

**Perspectives of Canadian Student Volunteers in a  
University “Conversation Partners Program” for  
International Students**

**by  
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## Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

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or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

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## **Abstract**

The experiences of Canadian-born students in university programs aimed at intercultural relationships as well as language exchange is lacking in the literature. This study asked, “How does the experience of communicating with international students in a university sponsored Conversation Partners Program shape the identities of the Canadian conversation partners?” Narrative inquiry was used to determine the most common and relevant themes through out the interviews with the participants. These common themes were identified as: “reflecting on cultural norms and values”, “emerging openness to diverse perspectives”, and “expanding social and cultural network identities.” Implications for these intercultural exchanges are that both parties (Canadian and International students) gain in perspective taking, in learning about other cultures while being encouraged to question their own cultural values, and in learning to navigate the world by gaining personal and cultural assets due to becoming more open to the values and beliefs of diverse cultures.

**Keywords:** intercultural; narrative inquiry; perspective taking; cultural network identities

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the participants in the Conversation Program. The participants I interviewed and that I have come to know, having been a conversation partner myself, are inspiring in the work they do. They are inspired to not only be open to diverse cultures and learn from them but also to continuously improve upon the gains they have made, by applying their intercultural awareness to aspects of their lives not only within the university setting but also outside of it.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Increasingly, university campuses are populated with culturally diverse student bodies (Engberg & Hurtado, 2011), highlighting the reality that education often occurs in the context of a pluralistic and diverse society. Given Engberg's (2007) argument that higher education has a societal responsibility to create graduates who will serve as leaders of social progress toward equity, furthering understanding about the impact of this cultural diversity on student life is crucial. Creating graduates who are leaders in social justice and equity can only be accomplished if students develop cultural understandings, perspective taking, multicultural competence, and a moral imperative for social justice. Such developments are most likely to occur through experiences that are meaningful to students within the context of the cultural diversity that characterizes the university.

At present, researchers and academics familiar with North American university dynamics are worried about the "self-segregation" of students by ethnicity and culture that is increasingly found at universities (Chang, Astin & Kim, 2004). The term "self-segregation" applies to students of a particular ethnicity or culture socializing among themselves and ultimately, isolating themselves from other groups. This can take place anywhere from the cafeteria of a campus to locations of extra-curricular activities such as special interest groups (Chang, Astin & Kim, 2004). Self-segregation can prevent openness toward other cultures and an embracing of diversity that may be explained in part, by Stephan and Stephan's (1985) model of intergroup threat. Intergroup threat derives from an exchange or exchanges between in-group and out-group members of a culture or society. The in-group is that which holds majority power and status while the out-group is typically the minority in a population with fewer resources and less representation with regard to power and numbers.

Intergroup threat theory has been used to explain intergroup bias and prejudice and "occurs when one group's actions, beliefs, or characteristics challenge the goal attainment or well-being of another group" (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006).



Intergroup threat is often experienced when individuals from majority and minority cultures interact with each other. Both the majority and the minority cultures may experience “intergroup threat”, often in the same way and at times in somewhat different ways as will be covered in the following pages.

Intergroup threat is thought to be created by three sets of factors: prior intergroup relations (e.g., the amount and conditions of prior contact), prior intergroup cognitions (e.g., knowledge of the out-group, stereotypes, prejudice, expectations, and perceptions of dissimilarity), and situational factors (e.g., amount of structure, type of independence, group composition, and relative status) (Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

The lack of prior contact between students of different cultures may lead to a feeling of threat from both parties. In other words, students of different cultures who have not had personal contact with each other may experience fear of encountering a culture that appears very different from their own in terms of values and characteristics, rather than experiencing curiosity that would lead to engagement.

Distorted intergroup cognitions in the form of stereotypes and prejudices also may discourage university students from intercultural exchange. For example, a Canadian student who has read articles in the international press about the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 15, 2015 may not be interested in meeting students from the Molenbeek area of Brussels, where the terrorists were known to reside.

And situational factors, such as students not having appropriate spaces to engage others of a different culture in a comfortable, non-threatening environment may also trigger a threat response in all parties involved.

Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison (2009) describe two types of group threats: realistic and symbolic. Realistic group threats are threats to a group’s power and general welfare, and may include actual physical or material harm to an individual member such as pain, torture, or death, as well as economic loss, and threats to health or personal security. Realistic group threats are rarely encountered in a university setting. On the other hand, symbolic group threats, which are threats to a group’s religion, values, belief

system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or worldview may be present, as international students adapt to their new surroundings in a host institution/country. Here, both the in-group and the out-group may sense symbolic threats, which undermine a person's self-identity or self-esteem.

Social identity theorists posit that the actions of out-groups, such as international students, often lead in-groups such as those in the majority North American culture to feel that their group's status is threatened (Branscombe, Spears, Ellemers & Doosje, 2002). The social identity definition of "status threat" refers to both concrete resources (e.g., a reduction of job prospects; Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002) and group esteem (Branscombe, Spears, Ellemers, & Doosje, 2002). Intergroup theorists believe that threats to concrete resources are potentially realistic and that threats to group esteem are symbolic. Although as previously mentioned, realistic threats are rarely encountered in a university setting, there are some cases that may represent a potentially realistic threat. For example, students from the in-group may observe that some of their international peers are gaining ground and out-competing them in terms of job prospects.

Intergroup threat theory is principally focused on perceptions of threat; the theory being a social psychological theory. It posits that perceived threats have psychological consequences, whether or not the perceived threats are actual threats in reality. Hence, the focus of intergroup theory is not the actual threat posed by out-groups (e.g., rising rates of unemployment or immigration) but instead, the perceptions of the threats that occur.

Semyonov, Raijman, Tov and Schmidt's (2004) study that analyzed attitudes toward immigrants in Germany has relevance to the current research in that a distorted perception of reality (a false notion of the population of an out-group), may lead to a sense of threat for the in-group. Four variables were examined: 1) the actual proportion of immigrants in counties across Germany; 2) the respondents' perceptions of the proportion of immigrants in their counties; 3) the respondents' perceptions of the threats posed by immigrants; 4) the respondents' exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants. The actual proportion of immigrants in the Germans' counties was not a predictor of exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants. Instead, it was the perception of the proportion of

immigrants in the respective county that was a predictor of both perceived threat and exclusionary attitudes. Within a university setting, Canadian students' perception of the proportion of international students from a particular culture that make up the student body may be influencing the extent to which they perceive this group as a threat and develop exclusionary feelings towards the group. For example, if the proportion of international students who are faring better academically (and hence will out-compete them) is perceived to be high within the student population, this could be interpreted as a source of threat.

### **1.1. Intergroup Relations**

In general, groups with relatively low power in society are more likely than high power groups to experience threats; however, when threatened, high power groups will react more strongly to threat (Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2009). Low power groups, being dominated by higher power groups are highly susceptible to perceiving threats. Low power racial and ethnic groups in the United States, such as African Americans have been shown to perceive higher levels of threat from high power groups such as European Americans (Stephan & Stephan, 2002). However, high power groups have much invested in terms of power and resources, so they are likely to react strongly to feeling threatened and moreover they have the resources to concretely take steps in reaction to the threats. Research suggests that the relationship between threat and intergroup attitudes such as prejudice are stronger for high power groups than for low power groups (Johnson, Terry, & Louis, 2005). Applied to a university setting, this relates to in-group students potentially being threatened by the out-group and perhaps using the power and resources that are more accessible to them than to the out-group students, to marginalize or segregate them. Out-groups self-segregate because through the actions of the in-group, they feel that they don't belong. In-groups self-segregate because they have more power in their group relative to the out-group and as suggested earlier, and they feel threatened by the out-group. This may take the form of an intentional pre-meditated effort to displace the out-group students by not socializing with them or by dominating campus life in terms of participation in courses or extra-curricular activities. In terms of participation in courses, the in-group members may use their greater expertise in the in-

group discourse to forcibly out-perform the out-group in class discussions and class activities.

When the in-group and out-group are relatively equal in power, perceptions of threat within each group may be high. The sense of antagonism arises when the two groups are competing with one another for limited resources and hence feel they are facing each other as rivals (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001). Zarate, Garcia, Garza and Hitlan (2004) compared European Americans who were members of a high power group and Mexican Americans, a lower power out-group on work-related traits, including job-related mindsets and opportunities. Work-related similarities (e.g., “They are just as hard-working as we are”) caused high power in-group members to perceive the out-group as competing with them on a more equal basis for limited resources such as work. In the same vein, other research has shown that more closely ranked groups tend to be more competitive with each other and are threatened more by each other than if they are less closely ranked (Garcia, Tor, & Gonzalez, 2006). Within a university setting, the in-group may perceive that the out-group is at the same level or perhaps even higher in terms of academics and this may lead to a greater feeling of threat to the in-group than if the out-group were underperforming.

