BEING CHAMELEON: THE INFLUENCE OF MULTIPLE MIGRATION IN CHILDHOOD ON IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Like nomads we moved with the seasons... As with the seasons, each move offered something to look forward to while something had to be given up... We learned early that ‘Home’ was an ambiguous concept, and, wherever we lived, some essential part of our lives was always someplace else. So we were always of two minds. We learned to be happy and sad at the same time. We learned to be independent and accept that things were out of our control...

Paul A. Seaman, *Paper Airplanes in the Himalayas. The Unfinished Path Home*

One of the most important characteristics of contemporary societies is mobility. It refers not only to humans, but also to the transfers of information, money, things and images. Old metaphors of society as a machine or “global village” were replaced by “flows”, “scapes” or a “rhizome”. John Urry declared that sociology should concentrate on different kinds of mobilities and not on society (Urry 2000). In their book “The Age of Migration”, Stephen Castles

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1 This article is based on the research conducted in the frames of PhD dissertation entitled „Strategie tożsamościowe globalnych nomadów. Mobilność jako kreator biografii” defended at Jagiellonian University in 2013.
Agnieszka Trąbka and Mark Miller claim that not only the number of migrants is steadily growing (estimated at 214 million people in 2011), but also that forms of migrations are more and more diversified. Among these new phenomena are, for example, lifestyle migrations and blurring boundaries between tourism and migrations, feminization of migrations, and their global and transnational character (Castles and Miller 2011). Numerous highly skilled workers decide to move abroad in the job or for the job, usually for at least a few years’ assignment. In such cases, they are most often accompanied by their families. Although research indicates that this kind of migration may be challenging for the family as a system – especially for “trailing spouses” and children (difficulties with adaptation of employee’s family members are the most common reason for ending foreign assignment prematurely), these issues were rarely analyzed by sociologists. This article is an attempt to fill this niche. It focuses on children who have “spent a significant part of their developmental years outside the parents’ culture” (Pollock and van Reken 2009: 13) because of one or both of the parents’ job. They are referred to as Third Culture Kids or “global nomads” (McCaig 1996).

This category of migrants will be characterized in the first part of this paper. Third Culture Kids (TCKs) were analyzed mainly in the United States, where the term was coined, and in Japan under the names kaigai-shijos and kikoku-shijos (Pollock and van Reken 2009, Cottrell 2012). I will summarize the results of previous research, and then present my theoretical framework as well as methodology of the research. Mobile childhood experienced by TCKs is connected with specific challenges and opportunities. Yet, in my opinion, it is impossible to generalize the whole category of “global nomads” and their psychological characteristics or biographical patterns. People react differently to the pressures and opportunities they face. Therefore, I will highlight the role of agency in the process of identity construction, taking into account that this process takes place in particular structures influencing people’s attitudes and behaviours. Identity became one of the fundamental concepts in the social sciences in the last decades. In this article I opt for Jerzy Szacki’s general definition of identity as “a way in which, more or less consciously, we locate ourselves in a social world” (Szacki 2004: 22). I agree with Szacki and with Manuel Castells that the role of identity is to regulate our relationships with the world and that therefore building one’s identity is an inevitable task.

I will thus describe the challenges connected with mobile childhood and identity strategies applied by TCKs concentrating on three issues: the question of control over one’s biography, the question of cohesion and continuity of identity and the specificity of global nomads’ social relations.
The term Third Culture Kids was coined in the late 1950s by American sociologist couple Ruth Hill and John Useems. They went to India to research men educated in Britain who then returned to India, and American expatriates living in Asia. They coined the notion of “third culture” and in the book entitled „Men in the Middle of the Third Culture: The Roles of American and Non-Western People in Cross-Cultural Administration”, they define the term as “cultural patterns inherited and created, learned and shared by the members of two or more different societies who are personally involved in relating their society, or segments thereof, to each other” (Useem et al. 1963, as cited in: Evanoff 2000: 127). The Useems were accompanied in India by their three children and from observing them functioning in this “third culture”, they coined the term Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Initially they were described broadly as “children who accompany their parents into another society”, but there were four main categories of TCKs identified: military “brats”, missionary kids, foreign service kids and corporate “brats” (Pollock and van Reken 2009: 15). In most cases the parents’ job had a representational character that influenced the whole family, including children. Also, back then, expatriates used to live in enclaves or compounds that were rather isolated from the local society.

