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Title Understanding the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity through Study Abroad – A narrative study of Vietnamese students in Finnish Higher Education			
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>International student mobility is becoming increasingly more popular across the globe because of its significant benefits to language learning, cultural awareness and career development. Study abroad is one kind of international student mobility, and my research mainly focuses on degree mobility. The Vietnamese context shows that an increasing number of students yearly yearn to study abroad for a degree to achieve a better higher education and develop their professional career in the near future. Study abroad can have a huge impact on students' life, but there are limited studies on Vietnamese students' lived experiences and how they adjust themselves to the host country.</p> <p>This thesis, at a glance, explores the cultural differences that Vietnamese students in Finnish university encounter, among the Finnish society. The research participants are given an opportunity to express their own story in living abroad and presenting their own observation of similarities and differences between Vietnamese culture and Finnish culture. This is a narrative research, using narrative interviews with three Vietnamese students who have studied or are currently studying in University of Oulu, Finland. The main goal of this research is to understand how Vietnamese student are able to develop their intercultural sensitivity in a new living environment. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and the concept of frame of reference from Transformative Learning Theory will be employed to comprehend their narratives and explain the possibility of their development and intercultural sensitivity.</p> <p>The influence of cultural context on the development of intercultural sensitivity will also be carefully considered in my study, especially the difference in thinking patterns between the East and the West. The cultural background from each research participant is also accounted for my research, in order to bring a holistic understanding of the participants' origin and their 'frames of reference'. The holistic analysis from Lieblich et al. (1998) will be implemented in the research to bring in well-rounded insights of the Vietnamese students' lived experience. Each of research participants' stories will be attentively interpreted using different patterns of thinking presented in The geography of thought from Nisbett (2003).</p> <p>In conclusion, this thesis considers how Vietnamese students obtain the development of intercultural sensitivity in their host country (Finland) through the lens of DMIS and the concept of frame of reference with careful attention to both the context of home and host country. This thesis also contributes to a current research agenda of international education from a seemingly neglected aspect: Vietnamese perspective on study abroad.</p>			
Keywords    Study abroad, intercultural sensitivity, frame of reference, cultural context			

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis, at a glance, explores the cultural differences that Vietnamese students in Finnish university encounter among the Finnish society. The research participants are given an opportunity to express their own story in living abroad and presenting their own observation of similarities and differences between Vietnamese culture and Finnish culture. The main goal of this research is to understand how Vietnamese students are able to develop their intercultural sensitivity in a new living environment. The primary research question of the thesis is: How do Vietnamese students in Finland develop their intercultural sensitivity? More specifically; what are the cultural differences Vietnamese students face during their stay in Finland? Do their experiences relate to the Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) and if so how?

This is a narrative research, using narrative interviews with three Vietnamese students who have studied or are currently studying in University of Oulu, Finland. My research is mainly dedicated to the complexities of Vietnamese students' lived experiences in adjusting themselves to a new country during study abroad in the context of Finland. Specifically, I examine if they might integrate with the host country and if consequently their intercultural sensitivity is increasingly improved. My target participants are Vietnamese degree students with long-term study through which they might enhance their capability to mediate between cultural similarities and differences in the host country.

My previous personal experiences have contributed to the choice of the topic. I used to work in an international college in Vietnam for nearly two years before deciding to study abroad for a Master's Degree in Education. There, I recognized that there was a huge demand for young people to study abroad, especially in the United States. Those years of working raised my curiosity of why everyone seems to really admire Western higher education, Western lifestyle, and its values while sometimes ignoring some of our good cultural traits. Why do Western universities have that reputation? Why do many people want to move to the West? What compelling cultural traits contribute to their wish to go to the West? Those questions significantly struck me from time to time, but I still did not find any satisfactory answers. Therefore, I have made a decision to live abroad and see with my own eyes where the 'best' education system is and to gain a deeper insight of what the Western world looks like. I came to Finland for my higher study in 2014 and this was also a first time I studied abroad in a

faraway country. Since moving abroad, I have had a great opportunity to meet up with, not only local people, international students but also people from my own country of Vietnam. The interactions with a wide range of people from different backgrounds have brought me various information and valuable knowledge of other cultures and my own. Personally, I am interested in individual experiences and cultural differences. Through attentively listening to all my friends and acquaintances, I have gradually recognized ‘the good, the bad, and the ugly’ sides of each country.

Along with my previous personal experiences, the literature review has also consolidated the choice of my research topic. The increasing number of international students studying abroad recorded in various statistics has drawn more attention from researchers in international education. The benefits of study abroad are enormous and have become evident across the globe, ranging from language learning, self-development, and academic achievement to intercultural capabilities as I will further discuss in the next section. In addition to its benefits, some sides of international mobility, such as international students’ lived experience regarding their adjustment in the host country and hardship upon entry to a new culture or country have also gained more consideration from several research. Despite much research (Andrade, 2009; Russell, 2010; Sidle and McReynolds, 1999) on international students’ adaptation and the increasing number of Vietnamese international students, there is a clear lack of research on the adaptation of this specific group. Furthermore, when studies focus on Asian international students, they mainly originate from China such as the studies from Chataway and Berry (1989) and Tsang (2001). When Vietnamese university students are included in research, they are usually second generation immigrants such as the studies from Chow (2006), Lay and Nguyen (1998), and Nguyen and Peterson, (1993) (as cited in Brisset, 2010).

Undeniably, Vietnamese oversea students are not an exception to struggling in a new place. Even though being accepted to higher education institutes abroad means being qualified for one specific program, Vietnamese students are likely to encounter challenges due to considerable differences from academic styles and lifestyles. According to Tran (2011, p. 81), “there has been extensive research into international students’ learning styles, language proficiency, challenges and expectations”. However, Tran (2011, p. 92) also notices that “while cultural and language aspects have often been cited, international students’ reflection on what is actually involved in their journey of adaptation are rarely explored.” In general,

people in Vietnam see those who study abroad as the lucky ones but do not fully understand their hidden stories. The more I contact Vietnamese students in Finland and listen to their story of living abroad, the more I realize how complex and enriching their lived experience is. Thus, I have decided to conduct my research on Vietnamese students living and studying abroad so that readers can obtain a holistic view on their life away from home.

In my research, The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Dr. Milton Bennett (1993) is helpful to explore Vietnamese students' story of study abroad and identify which stages they are at between ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages. Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning in terms of shifting frames of reference supports me in defining the meaning of their experience. In short, DMIS and the concept of frame of reference from Transformative Learning Theory as my main theoretical framework will be employed to comprehend the research participants' narratives and explain the possibility of their development and intercultural sensitivity. Additionally, the influence of cultural context on the development of intercultural sensitivity will also be carefully paid attention to in my study, especially the difference in thinking patterns between the East and the West in Geography of Thoughts from Nisbett (2003). The holistic analysis from Lieblich will be implemented in the research to bring in well-rounded insights of the Vietnamese students' lived experience. With the combination of Bennett's model and Mezirow's theory (1997), along with a high consideration of the influence of their cultural background and a given cultural context, I hope to attentively interpret and holistically understand the lived experience of Vietnamese students in Finland and further gain insights of what cultural difference they might encounter and to what extent they have adjusted to a new environment.

## **2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### **2.1 STUDY ABROAD: BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES**

Nowadays, the world has become interconnected and it is easier to move in different parts of the world, from one country to another. International student mobility has become increasingly popular across the globe (Altbach et al., 2010) and can be categorized into two types, degree mobility and credit mobility – terms commonly used in relation to Erasmus-funded mobility in Europe (de Wit, Ferencz, & Rumbley, 2013). Degree mobility is described as outward student mobility in which students are enrolled to obtain a full degree study in a foreign university outside their home country (Donna et al., 2016). The major trend of this mobility type is the movement from Global South to Global North, meaning that international students moving from developing countries to developed ones for a full degree study has taken over most of the cases of study abroad (Altbach et al., 2001). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data has shown more than 4 million individuals engaging in this type of mobility in 2013 (OECD, 2015). Meanwhile, the second type, credit mobility refers to outward student mobility in which students are enrolled to complete a qualification or credits in their ‘home’ university through participating in short-term study experience in a ‘host’ university abroad (Donna et al., 2016). This type of mobility mostly happens with a flow of students from Global North to North (Gribble et al., 2016; Altbach et al., 2001). The ERASMUS program is one of the most well-known of this mobility type and “the single most successful component of EU policy” (Altbach et al., 2001, p. 10).

Both kinds of mobility through study abroad experiences have an immense influence on each individual in terms of language capacity, academic attainment, personal and career development, and intercultural competence. Most interestingly, Dwyer (2004, p.161) emphasizes that, “This impact can be sustained over a period as long as 50 years.” First, enhancing language capacity is mentioned in various articles and research as one of the main benefits of study abroad, as teachers and students alike both agree on that aspect mentioned in studies and research from Isabelli (2004), Kuntz and Belnap (2001), and Pellegrino (1998) (as cited Amuzie, 2009). A study abroad context nurtures an open but obligatory environment for international students to use a common foreign language instead of their mother tongues to interact with each other. Meara’s 1994 article (as cited in Kinginger, 2008)



mentions that participants in study abroad programs have gained improvement in language acquisition especially in their oral-aural skills.

Furthermore, Carroll's (1967) report (as cited in Kinginger, 2008) presents positive sides on "improving students' skills and developing knowledge base on language learning" through study abroad. It also leads to academic attainment since the international students immerse themselves in academic fields with different perspectives and varied ways of teaching. Additionally, Coryell (2011) states that study abroad contributes to students' self-development and better prepares them for living and leading in our globally interdependent society. Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, and Jon (n.d., p.42) also assert that study-abroad experiences can profoundly influence individuals' pursuit of further graduate studies, career paths and global engagement. Therefore, study abroad participation is viewed as an enriching educational experience (Kuh et al., 2005).

Last but not least, when moving to another country for study, students are obliged to participate in a potentially different cultural context than their home country. For this reason, they are likely to achieve a greater understanding of a new culture. According to Matz's study (as cited Brux, 2010), students employ a broader perspective about world views and show a greater appreciation for different cultures when abroad. Sobania (2009) also points out that students would become globally open-minded to cultural diversity as a result of living or studying abroad. As the world is more interrelated, intercultural competence is highly valued across the globe. Studying abroad helps international students understand cultural differences and learn how to adjust themselves in a new context and enhance their intercultural communication among different groups of students. Furthermore, the students will achieve a holistic understanding of how the world works in its different parts and become more tolerant with any drastic changes in a new context.

Even though many great benefits from study abroad are mentioned, some preliminary work was carried out to show the uneasy process of the international students' adjustment to the host country. That process is undeniably tied to the cultural backgrounds from their home and host country. Examples of the potential barriers for international students' participation in study abroad programs include "insufficient linguistic skills, homesickness and loneliness" according to Furnham and Bochner's study (as cited in Brisset et al., 2010) related to cultural transition. Tran (2011, p. 81) mentions, "Too often, international students have been seen only from a "deficit" frame." Staying longer in the foreign country moves

the initial impression about the culture's surface to a deeper recognition of its hidden iceberg. Byram and Feng (2006) describe that foreign students often live in isolation, on the margins of the society in which they reside. This may be their mode of resistance to the input of life in 'the West' and compliance with the life from 'the East'. This social process sometimes does not offer an entry even to the most willing student committed to the idea of integration. All of the above obviously demonstrating the difficulty and struggle that international students undergo to reach a point of integration in their host country.