Perceived cultural differences can also lead to perceptions of threat. For example, according to the concordance model of acculturation (Piontkowski, Rohman, & Florack, 2002) groups tend to perceive each other as threatening when they believe their cultural values and characteristics are not shared with each other (Zarate, Garcia, Garza, & Hitlan, 2004). There are at least five factors that encourage perceived intergroup threat: 1) the in-group is highly valued in terms of overall self-esteem, self-worth and self-protection 2) the in-group has low power or control over the out-group whether this was the case in the past or exists in the present. 3) relations with the out-group have been negative 4) the in-group mistrusts or is suspicious of the out-group and 5) the status quo in terms of social hierarchy and rules is highly valued by the in-group.

New immigrant groups are often expected by the host culture to abandon their cultures and assimilate to the host culture. When this doesn't happen, members of the

host culture often interpret the immigrant group's lack of interest in assimilating to the host culture as threatening. And immigrant groups may feel threatened when they perceive they are being forced to abandon their culture, which may differ to a large degree with respect to that of the host culture. (Crisp, Stone, & Hall, 2006). In a university setting, the in-group may feel threatened by perceiving international students as having cultural values and characteristics different from them and this may be cause for alarm. At the same time, international students may want to preserve their culture and yet, often feel the societal pressure to assimilate to the culture of the majority of individuals in the society. In both cases, there is the experience of feeling threatened.

Symbolic threats are expected to be predicted by value differences more than realistic threats. Moreover, value differences predict group threats more than individual threats. In a recent experiment, German participants read about a fictitious immigrant group whose values were shown to be either similar or different from that of the participants (Rohman et al., 2006). The researchers found that when participants read about the immigrant group with different values, there was an increase in perceptions of symbolic threat. However, it did not affect perceptions of realistic threat. Likewise, as mentioned earlier, in university environments, there may be the perception of symbolic threats in observing international students with values that are not so similar to those of the in-group. The threats tend not to be realistic because there are rarely any possibilities of tangible harm (e.g. physical or material or that of general welfare) done to the in-group.

## **1.2. Cultural Dimensions**

Individualism-collectivism (Triandis, 1995), power distance (Hofstede, 1980, as cited in Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2009), and uncertainty avoidance - a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity which reflects the extent to which members of a society attempt to cope with anxiety by minimizing uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1995 as cited in Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2009) are value dimensions on which cultures differ and that can influence the perception of threats by in- and out-groups. Individualism refers to cultures in which the self is understood in terms of the individual's particular traits while

collectivism refers to cultures in which the self is understood in terms of associations with certain groups (Triandis, 1995). People from collectivist cultures, because of their attachment to their associations, will sometimes experience threats from those with individualistic cultures. Often, international students (the out-group) in a North American campus have collectivist backgrounds that differ from the individualistic values and characteristics of the in-group and this may trigger a sense of threat in the collectivist group.

### **1.3. Consequences of Threat**

#### **1.3.1. Cognitive Responses**

Feelings of threat can precipitate or amplify cognitive biases in intergroup perceptions. Attribution errors (Pittigrew, 1979) may be increased by the presence of threat. This is, negative acts of the out-group and positive in-group acts are typically explained in terms of group idiosyncrasies (i.e. innate differences between the groups), whereas positive out-group acts and negative in-group acts are typically explained in reference to the situation by the in-group (i.e. circumstantial related events, not innate reasons). In other words, the in-group always presents itself as somehow superior to the out-group, justifying even negative acts with situational factors. Communicative and memory biases are related to this. For example, memory errors such as remembering negative behaviours of the out-group occur more frequently in the in-group when these negative behaviours are believed to be due to differences in disposition. Positive out-group behaviours are remembered by the in-group to be due to situational variables, not intrinsic dispositional factors. (Ybarra et al., 2000). Threat may also lead to an elevation in the stereotype disconfirmation bias, in which out-group stereotypes are believed to be more difficult to disconfirm than in-group stereotypes (Ybarra et al., 2003). Overestimation bias, in which the size of the out-group is believed to be larger than it really is, as described previously, may also be affected by a feeling of threat (Gallagher, 2003).

### 1.3.2. Behavioural Responses

Behavioural responses to threat may include withdrawal, submission, and negotiation to aggression and discrimination and scapegoating among others (Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2009).

In general, whether the threat is symbolic or realistic in nature makes significant difference in behavioural responses. Symbolic threats, in comparison to realistic threats are more likely to lead to dehumanization, moral exclusion of the out-group, and reduced empathy for the out-group, as well as increased conformity to the in-group's norms and values (Jetten et al., 2002). Realistic threats, on the other hand, lead to more pragmatic responses to the out-group. These responses are meant to negotiate the threat the in-group feels. These behaviours might include withdrawal, avoidance, and aggression.

In most cases, threat is not responsible in and of itself for creating the responses previously mentioned. However, threat does function to amplify these responses. For example, researchers have found that when people are categorized by society into groups, this leads to intergroup biases (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). However, adding threat to the categorization would most likely amplify the biases (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1999). For example, in a university setting, the segregation of in-groups from out-groups is likely to create tension and intergroup biases based on stereotypes of cultures, for example. However, it is the addition of threat that would most likely lead to a greater cultural bias based on stereotypes between groups.

Finally, a feeling of threat and intergroup anxiety derives from the anticipation of negative consequences. People appear to fear three types of negative consequences: negative psychological or behavioural consequences for the self, and negative evaluations by members of the out-group and the in-group. In interactions between different groups, the fear may be that of experiencing embarrassment due to their own or others' behaviour. People may fear feeling out of control or incompetent and often anticipate embarrassment due to what they sense as awkwardness in interaction with other groups. Moreover, people may fear a loss of self-esteem or a loss of their sense of group identity. All of these dynamics may be prevalent in a university environment. Students of different

cultures may feel anxiety in approaching each other primarily because of the dynamics previously mentioned.

The origins of the discomfort of students engaging with peers of a different culture may also be traced to the fear of negative psychological and behavioural repercussions associated with being negatively judged by members of one's own cultural group. It is this sense of discomfort with respect to people of other cultures that is an obstacle to creating a much-needed flourishing environment in a diverse community such as that of a university.

Engberg and Hurtado (2011) studied how students' exposure to diversity initiatives (both curricular and co-curricular) and inter-cultural interactions in a university setting promoted student learning and democratic outcomes. Students' completed a survey that assessed their reported pluralistic orientation on five dimensions, at the time of matriculation and after two-years. The five dimensions included the ability to: work cooperatively with diverse people, experience multiple perspectives, discuss and negotiate controversial issues, show openness to having one's views challenged, and tolerate others with different beliefs. Engberg and Hurtado (2011) suggest that higher education institutions are particularly well fit for accomplishing the goals of a pluralistic approach to education by reducing the aforementioned discomfort levels and sense of threat between the in-group and the out-group. Institutions are thought to provide spaces where the diverse cultural assets of the student body facilitate the emergence of diverse perspectives. Moreover, in the university environment, students are encouraged to interact with peers from other cultural groups as a means to reduce biases related to cultural differences. Engberg and Hurtado (2011) conclude that engagement in educational practices that intentionally target cultural pluralism and continuous assessment of students' capacity to embrace pluralism is what ultimately allows for an improvement in intercultural relations.

However, the authors also report that engaging in a diversity experience may not be sufficient to lead to acknowledgement, understanding and accepting of cultures other than one's own. In a similar vein to Nagda, Kim and Truelove (2004), Engberg and



Hurtado (2011) suggest that more intensive, cross-cultural curricular and co-curricular experiences of students from diverse cultures forces them to engage directly with their own psychological material and that of others, and when these activities concern cultural awareness- that is understanding other cultures with respect to differences and similarities to the culture of one's own, wisdom about negotiating diverse cultures emerges. The wisdom related to navigating the cultures relates to not just understanding other cultures but also appreciating them in ways that were outside the realm of one's capacity or imagination beforehand. Inter-group threat no longer reigns when there is an appreciation of other cultures. Moreover, as Coste, Moore and Zaratre (2009) suggest, cultures are fluid in their capacity to be navigated. When a person understands and appreciates diverse sub-cultures, his/her identity becomes constituted from experience with these cultures. And in doing so, s/he incorporates greater tools to communicate and negotiate larger aspects of society by forming bonds with others. Ultimately, this has the effect of benefiting society as a whole as society is enriched by the cultural capital of its citizens.

When there isn't this cultural navigation of society as explained by Coste, Moore and Zaratre (2009), students understand diversity as something belonging to the "other" and not to themselves as well as the "other." (Sandell & Tupy, 2015). Guo, Arthur and Lund (2010) found that student competency for understanding other cultures as well as that of him/herself is increased after engagement with high-impact intercultural activities such as cultural partnerships. A crucial finding from the research on cultural diversity is that student-student interaction is essential in order to gain the educational benefits of cultural diversity (Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005). Yet, while there is evidence to indicate that significant educational gains result through interactions with culturally diverse peers, few studies have analyzed how these benefits accrue.