The notion of “third culture” did not gain popularity in academia, which may come as a surprise taking into account its resemblance to Homi Bhaba’s “third space” or cultural hybridity – both so prominent in contemporary sociology and anthropology. Although Ruth Hill Useem was a professor at Michigan University for a few decades, the concept of Third Culture Kids did not enter mainstream migration studies either. Instead, many governmental and non-governmental organizations were created promoting the notion and offering counseling, practical information, and facilitating networking for expatriates and TCKs.

In the nineties David Pollock and Ruth van Reken, who worked with TCKs for some time as members of Families in Global Transition (FIGT), wrote a book on the subject, entitled simply “Third Culture Kids. Growing up among worlds”. They present the following definition of a TCK:

A Third Culture Kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (Pollock and van Reken 2009: 13)
Since then, the notion becomes more and more recognized among TCKs, also thanks to the Internet and particularly to social media networks such as Facebook. In this paper I will use Pollock and van Reken’s definition of TCKs, although I do not presume their sense of belonging— it is one of the issues I research during the interviews.

METHODOLOGY

Since the aim of my research was to understand biographical consequences of international mobility in childhood and the process of identity construction, I chose the approach of interpretative sociology and the biographical narrative interview as my method. It implies that I was interested in how my interviewees interpret their biography and the meanings they give to their experiences. Biographical narrative interview, inspired by Fritz Schütze, is a method that corresponds very well with these goals. At the beginning I asked my interviewees to tell me the story of their lives and did not interrupt them nor ask any questions. In the first phase I just listened and encouraged them to speak. I then asked them to develop the plots I found most interesting or where it occurred to me that they might have omitted some details. Not until the last phase of the interview did I asked “theoretical” questions referring to my research questions (regarding the definition of home, the role of Internet, the notion of TCKs, etc.) (Schütze 1997, 2012). Data collection and analysis was organized in accordance with the constructivist version of grounded theory by Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz 2009).

I conducted and analyzed 53 interviews with adult TCKs of different nationalities. I used snowballing and purposive sampling in order to differentiate the sample. As I mentioned before, researchers usually focused on TCKs of American origin, which is a specific category in many ways. I wanted my sample to be differentiated by nationality. TCKs’ biographies are connected with at least two countries and I believe that while researching such transnational categories one should abandon “methodological nationalism” and not impose nationality as a main variable (Beck 2007). One is not only a member of a nation-state, but may as well be a member of a transnational community or social movement, one is either a consumer or producer of goods. I do not claim that nationality is not important anymore – I want to understand its role and meaning to TCKs. Talking to people of different nationalities enables having a broader scope and comparing between different categories. The characteristic of the sample is presented in the following table:
Table 1.

Characteristic of research sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td></td>
<td>50–64</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents’ country of origin</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (Germany, China, India, UK…)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s occupation&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Academic teacher or researcher</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign service (military)</td>
<td>9 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transnational company or foreign assignment</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (medical doctor, architect, artist…)</td>
<td>14</td>
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“PACK YOUR STUFF, WE’RE MOVING!”.
CONTROL OVER “LIFE OF ONE’S OWN”

The question of agency and control over the process of identity construction is in the center of contemporary discussions on identity. Individualization released people from the influence of social institutions, such as nation state, social class, and family, and made them responsible for “the life of their own” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). The issue of agency and control in global nomads’ lives may be analyzed in several dimensions. Firstly, as a control over one’s moves, secondly as a possibility to make decisions concerning one’s life at a particular moment, and thirdly, as a sense of influence on how one’s life looks, conviction that it is a result of one’s own plans and actions.

My interviewees did not have control over their mobility during childhood. Their parents were sent abroad by their employer (in which case they themselves

<sup>2</sup> I refer here to the occupation of the parent, whose job required migration (in my research it was always father, apart from families in which parents divorced and a child travelled with mother).
had limited influence on the moment of move and on the destination) or made the decision to move on their own. In the latter case they could choose time and destination taking into account the child’s welfare. Ambassadors and foreign service employees move every few years and while their families realize when the move will take place, few are aware of the destination until the last moment.