## **2.2 STUDY ABROAD IN VIETNAMESE CONTEXT**

Since Vietnam has achieved relatively successful progress after the economic reform in 1986, people's lives have improved enormously and some families are able to send their children to study abroad for better future. Vietnam is also among the countries with positive economic growth and has a young labor workforce, according to World Bank statistics (2015). Vietnam's economy is in transition to a more market-oriented economy where more and more foreign investors are encouraged to invest in Vietnam and more trading agreements have been reached. The Vietnamese government considerably values their contribution in boosting the economy and helping the country out of the poverty. Requiring high sources of skilled and efficient labor workforce is a must to keep the economy moving forward. Moreover, according to World Bank's study, *An African Exploration of the East Asian Education Experience* (Fredriksen, 2008, p.110), Vietnam has a long history of valuing education and the teaching profession since feudal periods, "Ordinary people understood they should give their children opportunities to learn to know how to be human beings." The two most important factors, an emerging economy requiring a skilled and capable young population and high values striving for an opportunity to better themselves and explore the outside world through education, combined with benefits of study abroad mentioned above have led to an increasing number of Vietnamese international students abroad.

Bochner's study (as cited in Coll, 2001) states that international students vastly contribute in the export industry of higher education. Notably, the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia, and the emerging middle classes in Southeast Asia have recently become a majority among international students in Australia as an example. Vietnam is not an exception in the large number of students studying in those countries. According to International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) Monitor's report (2014), over 90%

of outbound Vietnamese students are self-funded and total spending on overseas education amounted to roughly 1% of GDP in 2013. The most favored destinations of study abroad among Vietnamese international students are Australia, the United States, Japan, China, Singapore and France. Beside those top destinations, the number of students who also search for alternatives has increased quickly. Finland is currently rising as an appealing destination for study abroad. The statistics published by The Finnish National Agency for Education (CIMO, 2015) show that the number of Vietnamese international students has grown dramatically and that Vietnam is among the top five countries of origin to study in Finland for degree mobility in higher education.

Even though the number of Vietnamese students studying abroad increases year after year, there is limited research and studies on the processes they have to go through and whether they adjust themselves to the host country and culture. In the scope of my study, I recognize the need to understand not only the reasons for their choice to study abroad in Finland for higher education but also their ‘hidden’ stories of adaptation in terms of the development of intercultural sensitivity. My main focus is on Vietnamese students pursuing a degree study in Finnish higher education institutes. Before moving to the theoretical framework and research methodology, I will present a brief description of cultural context of both Vietnam and Finland.

## **2.3 BRIEF CULTURAL CONTEXT OF VIETNAM AND FINLAND**

### **2.3.1 VIETNAMESE CONTEXT**

Vietnam’s long and painful history in which the country has endured in times of war and occupation from the Chinese, Mongols, French, Japanese, and Americans leaves enduring influences on its own society now (Aragon, n.d). What is now northern Vietnam was ruled by China for more than a thousand years, between the second century B.C.E (Before the Common Era) and the tenth century C.E (Common Era) (Lambert, 2015). During those years, although the country was largely influenced with elements of Chinese culture such as Confucianism as the foundation for the political institutions of the state, the origin of Vietnamese language, and the educational system reflecting the Chinese model, Vietnam still had a separate culture with vibrant traditions (Le, 2017). Later was the French colonization which lasted 70 years, leaving some influences on culture such as forms of

Vietnamese writing, art and cuisine (Lambert, 2015). Vietnam has been going through a transition from a command economy to a "socialist-based market economy" since 1986 and currently maintains the political system with one Communist party (Dinh, 2000).

Confucianism has deeply affected Vietnamese culture until now in the way they think and behave (Truong, 2017). Phan (2008) emphasizes some features of Vietnamese culture in her research such as collectivism, face saving and high context. Gudykunst's study (as cited in Phan, 2008) presents that collectivist culture is described as a group-oriented value system; the so-called "in-groups" which an individual belongs to and closely interact with significantly influence his or her identity, behavior or attitudes. Burns' study (as cited in Phan, 2008) mentions the importance of saving face because the "face" is inherent to the 'webs of relationship' in many Asian cultures and defines one's position and social structure in the society. Therefore, hierarchy is important and valid in Vietnamese culture (Phan, 2008). Phan (2008) also underlines that high context feature is manifest in Vietnam, especially in its language and communication through implementing an indirect style of speech because it is essential to retain group harmony. For example, in communication, Vietnamese generally need to carefully consider what to say and who to speak with due to some formalities in the language such as different ways of addressing people based on their gender, age, status or family ties because respect is mainly based on position, status and age in Vietnamese society. Lastly, family plays the most important role in Vietnamese culture like in other Southeast Asian counterparts, which means people have a great allegiance to the family and tend to keep the family at the center of one's life (Chang, 1982).

### 2.3.2 FINNISH CONTEXT

Meanwhile, Finland is a comparatively young nation with a small population and a distressing history of being dominated by its more powerful neighbors (Sweden and Russia) with one hundred years of history (Zetterberg, 2016). In December 1917, Finland issued its Declaration of Independence. After having lived for decades in the shadow of the Soviet Union, Finland is now well settled in the European Union. Finland has a highly industrialized, largely free-market economy and a high standard of living in terms of welfare system thanks to a strong and vibrant democracy (Dimireva, 2012).

Over the past decades, several intercultural studies reveal some main features of Finnish culture such as “the Silent Finn” (Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985), which refers to the love for silence and limited emotional expression as politeness to respect one’s privacy. The individualistic and egalitarian Finn (Hofstede, 1994) reflects a loosely-knit social framework, gender equality and non-existent hierarchy. In addition, the Universalist Finn (Trompenaars, 1997) presents high obedience of rules and regulations. Scollon and Scollon’s study (1995) also mentions Finnish politeness strategies reflecting independency rather than involvement. Last but not least, the Finnish mentality and self-understanding have, until recent years, been strongly bound to nature, the countryside and agrarian values. Life in the midst of Finnish nature has been seen as an essential part of becoming a full citizen (Mcintyre, 2006).

Both countries have a completely different historical and geographical background. Their cultures are also clearly viewed in a different direction: one is more similar to Western values and the other is more influenced with Eastern ones, leading to different thinking patterns which will be discussed in the later part of my theoretical framework.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 CULTURE AND INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Culture is a broad concept and likely to be understood in two main types of culture: objective culture and subjective culture, according to Bergen and Luckmann's study (as cited in Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Their research (as cited in Bennett & Bennett, 2004) further clarifies that the institutional aspects of culture such as political and economic systems and products of culture such as arts, music or cuisine are the main components of objective culture. They also emphasize the second type of culture, subjective culture referring to the worldview of the people from a certain society (as cited in Bennett & Bennett, 2004). In my research, different points of view from a culture group needs to be closely explored, so cultural difference in the later Bennett's Model is mostly examined from the perspective of subjective culture. Furthermore, the difference of cultural stereotypes and cultural generalizations should be noticed to gain reliable insights of one's lived experience in another culture. Thus, the cultural stereotypes formed with one's opinion or assumptions should be avoided, and cultural generalizations generated from systematic intercultural research can be applied (Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

Generally, parents and teachers have transmitted their cultural patterns inherited from the society where they live to their later generations (Coll, 2001). These cultural patterns, later discussed as frames of reference, affect the way of one's thinking to make decisions in his or her life. Those fixed cultural patterns provoke the strong ethnocentric perception of one's own culture, especially if he or she has not experienced another culture. This is why Triandis (1994) reflects that ethnocentrism as a natural human tendency and it consists of using one's own culture as a standard for evaluating others. However, later in one's life, he or she recognizes his or her culture as one of many possible patterns of thinking and acting when engaging *intercultural contacts* (Coll, 2001).

Bochner's study (as cited in Coll, 2001) clarifies that *intercultural contacts* can be classified into two broad categories: those that occur among the residents of a culturally diverse nation or society and those that take place when a person from one society travels to another country with a particular objective in mind such as work and study. According to Coll (2001), there are four common ways of how to respond to different intercultural contacts: (1) passing: individuals might reject the original culture and adopt the new one which is perceived as a

superior position; (2) chauvinist: individuals might refuse all the influences from the second culture and retreat back into the culture of origin; (3) marginal: individuals might go back and forth between two cultures but belong neither; (4) mediating: individuals might synthesize their various cultural identities to create genuine bicultural or multicultural personalities. These responses can also be found in the Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity such as integration stages comparable to mediating or marginal responses. Before the description of this model as one of the main pillars of the theoretical framework, a certain understanding of what intercultural sensitivity needs to be obtained.

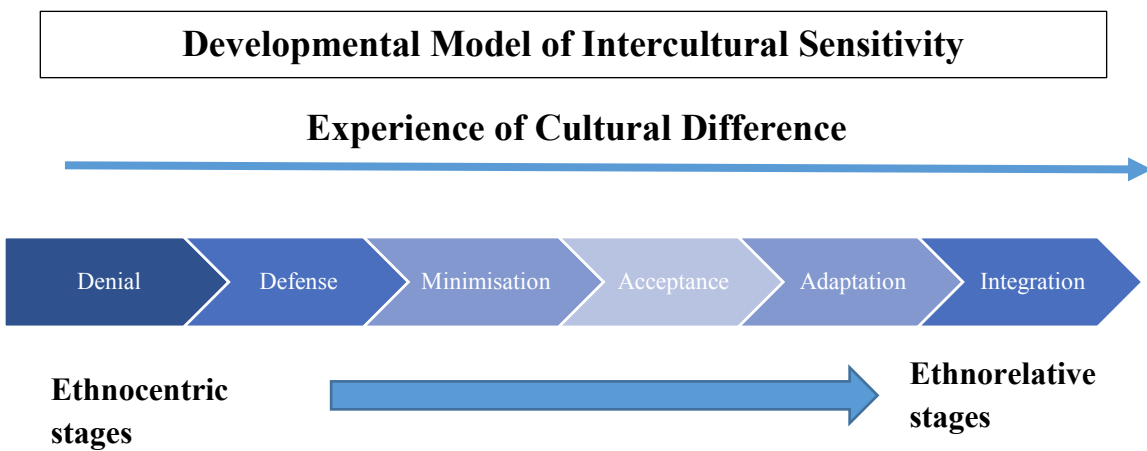
The importance of intercultural sensitivity to advance intercultural competence in an intercultural context is increasingly acknowledged in the world of globalization. Bennett and Bennett's study (as cited in Tamam, 2010) states that intercultural sensitivity is viewed as a crucial ability to effectively perform in a different cultural environment and efficiently interact with people of different cultural backgrounds. Bhawuk and Brislin's study (as cited in Blue, Kapoor & Comadena, 1996) mentions that intercultural sensitivity is described as a certain curiosity about other cultures, a good sense of recognizing cultural difference, and an ability to adjust one's behavior of respecting the people of other cultures. Individuals are expected to develop their intercultural sensitivity thanks to development of technologies and increased opportunities for intercultural contacts and interactions such as moving in another culture with a different language. Such a migration helps them gain a greater insight of their own cultural values and biases and establish a more refined way of viewing the world (Dwyer, 2004). Therefore, study abroad is one of the intercultural contexts under which students step out their own culture to interact with people from different cultures and experience other possible thinking patterns, so their intercultural sensitivity is likely cultivated to a greater extent during time spent abroad.