An exception is Hudson's (2015) study of student friendship making in a culturally diverse university in the United States. In this research, a constructivist grounded theory method of inquiry was used to develop a substantive theory of the process by which college students develop and maintain intercultural and interracial friendships. Twenty-one students from a large, public research university in the south-eastern United States participated in interviews and completed solicited journals to

describe their friendships with a student whose cultural and racial origin differed from their own. Findings suggested college students develop and maintain intercultural and interracial friendships through a process of inter-personalizing cultural difference that represents the core category of the substantive theory. Inter-personalizing cultural difference consists of four sub-processes, which are central for college students to develop and maintain their multicultural and multiracial friendships: (1) cultivating trust and establishing a “silent contract,” (2) embracing similarity without forgetting difference, (3) exploring other cultures, and (4) bridging difference to connect.

Cultivating Trust and Establishing a “Silent Contract” results in feeling able to be authentic with, and having mutual respect for one’s friend. These are requirements for “exploring other cultures”. Cultural exploration requires authenticity, trust and respect if it is to take place. In order to explore each other’s culture at a level that also encourages a deep friendship, the friends need to feel that they can be their genuine selves and be allowed to explore a friend’s culture by asking questions, often being wrong in assumptions and still be accepted as a friend in return.

The process of “Exploring other Cultures” both facilitates and is facilitated by the process of “Embracing Similarity without Forgetting Difference.” For example Hudson (2015) provides an example of how connecting through a shared interest in music is an especially common and powerful way for embracing similarity. Connecting through music can also be a significant way to explore each other’s cultures because a common interest in music (or any other form of expression) allows friends to both connect in their similarity and also explore their cultural differences.

“Exploring other Cultures” is also affected by whether one friend guides the other friend in exploring his/her culture and whether the friend helps the other to acculturate to his/her culture. By acculturation, Hudson does not mean to say that one friend will lead the other to incorporate everything about his/her culture. Instead, it is about having the friend experience parts of the other culture in a way that can please him or her. Here we come to the final sub-process, which is “Bridging to Connect”. In “Bridging to Connect”, the friends find the motivation to befriend each other at a deep level by bridging the

differences and connecting on the similarities. This is when the friendships materialize despite all the challenges due to differences in culture and beliefs.

The proposed research extends the work of Hudson by focusing on intercultural partnerships although not interracial friendships per se, who come together in a more formal context than in Hudson's case and share each other's company with their accompanying beliefs and cultural backgrounds. The sub-processes of Hudson's work are a starting point in understanding the intercultural partnerships of my subjects.

My investigation focused on dynamics similar to Hudson but in a much different setting and without the qualifier of race as the main focus in the relationships. Instead, my research explores how the beliefs of Canadian undergraduate students are influenced by their interactions with international students in "Conversation Partners", a university based program aimed at improving English language skills of international students. In this program, Canadian student volunteers aid international students by providing conversation one hour per week with each of two international students at a mutually accorded designated place. The conversations are open to any topic the conversation partners would like to engage in, from special interests, hobbies, school to cultures. How Canadian conversational partners seek common understandings and shared values with their international partners in order to engage them, while at the same time staying true to themselves and grounded in their own culture is also explored. It is also of interest to explore how Canadian conversation partners become self-motivated to learn about cultures that may seem unfamiliar, unusual or even perplexing. Lastly, how conversational partners bridge differences to connect and establish strong bonds with each other is investigated. How discrepancies between the cultural values of the Canadian student and his or her international conversational partner emerge and how these discrepancies are resolved needs much clarification.

In summary, the purpose of the present research is to explore how Canadian students in a university-based, Conversation Partners program describe their intercultural competencies and how their interactions with international students influence their views on intercultural relations. Specifically, the primary research question asked is:

*“How does the experience of communicating with international students in a university sponsored Conversation Partners program shape the identities of the Canadian conversation partners?”*

As an American student who has lived in several cultures, my research for my thesis in the Conversation Partners program may not have been completely unbiased. Despite the fact that parts of American culture(s) are similar to Canadian culture(s) and that I suffered absolutely no culture shock when immigrating to Canada, I was influenced in part by my trips abroad (especially a four year stay in Argentina) and by my parents both having been born in Argentina.

In Latin America, there is generally a greater sense of collectivism (as defined earlier) than in North America. I have always been attracted to collectivist societies, in part because it suits my world view better, as places where instead of a fierce, reigning individualism, there is a greater orientation towards family and community as aspects that trump materialism, selfishness, status consciousness, etc.- at least in my experience. Hence, I suppose that as a researcher who wanted to remain as unbiased as possible but who as any human being has his/her own biases, I believe deep in my sub-consciousness there was the potential bias of expecting, perhaps even looking forward to perceiving how Canadian volunteers would perhaps be influenced by more collectivist societies like those of the Chinese conversation partners. And moreover, how they would come to grips with some of the limitations sometimes ingrained in North American societies, in particular the sense of individualism and a lesser emphasis on community oriented affairs. I suppose, perhaps in being more honest with myself, I somewhat expected Canadian volunteers to perceive positive aspects of the cultures of their partners such as the ones mentioned in their “Emerging openness to diverse perspectives”. And in fact, I did find that one of my participants, Jeff, actually perceived “how some things were done better in Canada and others were done better in other cultures (e.g. China)”. In his communion with his participants when they ate together, he was able to feel camaraderie with his international students who were Chinese and who were accustomed to sharing meals and stories with others. In fact, at one point, his partners wanted to treat Jeff to a

Chinese meal for his birthday. Because of the Conversation Partners Program protocol, this was not allowed.

I had to be assured that I would remain as unbiased as possible during the process of interviewing my participants, albeit I think part of me realized that my life in North America in combination with my experiences living abroad were part of my life story and that it would not be so easy to be as unbiased as I wished in terms of how my experiences affected my questioning and exploring of the stories of my participants. In the end, I think I fared quite well, in being vigilant of my biases.

## **Chapter 2. Methodology**

The study is a narrative inquiry, which is based firmly on the premise that as human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008). It is a form of qualitative research that involves the gathering of narratives, focusing on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences and seeking to provide “insight that (benefits) the complexity of human lives.” (Josselson, 2006, p.4). But narrative inquiry is more than the uncritical gathering of stories. Narrative inquirers strive to attend to the ways in which a story is constructed, for whom and why, as well as the cultural discourses that it draws upon.

The study of narrative is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories. All the participants in a study are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories (Connely & Clandinin, 1990). Researchers are continually attempting to give an account of the multiple levels at which a narrative inquiry is explored. A participant in a narrative inquiry is “engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories.” (Connely & Clandinin, 1990). The unstructured interview is a data collection tool in narrative inquiry. Interviews are conducted between researcher and participant, transcripts are made, meetings are conducted for further discussion and these all become part of the narrative record.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998) urge narrative inquirers to learn an attitude of empathic listening by not being judgmental and by suspending their disbelief as they attend to participants’ stories. Narrative researchers do not pretend to analyze participants’ stories objectively. The construction of the narrative is affected by the researcher’s biases- how s/he questions and provides responses in the interview, for example. In the present research, I actively listened to and acknowledged the value of the personal narratives the participants shared about their experiences with their conversation partners, attempting to be as reflective as possible in terms of monitoring my biases. I realized that my biases and assumptions played a significant role in the construction and analysis of the narrative.

Generalizing findings to larger populations is not the objective of a narrative inquiry. The point is to understand the multi-layered personal stories and the meanings they convey about the participants (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). Through the analysis of personal cases and comparisons between cases, a researcher can gather information about a particular dynamic. Hence, the cases allow for conceptual inferences to be arrived at regarding the particular social dynamic being analyzed. (Riessman, 2008).

Although the number of participants in a narrative study is smaller than in a quantitative study or even other qualitative research, there is a lot of information provided from interviews in a narrative study. The interviews allow for large amounts of data regarding description, emotions and thought processes. As each story from a participant is singular in nature, the description is more in-depth and therefore has the potential to add more to the understanding of the dynamics being analyzed. (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998).

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the research method in the current study because it was my intention to explore in depth the emotions and thought processes of my participants. The aim was to understand the unique stories of a few participants.

The Conversation Partners Program was officially launched in Fall of 2006 at Simon Fraser University. As explained in the official website, the Conversation Partners Program is designed to support multilingual learners' English conversation skills as well as help them with their social and cultural needs as they transition into and through the university.

The multilingual learners sign up to have a Canadian volunteer provide one hour of free form conversation with them per week. A limited number of placements are available, as the volunteers do not normally number more than 15 or 20 students.

In the Conversation Partners Program, there is a relatively strict protocol in terms of overall context that determines how the two parties meet, including the schedule in which they meet. They are welcome to choose where to meet, and the conversations they

have (excluding what could be deemed as offensive or inappropriate of course). But the participants must adhere to good manners, patience to listen to the other, even when not fully understanding him/her and to be respectful of the culture shared by the other.

## **2.1. Sample Recruitment Procedures**

After receiving Ethics Approval for the study procedures, participants were recruited by my sending a letter to the director of the Conversation Partners program describing my thesis plan and asking him if he could e-mail all the native speaking conversation partners volunteers regarding whether they would be interested in participating in my study. I received e-mails from three, Canadian born, English speaking volunteers and I asked them to inform their international partners about the study in the hope that the international students would also be interested in participating in the study. Having both the Canadian and the International conversation partners in the research provided a rich context to interpret the interviews. All together, three Canadian-born conversation partners and four international students participated in the research (one of the Canadian conversation partners saw two international students, whereas the remaining two Canadian conversational partners interacted with one international student each).