Some parents inform their children months before the planned move is to take place, and prepare them for this transition, others tell them only at the very last moment. My research confirmed the observations made by Ruth van Reken and David Pollock that children need to prepare for the transition, they need to say goodbye to their friends, places, etc. Some of my interviewees mentioned that the most traumatic transitions were those, when during holidays they were informed that they were not going back “home” and that “home” was going to be somewhere else from now on. This experience results in the belief that they do not have influence over their life. Theories of acculturation stress and culture shock (see article by Kornelia Zakrzewska-Wirkus in this issue) demonstrate that the lack of linguistic and cultural competences and social networks during the adaptation process may result in lower self-esteem, self-efficacy, and even depression. The support of the family appeared to be crucial for many TCKs in the new place of residence. Unfortunately, the fact that family is the sole source of support at the beginning, may have negative consequences for a child if there is a crisis in within the family system.

Feeling that all decisions influencing their life are made by their family, TCKs want to “break that cycle” and start to live on their own. Usually this begins when they start college, but some of them start their independent life in high school. It should be highlighted however, that before the end of college it is rarely economic independence, since parents usually pay tuition fees. One exception from this rule is worth mentioning: TCKs of Polish origin coming back for college to the parents’ country gain financial independence relatively quickly. This is possible because higher education in Poland is free and the linguistic (usually fluent knowledge of English or French) and cultural competences of these TCKs make them very attractive on the Polish job market.

In terms of agency, one of the most interesting phenomena I identified during my research was the long-term influence that their mobile childhood had on TCKs’ adult lives. There is a category of global nomads that feels determined by their past. They feel that their present life is not shaped by their decisions, but by the way they were brought up.

At first it was just something that happened to you – you had no control over where you moved, what you did, and then later you start to see these kinds of
values manifested in your later life, for example the wanderlust, the itch to move, the itch to travel and the judgment of people who don’t travel, looking for a job that allows you to travel internationally, so yes, I definitely look at it like “this was an opportunity and I do want to utilize this opportunity to make more out of my life. (…) So I think that my upbringing had a lot to do with where I ended up now. My parents started to look for a job in the UN about five or six years ago, and I ended up in a school where the biggest recruiter is the UN and Peace Corps (Mira, 28).

Mira’s words illustrate how certain decisions made by parents for their kids – choice of school, extracurricular activities, ways of spending free time and the values – had important influence on that child’s adult life. Obviously, this influence may be perceived by the latter as an opportunity or may be criticized as oppressive. Very often its perception changes over time and what was seen as forced, troublesome, and painful during childhood or adolescence is appreciated later on. Another important plot mentioned by Mira, and by Gabriela (see below), is the intergenerational transmission of privileges – of economic, social, and cultural capital. TCKs’ attitudes toward this privileged life range from pride and idealization to critique and rejection and are very often ambivalent.

But especially in an international school, we were raised to believe that we would one day rule the world, because our parents ruled the world, so we just assumed we would too. So when you didn’t get into an Ivy League college, you were expected to commit ritual suicide (laughter). I don’t know, it was a very high pressure. I admit, it was very elitist, but you were just expected to be ambitious. I only know like one person from my high school, who didn’t go to university. Because everyone was expected to be super, super ambitious (Gabriela, 25).

Ayana, on the other hand, represents a category of women, who, around the age of thirty-five realize that this lifestyle (mobility, higher education, demanding career and travels), which is so natural to them, led them to a certain point where they are single, and sometimes feel uprooted and confused.

I definitely think that if you have family, the straight path is the easier way to take, but at the same time I think that whether or not you have family, also depends on which path you’re on. Sometimes it’s a bit like… you have to make sure that you’re on the right path.

*Do you think it is impossible to change the path?*

No, it’s not impossible, but it is hard. Like, I could do it, but it is hard. When I think of being in the same place forever, it’s not that attractive. Or it has to be a place I really want to go to, that has something special about it, like Tanzania, New
Orleans, maybe Ethiopia. But it has to be a place with something. I can’t go to… like my entire family is in Dallas, I cannot just go and live in Dallas (Ayana, 38)

In the case of Jenny, this long-term influence from her mobile childhood and feeling uprooted refers to an internalized urge to move every couple of years. For many TCKs, staying mobile is all they know, it is the “default option”, settling down somewhere is what really requires a reason.