### **3.2 BENNETT'S DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY**

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Bennett (1993) is the framework describing the development of one's intercultural sensitivity due to different cultural encounters. It also offers a conceptual tool to understand some emotional responses and reactions to cultural difference. Therefore, the DMIS is not a model of changes in attitudes and behavior, but a model of development of cognitive structures (Bloom, 2015).

Individuals who live in a monocultural society normally rely only on their own cultural lens to make sense of the world, so they are not usually capable of construing cultural difference between their own perception and that of people from other cultures (Hammer, 2003).

However, when stepping into a new culture, people will surely be faced with cultural difference. The DMIS demonstrates that the more one starts experiencing cultural difference and adopting cultural perspectives other than one’s own, the more culturally sensitive one becomes. DMIS is divided into three ethnocentric stages and three other ethnorelative ones. The content of DMIS (Bennett, 1993, 2004, 2011) will be presented with modified observations (Pelkone, 2005; Greenholtz, 2005; Hammer, 2003; Bloom, 2015) as below:



Adapted by Hien Le from Bennett, M. J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (revised). In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Yarmouth, Me: Intercultural Press.

**Figure 1. Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity**

Stage 1. Denial of Difference: This stage describes the lowest degree of openness to cultural differences. People are unaware of the existence of cultural difference and view their own culture as the only valid one. They usually consider their worldviews at the center of all reality because they do not feel threatened by difference. Other cultures are either avoided, stereotyped or construed in an ambiguous way through superficial statements or ignorant observations. In short, cultural difference is not experienced, but seen as “foreigner”, “immigrants” or “other” and replaced by the fact of finding what is different to be strange. Two ways of sustaining denial stage are physical isolation or social separation from differences. Some example expressions (Bennett, 1994) for this stage are: “All big cities are the same”, “As long as we all speak the same language, there’s no problem”, or “With my experience, I can be successful in any culture without any special effort.”



Stage 2. Defense against Difference: People in this stage recognize that cultural difference does exist but their own culture is the privileged one. Recognition of cultural difference is viewed under denigration or discrimination of other cultures and characterized by polarized thinking between us and them where “we” are superior and “they” are inferior since people feel difference as something threatening. An interesting variation on defense is reversal, where an adopted culture is considered superior to their own and this process is referred to as “going native.” The perception of cultural difference is more real than in the denial stage but still remains at mere stereotype because the Defense worldview structure is too simple to better understand a “human” experience of other cultures. Some colloquial examples (Bennett, 1994) for this stage are: “Why don’t these people speak my language?”, “When I go to other cultures, I realize how much better my own culture is” or “My culture should be a model for the rest of the world.”

Stage 3. Minimization of Difference: People in this stage neutralize differences and accept the assumption that all human beings are ruled by common basic principles to avoid conflicts and seek comfort. Cultural similarities are pursued while cultural differences are minimized or experienced as an obstacle to communication. Two forms of minimization are physical universalism and transcendent universalism. Physical universalism embarks on biological similarities, while transcendental universalism emphasizes on spiritual similarities. Some example statements (Bennett, 1994) are: “The key to getting along in any culture is to just be yourself - authentic and honest!”, “Customs differ, of course, but when you really get to know them they’re pretty much like us” or “No matter what their culture, people are pretty much motivated by the same things.”

Stage 4. Acceptance of Difference: People in this stage seek better understanding of cultural difference to inform trueness because it is no longer considered as a threat. The stage of acceptance is a beginning sign demonstrating openness to cultural difference. People recognize the importance of cultural difference in improving human interactions in intercultural contexts. However, this acceptance does not necessarily imply agreeing with or liking the other culture (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). According to Bennett (1993), there are two forms of acceptance: (1) respect for behavioral differences (an acceptance of verbal and nonverbal behavior), and (2) respect for value differences (an acceptance of various worldviews and beliefs). Some examples of expressions (Bennett, 1994) are: “The more difference the better - it’s boring if everyone is the same”, “People in other cultures are

different in ways I hadn't thought of before", or "Sometimes it's confusing, knowing that values are different in various cultures and wanting to be respectful, but still wanting to maintain my own core values."

Stage 5. Adaptation to Difference: In this stage, people shift their frames of reference in and out of another cultural worldview to better understand different perspectives of another culture and their own. Therefore, they can adjust their behaviors appropriately to the context because they feel more comfortable with cultural difference and have a sense of security of their own culture. Furthermore, an extended self emerges in an intercultural context through intercultural encounters when people are capable of not only upholding their own values in their culture but also embracing different cultural worldviews. According to Bennett (1993, 2004), empathy and pluralism are two ways of adaptation. Adaptation through empathy means that an individual acknowledges an alternative cultural pattern from other cultures. On the other hand, adaptation through pluralism conveys that an individual construes a new, holistic, long-lasting worldview (Bennett, 1993, 2004). Therefore, at this stage, one's intercultural sensitivity is conceivably developed and transmitted into a person's ability to act in an intercultural context with an ethno-relative manner through employing cultural empathy or pluralism. Some statement examples (Bennett, 1994) are: "I greet people from my culture and people from the host culture somewhat differently to account for cultural differences in the way respect is communicated", or "I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways".

Stage 6. Integration of Difference: People at this stage show the highest degree of openness to cultural difference. They can shift the frame of reference in and out of different cultural frameworks *naturally* or employ a certain aspect from a number of frames of reference to *produce their own and particular frames of reference*. Their identities are 'marginal' (not central) to any particular culture. Furthermore, they can modify their behavior according to different cultural contexts because they 'feel right', not because 'that is how one is supposed to enact'. However, reaching this stage is not easy because integrated people always need to face with their own "cultural marginality" (Bennett, 1993, 2004) meaning that they construe their identities at the margins of two or more cultures and central to none. As suggested by Bennett (1993), cultural marginality may have two forms: an encapsulated form, where the separation from culture is experienced as alienation; and a constructive form, in which movements in and out of cultures are a necessary and positive part of one's identity. Thus,

an ethnorelative person is constantly in the process of becoming a part of and apart from a given cultural context through perceiving cultural difference as an essential and stimulating aspect of life. Some statement examples (Bennett, 1994) are: “Everywhere is home, if you know enough about how things work there”, “While sometimes I feel marginal in groups, I am able to move in and out of them with relative ease” or “I truly enjoy participating fully in both of my cultures.”

### **3.3 CRITICISM ON BENNETT’S MODEL**

Bennett’s developmental model of intercultural sensitivity refers to the theoretical framework describing one’s cognitive growth when an individual encounters cultural difference. Nonetheless, there are several disputes on how the concept of intercultural sensitivity is shaped and what development of intercultural sensitivity actually means.

Chen and Starosta (2000) argue that Bennett’s concept of intercultural sensitivity seems closer with the concept of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence is an umbrella concept including cognitive, affective, and behavioral ability of a communicator in an intercultural context. The cognitive aspect is viewed as intercultural awareness that refers to understanding of cultural practices that influence how we think and behave (Chen & Starosta, 2000). The affective aspect is described as the concept of intercultural sensitivity, an eagerness to delve into and appreciate cultural difference whereas the behavioral aspect is identified as the concept of intercultural adroitness, an ability to produce effective intercultural interactions (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Chen and Starosta’s conceptualization of intercultural sensitivity is more preferable to emotional dimensions than cognitive ones, which challenges the Bennett’s model in terms of cognitive development. Furthermore, they emphasize that intercultural sensitivity is just part of intercultural communication competence, not a main factor leading to improvement of intercultural communication. In short, Chen and Starosta (1997) conceptualize intercultural sensitivity as a person’s positive affective ability to embrace cultural difference, leading to relevant behavior in intercultural contexts.

On another note, Bhawuk and Brislin’s study (as cited in Chen, 2000) values intercultural sensitivity from the perspective of individualism and collectivism. They propose three main elements constituting intercultural sensitivity: the understanding of cultural behaviors, open-

mindedness towards cultural differences, and behavioral flexibility in host culture. It means cultural context plays an important role in generating a different geography of thought and intercultural sensitivity is seen as a big umbrella covering all affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions.

Despite several critics on Bennett's Model, I think DMIS is more comprehensive and concerned with an individual's cultural background compared to other models such as U-curve model introduced by S. Lysgaard (1955) or W-curve model created by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963). Both U and W-curve models also describe an individual's intercultural adjustment. However, the models seem to be too broad and vague since they do not detail in any specific aspect of personal accounts, making a person's lived experience too general and shallow. Meanwhile, DMIS from Bennett (1993) is more issue-focused and has strong descriptive details on each stage. The model is mainly involved with intercultural sensitivity, which is understood as a cognitive side. Most importantly, a great consideration on the importance of students' cultural context is persistently mentioned throughout different stages of the model.

### **3.4 DMIS AS A TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PROCESS**

As I have stated above, DMIS is viewed as the model of cognitive development through construing new cultural frames of reference and altering the old ones. To reach the last stage of DMIS, people need to extend their cultural worldview and embrace cultural difference. It means the rigid frames of reference from their own culture have transformed into bicultural or multicultural frames of reference. In order to understand their development of intercultural sensitivity, a definition of the important term 'frames of reference' is needed viewing through the lens of transformative learning concept by Mezirow (1996). Mezirow's study (Mezirow et al., 2000) describes a frame of reference as a "meaning perspective". Individuals employ their meaning perspectives as main criteria to navigate their appropriate actions, establish their 'correct' judgment and constitute their interpretations of experience under the context in which they live (Mezirow et al., 2000). On a similar note, frames of reference can help to interpret one's lived experience, guide one's action and make sense of life with attention to emotional responses (Mezirow et al., 2000). He notices the tendency to "embrace frames of reference that complement each other" (Mezirow et al., 2000, p.16-17). Mezirow also emphasizes that a frame of reference includes two dimensions: a habit of mind

and points of view. A habit of mind is a set of assumptions certainly affecting the selection of certain interpretations of the meaning of one's experience (Mezirow et al., 2000). Furthermore, according to Mezirow's study (Mezirow et al., 2000), the habit of mind is concretely shaped due to one's own culture and hard to be changed in the course of time. A habit of mind is presented outwardly through a point of view, which is a collection of meaning schemes defined as one's specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments that form an individual's specific interpretation and determination on the meaning of objects, life events or lived experiences (Mezirow, 1991 and Mezirow et al., 2000). A point of view, however, is easier to alter than a habit of mind when an individual confronts a challenging situation (Mezirow et al., 2000).