**Table 1. Conversation Partner Characteristics**

Partners	Nationality	Gender	Language <sup>1</sup>	Area of study	Academic Year	Time spent as Conv. Partners
<u>Group 1</u>						
Jeff	Canadian	M	English	Political Science	3rd	One trimester
Ron	Chinese	M	Mandarin	Computer Science	1st	One trimester
Carson	Chinese	M	Mandarin	Computer Science	1st	One trimester
<u>Group 2</u>						
Jane	Canadian	F	Cantonese	Communications	2nd	Five trimesters
Samantha	Chinese	F	Mandarin	Business	2nd	One trimester
<u>Group 3</u>						
Isaac	Canadian	M	Punjabi	Biol. & Biochem.	3rd	One trimester
Allison	Chinese	F	Mandarin	Business	Master's completed	Two trimesters

Note: <sup>1</sup> Language refers to spoken language of cultural origin

As shown in Table 1, all of the Canadian partners interacted with international students from Mainland China. The conversation partners in Group 1 were all male, in Group 2, they were both female and in Group 3, one partner was male and the other female. The Canadian partners were either in their second or third year of undergraduate studies. In group 1, the International conversation partners were both computer science majors in their first year. In group 2 and 3, the international students were both in business, with one as a second year undergraduate and the second as an MBA recipient. The three Canadian conversation partners had different majors, namely, Political Science,

Communications and Biology & Biochemistry. They also had different cultural/linguistic backgrounds: their linguistic backgrounds were namely, English in Group 1, Cantonese (the parents were from Hong Kong) in Group 2 and Punjabi (of South Asian descent) in Group 3. In terms of the time they have been Conversation partners, in Group 1, they had all begun that trimester (about 4 weeks into it); in Group 2, Jane, the Canadian partner had been a Conversation Partner for 5 trimesters and her Chinese partner had started that semester (again about 4 weeks into it); and in Group 3, Isaac, the Canadian partner had also started that trimester (about 4 weeks into it) while his Chinese partner had been in the program for two trimesters.

## **2.2. Interview Questions**

The interview questions were developed prior to the interview, and in a sufficiently open-ended way in order to have the participants tell their story in the least constrained way possible, while at the same time, keeping the topic of conversation focused on the aims of the project. The two central questions asked in order for the participants to open up and “tell their story” were:

- 1) How long have you been a conversation partner?
- 2) How/why did you decide to become a conversation partner?

The rest of the questions were developed to be used only when appropriate. They were asked with a conscientious mindset of not probing them for answers or leading them on a particular path I may have unconsciously been thinking of. The two essential questions were sufficient to have the participants talk at length in relation to the overall aim of the research. Please refer to Appendix A for the complete list of questions.

## **2.3. Procedures**

I met the participants the day the interview was conducted at the library location where they normally engage their partners and had each of them accompany me to an office I was generously provided by a professor for the interview. As I walked with each

one to the office, I engaged him/her in casual conversation in order to have them feel relaxed and comfortable with me during the interview.

The office I used is shared by various coworkers and professors. Aside from the equipment used for studies, it looks very much like any academic office, with a large desk and conventional office chairs. The interviews lasted from 45 to 120 minutes depending on the particular case. There were no planned breaks and the interviews appeared to flow very fluidly as the participants seemed comfortable in their position and narrated their stories very naturally. Once in a while, I would ask them to be more specific about a particular incident or phenomenon, although I attempted to intrude as little as possible, taking the lead of Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998) in having an attitude of empathic listening, by suspending disbelief as I listened to the participants' stories in the narrative inquiry.

I used my MacBook Air laptop and an I-phone 4S as a back up to record the interviews. A day or two after each interview, I transcribed the full interview verbatim and as soon as I had transcribed all of the interviews, I began the data analysis.

## **2.4. Data Analysis**

The transcription of my data was the starting point of my data analysis. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Each utterance of an individual was transcribed separately. An utterance is defined for the purposes of this study as a fully formed sentence with at least one noun phrase and a verb phrase. I transcribed the interviews myself so that I could engage with the material in the most intimate way possible. After transcribing the interviews, I was ready to analyze and understand the text in ways that had not been possible while conducting the interviews- as my mind had been focused during the interview in part on absorbing a holistic sense of the perspective of the individual.

I read the text of each interview several times in order to have a good sense of all the stories before I began using content analysis to code individual interviews. This type of analysis consists of dissecting a story into clusters- specifically those pieces that

seemed most pertinent to me in terms of themes that were repeated often and seemed significant in terms of understanding the research question posed.

Scenarios were written where an utterance or series of utterances highlighted a personal belief or insight from a speaker. The scenarios generated from each speaker were organized into a series of thematic clusters as mentioned that illustrated the beliefs of the speaker. Common themes that emerged from the review of these thematic clusters were identified.

There was triangulation of data from multiple sources. One, the students were asked to review the transcripts for any transcription errors. Second, e-mail correspondence with the director of the program provided information about the program. And thirdly, program materials and website information were reviewed for information on the program.

## Chapter 3. Results

My research involves participants in the Conversation Partners Program; however, I sought to understand the perspectives of the Canadian volunteers more so than those of the international students. I chose to focus on the Canadian students primarily because there have been quite a few studies on how International students adapt to a new country and in this case, a university environment. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the focus on Canadians' perspective with regard to others' cultures as perceived in a program such as the Conversation Partners Program is extremely scarce in past research.

This chapter discusses three main themes that emerged from the data analysis: 1) "Reflecting on cultural norms and values" 2) "Emerging openness to diverse perspectives" and; 3) "Expanding social and cultural network identities". The three themes were arrived at, by noting that they were echoed more than any other themes during the interviews with respect to all seven participants. The interviews led to having these themes, which are interlinked, create a narrative of their own. It is a wondrous yet not a particularly strange irony to find that the overarching themes to a narrative inquiry spell a story onto themselves.

The three interconnected themes discovered in the interviews are tied to each other in a very holistic sense. "Reflecting on cultural norms and values", relates to an awareness of the cultural norms and values of others as well as of oneself. This is accomplished by having Canadian students engage with international students and having both parties mentally taking notes of the cultural norms and values that are familiar to them and those that are not.

The second common theme "Emerging openness to diverse perspectives" is one step further to opening up to and sometimes even embracing the others' perspectives as ones that possibly make more sense than one's own. Finally, it is the engagement involving both the initial awareness of a different culture and the opening up or embracing of the others' culture that leads to both parties having the motivation to

“expand social and cultural network identities.” In other words, both parties become interested in befriending each other, in having bonded over a myriad of things, not least of them cultural and having become familiar with the other. In the end, there are three common themes, the second and third following the one prior to it.

### **3.1. “Reflecting on cultural norms and values”**

Culture has been defined in numerous but not altogether different ways. The anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1974) defined it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." The Cambridge English Dictionary states that culture is "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time." “At a particular time” in the quote is relevant because cultural norms and values are always in flux- part of the changing dynamics of a culture. When individuals reflect on their or others’ cultural norms and values, they are getting a “snapshot” of particular cultural norms and values, given the fact that cultures are always in a process of transformation.

These “snapshots” are relevant in that in the process of having individuals (in my thesis, Conversation Partners) interact with others in the program from different countries, as each party goes through a process of comparing and contrasting the different cultures from the perspective of a “snapshot”. That is, they are viewing their own cultural norms and values and that of others’ from a particular moment in time.

There tends to be a sharing of perspectives and ultimately a certain affirmation of their identities, as members of one culture, that varies from the other. In other cases, there is an adjustment made in learning that the generalizations made by that individual about others’ cultural norms and values are false or at the very least not very accurate.

In many cases, individuals of different cultures discover that they have much more in common in terms of norms and values as opposed to differences. Often in these cases, they realize that similar sensibilities and personalities due to commonalities

between particular individuals, regardless of their culture, have a greater priority in terms of social engagement, than the cultural backgrounds these individuals identify with.

In the first example of Jeff, an Anglo-Canadian, there is the initial discovery of having found new cultures to explore within the program. He then reflects upon his cultural norms and values as compared to those of his international partners, as will be noted further. He says that the program exceeded his hopes, precisely for this reason:

At first I thought it was just going to be about teaching English, and forming a relationship, but the cultural component sparked in me an even bigger interest in the program, as I later found out it was also part of the program, although not emphasized. I didn't think the cultural factors would factor in, but now that they have, I'm very appreciative of seeing things from their (his partners') point of view and mine.

Jeff, learned that with respect to his Chinese conversation partners, there was a sense of universality in the way they did some things, while others remained distinct. He seemed as interested and surprised in the ways he and his partners shared common cultural norms and values as well as in those aspects his partners practiced and believed in differently.

