddens posits, sociology is not only about institutions but also "very much about the individual and our individual experiences. We come to understand ourselves much better through grasping the wider social forces that influence our lives" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:754). I was determined to use my **agency**, or ability to make a difference, and **cultural capital**, my education, skills, and other acquired attributes that can be translated into economic capital, to make a positive difference in the world. I

found what I believed to be the ideal compromise between dominant culture's views of obligations post-college and my desire to gain experience beyond traditional work and school environments. I therefore joined AmeriCorps's National Civilian Community Corps, a national service program dedicated "to [strengthening] communities and [developing] leaders through direct, team-based national and community service" (americorps.gov). The second set of experiences that influenced my choice to study sociology ties back to my experience as a third culture kid. As a third culture kid accustomed to redefining myself with transitions, I continued this pattern of revision by pursuing various courses of study in college before finally landing on sociology. This choice was not what Weber referred to as a **value-rational** choice. A value-rational choice "involves the strategic selection of means capable of effectively achieving one's goal," and does not fit my selection of sociology because a) my academic strengths have historically been in math and science rather than critical thinking and analysis as is required in sociology; b) I could envision no future job for myself as a sociologist; and c) I was a few credits shy of completing my degree in communication disorders and graduating early. However, my **affective** choice, Weber's idea of an action characterized by impulsivity and free emotion, to study and pursue sociology fit my desire to understand the social world, especially inequalities, while using observation skills innate to me having experienced multiple shifts in culture.

During my time with AmeriCorps, my entire perspective was brought into question and influenced by the situations I encountered during the service projects I took part in. In what could be compared to what Dr. Sayer experienced in the film *Awakenings*, learning from the simple joys his patients experienced when awoken from a catatonic state, I felt a sense of both

enlightenment and renewal during my experience with AmeriCorps. Dr. Sayer learned from his patient, Leonard, the power of constant awakening in life, awakenings we often become inured to as a result of routines, obligations, and alienations. I found myself similarly enlivened to the overwhelming amount of things I and so many others take for granted in life. From helping build a home that would provide families with a stable place to live, to providing shelter for those needing a place to stay during a storm, I saw indescribable appreciation for things many of us take for granted each day. With my experience both abroad, and with AmeriCorps throughout the US, I often saw what different groups and cultures had in common rather than their differences. Universal values exist and span micro and macro sociology, cultural and regional differences, and overall life experiences; we each seek to build connections to those around us and through those connections we can continue to experience times of awakening throughout our daily lives.

## V. CONCLUSION

This sociological self research paper has allowed me to explore a part of my life that has shaped, and will continue to shape, me in ways I have not fully explored before. From this self-exploration I take away three steps I will take to bring about positive change in my life. I will continue to capitalize on my hypersensitivity to my surroundings. As I have discovered through my course work and travel experiences observation is often the key to understanding. I will strive to continue to realize that people's perception of me is not necessarily based on who I am. I am an ever-changing person shaped by innumerable experiences and not one according to a single individual's preconceived notion. And lastly, I will continue further my understanding and

exploration of micro- and macro-sociology and apply a sociological imagination to my coursework and beyond.

To be a sociologist is much less of a label than a process and only with constant attention and dedication to understanding will I be able to be the sociologist and citizen I strive to be.

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