Within the six stages of Bennett's model, the first three stages present one's fixed frames of reference being challenged into a new culture. There is no deep shift in frames of reference but the meeting of different points of view. The other three stages of DMIS mark the movement from a fixed frame of reference to a more 'dependable' frame of reference, which means a more inclusive, permeable (open to other viewpoints), and integrative one (Mezirow et al., 2000). This new frame of reference is more flexible to be revised to a certain situation and might generate more authentic and justified beliefs and opinions to guide appropriate action (Mezirow et al., 2000). In order to construe such a frame of reference, Mezirow states that transforming one's taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) is essential (Mezirow et al., 2000, p.19). He also believes this transformation should occur in a sequence - elaborating existing frames of reference, learning frames of references, transforming points of view, and transforming habits of mind - and names critical reflection as a *component* of all of these (Mezirow et al., 2000, p.142). Therefore, DMIS can be considered as a transformative learning process where, at the beginning, one only depends on their fixed frames of reference about cultural differences (denial stage), and move towards reconstructing a frame of reference to be more integrative to a new cultural context (integration stage).

Individuals' frames of reference are the lenses helping to view themselves and the world and make meaning out of their experience. They are largely constructed or framed by their own cultural context. Their frames of reference can come into question when they confront new and different viewpoints especially through moving in a totally new culture with different way of thinking and behaving. However, according to Volet and Renshaw's study (as cited

in Coll, 2005), many researchers tend to forget that each frame of reference is differently construed due to an individual's various cultural background. Especially when examining the thinking patterns of those who are from Asian cultures, several researchers normally adopt Western views to interpret Asian people's lived experience in a certain context. Volet and Renshaw's study (as cited in Coll, 2005) also emphasizes the underestimation of recognizing individual differences amongst the international student population and the lack of considering students' cognitions and behaviors, especially about Asian students, formed within the context in which they are embedded in the current literature review.

### **3.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR DIFFERENT THOUGHT PROCESSES IN WESTERN AND EASTERN CULTURE**

Because of being born and brought up in different cultural contexts, people in one culture cannot have the same thinking habits as those in another culture. Nisbett (2003, p.37) demonstrates that people should not expect those who are from the culture valuing harmony to appreciate a tradition of confrontation or debate. The previous section about Vietnamese and Finnish culture, respectively, has presented some cultural traits between both countries which shape peoples' values, thoughts and behavior. Technically, it is fair to assume that thoughts formed in a Finnish context relate to the Western cognitive pattern. A similar assumption can be done for Vietnamese people, forming thoughts closer to East Asian thinking patterns.

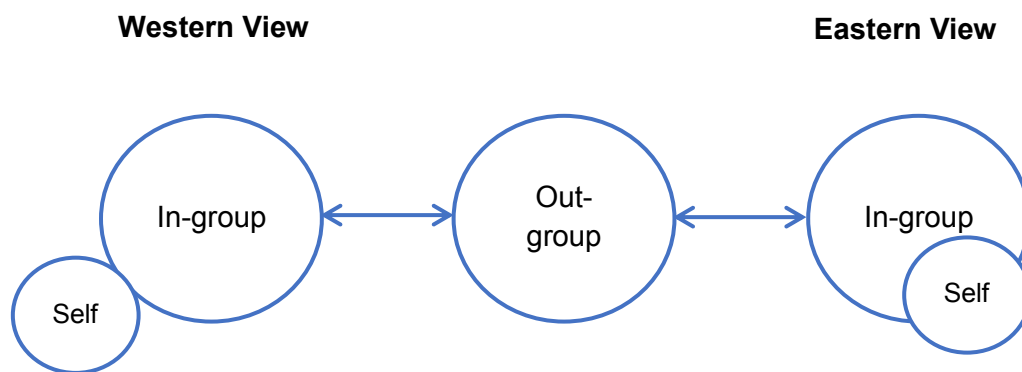
Some implications for different thought processes in Western and Eastern culture summed up in the book, *The Geography of Thought* by Richard E. Nisbett (2003), will be utilized in my research. There are two major different aspects in Western and East Asian culture, *essence* versus *evanescence* and *independence* versus *interdependence* (Nisbett, 2003). The characteristics *essence* and *independence* manifest the main cultural traits of Western culture whereas *evanescence* and *interdependence* stand for those in Eastern culture (Nisbett, 2003).

Nisbett (2003) states that *essence* refers to the nature of an object as isolated from surroundings and "accidental" properties of the object are referred as alterable properties without changing the object's essence. Meanwhile, *evanescence* implies the nature of an object is flexible and fluid and incorporates with constantly changing surroundings. In other words, because the world is uncertain and full of contrast, the nature of an object requires the existence of the opposite of one state of events and always resonates with the

environment (Nisbett, 2003). For example, from the perspective of *essence*, a person defines himself/herself through his/her own achievements, own interests and personalities. On the other hand, from the perspective of *evanescence*, the definition of self is always incorporated with relations to others such as friends and family.

Four related but distinct dimensions of relatively independent and interdependent societies are discussed to clarify *independence* and *interdependence* (Nisbett, 2003). Those are insistence on freedom of individual action versus a preference for collective action; desire for individual distinctiveness versus a preference for blending harmoniously with the group; and a preference for egalitarianism and achieved status versus acceptance of hierarchy and ascribed status; and a belief that the rules governing proper behavior should be universal versus a preference for particularistic approaches that take into account the context and the nature of the relationships involved (Nisbett, 2003, p. 61).

*Essence* versus *evanescence* and *independence* versus *interdependence* are relatively illustrated in the difference between Eastern and Western views on the relations among self, in-groups, and out-group. “Easterners feel embedded in their in-groups and distant from their out-groups. They tend to feel they are very similar to in-group members and they are much more trusting of them than of out-group members”, Nisbett (2003, p.51) mentions.



Adapted by Hien Le from Nisbett, R. E. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently ... and why*. New York: Free Press.

**Figure 2. Eastern and Western views of the relations among self, in-group, and out-group.**

The self in Eastern thinking stresses the interaction and dependence on the in-group to create a complete self and isolate from the out-group. Meanwhile, the self in Western thinking

separates more from both in-group and out-group. Nisbett (2003, p. 51) states that in-group illustrates “close circle of friends and family” while out-group refers to “people who are mere acquaintances at most”. This can be further clarified in differences surrounding the concept of self and family (viewed as in-group). In Nguyen and William’s study (as cited in Chang, 1982), of Southeast Asians, self and the family are integral but not separate; one’s self is not fully defined without family part. Therefore, in Eastern thinking, the self is more attached to his or her family and surroundings while Western view detaches the self from his or her family and the environment. Especially in those countries influenced with Confucianism, an individual works not for self-interest but to support the family, so the concept of self-growth without family advancement is unfamiliar to cultures with Confucian orientation (Nisbett, 2003).

Those main cultural traits from Eastern and Western culture illustrate several main different thinking patterns or frames of reference among people from different cultural backgrounds. The different patterns of thinking in Nisbett’s book (2003) will be viewed as a primary ground to better understand frames of reference of my research participants in the research. With *Easterners* (presumably in East Asian cultures), their patterns of perception pay more attention to environments and are able to detect relationships among events (Nisbett, 2003, p.44-45). They believe less in controllability of the environment and view the world as constantly changing (Nisbett, 2003, p.44-45). Furthermore, their preferred patterns of explanation for events likely involve a broader net including the environment. About applications of dialectical approaches, *Easterners* tend to seek the Middle Way (harmony or common grounds among different beliefs and values) when having confrontations (Nisbett, 2003, p.44-45). With *Westerners*, their patterns of attention and perception concern the environment less, and they are less likely to see relationships among events (Nisbett, 2003, p.44-45). They tend to believe in controllability of the environment and recognize stability (Nisbett, 2003, p.44-45). Furthermore, they focus more on objects as preferred patterns of explanation for events and usually prefer categories for habit of organizing the world (Nisbett, 2003, p.44-45). They are also more inclined to use logical rules and insist on the correctness of one belief versus another in terms of applications of dialectical approaches (Nisbett, 2003, p. 44-45).

All of those patterns of thinking simultaneously exist but vary in each society. Every society and every individual is a mixture of *independence* and *interdependence*, *essence* and



*evanescence*, but some countries tend to weigh more heavily on one aspect than another. The differences of culture have a considerable impact on thinking patterns of people who live in one country and move to another one. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that one's cognitive patterns can be different from another due to cultural context, and the researcher must review an individual's cultural background first to apprehend how he or she thinks and makes sense of the surrounding. This important aspect will be discussed in my research so that I can better understand how the process of Vietnamese students' adjustment into Finnish society and how the movement of frames of reference into different cultural context contributes to their development of intercultural sensitivity.

## **4 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK – NARRATIVE RESEARCH**

### **4.1 NARRATIVE RESEARCH AS THE MAIN METHODOLOGY**

The world is commonly understood and constructed through peoples' stories (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). Generally, people go through different events or incidents in life and shape them into their own stories through the way they interpret surroundings. Therefore, stories are considered to present consistency to one's experience and play an important role in our communication with others (Lieblich et al., 1998). Each person comes from a different background and clearly undergoes different phases and directions in life, so his or her lived story is not identical to others but has its own color and characteristics. Riessmans (2008) states that order and emotions which arise in stories about difficult times also contribute to the search for deeper meaning and bring a connection with others, so a person's story seems to speak for itself, not requiring interpretation (Riessmans, 2008). In short, these stories can help us gain deep insights and understand the wholeness from their lived experiences through our own course of life.

Larsson and Sjöblom (2010, p. 273) claim that many researchers also agree narratives refer to "discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way" and that they "offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it". Narratives have the same function as stories and are commonly used in research to gain in-depth understanding of research participants. Several authors have attempted to define narratives, but currently there is still no exact definition. Riessmans (2008, p. 6) clarifies the term as following:

The term narrative in the human sciences can refer to texts at several levels that overlap: stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive), interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation (a story about stories), and even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant's and investigator's narratives.

While Churchill and Churchill (1982) (as cited Sandelowskil, 1991) mentions another definition:

Generally, narratives are understood as stories that include a temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of those events: to render, or to signify, the experiences of persons-in-flux in a personally and culturally coherent, plausible manner. Narration is a threshold activity in that it captures a narrator's interpretation of a link among elements of the past, present and future at liminal place and fleeting moment in time.

Although the definition of narrative is still in discussion, some of its common features have been identified in several studies. First, narratives bring closer access to a person's identity and personality (Lieblich et al., 1998). Narratives, as a story, can describe someone's reaction to certain issues, reflect his or her thoughts on specific areas and make an audience connect to his or her inner self. In most cases, narratives can be used as the main tool to explore individual and personal identity within various contexts (Striano, 2012). Yuval-Davis' research (as cited by Riesman, 2008) also emphasizes the point again, "Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who are (and who they are not)" (p.8). When people start telling their stories, they begin revealing themselves to others through some life events and at the same time confirm their identity. Nonetheless, identities are fluid and likely to include a "multiplicity of self" depending on political, social and cultural situations (Striano, 2012) and "always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong" (Riesman, 2008, p.8). The narratives present a complex of not only real self but also desired self from narrators and also bring a voice to minority and/or discriminated groups. Thus, it is absolutely necessary to examine the cultural background sustaining the process of sense making of identity (Bahtia, 2011, p. 347) to recognize deeper thoughts from their stories. This emphasizes the importance of the context, an inseparable part from the story teller. Last but not least, Westlund (as cited in Striano, 2012) points out, "the narrative to be told about life is not finished until the life is over" (p.152), so there will be a variety of possible smaller narratives within one's life story because narrators always recall past meaningful events at a certain time and place (Riesman, 2008). Riesman (2008) again stresses that the most familiar way to construct one's narrative is remembering the past, because this reaffirms and relatively organizes fragmented and confused memories before recounting them. In this sense, narratives are comprised of past experiences and make sense of them simultaneously.