Some of the things we do different and some of the things we do similarly surprise me. For example, I found out that Chinese high school students learn new topics the first two years of high school and then the last two years are reserved in order to review the material to prepare for university examination entrance exams.

Jeff also has discovered that in being a Canadian conversation partner he is asked questions about Canadian culture he does not know how to answer at times. This seems to take him aback somewhat, first because he seems not to have ever questioned why he does certain typical Canadian things his partners ask him about and second because he does not necessarily have a good answer to give them. He appears to feel that he should know why he has followed typical Canadian cultural values and norms through out his life, now that he is more familiar with other cultural values and norms that function as

comparisons, as shared by his partners. Moreover, he now feels forced to be more introspective with regard to the typical cultural values he has always followed.

When they ask about Canadian culture that I do everyday but I don't think about, I think it's interesting because they are like "Why do you do it?" and I say, "I don't know. This is how I've been doing it for 19 years so I don't think about it and my conversation partners find it odd. Every time they ask about a tradition and I don't know why I do it, I find it interesting to think about.

When Jeff does have a set opinion about something he does, he finds that the differences in perspectives he may have with his conversation partners have allowed him to navigate differences to reach a level of resolution with his partners as well as others outside of the university environment. This is particularly interesting because he finds that in relating to international students, he has learned to relate to others (particularly, his parents). He has also learned that at times, others- whether it is his international partners or his parents, may have a better perspective for understanding certain things he once took for granted. Finally, "Jeff" feels he is in a much better position than ever before in educating people from all spheres, about perspectives they had never considered.

Being able to explain different perspectives-using my parents as an example, they (his parents) have different views and they don't necessarily acknowledge other views....they have trouble seeing them as their own perspective....Being able to talk to my conversation partners about their perspectives and reflecting it on my parents in conversations about different topics, I feel I'm better able to explain to my parents why something might come across as different or why we might have to do things different- something may work in China that doesn't work here or vice versa. The program has allowed me to expand and inform people about perspectives they may not consider normally. Explaining to my parents why we do certain things in Canada after partners ask me about it has allowed me to explain that there are different ways and that the way my parents have been taught forever may not be the best way to do something. Having my own culture



questioned has allowed me to open up more conversation with my parents about various topics.

Jeff did clarify that the process with his parents has not been easy. And that there needed to be more time and energy dedicated to exchanging perspectives and conflict resolution.

My parents may get a little heated with this new dynamic (of questioning their beliefs) and get frustrated with me always questioning things that they've done forever and that they take for granted and more questioning they may not agree with as well- but we are starting to open up new dialogues of different issues that they are passionate about. Questioning of my own culture has allowed me to better express, and go into detail with my parents about certain things that they may not have normally thought about.

Jeff is by no means in denial of the limitations of the progress he has made with his parents.

My parents have not allowed for a completely different perspective but there is starting to be a little more wiggle room...we can look at a situation from a different perspective in a different way and I'm starting to make a difference but not necessarily a huge impact on how they think about people of different cultures other than Canada's.

Jeff's process of absorbing different perspectives thanks to the program has also allowed him to perceive perspectives from the lens of his parents.

It's allowed me to realize that certain things I have questioned...not necessarily sensitive topics, I can see now why my parents want to keep things traditional- and not have their perspective changed. After I question a certain perspective and they explain why they think they do back to me, I can see their point of view a lot better. The program has given me the opportunity to expand and converse with my parents in a way that if I had not done the program, I would not have questioned in a deeper or more informed manner.

Isaac, the Canadian biology- biochemist major, found that in his function as a conversation partner, he encountered that some of his pre-conceptions of people were just not accurate. He had made it a priority in volunteering in the program to rid himself of some of the generalizations he had made in his life regarding other cultures. Prior to the program, he had not been exposed to cultures that were not Canadian, at least not in an intimate way. All his friends in high school were of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but they were all Canadian born. He relates the following:

I was surprised that my participant spoke English so well. I expected her to be a Chinese, non-English speaker. And I was surprised she was Muslim. I didn't know Islam was a major religion in China.

In reflecting on cultural norms and values, Jane, the third year Canadian Communications major student explains that she solidly affirmed her identity to be that more akin to Canadian culture once she learned about the culture of some of her international partners:

One of my conversation partners was going back to China to get married at the age of twenty-three as is often common there to get married early on. This gave me perspective in life in the sense that I thought to myself that I wouldn't want to get married at that age. I didn't want to be in her place. I'd rather be travelling or doing other things. I wouldn't want to be living the life of my conversation partner.

Jane expands on this point by saying that:

There are certain values I do not share with my conversation partners (from China). For example, I don't share the traditional values of getting married at such a young age like the case of the partner I spoke about; or having family come before you in terms of choosing a lifestyle or making daily decisions; or the incredible academic pressure put on students, unlike in Canada for the most part.

Interestingly, she reserves a bit of doubt in what she says, presumably because she realizes her limitations in what she knows about Chinese culture. Hence, she states:

“But perhaps, I just don’t know enough about their culture yet.”

Ron and Carson, Jeff’s partners who are Chinese have reflected on some interesting differences between China as compared to Canada. And in some cases they speak of, they seem to resonate more with more typically Canadian culture rather than with the more typically Chinese culture they grew up in. For example, Ron says:

“I am from the one child generation in China. When Jeff talked about his siblings, I had wishful thoughts about having had a brother or sister.”

On the other hand, Carson, Jeff’s other partner seems to affirm his cultural values are closer to those of Chinese, rather than Canadian individuals:

Jeff doesn’t plan on going to graduate school after he graduates but I certainly do. I think there may be a cultural component in explaining this difference. In China, people normally want to pursue as high of a degree as possible considering the harsh competition that exists in the work place. The higher degree you have, the greater the chances of landing a good job.

Carson goes on to say that despite this cultural difference that he sees:

I don’t feel major differences in values with Jeff, at least not yet. There must be some differences I suppose, but they haven’t shown up yet.

This last quote is interesting because one may be predisposed to thinking that there is a tremendous gap in cultural differences between China and Canada. But perhaps as Carson feels it, friendships can be made across cultures, and that there may be a potential universality of values that trumps cultural differences. He obviously feels an affinity with his Canadian partner that seems to transcend all boundaries.

Samantha, the Chinese student whose partner is Jane and who majors in business, reflected on the idea that she perceived certain characteristics of life in Canada as resonating more with her than the experience of individuals living in China. Similarly to Ron, she states:

I appreciate that in Canada, people are more casual and more open to talking to each other. Also, Canadians seem to be overall more friendly than the Chinese. Canadians ask you how you are doing; they say thank you to the bus driver.... I really appreciate this aspect of Canadian culture as well because it allows for a greater sense of community.

Allison, who is Isaac's Chinese partner, reflects on the differences she sees between the culture of societies in Canada and China. She explains that like Samantha and Ron, certain aspects of Canadian culture suit her better than the culture in China:

In China, we have to live with our parents until we grow up. But in Canada it's not like this. Also in China, when people communicate, they hide and have the other guess what they are thinking. Canadians are more straightforward. I prefer that people be more straightforward.

### **3.2. Emerging openness to diverse perspectives**

The second theme: "Emerging openness to diverse perspectives" refers primarily to participants' aperture to other perspectives and cultures. However, it is also much more than that. It is having the incentive and motivation to not only see things from a different perspective, but also to allow the perspective to shape one's sensibility. This in turn, leads to a dynamism of not simply knowing the "other", but also making the perspective and culture of the other, his or her own, to some degree. Here, I do not necessarily mean that the participant will follow the traditions or values of the "other", but will at the very least have them incorporated as "another way of doing things" that is just as valid or even more valid than the beliefs and values from his or her own culture.

Isaac, in the course of the Conversation Partners Program began to realize that not only were his pre-conceptions not necessarily accurate, but moreover, they were hindering him from having great experiences. As he put it:

I felt a little close-minded after realizing that I had misconceptions about my partner. I now guess that anybody from any place can have their own religion.

After meeting my Muslim Chinese partner, I wouldn't be surprised now in meeting another Muslim Chinese person. I would think it's normal. I'm gradually becoming more open-minded. Things aren't always as they seem. I thought my partner would have a broken English from looking at her. I underestimated her and I was pleasantly surprised. I think the low expectations I had of my partner and international students in general have been reduced with each session. I think that my partner is smart and I expect more from her now. I know that she's quite knowledgeable.

Isaac is aware of the journey he has to traverse in order to be much more open-minded but at the same time he is mindful that he has come a long way in such a short period of time (approximately one month in the program). As he states,

My subconscious still has expectations. I try not to stereotype though. But when I meet someone, I still often judge them by the way they look like or the way they speak. I come to the program with a goal of being more open-minded but I haven't made the complete shift yet because of the few sessions I've had with my conversation partners.

Isaac admits that:

Generally speaking, I probably associate better with people who are more similar to me in terms of language and religion. I am Christian, but what I am saying pertains more to the realm of work than anything else. On a daily, socializing basis, I don't mind relating to international students, but again, in work related or career related dynamics, I care somewhat. However, in putting a high premium on intelligence and competence, I no longer judge people so much on the basis of how they look like or how they speak and the program has had a huge impact on this shift. I still need more time in the program in order to achieve my personal goal of not being culturally biased. I'm early in the program. The trend that the program is leading me on will be amplified. I'm headed towards a certain direction.