I really felt that and it was an important moment for me, because I felt like I needed to try and stay, try to build this into a home for me. My plan right now is to stay. And actually I can’t imagine leaving, even though 6 months ago I wanted to leave for sure. It’s because I’ve programmed my brain – it doesn’t know anything else; you stay a couple of years and then you go, that’s how it works. It’s like this automatic thing I do. But no, my plan right now is to stay. (Jenny, 36)

Jenny decided to settle down in Germany because she realized that due to her mobile lifestyle she does not have a home, and now, at thirty-six, she would like to build one. Very often only after meeting a girlfriend or a boyfriend, does the thought of settling down occur to global nomads.

RELATIONSHIPS OF TCKs

The crucial role of “significant others” or primary groups in the process of identity construction impels us to take a closer look on a TCKs’ social relations. What is the specificity of TCKs families? How do their relationships with peers look like? Do they prefer to hang out with people who share their international experience? And, last but not least, what is the role of a virtual TCK community?

One of the first characteristics of TCKs’ families are close bonds between their members (Pollock and van Reken 2009; Schaetti and Ramsey 1999). My interviewees mentioned that either their siblings or their parents were their best friends during their time abroad and that they tended to spend more time with their family than their peers and more than they used to spend before leaving their country of origin. It should be stressed however, that migration usually takes place due to the father’s job and it is the mother who has to dedicate extra time to kids. Very often, her assistance is needed during activities that a child used to perform on his/her own in the country of origin, such as going to school and extracurricular activities, doing homework, etc. As a result, it sometimes happens that mothers feel overwhelmed by their own problems with adaptation and the
pressure to assist their kids in the transition process (Nukaga 2008). Children are not satisfied with this situation either: very often they feel over-protected, deprived of the independence and freedom they used to have.

Another research demonstrated that a child’s adaptation and wellbeing in the new country of residence is influenced by the mother’s adaptation (Schaetti 2000) and relations with peers. The latter is more important in the case of schoolchildren and becomes crucial during adolescence. Therefore it appears that the pre-school years, when a child does not have strong bonds outside his or her family, are the best moment for a move. On the other hand, however, strong intra-familial bonds and a lack of alternative sources of support makes a child extremely vulnerable in the case of a conflict or crisis, such as parents’ divorce, conflict of values, lack of acceptance for the child’s lifestyle, etc.

When it comes to choosing a school, there are several options: a national school abroad with a curriculum from the parents’ country, a local school in the country of residence (private or public), and an international school. Obviously, not every option is available for everybody. The first one is available mainly for Americans and British, in some cities for French, German and Dutch expats. Others, such as the Polish, must choose between a local or international school and, additionally, send their kids to Polish school on weekends. International schools on the other hand, have very high tuition and if the parent’s employer does not subsidize the fees, it may be unaffordable for many families. Although international schools are usually elitist and contribute to reproduction of privileges, as outlined above, they represent a much more welcoming and accepting environment for children. In comparison with local schools, they are usually less homogenous, both staff and pupils are used to foreigners, their staff and students are more open, and it is easier to relate to others with similar experiences there. TCKs in local schools, especially if they look different than the majority of pupils or do not speak the language, may experience bullying or isolation. According to my research, this is much less likely in an international school. I will not develop this issue here, as the whole section of this issue is dedicated to educational problems of children migrants and TCKs.