In short, narratives provide a reader informed identity of a narrator through mainly using memories of past experiences combined with his or her context.

With such mentioned characteristics, analyzing narratives is a complex task since it requires an interdisciplinary approach from multiple perspectives and tools to comprehend narratives and their contexts. Narrative data can be significant and deeply meaningful and be susceptible to endless interpretation depending on the narrator, the researcher and its context. Because presenting a narrative is telling not only about the self of a story teller but also about the social context of which he/she is a part (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010), researchers should recognize a significant correlation between both. Generally, researchers often concentrate on some parts of an individual's identity which are suitable for their research and not on his or her 'total identity'; however, "quality of mind, not plot, is the soul of the narrative" (Mishler, 1986, p.81). Indeed, it is better to grasp the whole context and offer participants multiple means of expressing their stories around their observations, ideas, emotions, and activities, so that the researcher can gain a richer and more holistic understanding of a narrator and generate new perspectives and knowledge. Therefore, close interpretation – narrative analysis – is needed, which can be conducted in different ways depending on the objectives of the research.

## **4.2 METHODOLOGICAL PRACTICE OF THESIS PROJECT**

### **4.2.1 NARRATIVE RESEARCH ON MY THESIS PROJECT**

This part will be dedicated to explaining why I choose narrative research for my thesis and later parts will further clarify how I conduct this methodology. As I have demonstrated, some main features of narratives and narrative research in the first section, the primary reason in choosing this methodology is to better understand research participants' lived experience as a whole in combination with their cultural contexts. The research conducted by Reid and West (2011) is one good example of using narrative research because it focuses on providing various perceptions of different individuals and communities in different settings. Their main method for narrative research is interviewing their participants in order "to generate, in our method, a luminosity towards lived experience often absent from conventional research and large data sets" (Reid & West, 2011). Therefore, narrative research will allow me to do the same thing as Reid and West do: provide possible deep insights of a complex

self of an individual interacting with surroundings recounted through his/her story. This methodology helps me further explore how Vietnamese students experience life abroad through study in Finland and if they possibly develop their intercultural sensitivity through immersing themselves in a totally new environment. Narrative research is the best choice to consider students' lived experiences abroad without neglecting their background and cultural context.

To conduct this methodology effectively, a researcher should be a detached observer, a participating member or an interpreter or all three. As a researcher, I also need to select target participants to collect suitable narratives and attentively analyze narrative data. Methods for gathering data can be field texts, such as stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, and life experience sharing or video or blog. Compare these stories together to discover commonalities and differences and make sense of the research (Riessman, 2008). Analysis and interpretation of language in use in this methodology needs to be done very carefully because it will help researchers to better interpret participants' situation and life story. Larsson and Sjöblom, (2010, p. 276) describe that three analytical functions of language should be taken into account: what someone says (ideational) is connected to how something is said (textual) and to whom it is said (interpersonal). In the next part, I will present the criteria on research participants.

#### 4.2.2 CONDUCTING NARRATIVE RESEARCH

##### a. Research participants

My aim was to select three participants from Vietnam currently studying or staying abroad. In order to fully examine student's adjustment and development of intercultural sensitivity, my research participants needed to stay abroad at least one year. Another criterion was that the students must have had some years of working experience. At first, I wanted to do research on Vietnamese students who study abroad in Finland and in the United States. However, it would have expanded the scope of my research and would have been difficult to find research participants because of my lack of connections in the American context and a superficial understanding of its society. I needed to refocus my research on where I am more familiar with and feel a part of the surroundings during my almost two-year stay. My final decision was to choose three Vietnamese students who studied or are studying in

University of Oulu, Finland but still remain in Finland. Fortunately, I finally found three research participants perfect for my targeted group and coming from different areas in Vietnam. Because my study concentrates on their lived experiences abroad and aims to reveal some cultural differences students might encounter during their stay, the various backgrounds of the participants can provide the richness of research and academic enrichment for a fresh-minded researcher like me.

There is no research done in my home country or abroad about this matter, even though a number of Vietnamese students who yearn to study abroad in Finland particularly, and around the world, keep increasing every year. Furthermore, those who have working experience but stop their career to pursue higher education are also neglected in literature review of study abroad. I contribute a large part to describing each participant's initial impression to a general idea of his or her cultural background. The initial impression also helps us understand his or her position in the development of intercultural sensitivity before and after moving abroad and detect a leading feeling and attitude of his or her lived experience oversea regarding if he/she is satisfied or positive with life in Finland. Concluding remarks in my result section reaffirm my participant's state of the story, but also and more importantly bring an emphasis on the main themes in each participant's narrative. Both sections give me a brief look on a participant's cultural context and a general understanding of their lived experience which is normally forgotten in several research studies and acts as a main navigation tool for selecting main themes in my research.

#### b. Data collection

I chose interview as my main method for data gathering because I can clarify further the participants' points of view right at the time they share. This methods also allowed me to capture a more genuine impression including their feeling at the moment, providing me with more accurate thoughts on their lived experiences. I have learnt about a process of obtaining a narrative interview from Bauer's study (as cited in Muylaert, 2014) in conducting my interviews with five phases: preparation, initialization, main narration, questioning phase and small talk. According to Bauer's study (as cited in Muylaert, 2014), preparation phase is to explore the research field and formulate interview questions; initialization is to form the initial topic for narration; main narration is to encourage research participants to tell their stories in more detail without interruption; questioning is to ask for further clarification

without the involvement of the researcher's opinions or arguments; and small talk happens after recording has ended with the question 'why'.

I have prepared and made my own narrative interview guidelines (Appendix 1) and all the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. In order to officially obtain data from participants without impairing their privacy, consent forms were sent out to all research participants in advance and signed onsite. I emphasized that confidentiality would be preserved for the entire duration of the research project and data will be destroyed if desired when the project ends. All the interviews happened in an open atmosphere without any formal or complicated words so that interviewees could feel comfortable enough to share all their thoughts and experiences in as much details as possible. Each interview was implemented separately and lasted around two hours.

At first, I asked all interviewees to reflect on what they have gone through in their years staying in Finland, and choose words or phrases to write down about their impression of their own experiences. This task helped them start thinking back through all significant or important events during their stay and triggered their story to go smoothly in the later part. All the 'questions' in my interview guidelines are divided into three main themes: students' background before coming to Finland, decisions to study in Finland and lived experiences during their stay, and possibilities for their future adjustment to the host country. These themes act as a guide to help me conduct interviews without skewing the main direction of the research question. All of my prepared questions are open so as not to restrict their thinking and sharing in any category but, rather, freely express themselves.

Furthermore, I restricted my own opinions and impressions in order not to step into the participant's answering space, or give out my own opinions during their talk. I prepared myself in advance to build trust between me as a researcher and the research participant, so all the stories told by the interviewees became presumably similar to a friendly and intimate conversation between friends. This process definitely enriched the data I could collect for data analysis.

Since DMIS's stages were described in an academic method in my theoretical framework, I came upon Statement Order activity in the last part of each interview. All the participants arranged some pieces of paper with simple and understandable sentences representing each stage of DMIS (Appendix 2). They organized the sentences in the way they perceived the

process of their own story. This allowed the research participants to recall some details in their stories and organize them chronologically. This exercise also gave me a complete picture of their situation of life abroad until now. Then, I stopped recording, had some talks about the interview process and made notes immediately after each interview.

c. Holistic content analysis

I am truly interested in research participants' stories as a whole, to fully 'feel' their lived experiences and cultural context. This holistic content analysis was the most suitable method for my research, since a person's story would be viewed holistically, with attention to his or her background. Thus, I could fully understand "his or her development to the current position" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.12-13). My goal was to go as deep as possible into the participants' story from significant events or people they might be involved with, to any cultural difference they might perceive during their stay abroad. Because of the well-structured preparation of the interview guidelines, I have obtained rich data. Thanks to the holistic content approach guided by Lieblich et al. (1998), I gradually came to know how to handle such overwhelming information. It was useful in order to make sense of the participants' lived experiences and to start embracing the meaning of their stories in the most fruitful way. The holistic analysis was chosen over the categorical analysis because holistic content analysis generates the major themes in texts by looking at the text as a whole whereas the categorical analysis looks at separate parts of the texts to find themes (Lieblich et al., 1998). For conducting this analysis, Lieblich's research (as cited in Iyengar, 2014) suggest that the researchers (1) read the texts multiple times until a pattern emerges (2) document the initial overall impression (3) note down the foci or themes of the text (4) color code the themes and (5) keep a record of the themes as they occur in the text. In addition, Lieblich et al. (1998) ask to be mindful of unusual features of the story such as contradictions or unfinished descriptions regarding content, mood, or evaluation by the teller. These steps proved to be helpful, and I followed them in the analysis of my data.

I have interviewed three participants in Vietnamese so that they feel at ease to express their stories through their mother tongue. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed in texts immediately and objectively after each of them finished. I read and reread the whole story many times to gain a deeper understanding, and to retain my first but important impression of their lived experiences. After that, I tried to read all three narratives again and



outline some main points from their stories to make myself remember their core parts and their positive or negative feelings during the interview. Next, I carefully investigated each story to grasp compelling statements or contrasting and repeating ideas from their talk and group them into certain main themes. I consistently noticed that themes are inevitably affected by researcher's interpretation skills.

### **4.3 PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE DATA ANALYSIS**

In the scope of my research, I use the term "intercultural sensitivity" to refer to the cognitive ability to distinguish, experience and make sense of relevant cultural difference. However, I need to put a great consideration on students' personal and cultural background and question if they do go through those steps and if so, to what extent? Also, I need to recognize some mentioned critics on the model and integrate some perspectives from Mezirow's transformative learning when analyzing the data.

Through this research, I want to further gain holistic insights of Vietnamese students' life abroad, and more precisely understand the context of the country I was born and live in based on each story of the research participants. My cultural background as Vietnamese helps me better understand the research participants' responses and stances towards Vietnamese culture. Furthermore, the use of my mother tongue in the interviews help participants feel more comfortable in expressing their feelings and telling their stories. Also, thanks to having known each other for a certain period of time and having been in the same situation as a Vietnamese student living abroad, I assuredly build trust and gained empathy with my research participants. Additionally, I can have less difficulty interpreting their views on cultural difference through the similarity of my patterns of thinking with the participants and concepts from theoretical framework. Lastly, I will not include myself as a research participant due to my limit of time spent in Finland compared to other participants, and not-so-original story since I lived in two countries during my study abroad (France and Finland). Therefore, in order to analyze my own lived experience, I need to employ French cultural context, which makes the background of study no longer the same because of the blend of different cultural contexts and frames of reference in my story. This would create some obstacles in my research in terms of content consistency since the scope of the study would expand on the larger scale.