Isaac reflects on the sources that have made him have pre-conceptions of people from other cultures in a way that he no longer justifies.

I think there are stereotypes in the media, online and T.V. that impact the way I think. It's hard to ignore because I see it so often but when I meet someone face-to-face and speak to them, my conception of the person seems more transparent than when I watch them on social media or T.V. I then realize upon having the face-to-face meetings, that the stereotypes are not true. Social media, which I happen to participate a lot in, has created more challenges in reducing the stereotypes. Social media makes me less accepting. I don't see the whole person as I would if I were to meet them face to face and instead I make judgments based on fragments of the person, such as the way they write or their profile picture. When I meet somebody face to face, I factor in eye contact, head movements, clarity and tone of voice, all of which create a more holistic picture of the person. As I meet more international people, I think I become less judgmental.

He seems keenly aware that being challenged with the stereotypes he has is a great incentive to becoming more tolerant and embracing of other cultures. He reflects,

I think I would understand that not all international people are going to meet positive expectations. However, after meeting so many people that surpass my expectations, I would become more tolerant. This is true even if half of the international people I meet fall into the category of stereotypes. Still, the people who surpass my expectations will stand out more because of the positive experiences I will have had with them. In other words, when my profiling is proven wrong, I am being hit harder. So this would point me in the right positive direction in helping me become more culturally accepting.”

Jeff has also reflected on how meeting people of other cultures, is changing his mental landscape.

I didn't think the cultural factors would factor in the program, but now that they have, I'm very appreciative of seeing things from their point of view and mine. I learned a lot about China through my partners that I wouldn't have learned otherwise...some of the things we do differently and some of the things we do

similarly surprise me. I've learned the tools to learn about other cultures in a less superficial way.

Moreover, he explains that his improved conversation/discussion skills are not limited to those with his parents. He states, "The experience in the program has allowed me to expand and inform people about perspectives they may not consider normally."

He adds that it is not simply a matter of informing others about a new perspective, but also in being more open to ideas he thought he was certain about before. As he states,

Being in the program and talking to my parents has allowed me to realize that certain things I have questioned in the past, I can now see why my parents want to keep things traditional- and not have their perspectives changed. After I question the topic and they explain why back to me, I can see their point of view a lot better.

Jeff ends this part of the interview by concluding that "This program has given me the opportunity to expand and converse with my parents and others in a way that if I had not done the program, I would not have questioned in a deeper or more informed manner.

Jane realizes that the program had also given her a greater sense of perspective on other cultures and that this has allowed her to be more open-minded overall. She states:

I learned from the program how biased I used to be with respect to international people. Once the program started and I met them, I realized they looked at things differently but not in a negative way. So, I've learned to be more open about international students.

Like Isaac, Jane explains that in large part, the source of her prejudices is due to the media.

In Vancouver, I constantly heard in the news about Chinese people doing certain things like a kid peeing in a trash can in the presence and permissiveness of his grandmother. Or for example, watching on the news that Chinese people are rude, that they don't follow formal rules, etc.

She reflected that one of the precipitating events that led to her diminishing of false pre-conceptions was “that one of my partners was a Chinese Christian and was very kind and gentle and he didn’t fit the stereotype I had of the Chinese being rude.”

This, in turn, led her to reflect that:

I learned to have a more open mind. And I guess I’ve learned that even though I’ve always lived in Vancouver and my partners are mainly from China, I still find that we are the same, that we have the same struggles in school and in life.

In other words, she came to the same conclusion as Carson (one of Jeff’s partners) that there are more likely to be more similarities than differences with respect to somebody from a different culture, something they were not aware of before joining the Conversation Partners Program.

Interestingly enough, as a result of the program, Jane became pro-active in educating her friends about not profiling. In the past, when her Canadian friends would say something negative about a Chinese person in profiling him or her, Jane would stay silent.

Now I say to my friends, “Maybe he or she is not really like that.” I try to steer away from the negative comments. Before, I would have stayed silent. I wouldn’t have said anything explicit but in my mind, it [her friends’ comments] would have confirmed the stereotype.

### **3.3. “Expanding social and cultural network identities”**

“Expanding social and cultural network identities” refers to having participants broaden their circle of friends and acquaintances to others outside of their traditional setting. In my thesis, it refers to having a Canadian form emotional bonds with an international student and share a part of him/herself with the other student, while receiving a similar sentiment from him/her.



This theme also pertains to international students learning to navigate the cultural norms of Canada and gradually becoming more inserted in the Canadian culture by having as close acquaintances or even friends, native-speaking Canadians. This theme is very important in terms of the aim of the program. The benefits of the program include being able to (particularly with an emphasis on the international students) open themselves up to others who are not of their culture, in order for them to have more opportunities in terms of work and social life.

In my thesis, I have found that Canadian participants also benefitted from extending their networks to those of international people they normally would not have associated with, had it not been for the program. All three Canadian participants found that there was a tremendous treasure to be had in learning to relate to others of a different culture.

Isaac comments,

There would have been blocks to being friends with an international student without the Conversation Partners Program. I wouldn't have been inspired to reach out to them. I wouldn't have felt the need or desire to talk to them.

Jeff and his partners have since the beginning of the program decided on sharing a meal together during their sessions. Bonding over food has allowed them to do a few things at once. For one, they learn about the culture of the other through the explanation of the origin and tradition of the dishes. Jeff's partners explain to him the characteristics of different Chinese dishes and Jeff does the same with Canadian dishes.

Besides learning about cultural practices through food, the partners share other aspects of culture such as that of politics and academics, which they find interesting to compare in terms of Canadian vs. Chinese cultures. Besides this "sharing of cultures", the food serves as a bridge for the three partners to socialize and become friendly with one another.

Jeff and his two partners both acknowledge that they have formed something more than an acquaintance, although not yet a deep friendship (presumably because of the limited number of sessions they've had with each other).

Jeff, like Isaac, has learned that it is due to the program that he has been given the incentive to engage others of different cultures:

Canada is a multicultural society but I don't usually take time during the day to speak someone who may not have the best English to speak in a fluent conversation. If you actually take the time to listen to them and learn about their experiences, I think this is very rewarding. I now have the tools to communicate with people who are EAL learners. Outside of classes, I've been able to talk to people who are not native speakers thanks to the Conversation Partners Program.

Jane feels that, "Thanks to the program, I have more of a desire to travel and to see China, among other places."

## Chapter 4. Discussion

In this chapter, the main insights of the research as they relate to the Conversation Partners Program are discussed. These insights are a product of an in-depth analysis of the interviews. Analysis of the interviews enabled me to address my research question,, *“How does the experience of communicating with international students in a university sponsored Conversation Partners program shape their identities?”* and led me to several interesting insights and perspectives.

Canada represents for many a society where people of different cultures can meet and where there is the possibility that the lens through which these people view the world can shift to include different cultural perspectives. Within multicultural places like Canada, the extent to which people from diverse cultural origins interact with each other in everyday life varies considerably. Stephan and Stephan (1985) hypothesized that intergroup anxiety is created by prior intergroup relations, prior intergroup cognitions, and situational factors. Participants in the Canadian conversation partners program were influenced by their prior intergroup relations and cognitions as well as by situational factors when they engaged with students from cultural origins different from their own.

Prior intergroup relations, which refers to the amount and quality of prior contact with people of another culture, even when actually minimal can be built through exposure to media or other influences. This was exemplified by Jane, one of my Canadian participants, who confided that negative stereotypes about Chinese people that she saw on television influenced her beliefs about this cultural group. It is interesting to note that Jane is ethnically Chinese- her parents are from Hong Kong, although she readily admits that growing up she felt that the actions and behaviour of people from Hong Kong did not fit the stereotypes of mainland Chinese as exhibited in the media. She says that her friends in high school were Canadian born and that her friends would often make derogatory comments about Chinese and other people from cultural origins that differed from their own. Moreover, Jane says that those comments actually reinforced the stereotypes she had about Chinese people. It was only after being part of the

Conversation Partners Program for some time that she says she began to be critical of her friends' comments about Chinese people and other culture-minority groups.

Prior to the program, Isaac, like Jane, hardly associated with non-Canadian born (particularly in high school) because he says he could not identify with them and felt that they were too different from him. According to Isaac, this dynamic has changed since he joined the Conversations Partners Program, and not simply with his international partners. Both Jane and Isaac say they are both now much more open to engaging with people from diverse cultural origins, including new immigrants from foreign countries.

Interestingly enough, one would think that in both the case of Jane and Isaac, as descendants of people from countries represented by minorities in Canada, they would have had a more open-minded view of international students prior to their joining the Conversation Partners Program. The hesitation of Jane and Isaac to engage with international students prior to joining the program is consistent with Stephan and Stephan (1985) intergroup anxiety.