No matter what school a child will attend, the first challenge is to learn the local language. My interviewees claimed that because of that, the first school year is the most difficult and it takes more than two years to feel truly comfortably in a new place. TCKs very often speak about the solitude and difficulties in finding friends. Usually, they have two or three close friends, but do not belong to cliques or circles. TCKs coming to the US or western European countries feel that in comparison with their peers they are immature or even childish, as far as boyfriends/girlfriends, cars, make-up, etc. are concerned. On the other hand, when they come to those countries to attend college, they have opposite impressions: American teenagers are immature and have very little knowledge
and interest in the world outside of their country. Global nomads that move every couple of years and have experienced many partings, may suffer from difficulties with commitment in relationships:

When we move around so much, it might be one of our survival skills – not be attached. If you attach yourself to too many things and it keeps getting broken, it’s like… How many times can your heart break? How many times can you cry because you’re losing a friend? At some point you’re more like: “I’m just going to be very careful about who I become friends with, because my heart has been broken so many times. So unless this person is really special, I’m not going to get too involved”. I want to be able to drop them if I have to – if I leave, if they leave, if something happens (Philipp, 24).

Apart from “technical” problems with finding friends (language barrier, bullying, homogenous and closed environment), some TCKs speak about the solitude inherent to their biographies. This issue also applies to romantic relationships, which is one of the “problematic” spheres for many TCKs for two reasons. Firstly, they may have difficulties with finding “the one” due to cultural differences, and secondly because of “commitment issues”. Not only are they afraid, but their partners may be reserved when seeing their hesitant attitude.

I claim that the main challenge TCKs have to face is feeling different or foreign and, what is even more important, being treated as such. According to Kathleen Finn Jordan, 74% of TCKs perceived themselves as “outsiders” both in their passport country and in their country of residence (Finn Jordan 2002: 213). My interviewees, like bricoleurs, formed their identity out of different elements coming from different cultural contexts. For most of them, identity was constantly “under construction”, it was a fluid concept. Their social environment, however, forced them to identify themselves once and for all, to somehow relate to existing national or ethnic categories. Labeling and lack of recognition for the identity they constructed, faced mainly by TCKs whose appearance was different than the dominant group, were one of the most frustrating experiences.

“Where are you from?” is another one. Well, ironically, when I’m in Spain I understand perfectly why they ask, because they know I’m not Spanish. And I’d have to say I’m Korean. But sometimes I say I’m Spanish, although I understand what they mean with that question: “You’re an outsider”. So when I say I’m Spanish, we always get to the same question: “Ok, but where are you from?” (…) Spain is like war, every day. I have to prove them that I can speak Spanish. That was really funny, because I used to be a teacher – I taught Spanish to foreigners. And that is something that Spaniards couldn’t really expect. “She looks Chinese and she’s teaching Spanish?” (Jin, 28)
Being chameleon. The influence of multiple migration in childhood on identity construction

[in Nigeria] I might have looked a lot like the people there, but then I would open my mouth to speak and they were all like: “Oh, this is the American kid!” That was how I was perceived. I wasn’t perceived as someone who belonged to that culture, even though I have a heritage that connects me with it. Having to actually prove this was really interesting – “No, my dad is from here!”. And they were like: “No, you can’t be”. Being told who you are is a very interesting experience (laughter). Being told: “No, you’re not from here. You have no connection to here. You are foreign, you are different”. I had to go through almost the same process upon my return to the States. In my mind-space, I was American. You know, with Nigerian and Brazilian influences, but basically American, a New Yorker. But being put into that environment and being told: “Ok, no, you’re not a New Yorker, you’re not an American. Passport – no. Mother – no. Father – no”. I was always being redefined by other people’s expectations, by people telling me constantly, who I am. I had to prove who I am and I questioned it myself: “Wait a minute. Am I really that?” (Obi, 40).

Ewa Nowicka identifies two kinds of being foreign: subjective (obcość podmiotowa) and reflected (obcość odzwierciedlona) (Nowicka 2007; 2008: 264). The first one implies a sense of not belonging to a specific culture and feeling like an outsider. The second one refers to the way one is treated by others. The two above-mentioned citations illustrate how the reflected foreignness can lead to the subjective one. The fact that one’s identity is not socially recognized makes people doubt their identity or fight for it. Therefore, TCKs often look for the company of people with similar experiences, who would understand that the answer to the questions “Where are you from?”, “What is your nationality?”, etc., may be very complicated.

In this matter, there is a difference between European and American TCKs. The former usually do not know the notion “Third Culture Kids” and hang around with migrants’ children, children from mixed marriages, in other words anybody, who has had some kind of multicultural experience. Many American TCKs on the other hand, are familiar with the notion and with the Internet resources, meeting groups and organizations dedicated precisely to them. They internalize the notion in an international school, through friends or – which is very interesting – by searching for it online or at a library, usually during a psychological crisis or difficulties during adaptation.