## 5 RESULT SECTIONS

This section presents the main results from three research participants' narratives. Each of their stories represents their lived experience in Finland up until the interview moment. Each narrative includes three parts: initial impression, major themes, and concluding remarks. These findings contribute a large part to seeing the connection between their narratives and theoretical framework which will be presented in the next section of Discussion and Conclusion. Names and other personal information have been appropriately changed to protect the privacy of the research participants.

### 5.1 LOAN - A BEAUTIFUL CHAPTER OF LIFE

#### INITIAL IMPRESSION

The first research participant – who I will refer to as Loan - used to work in Vietnam before moving to Finland. Loan described her home city as a peaceful place with nice people and friendly and helpful coworkers at her workplace. Her life in Vietnam was stable and happy with a strong family bond. Later, she decided to study abroad for her job requirement. Loan chose Finland for higher education because of its reputation for a good quality of education and life, and free tuition. Before coming to study in Finland, she did not have much contact with foreigners, so her knowledge of Western culture was limited. However, Loan was sincerely content with all the living conditions and learning environments during her stay. Until now, Loan has studied and is currently working in Oulu, Finland for the last three and a half years.

Loan's narrative needs to be viewed under her background and relationships with others in her new place. Two most significant people constantly mentioned in her story are two local Finnish people: her Finnish host family (described as kummi) and her current flatmate, who treats her kindly; like a family member and a friend. Such encounters with Finnish people together with the involvement with Finnish working life and study life led her to further understand its society. When telling the story, Loan considered herself as an introvert person without a large group of friends but mainly with close and strong friendship. She also described Finland as the land for introvert people. Loan significantly recognized some cultural differences and embraced them as a part of the culture despite sometimes not feeling at ease in a certain situation.

In short, all the people Loan met are genuinely more kind and helpful than what she could imagine, and a living standard in Finland is better than what she could expect. Loan noticed that being lonely sometimes in a faraway land is inevitable but “it is a very comfortable loneliness”. Loan’s story was told with a positive and optimistic worldview. The content of her story showed connections between her personalities, living conditions in Vietnam and adaptation to Finland to some extent.

## MAJOR THEMES

Loan’s story has suggested three themes Kindness and Closeness, Hierarchy and Relationships, and Respect for Privacy and Individual Freedom that appeared repeatedly and represented the uniqueness of her living experience abroad.

### *Kindness and Closeness*

Loan shared some initial thoughts of Finland including an equal society with a good education and nice people:

Something here is better than what I have imagined especially a very equal society and very friendly people. People are much nicer than what I previously thought. Westerners (including Finnish), in my imagination, do not care about each other and mind their own business, but since living here quite a bit of time, I see they are really affective and caring to me.

Loan acknowledged that kindness in Finland broke her stereotypes of foreign people. Using the words, ‘imagination’ and ‘imagined’, in her sentences displayed her lack of real contact with foreign people in Vietnam. The first perspective of kindness continued unfolding as the story went on.

While describing her living experiences in Finland, Loan kept mentioning two Finnish local people, her kummi and current flatmate, bringing her a strong influence and impression of Finnish people. The first important person was Loan’s kummi (literally means ‘the host’) who she met through an exchange program for international students to stay in Finnish family to learn about Finnish culture:

My kummi is extremely nice and treats me as a family member. She takes care of many things for me. When I’m in need, she always helps me with all her

enthusiasm... Besides helping me with everything, she also shares my sentimental side and cares about my personal life. Sometimes, I relate to her just like my mom.

Loan expressed her close feeling and felt ‘cozy’ thanks to the care from her kummi. Loan also showed high appreciation for her kummi when considering her as ‘mom’.

The second most significant person, her flatmate, was frequently mentioned in Loan’s story:

My flatmate is really lovely. She is like a good friend of mine because I can share most of my personal and private stuff with her such as love and relationship and usually has some activities including swimming and practicing English and Finnish together...I’m very happy when living with her.

Loan showed the intimacy between her flatmate and her by using the word, “good friend”. Such affective connections as sharing and doing activities together with Loan’s flatmate, again, embodied kindness and closeness in Finland. Furthermore, using the word “happy” indicated Loan’s high satisfaction of living with her current flatmate.

Aside from her kummi and flatmate, other people she had encountered also left her with a good impression of kindness. They were found to always lend her a hand even when Loan did not ask for assistance.

My coworkers are also very nice, and my supervisor is nice, too. Everyone here is friendly, and whenever I need help, they will do their best to help me. Sometimes I need help but do not say, they still know and offer help.

However, despite feeling attached to certain people and keeping distance among other people, the difference in communication brought another dimension of closeness among people.

Finnish people are also not the people who are easy to make friends. It means they are very friendly and nice but also cautious in getting in touch with someone. The ones I have contacted are mostly shy or cautious to communicate with foreigners... On one hand, when I need help, they are always willing to help, but on the other hand, if there is nothing, there will be no communication and no small talk. No talk leads to not much closeness to them.

Loan noticed that it was challenging to make a close connection or contact with Finnish people and have a small talk with them due to their shyness and caution in communication with strangers. The words, “dè dặt” literally translated as “cautious” and “communication”

were repeated many times in her talk as barriers to her closeness to Finnish people. Loan's story reflected her perspective of considering communication among people and sharing something together as an important element of closeness between both sides.

When I asked Loan for the clarification on this matter, Loan gave an example:

Regardless of their good English, Finnish seems not like to speak English. My coworkers are friendly and always ask me to have lunch together every day...But when I go to have lunch with them, they speak Finnish with each other and do not talk with me and just leave me alone. So why do they ask me to have lunch with them?

The words, "rude" and "uncomfortable" were mentioned several times in Loan's expression to partly show her discontentment and discomfort when being neglected by her coworkers during lunch time. The example also showed the disconnection between Finnish people and her since they did not have any conversation together and even try to initiate any topic in English.

#### *Hierarchy and Relationships*

Hierarchy is the most apparent cultural difference in Loan's story, being manifested in relationships between teachers and students, and between her superior and her coworkers. Thanks to what she had gone through with work and study in Vietnam, Loan could easily point out how the people in Finland work and study with greater freedom and no hierarchy between superiors and juniors. Loan mentioned that Vietnamese students paid more respect to teachers by accepting whatever teachers said because of viewing teachers as someone superior.

When I were a teacher in Vietnam, students have to respect teachers, take command from them and obey whatever they say. The classroom environment is also silent... When students have different opinions, they don't dare to tell teachers because they are not encouraged to do so. However, in Finland, students are freer to express what they want and have opposite ideas because here everyone can have different ideas.

Loan described the fear from students in raising up their various thoughts or different opinions from the teachers because of lack of encouragement from teachers in Vietnam. Nonetheless, Loan witnessed the difference when she was in Finland. The students in

Finland can say what they want and deliver opposite ideas because teachers in Finland are seemingly more willing to accept their different points of view and thoughts.

Furthermore, Loan elaborated the differences between the superior and employees in Vietnam and Finland. She also displayed a slight preference of not having a power distance in workplace or at school in her story.

Here (Finland), I can feel very comfortable to share any point of views or ideas to my boss or superior or tell what things I like or dislike straightforwardly to him. However in Vietnam, I don't know which word to describe the situation, it's like I'm generally afraid of the boss or superior, consider him as someone in the higher level and show both respect and fear to him at the same time. Even though my boss is very nice, I still feel a distance and do not want to raise up my own opinion. One common thing in Vietnam is that what the boss says is always right.

Loan explained that in Vietnam, bosses' opinions were generally considered as always being right, making people fearful to speak up for themselves. In short, Loan identified a significant disparity between the relationships of superiors and employees in Finland and in Vietnam. The working experiences in both Vietnam and Finland seemed to influence her preference towards Finnish workplace even though she did not obviously state her inclination.

### *Respect for Privacy and Individual Freedom*

Loan dedicated another part of her story to her memories about her various experiences in another different cultural aspect, silence and individual freedom. Staying here longer rendered her more adapted to many things such as respecting personal privacy.

In Vietnam, everyone chitchats and gossip more, so sometimes I am a bit curious about other people's personal life. Although I do not want, it still attracts my involvement... sometimes we just start a normal conversation; however, the talks turn into gossip after a while. Now I wouldn't say I am not totally interested in other people's personal matters but it is better in the way that I don't care much about other people's matter and what people think about me and each other. Before, I did care more about what people think.

Loan mentioned that gossiping about others' personal life happened more frequently in Vietnam and she still got involved in those conversations without any strong desire for it.

However, Loan said that the life in Finland made her figure out “care” with another meaning. It is not an involvement of other people’s personal matter but a respect of their privacy. The reason, according to her, is because of the society. Loan reflected, “the society here respects right of everyone’s private life, so living here for a while makes me do the same”.

Also, the respect of privacy was seemingly reflected in the aspect of silence in Loan’s story. She stated that in general, Finnish people only say what they need to say and do not feel strange with silent moments.

At the beginning, I read something about ‘Silence is fun’ in Finland. I still did not get it... After staying here (Finland) for a while and meeting more people, I recognize that Finnish people do not talk a lot or are generally shy... Basically, they will say enough what they need to say and nothing else. When meeting people I know at corridor, they just say “Hi” and that’s it. Besides saying “Hi”, they do not need to know anything more about me, so there is nothing such as chitchat or small talk.

Loan’s sayings were likely intended to clarify the idea that Finnish people maintain silence because of not wanting to interfere much with each other’s personal life and privacy.

Loan also admitted that the living environment did have an influence on how she came to recognize and practice respect for the privacy and individual freedom.

Maybe living in a new environment does affect me. I am not sure how to explain but how they behave here (in Finland) influence the way I think. As I said before, in Vietnam, people do care about what other people think, but personal privacy and individual freedom here (in Finland) are more appreciated.

Another aspect Loan also emphasized in her narrative about cultural difference was individual freedom.

In Vietnam’s workplace, a person has to do many things because the company or the boss wants or because they are good for an organization. However, here (Finland) it seems that a person first works because of his or her own interest.

Loan mentioned that in Vietnam, one should work for organization goals first instead of working for his or her own good, but in Finland it is the opposite situation. Furthermore, in Vietnam, an individual’s decision is generally influenced by other people in a community.

Loan pointed out that a very personal decision could turn into a collective decision in Vietnam such as getting married or having children in Vietnam because of one's parents' wish.

In Vietnam, frequently parents or other people tell a person to do certain things such as getting married or having children because it shows his or her love and gratitude for his or her parents. Actually, such things are really personal. The decision about those things need to be only a personal decision not a decision made by a group of people because it does not involve or affect other people's life.

However, in Finland, Loan has more freedom in pursuing whatever she wishes to do, make her own decisions without any interference from other people and is more in control of her own life. This reflected in her sentences:

All my decisions I make are mine. I live for my life. Do everything because of me. They are not influenced by anything or I am free in what I think. Back home, my decisions are affected by other people, my parents, the society and people surrounding me because too many relationships control me, but here I'm just being myself, only me.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The first participant has the ability to recognize major cultural differences during her stay in Finland demonstrated in three major themes. Loan felt that three and a half years staying abroad in Finland are enriching and fulfilling experiences because she has much more time for her self-reflection.