Prior intergroup cognitions, which relate to knowledge and cultural understanding of the out-group, are a potential factor that influences current beliefs about a culture. Prior intergroup cognitions may begin with either a lack of education about cultural values or apathy in understanding other groups, and may impede a greater incentive to meeting people of a different culture. Perhaps this was the case with both Jane and Isaac, who did not have a comprehensive source of knowledge about people from the countries of their ancestors, not to mention people from other cultures and which most likely did not aid in having them actively engage those people in the past.

In an apparent effort to become as open-minded and as knowledgeable as possible about people with whom they had had little engagement in the past, all three Canadian participants explained, when asked why they joined the program, that unlike in past, they were now curious about international students and they wanted to learn about their cultures. Isaac admitted he hoped that the program would aid him in dissipating some of the cultural biases he believed he had. Jeff mentioned that he had had a friend who had taught English as an additional language to students abroad and had gained a positive

experience to put in her curriculum vitae for future jobs. Jeff, too, sought to increase his opportunities in terms of jobs through his experience in the Conversation Partners Program. In other words, this line of thinking parallels what Coste, Moore & Zarate (2009) explain plurilingualism and pluriculturalism to be: as ways for individuals in a global society to engage with each other that allow for profit both culturally and economically. Plurilingualism refers to the exposure, fluency and fluidity an individual may have in more than two languages and pluriculturalism refers to the fluidity and dynamism with regard to one's movement through out cultures. As Coste, Moore and Zarate (2009) explain, it is not simply a matter of joining pieces of other cultures to one's own in a mosaic fashion, but to have movement among cultures, embedded within what is one's full composition. All that is embedded flows naturally (in other words, the cultures cannot be teased apart) and allows for more societal capital in the individual's navigating of the world.

Finally, situational factors may also have an effect in motivating Canadian students to want to have cross-cultural contact that may lead to a sense of pluriculturalism. Situational factors may involve the amount of structure in a potential setting of a meeting. As mentioned earlier, Stephan and Stephan (1985) noted that people may fear feeling out of control, incompetent, embarrassed or awkward when having cross-cultural interactions, especially if they have had no prior experience in doing so. Having greater familiarity with the situational context may enhance individuals' propensity to interact with people of other cultures. The Conversation Partners Program has a set protocol that describes how the partners meet and how they might engage with each other. Anxiety due to a lack of familiarity with how to act in a cross-cultural situation is minimized; therefore, there is an opening for individuals to learn about each other's culture and become fluid in cultures they had not been exposed to earlier. All three of Canadian participants and their respective partners say they felt comfortable soon after they became acquainted with each other.

It appears then, that the Conversation Partners Program facilitates intergroup relations, which in turn, supports knowledge construction about each other's culture, which implies in part, the possibility of discarding distortions with regard to stereotypes

and prejudice. This is illustrated in my research when the preconceptions about people from other cultures held by Canadian participants, Isaac and Jane, dissipated to a large degree after being Conversation partners, as reported by them, and their becoming increasingly open to diverse perspectives. In my interview with Jane, she explains that thanks to the program, she now feels that her international partners are not so different from her in the more essential ways. She says she has discovered that ultimately, she and her partners have similar struggles in school and life in general. Isaac too, believes that in engaging an international person face to face as in the Conversation Partners Program, he senses that the international student is not the cultural stereotype he once may have conceived. More specifically, he was surprised to discover that his Chinese partner is Muslim and that so are many Chinese, and furthermore that his partner is competent in speaking English and is quite knowledgeable about current events and politics among other subjects: characteristics he would not have as easily associated with international students prior to participating in the program. He says that in engaging with his partner, he realized he used to underestimate non-North Americans but now believes this tendency to not be healthy. In terms of his partner's religion, he realizes now not to generalize about a particular person's religion based on their nationality. "I now realize that people from anywhere can be of any religion," he states. These shifts in perceptions among my Canadian participants were due perhaps in large part to the accommodating situational factors involved. There was sufficient structure involved that facilitated very positive engagements.

In Hudson (2013)'s study, students of different races who became friends often met in places where there was less structure implied in the activities, such as sitting next to each other in a classroom or participating in an extracurricular activity together in the same place. The relationships that were analyzed by Hudson (2013) were more casual than in the Conversations Partners Program described in my research. Yet, all three Canadian participants affirmed how after participating in the program, they are more inclined to interact with International students, what they perceived as personal biases entering the program seemed to dissipate, and they identified with the spirit of sharing commonalities while still retaining their cultural values.

Likewise, Hudson (2013) describes students in a pluralistic education setting as embracing similarities without forgetting difference. In this sense, two friends of different cultural backgrounds were able to forge a friendship by seeing their common values and respecting their differences. They retained their own values and adhered to cultural norms that may have been different from their friends', but just as importantly they found the similarities they shared to be of interest in forging a friendship. This is not too different from what I observed to be a first common theme in my interviews: "Reflecting on Cultural Norms and Values." Like Hudson, the participants in my narrative inquiry sensed what was different and what was similar about the other party. At the beginning of the Conversation Partners program, students held close to their known cultural values, just as with Hudson's participants. However, they were also willing to see the similarities in their cultural values and reflect upon the differences.

For example, Jane described how she could not identify with Chinese culture in a number of ways, namely that 1) women were generally expected to marry earlier than in Canada and follow strict norms set by society; 2) that the Chinese generally seem to be bound by familial responsibilities and expectations and hence, have less independence and sense of individualism than Canadians; and 3) that the Chinese live in an extremely competitive society where academic rigor is highly prioritized. Nevertheless, Jane reflected that she had greater commonalities with her Chinese partner than differences especially in terms of navigating the challenges of life, as stated earlier. In other words, Jane seemed to be adapting a sense of pluriculturalism in perceiving cultures not as distinct entities, but as forces that could be intertwined, or blended in their characteristics, and constituted in her identity.

Hudson's second theme, "Exploring other Cultures" is also akin to my theme "Reflecting on Cultural Norms and Values." In each case, there was an interest in understanding the others' differences, in part out of curiosity and in part to be able to become friends (as with Hudson's participants) or at the very least, "friendly" as with some of my participants. Hudson provides an example of how connecting through a shared interest such as music is a powerful way for embracing similarity. Connecting in this way is also important to being able to explore each other's cultures because there is a

common interest. Hudson found that her participants in many cases were connecting in their similarity and at the same time, realizing a comfort level that allowed them to explore their cultural differences during their engagement.

This is similar to how Jeff, the Canadian, and his two international partners, Ron and Carson loved to share meals together and in doing so, learned about each other's culture. For example, Jeff would take Ron and Carson out to a restaurant where they served Canadian dishes and he would tell his two partners as much as he could about the Canadian food they were eating. Likewise, his two partners would invite Jeff to eat a varied menu of Chinese food and in doing so, explain the geographical area where each dish was from, what ingredients went into them and what the cultural context was in terms of each dish. Jeff related how he was so curious to learn about not only the differences in the Chinese meals he was eating compared to the food he was accustomed to, but was equally interested in the variety and differences between the foods from different regions of the same country (i.e. China). These three connected over their similarity (their love for different kinds of food), exploring the cultural differences represented by the variations in culinary style, and at the same time bonded emotionally as friends in their joy for food and conversation. Needless to say, when the three shared meals, they not only talked about food, but also about politics, aspects of culture not necessarily related to food, school, future plans, etc. They discovered that in a way, their differences in cultural practices were surpassed by universal values regarding friendships including all the great aspects friendships embody- including sharing stories and knowledge, having solidarity in giving advice to one's friend, and in general bonding over the simple joys of life. They seemed to be in a process of absorbing pluriculturalism.

Hudson's final theme, "Bridging Difference to Connect" is similar to my theme "Emerging openness to diverse perspective" in that both emphasize the main point in the last paragraph even further. Hudson's participants were intent on bridging gaps in order to be able to become friends by not focusing on differences that could be detrimental but instead on the differences that could be overcome. Likewise, my participants were also intent on being open to new perspectives which eventually led them to also bridge the differences in order to become friends or at the very least friendly with each other. This



was illustrated by Isaac's sharing a love for a common hobby with his partner: namely, video games, and talking about the games they played at length- in particular, characteristics of the games each liked and strategies in how to perform better when playing them; Jane sharing similar struggles in school and in life she had with her partner and Jeff sharing common interests with his partners, namely, politics and food.

One of the most vital characteristics of a program such as the Conversation Partners Program, aside from what has already been discussed, is that the effects of the program are "contagious"- not only within the university campus, but also outside of it. As Jeff declared, the program has helped him converse and debate more openly and informatively with his parents and others outside of the university community. Hence, the program seems not only to have an effect on improving relations between those of different cultures, but also of people within the same culture. At least with respect to this program, it seems that in speaking to international students in a setting that is comfortable and accommodating to learning about different perspectives, there may be a significant allowance for applying what is learned in the program in terms of perspective-taking and putting it into practice elsewhere (including as in the case of Jeff, with his parents). This again is a sign of the fluidity and dynamism that pluriculturalism has to offer. In other words, Jeff was absorbing knowledge about his culture and that of others and learning to navigate the different perspectives to construct a more complex and multi-faceted version of himself and the world. This work entailed learning about perspective taking with regard to other cultures and using this with respect to his parents and society as a whole.