I was in the fourth year of college. So pretty late. But you know what’s interesting? It wasn’t that I came across it, I was looking for a term to describe people that moved around like me, I was looking for it, I went to the library to do research. I thought that there must be some sort of term to describe it (Yanyu, 27).
The moments when my interviewees described how they came across the notion of “TCKs” were very emotional and moving. Reading the book by David Pollock and Ruth van Reken (the “bible”, as they call it), they experienced immense relief and felt validated. In many cases this moment can be described as a “turning point” (Strauss 1997; Schütze 1012) in their biographies.

I googled it and saw that there are some doctors actually studying it and researching this as a job. I was like: “This is interesting”. I remember I was at work, in the airport. I was opening offices for a company. We had an airport office and I’m the only one at the airport, it’s 7 o’clock. I remember going through this list and almost getting teary-eyed – this was everything I wasn’t able to vocalize, that I’ve been going through for the past 8–10 years. It was like an epic moment, I still remember it – it was amazing! (Daniel, 32)

Yes, exactly. So I read the book and it was a revelation! There is a word for it! There is a word! You know, it explains everything that you were going through at the precise point, which is definitely a relief: “Oh, I am not a freak! There is an explanation, it is normal and there are other people like these out there!” And it’s normal that I didn’t assimilate too well, because before I thought that I was just bad at human interactions (laughs). (Mia, 27).

The next step, after getting familiar with the term, may be engaging in one of the offline TCK communities3. In some cases we can speak of “professionalization of identity”, when personal identity as a TCK is very tightly combined with professional life. It concerns mostly counselors, artists realizing projects related to being a TCK, etc. The TCK community – mostly virtual, with a few offline islands – may be perceived as “sociation” (Urry 2000, chapter 6), or an example of new “tribes” or “networks” described by Zygmunt Bauman or Michel Maffessoli. John Urry defines sociation as a community joined by choice and in search of emotional satisfaction (not based on traditional criteria such as nationality, age or ethnicity). It is relatively easy to become a member and equally easy to leave this community; “these sociations enable people to experiment with new kinds of dwellingness which are often temporary and involve diverse mobilities. They may empower people, providing relatively safe places for identity-testing and the context for learning new skills” (Urry 2000: 143). Bauman is skeptical whether these communities may successfully fulfill the role of traditional communities in providing support and frames of reference in the process of identity construction (Bauman 2007). The example of the TCK community proves however, that it is

3 Offline communities are located in major American metropolis (New York City, Los Angeles etc.) and in few Asian cities with numerous expatriate population (Singapore, Hong Kong etc).
possible, at least to some extent. Understanding the notion and getting in contact with other TCKs helped many interviewees to cope with psychological crises, build an identity, and offered them social support and validation. My interview partners mentioned another problem: identity formed and validated within this community was not recognized by other members of society, who insisted on referring to traditional categories like national identity, class, etc.

BEING CHAMELEON: COHESION AND CONTINUITY OF IDENTITY

Sociologists and anthropologists theorizing about late modernity, highlight rapid changes which influence people’s everyday life, the role of mediated experience and “the intrusion of distant events into everyday consciousness” (Giddens 1991: 27). These characteristics are particularly evident in TCKs’ biographies. Not only are they obliged to relate to different social contexts at the same time (some of which are geographically distant), but these contexts also change over time. The words of one of my interviewees, Dustin, very clearly illustrate this lack of continuity and sudden break of biographical trajectory:

Well, I remember that as soon as we arrived to the new place it was just like the beginning of the new kind of reality, I guess. It’s like you get on the plane and this part of your life is immediately forgotten, I am not gonna see it again. So as soon as we arrived to the new place I thought: “wow, this is a new world that I am arriving in” (...) My behaviour changed, I would do what my friends did. I would talk about what people there were talking about. For instance, when we moved to Saudi Arabia, when I was young, what people did was play Pokémon – I’d never seen it before, but eventually I made my way into it and started to play, and then, when we moved to Kuwait people there would play computer games, they would stay in the city and play computer games, so I started to play computer games, and then when we moved to Saudi Arabia again, what people did there was go out and smoke and drink, so I started smoking and drinking. And then we moved to Abu Dhabi and people had these fake ideas to go out to bars and night clubs and the beach, so I would do these things. And everything changed, my values changed, there were no values actually... I was just a child. Pure pleasure was my intention, pleasure and some kind of friends, I guess (Dustin, 22).