Here (in Finland), I live for my life and only me. Although I can feel lonely sometimes, this loneliness is very comfortable. Or at least, I have time for myself to think about my life and my traits. In Vietnam, pace of life happens too fast and busily to spend time for myself.

The phrase "a beautiful chapter of my life" Loan wrote from the beginning of the interview, truly makes a good presentation of her positive attitude and high satisfaction of the lived experience in Finland.



## 5.2 MINH – CAREFREE

### INITIAL IMPRESSION

The second participant, Minh, described the city where he was born as a “crowded but indifferent” place. Minh also showed his unsatisfactory sentiment towards the city and considered the city as “not an ideal place to foster the human aspect due to the fast pace of urbanization and bad security”.

Minh chose to study abroad in Finland, and in no other place for three reasons. First was the free tuition policy. The second reason was Minh can earn a Master’s Degree in his major, with a good quality of English programs in Finnish universities. The last reason was his Finnish favorite author, Juhani Pallasmaa, whose books became a phenomenon among architects in Vietnam; because of his strange thoughts compared to the culture and the general thought in Vietnam at that time. Minh wanted to explore Finland, in order to understand Pallasmaa’s thoughts.

Minh had some initial intercultural understandings during his three years of working experiences in various foreign companies in Vietnam. Thanks to his rich working experiences, he is more familiar with cultural differences of the East and the West. Furthermore, Minh described his family as a traditional one with “four generations under the same roof” (tứ đại đồng đường) and saw himself as a comfortable, generous and artistic person.

Minh’s background provided his better ability to identify cultural difference and understand different cultural aspects of Vietnam and Finland. Minh’s story gave a broad and deep picture of how he gained a deeper understanding of Finnish culture and how he evaluated and compared ‘good and bad’ parts of its culture. The lived experience abroad in Finland, which will be presented into four main themes later, is seemingly self-liberating to Minh.

### MAJOR THEMES

Minh’s story suggested four main themes as representation of his background presented above. These themes are: Correlation Between Nature and Architecture, Comfort and Creativity, Hierarchy and Equality, and Freedom of Choices.

*Correlation between Nature and Architecture*

The first part of Minh's story told how nature could be related to architecture especially through viewing Pallasmaa's idea on the relation between architecture and human.

Most people view or evaluate one architectural work by its outside experience but the relation between human and architecture is deeper than just an appearance. The author means that a modern architect should evaluate this relation comprehensively in both appearance and human experience... The architect must develop the empathy between his architectural work and the ones who use the work.

Minh did not fully understand the ideas of the author and his remarkable calm visual observation when he was in Vietnam. Until Minh reached Finland, he came to understand that Pallasmaa's unfamiliar thoughts about architecture seemed to derive from relations between people and nature because he saw Finland all surrounded with nature.

Through all his (Pallasmaa) books, people would recognize his great observation and thinking towards nature. When coming to Finland, I really see the way he thinks is actually relevant because Finland has a low population and surrounds with nature, so it is not very surprising that people develop psychology to see and analyze nature.

After living in Finland for a while, Minh further realized that nature is one important part of Finnish culture and achieved a remarkable understanding of his favorite author of nature from viewing nature as not separate from human life but incorporated within it.

Analyzing a tree is an unimaginable thing in Vietnam because trees in a city are rare and people have no time to do so. However, coming here (Finland), I see that spending time thinking about the meaning of tree and nature is not a strange thing anymore because trees or nature are simply part of their life. Where they go or see, nature is everywhere. I think other Finnish people also have the same thoughts about relation between human and nature like Pallasmaa. The difference is that Pallasmaa is an architect and actualizes those thoughts into architecture.

The more Minh stays close to nature in Finland, the happier he feels as he mentioned in his narrative, "Living closer to nature here makes me very happy. Regardless of the season,

winter or summer, just going outside to breathe the fresh air and look at trees is good enough for me.”

### *Comfort and Creativity*

Minh mentioned another aspect of cultural difference regarding views on creativity in architecture and pace of life based on his own observation. Finnish perspectives on creativity are more relaxed on deadlines than North American culture on creativity for example.

When I worked in a Canadian company about architecture, the creativity is about the focus on productivity rather than satisfaction of architects. However, working with Japanese company brought me a different cultural working experience, where the creativity was based on the satisfaction of the architects. They would continue designing their works until they feel them complete without pressure of time, and he starts adjusting his habit to this style. When being here (Finland), I feel that culture of creativity is similar to the one in Japan.

Minh found the way Finnish view creativity relatively similar to Japanese culture in terms of thinking thoroughly and reflecting about the creative works until architects satisfy without time constraints. Minh clarified, “when people have enough time to reach certain serenity and comfort in their mind, creativity is more assuredly found.” North American perspective on creativity can be about meeting the deadline whereas Finnish creativity depends on whether architects feel fulfilled by his works or not.

However, Minh also carefully noted that the generosity with time in creative works sometimes led to lack of the work productivity and confusion.

It means here people are not too strict about time when doing creative works. I somehow have a bad influence from this side when I am now too generous with my time to care about my work productivity...there is nothing certain in creativity. Sometimes, the more you spend time on creative works, the more you feel confused and lose the direction in your work.

Minh stated the pace of life in Finland and Vietnam could influence the way people think about creativity.

Pace of life in my city (in Vietnam) is much faster and makes people always in hurry, busy and tend to shorten steps in a task. In contrast, life in Oulu is at

a slower pace, so people are more laid-back, have enough time to think about and reflect themselves and what they have done and articulate their works again if needed until the works reach their desired state.

A slower pace of life in Finland brings more comfort. However, Minh emphasized that being so laid-back also raises a problem that people are less competitive in Finland.

Don't let the comfort go beyond the student's reach. Being too easy leads students to the lack of confidence and the increase in confusion in group work. Also being too comfortable also causes them to more easily give up on their creative work.

Minh acknowledged that comfort can be “good in a closed environment such as school, students can be free to release their creativity” but not suitable in workplace “because the students are easier to give up their ideas if working under pressure such as deadline”. Minh concluded, “There is nothing certain and there is no standard on which culture of creativity is right”. However, if education in Finland orients students towards direction of comfort, Minh will “appreciate, enjoy and make the best use of it.”

### *Hierarchy and Equality*

Another obvious cultural difference is hierarchy in Vietnam and equality in Finland. The two are in complete contrast to each other. Minh emphasized that social hierarchy plays a big role in Vietnam context.

The importance of seniority is still very strong in Vietnam. Five years studying in architecture school (in Vietnam) turn into five years of chasing after and satisfying professors' opinions. Such extreme words of forbidding as ‘must not’ and ‘have to’ are frequently appeared in my study environments, contributing to students' habit of hesitating to show their own point of view in front of teachers or professors.

He further explained that hierarchy in Vietnam was also regularly recognized in the respect of an individual's opinion.

Normally, opinions from the one who is older or who has more years of working experiences are always weighed more highly than those who are

younger or inexperienced without considering if their viewpoints are right or wrong.

According to Minh, “the idea of dispensing knowledge is still heavy in Vietnam”, meaning that teachers’ opinions are always optimal and students always worry if their teachers will agree with or accept their ideas. In Minh’ opinion, the thought about using hierarchy in knowledge distribution is outdated and the role of the teacher in Vietnam needs to be changed.

The thought of dispensing knowledge from teachers in Vietnam is no longer correct in modern time since all the information is available on the Internet, so students can study themselves. The teachers should support, encourage and instruct students to construct their own opinion in an open learning environment instead of supplying rigid and strict guidance.

Minh recognized that hierarchy is not as important in Finland as it is in other contexts and further added, “People in Vietnam do care more about seniority and social status, which invisibly creates more pressure on being mindful of how to dress and what to speak”. However, Minh observed that “people in Finland do not care where you are from, who you are, what you wear and what your political views are”. Thanks to a lack of hierarchy in Finland, Minh stated, “I feel more comfortable and free to express myself and speak with older people or important people just as similar as with friends”.

Since staying in Finland for study, Minh commented that the perspective on equality seems to be in Finnish blood, especially when he was in group work.

Everyone’s idea is valued the same regardless of their status, positions, gender, working experiences and age because they are all equal to each other and ready to argue with each other to find possible best solutions for a project.

The equality is also reflected in equal learning opportunities and accessible student services Minh receives at university.

My university provides students with free access to school facilities and free tuition for even ‘elite’ major such as architecture. Also I feel more open to share my ideas with my teachers here than in Vietnam because lack of the importance of seniority... Teachers are open to different ideas because every

idea has a possibility to become reality, and even if their design ideas seem to be unrealistic, there will be some adjustment to make them more realistic

The equality in learning environment in Finland contradicts what Minh has experienced in Vietnam. The cultural differences become increasingly prominent the longer he lives in Finland. Minh expressed, “I really like the relationship between teachers and students here (Finland)”, relatively referring to his favor of the idea of equality in Finland over hierarchy in Vietnam. Minh again emphasized that the role of teachers should “encourages students to easily and openly present their ideas and let them be the first one evaluating if their ideas are right or wrong” after his study experience.

### *Freedom of Choices*

Minh also recognized the strong influence from collectivism in Vietnam towards the pursuit of his own interests. Minh clearly described, “I have my own hobbies but I didn’t dare to chase them because I was influenced with collectivism in Vietnam in terms of paying too much attention on what people think about me.” Minh further noticed, “people are more restricted themselves to one certain direction or orientation influenced by parents, society and friends, and then they will assume this orientation is the safest and ‘close their eyes’ to follow this choice”. Such statements significantly presented Minh’s great understanding of his own cultural context in a way that choice and decision making in Vietnam is generally affected by and concerned with other people’s opinions.

However, living in Finland brought Minh a different experience in feeling freer to think and choose whatever he wants to try. Minh mentioned that he could make his own choices without much interference from other opinions and also considered other options to make sure that he will feel happy in the long run.

Here (Finland) who we are and what we do is the thing we can decide by ourselves, by our feelings and thinking instead of depending on other’s opinions and feelings. In Vietnam, I never think about other choices and just blindly follow one direction which I am unsure and doubtful of to bring me happiness in the long term.

Minh again confirmed his thought on freedom of choice, “if people have no pressure from surroundings such as hierarchy and unnecessary involvement from other people, they will feel more comfortable and easier to make a choice about their future and personal matters”.

Being in Finland provided Minh with an opportunity to explore different options and the conclusion that personal choice must be decided by oneself instead of collective action and opinion.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Minh's first impression of Finnish people was cold, but after encountering with Finnish people more he could recognize that they were helpful and open-minded. Minh mentioned, "I feel that Finnish are not as cold as I previously thought. When I visited Finnish family or worked with people in my group, they are really open and friendly to me." The first impression of Finnish helpfulness and kindness contrasts with what Minh experienced in Vietnam as he described, "people in my city (Vietnam) are more suspicious in helping each other and do not care much about each other". The longer Minh stays in Finland, the more cultural differences he has discovered as presented in those themes above.