It is important to note that Jeff was forced to delve deeply into thought about his cultural values and expectations for societal, normative behaviour. He reflected on his own actions after being probed about them by his conversation partners. He was not always so sure of his response and this led him on a path of self-reflection that appears to be one of the most important gifts of the program to him and the other Canadian students. As Sandell and Tupy (2015) state, in cross-cultural interactions, students not only learn about other cultures, but they also learn more about their own culture and consequently about themselves. Self-reflection is something that is usually occurs when one is either naturally introspective or when one is put in a position of having to be introspective. In

many cases, even with respect to introspective people, the answers to the deeper questions about oneself don't arrive easily. But it often does help to have others direct you in that path. This is why the program is important in having Canadians be put in a situation of having to explain how people and systems operate in Canada (as was the case with Jeff) and in doing so, sometimes be forced to reflect upon the core values of Canadian society and culture. It seems to be part of human nature that it often requires a secondary party to put a mirror to one's face in order to have one see oneself through a new lens. Self-reflection and analysis is as essential to the life of an individual as it is to society. The Conversation Partners Program seems to have directed my participants to a self-reflection that lends itself to individual and societal growth.

Another way Canadian students learn from a program such as the Conversation Partners Program is by learning to see people in a more holistic way, and not by the often-ordinary way of viewing others through a fragmented lens. One case in point is Isaac who learned that the online virtual world he immersed himself in, encouraged him to dissect people into pieces, often with stereotypical qualities. In the virtual world, it is more difficult to perceive somebody entirely or as Isaac mentioned "holistically", because very few elements of the person are being conveyed- due in large part to the nature of the source (i.e. virtual media). Moreover, Isaac admits that he would "fill in the gaps" of information not provided by the virtual media with his own preconceptions of the person depending on his/her background. Isaac realizes now after having experienced the program that he is more likely to see somebody as a whole, with the positive characteristics often seemingly surpassing the negative aspects, when meeting the person face to face. This is particularly pertinent when it relates to engaging with people of other cultures. He states that when he meets somebody from a different culture in person and the person differs from his expectations, he is affected to a larger degree than when he meets somebody who fits a stereotype affiliated with the person's culture of origin. "It hits me harder", he says. And by this, he reflects that he is reminded that 1) the feelings, beliefs, and actions of individuals are multi-faceted and complex, and extend beyond those represented by static stereotypes, and 2) it is not wise or healthy to focus on cultural stereotypes because of the often demeaning and limiting effects on the construction of identities of people from diverse cultural origins. Hence, any negative feelings that result

from profiling a person based on their culture of origin become much duller when the emphasis shifts to seeing a person holistically. Focusing on the stereotype both limits the individual and the person doing the stereotyping and needless to say, this finding is important to a multicultural society such as Canada.

The international students too, as one would expect have also gained much from the Conversation Partners program and have gained new perspectives they did not have before. For example, Carson, one of Jeff's partners, who is Chinese, talks about how being exposed to the cultural value sometimes shared in Canada of being mostly independent of one's parents after high school, resonated with him to the point of his making it a priority in his life- although he would normally have lived at home with his parents while attending school.

One interesting aspect of having international students learn about Canadian cultural values is that they may later potentially share these new perspectives with their families and friends in their home countries. This is vital from a global perspective in that these series of chain events as insinuated earlier can have an influence in the way people from different countries understand each other.

Hence, one should not consider the influences of a program such as Conversation Partners Program lightly. It may allow for benefits in that 1) international students better understand their experiences in a Canadian cultural context while improving their spoken English language skills; 2) Canadian students expand their perspectives on culture across greater social and cultural networks; 3) a context is provided where students, both Canadian and International, can become introspective and self- reflective about their own culture and how they are situated in this cultural context, which allow for a personal and a societal growth that is difficult to accomplish otherwise; 4) Canadian and international students are more inclined to seek each other out socially and in the workplace (as all the Canadian participants attested they would, after their experiences in the program), which in turn; 4) may lead to a society that is more cohesive, less fragmented and healthier in various spheres of life, as people with diverse cultural origins come together and 5) the effect of the program, if implemented widely could shape a generation of graduates who

will have a generational impact on societal policies. Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism reign as paths of learning to embody diversity in cultural value systems, including in the sphere of higher education. As Engberg (2007) proposed, it is the higher education that has as a societal responsibility to create graduates who will serve as leaders of social progress toward equity, that may be the main precipitator of a more open, just and caring society and world at large.

Future research could investigate the response of individuals to programs such as the Conversation Partners Program in different universities and perhaps also outside of university settings. There seem to be too many benefits, for this format and conception of cultural perspective sharing and understanding to not be implemented more widely.

The research informs educational practice in many ways, but perhaps foremost its influence is in “leveling the playing field” for international students in being able to understand their professors as much as possible after gaining English competency. This is vital if we want to have international students take advantage of the educational system in Canada and have them be able to compete fairly with other students, including of course, Canadians. As Jeff explained in the interview, he felt sorry in observing that some of the international students in his courses, did not understand their professors and moreover in feeling impotent in aiding them during class. However, the Conversation Partners Program seems to aid international students in gaining the competency needed to better understand their professors. In part, this is because the focus of the program is on speaking and listening, as opposed to simply grammar that in many cases was the only way international students were taught English in their country of origin. In fact, Ron, one of Jeff’s partners, complained about the fact that in China, he was merely taught grammar and not oral communication with English speakers which he found much more pertinent. In improving their speaking, and especially listening competency in English, the international conversation partners were presumably able to understand their lectures better. Moreover, as Alison, Isaac’s partner made note of, she was able to learn to interview much better thanks to the Conversation Partners Program- and even landed a job in business due in part to her improved capacity in understanding the interviewer better and responding to the questions in a more fluent and articulate manner.

There is also the possibility that with improved English competency, international students may enter academia or other careers and not only be proficient in teaching the courses or practicing other careers with a Western perspective, but also incorporate their earlier understandings from their native countries in order to enrich the academic, business, technology, etc. landscape to a degree not having been practiced as much earlier. In other words, there may be a multi-faceted and more efficient approach in teaching at a university or college level, as well as in other jobs, in terms of combining subjects and tools from different cultures by people who have been able to learn from different perspectives. In fact, many of the international students in the program may not only become great professors, but also be more inventive in other fields as they have learned to have a more multi-faceted mentality. This is key to making Canada more diverse and more competitive economically as a society as well as more enlightened in terms of the education of its citizenry.

#### **4.1. Limitations of Research**

Limitations of the research include the very small size of the sample can't be used to generalize a whole population. However, the purpose of narrative inquiry is not to generalize about large populations, but instead to delve into cases that may help us infer insights about particular dynamics in a phenomenon.

Second, not all cultures were included in the research. Specifically, the only cultures represented were 1) Anglo-Canadian 2) South Asian-Canadian 3) Hong-Kong-Canadian and 4) Mainland Chinese. This is far from a comprehensive study that would include many cultures.

Third, there hadn't transpired a significantly long period of time with respect to both Jeff and Isaac as Conversation Partners. They both had begun as conversation partners at the beginning of the trimester and were about a month into it. In contrast, Jane had been a Conversation Partner for two years. Hence, one is left to wonder how much more Jeff and Isaac will achieve thanks to the program after participating in it for a much

longer duration. However, the vital question is: are there any dynamics that may change with respect to Jeff and Isaac in a way that does not accurately represent the reality of their participation in the program as narrated in the interviews because of the limited time they have been participants? For example, have they been too optimistic in their program appraisal because of an early exuberance?

Other limitations were that the research relied upon a volunteer sample- hence there was no opportunity to test out whether non-volunteers would experience the same dynamics as the participants in my research: namely in 1) “Reflecting on cultural norms and values” 2) in “Emerging openness to diverse perspectives” and 3) in “Expanding social and cultural network “identities”.

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# Appendix A

## Interview Questions

### Initial Factual Questions:

- 1) How long have you been a conversation partner?
- 2) How/why did you decide to become a conversation partner?

### The Essential Two Questions asked of all participants:

- 1) Tell me about your first encounter with your conversation partner
- 2) Tell me about other memorable meetings you had with your conversation partner

### Other questions that may have been used as prompts during the interviews:

- 1) How does your experience reflect your hopes when you first enrolled in the program?
- 2) How do you feel about meeting new people?
- 3) How do you feel about meeting with your conversation partner? How well do you feel you know your conversation partner?
- 4) How open are your discussions?
- 5) What have you learned through being a conversation partner?
- 6) What do you think your partner may have learned through your conversations?
- 7) What values do you feel you share with your conversation partner?
- 8) What explains any differences in values between you and your conversation partner?
- 9) How does culture influence your interactions?
- 10) What has being a conversation partner meant to you?
- 11) Can you tell me about an experience you have had in the program that captures what it has meant to you?

12) How has your experience as a conversation partner influenced you?

13) Do you plan on participating in this program in future? Why or why not?