This citation brings to mind Kenneth Gergen’s concept of “saturated self” (Gergen 1991). It seems that some TCKs, like Dustin, opt for “relational self”, meaning there is no one, core authentic identity, but rather many contextual selves depending on social relations. One’s main goal is to learn how to efficiently
manage these different selves without thinking about traditional concept of identity or being true to oneself. In accordance with that, the most popular metaphor used by my interviewees to describe their identity was “chameleon”. Some of them stipulated that “blending in” refers only to their behaviour and not to their “inner self”, which remains unchanged and stable.

Keeping constant and integrate identity when relating to many different social and cultural contexts at the same time (home, school, different groups of peers), is another challenge TCKs have to face. Many global nomads find themselves in the position of “marginal man” (Stonequist 1935), or experience “multifrenia” (Gergen 1991) as far as language, values, or nationality is concerned.

When I’m in Korea, I’m not Korean. When I’m in Spain, I’m not Spanish. But I’m both (Jin, 29)

There was this time, the reason why I made my film, I realized, I felt like I was a different person in each of these places. When I was in Japan with my family I would be one way. Then when I was in my international school with my friends, I would be like a different person. In England I would be a different person, here I am a different person. I was like four people and I was like: “Which one is me? Why am I fake in one place?”. I felt, that I must be fake sometimes if I am not the same person. I freaked out, I did not know which one was me. I thought there should be one self. I should be consistent. Obviously what I figured out through the film was that that’s not how it works. My discovery was that I obviously have to adapt, depending on my environment. It’s all myself but I am different, because of the different cultures and circumstances I’m put in. Because all through my life I’ve been put in different cultural circumstances and I had to adapt to survive. It’s like a part of me, it’s not like I am being bad in one place because I am not being the same as here (Sara, 24).

Sara’s words bring to mind a question analyzed by representatives of “reflexive modernization school”: Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash. They wondered if in late modernity, creating cohesive and continuous identity is possible at all. According to Beck, individualization uprooted people from traditional institutions such as the nation state, local community, class or even family, and imposed on them the obligation to build their identity. They cannot find an anchor in the outside world anymore and the only signpost they have is their own experience (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Scott Lash is even more radical in his opinion about late modernity:

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4 Sara made a film about being a TCK.
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The contemporary individual, Beck never tires of saying, is characterized by choice, where previous generations had no such choices. What Beck often omits to say is that this individual must choose fast, must – as in a reflex – make quick decisions. Second-modernity individuals haven’t sufficient reflexive distance on themselves to construct linear and narrative biographies. They must be content, as Ronald Hitzler has noted, with Bastelbiographien, with bricolage-biographies in Lévi-Strauss’s sense. The non linear individual may wish to be reflective, but has neither time nor space to reflect. He is a combinard. He puts together networks, constructs alliances, makes deals. He must live, is forced to live in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge and life-changes are precarious (Lash 2001: ix).

Anthony Giddens, who agrees with Beck and Lash in general characteristic of contemporary society claims, however, that people still try and succeed to build coherent and continuous identity. The fact that they change attitude and appearance in multiple contexts does not prove that they have no inner core of self-identity. On the contrary, most people are able to effectively integrate their demeanour into their personal narratives, which contributes to the sense of coherence and continuity (Giddens 1991: 100). Coming back to global nomads’ dilemmas, the notion “Third Culture Kids” sometimes enables them to frame different, sometimes contradictory, experiences and integrate different demeanours into their personal narrative. In such cases “being a TCK” is like a basic identity, which encompasses others:

There are different, cultural pieces of me, but saying that I’m a TCK allows me to continuously pull that together. So it’s not like I feel South Asian today and tomorrow I’ll feel French or something else. It’s more like I’m allowed to feel all those things at the same time. To me, that’s how being a TCK keeps all things together.

And you need this frame and continuity in your life?

Yes. I need that, or else I’ll constantly try to figure out why I feel like this, but I also like that and do this, while it doesn’t make sense to me. Being a TCK allows me to hold all that together as a person. It’s a way to make everything make sense. There was a time when I didn’t know TCK and that was when I had a cultural identity crisis, I was falling apart. I just didn’t know how to make things fit together (Dewanshi, 29)

Obviously, there are people who do not know the term TCKs and are still able to form their identity. One of the strategies is “dual” identity (Kłoskowska 1996; Łukowski 2001), applied most often when a person did not move very often and spent many years in one country. I identified this strategy among Poles whose parents had a job in France, Brazil, or the USA, and who stayed there during the
majority of their school years. When defining who they are, they referred to the parents’ country (“ideological homeland”) and to the country of residence, their “private homeland” (Ossowski 1984). Another common strategy among TCKs consists in looking for general terms describing their multicultural and mobile lives:

I want to be a global citizen and be based in different places. (Mittali, 29)

I feel very globally-minded. I call it “worldcentric” (Divank, 30)

I: Where do you consider to be your home?
Paul: (laughs) Planet Earth. I don’t consider myself American. It’s one of the things I don’t often say – particularly here, in America, because people are kind of nationalistic and proud of being American; maybe not that much in New York, but still… To me, a passport is rather a nuisance, I’d rather not have those. I understand some of the relevance of it, but a lot of the stuff is just overdone, it’s a pain. (Paul, 41).

Paul represents yet another category: those, who do not identify with their passport country nor with any other country. These people do not want to fit into national categories, because they perceive them as oppressive and not reflecting their identity. Ulrich Beck called institutions of the First Modernity (nation state, local community…) “zombie categories” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Although their death was proclaimed a few decades ago, they still remain an important point of reference for many people. My research seems to confirm this observation. TCKs’ national identity was rarely clear-cut and unambiguous, yet they referred to national categories. Perhaps the explanation lies in their social relations: it is not their subjective need to define themselves as American or Polish, but they are constantly asked to do so and are thus confronted with other people’s expectations and labels.

CONCLUSION

Ewa Nowicka, who analyzed identity strategies of people coming from mixed marriages, claims that there are specific dilemmas and problems in their lives, but also opportunities and strategies for using social capital and benefiting from their situation (Nowicka 2007: 105). In my opinion this observation also applies to TCKs. Participants of my research had different appraisals of their biographies, ranging from:
I sometimes feel like my life is just a series of uncomfortable adjustments, you know… (Philipp, 24).

But we never say: “It’s all brilliant” or “You’re so unlucky not to be travelling”. No, because it’s challenging, makes you feel lonely, all the old friends move eventually, like ours did. We’re not trying to make it sound like it’s wonderful. There are moments when it is, obviously, but there are moments when it’s not. (Stephanie, 49).

Well, it is very broad… very rich, I am super happy with this experience. This is the best, that could ever happen to me, really! I’ve grown up internally, mentally and everything. My eyes opened for so many different things (Kasia, 42).

To me it was a good fortune, it was my prize on the cosmic lottery, as one of my Asian friends says… Because it is not my merit, right, but just a cosmic lottery. I was lucky that this journey took place and that my stay in Asia was just in this age when a child opens for the influence from the outside world. (Wojciech, 60).

If we take into account two common traits for all the TCKs, we can see that challenges and problems are connected with mobility, while opportunities and advantages result from the contact with many places and cultures. My research also indicates that American TCKs highlight the negative part of their experience more, whilst Polish TCKs insist on the positive part. This short essay did not cover all the interesting plots in TCKs biographies. I focused on the identity dilemmas and strategies in three dimensions: agency and control over one’s life, cohesion and continuity and social relations. Some of the problems mentioned here, such as construction of national identity, choosing schools and relating to peers, may refer to other types of migrants as well, while others are specific for TCKs. Dilemmas and strategies described in this essay also prove that global nomads’ biographies illustrate main problems with identity construction in late modern times. It is important to analyze their adult lives in order to better understand the consequences of multiple migration in childhood.

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