I see how we were born and brought up and where our origin is all constitute our self, personality and manner. It means we should keep our true nature without shaping it into any direction. However, the thing we need to change is not our true nature but the acceptance towards differences of a living environment... When we learn how to accept those differences from other people, we can live anywhere without changing our true self.

Staying in Finland for a while, Minh acknowledged that people should not change their true nature to conform into any culture but accept cultural difference in a new living environment. Using the word "carefree" at the beginning to describe his whole lived experience speaks for Minh's positive outlook on the life in Finland.

### 5.3 THANH - STRANGNESS

#### INITIAL IMPRESSION

The third participant is referred as Thanh, who had four years of working experiences in Vietnamese company before studying abroad. According to his story, Thanh fully felt "comfortable with life in Vietnam with friends and family around, and did not cope with difficulties and worries about spiritual and material life". Thanh described, "People in my city do care about each other in a moderate level but not involve too much in each other's

personal life”. Thanh’s description of life in Vietnam showed his gratitude, his positive outlook and his strong love for his birthplace.

Thanh’s main reasons for studying abroad were his curiosity about what happened outside his calm and peaceful life in Vietnam and his desire to further obtain new knowledge. In addition, Thanh interacted with someone who had studied abroad and brought up many strange ideas in his previous workplace in Vietnam which Thanh could not understand or imagine. This triggered his idea to study abroad, in order to open up his horizon of knowledge so that he can see what differences between Vietnam and a foreign country are in terms of culture and education. Thanh chose University of Oulu in Finland without knowing much about the country because of its high ranking and evenly high quality of universities. Furthermore, the living expenses were affordable to Thanh since he did not pay tuition fee thanks to Finland’s policy of free education for international students at that time.

In short, Thanh dedicated a large part of his narrative to remembering his favorite things in Vietnam. Despite not fully embracing living environment in Finland due to “low population and limited choice in social activities”, Thanh considerably recognized several aspects of cultural difference in Finland through his intercultural contacts with local and international students and professors at university, especially academic openness. Thanh’s horizons of his knowledge has been broadened since his stay in Finland according to his narrative.

## MAJOR THEMES

Thanh’s story introduced another interestingly different angle of the living experiences abroad with four major themes: Kindness and Closeness, Gender Equality and Seniority, Openness to Knowledge or Academia, and Feeling of Depression.

### *Kindness and Closeness*

When describing relationships with professors, Thanh highly valued their help for international students. Thanh confirmed, “In my faculty in Finland, the professors are very close and helpful to students such as introducing job opportunities or writing reference letters to apply for paid internship or work projects.” However, since working for several months in the Finnish environment, Thanh better noticed another aspect of closeness in workplace; “Here coworkers do not socialize much with each other and hang out together after work, so



the connection among people in workplace is not strong and people do not involve much in other people's matter." Thanh recognized that a strong connection among coworkers did not exist in his workplace in Finland due to a lack of interaction with each other. Thanh raised his opinion, "this will be good for someone who wants to separate personal life and work life but hard for those who want to have close partnership at work".

In addition, Thanh also emphasized friendship among international friends and Vietnamese friends. Thanh found it less difficult to socialize with international students than with Vietnamese students from what he observed and went through.

International students have mutual understanding because they are highly aware of what prejudices people might have about them and also foreign to the country, so they easily forgive each other if they have any opposite opinions or ideas. The most difficult thing is the relationships among Vietnamese students in my year because everyone has real contradicting values, and he or she extremely protects his or her value as the ultimate one.

According to his story, Thanh could not find a close friend in Finland because his classmates who Thanh considered as friends finished their studies and went back to their country. Those who Thanh meet nowadays are considered just as acquaintances.

Here I don't have close friends. Some foreign friends are just temporary ones because when they leave, it seems that we disappear from each other's life... Now only several classmates just meet and say "Hi" to each other. Sometimes I visit and have a dinner with a new group of Vietnamese students, but I couldn't get closer to anyone.

### *Gender Equality and Seniority*

Thanh also presented briefly the differences in equality in genders and seniority, referring to authority gap between superiors and employees. Thanh was surprised with how independent and equal Finnish girls are, and the independence and equality are shown clearly when they work in groups. He added, "They are not hesitant to work with something requiring physical strength but still show a very feminine look." The independence of Finnish women is something Thanh has rarely seen in Vietnam. Thanh described, "Generally in Vietnam, most girls who have a good appearance do not study something related to engineering or technology, and women are much more reliant on men when facing with difficulties".

However, Finnish women can do what men can do because Thanh remarkably came to notice that “gender equality is prominent in Finland while in Vietnam each gender is assigned or viewed in a specific role”. Thanh showed his strong preference for the gender equality in Finland through the statement “The independence of the women in Finland is very charming.”

Beside the difference in viewing gender equality, Thanh noticed that seniority is more obvious at the workplace in Vietnam than in Finland, especially through the way a person greets his or her superior.

When meeting the superior in my workplace in Vietnam, you need to bow yourself and have to know who the most important person is in the company. Here (Finland) is not necessary to do so even though the nature of work is the same.

Thanh considered that the working environment in Vietnam is not as professional as in Finland due to the fact that “managerial positions normally depend on how long one works in the company instead of his or her capabilities.” However, Thanh did not express any clear opinion about whether or not he likes the seniority in Vietnam but just briefly described the situation. Thanh did realize the cultural difference but still had an ambiguous point of view on the effects of those aspects to his personal life in Finland.

### *Openness to Knowledge or Academia*

Another cultural difference Thanh focused on in his narrative is openness to academia and knowledge. Thanh stated that

The common learning way in Vietnam is to learn by heart the concept and application... Teachers in Vietnam need to teach certain theories, but those in Finland just teach briefly on theories and ask students to find a new application from those theories. Especially using scientific paper open much broader horizons of knowledge and shows that knowledge is unlimited.

However, the learning method in Finland is different through Thanh’s experience. Textbooks are mainly used in Vietnam whereas scientific paper is commonly in use in Finland according to Thanh. He said that “many subjects do not have textbooks but use scientific paper as teaching materials and students have to read them to draw the content of a subject.”

From Thanh's perspective, learning from scientific papers to broaden knowledge and approach the latest information was something he considered as "enlightenment". Thanh referred to the context in Vietnam when old textbooks were still in use. Thanh also stated that students in Vietnam did not know there was much knowledge which was explored a long time ago and presented into scientific paper.

Furthermore, there is one more different thing here (in Finland) that people use scientific paper as teaching materials, and they open your mind that knowledge is unlimited and there is no way to learn all the knowledge in life. In my country (Vietnam), the numbers of books about a certain field in information technology are not a lot...The thing I should know in Finland is the skill to search scientific paper. Without this skill, it will be very hard to develop oneself. Finding out about scientific paper is like a blow in my mind. Very enlightening! That is the only thing I feel most useful in studying here (in Finland).

### *Feeling of Depression*

Thanh described, "The living environment changes, so my life also changes but follows a negative direction." Thanh continued telling his negative situation, "My life is not full of activities anymore. Currently, I have depression which I have never had before." Thanh further clarified his depression:

It is like you do not have any reason to wake up. Even though you feel hungry, you do not want to wake up to feed yourself. I also feel time flies fast with nothing to do. I want to turn my computer on to work on thesis but I feel so bored and my head just spins around and around.

Thanh mentioned that the reasons leading to his depression were lack of friends and communication with other people. Back in Vietnam, because of crowded population, Thanh felt it was easier to get in contact with people and find someone to have with something in common with. However, he perceived that living in Finland offered him less choice in life with limited contact to other people. Friendship was emphasized again in his story.

In Vietnam, I have close friends. We can talk freely any topic with each other, so it is close to my true self and easy to sympathize with each other. But here I do not have close friends and even a girlfriend. Well, I must bear with it.

In addition, Thanh said that communication among people was also hard in the workplace because Finnish coworkers limited hanging out with each other after work. Thanh acknowledged his preference towards Vietnamese lifestyle with ease of getting closer to each other and staying longer in friendship.

Here (Finland) the work might be easy but communication among people is limited. Working time is for working, and that's it. Nothing more after working time. It is very rare for people to hang out after working hours... However, it is very hard for me to find friends or get closer to someone, so I prefer Vietnamese style. It is easier to get closer with other people in Vietnam than here.

Thanh participated in different groups but could not find intimate friends with shared values in Finland. Therefore, no close attachment such as good friends and a lack of daily conversation possibly led to Thanh's depression in Finland.

Another thing (lead to the depression) is the limited communication. Communication among people here (Finland) is harder. And also hard to find a girlfriend because those who are matched to my personalities are not plentiful. In Vietnam, if you can't get along with one person, you can have a choice to meet up with other people because of a big population. Life now is different in a negative way for me because of the lack of interaction among people.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The longer Thanh stays in Finland, the more he shows his dissatisfaction in the environment due to lack of a feeling for social connection, limited choice for social life and gloomy and cold weather. Thanh even emphasized, "When I look back life back home compared with living here (Finland), life back home (Vietnam) is just perfect to me." Thanh identified some cultural difference in Finland as described in those themes and also noticed a part of the reason leading to his unsatisfying situation is from himself but clearly stated that he would not change himself just to improve the condition, "If someone is perfect and active, he or she still can enjoy being here (Finland) but I'm not that kind of person and does not want to be like that person." Using the word "strangeness" to summarize his lived experienced apparently signifies Thanh's mixed feeling toward life in Finland.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### 6.1 OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS IN RELATION TO THE THEORIES

People have different reasons for studying abroad, but all who come from different backgrounds and countries are likely to experience various culture differences in a new country. In the scope of my research, three Vietnamese students who study in the University of Oulu are the main research participants; Vietnam and Finland are the main cultural contexts for the study. My research participants have presented their recognition of cultural difference categorized into specific themes in each narrative. Some similar observations about cultural differences are noticeably described in their narratives. Three participants all mentioned the most significant cultural difference for them is high hierarchy in Vietnam and low hierarchy in Finland. The first and second participant, Loan and Minh, show a great appreciation for a lived experience in Finland especially in regard to their freedom to pursue what they want. In contrast, the third participant, Thanh, has a negative feeling toward his lived experience in Finland due to a lack of a circle of close friends who share mutual communication and common values.

<b>Loan</b>	<b>Minh</b>	<b>Thanh</b>
Kindness and Closeness	Correlation Between Nature and Architecture	Kindness and Closeness
Hierarchy and Relationships	Hierarchy and Equality	Gender Equality and Seniority
Respect for Privacy and Individual Freedom	Freedom of Choices	Openness to Knowledge or Academia
	Comfort and Creativity	Feeling of Depression

**Table 1. Major themes from three research participants**

The rich data from my research participants significantly contributes to highlighting the relation between the theoretical framework and my research question about the development of intercultural sensitivity. Bennett's model was useful in explaining the development of one's intercultural sensitivity with the main focus on the cognitive aspect of one's lived experience. The data has shown that the research participants with different backgrounds have a different lived experience. Moreover, their lived experience reflects how they adjust

to the new living environment and how they are more aware of their own culture. Their narratives also present that they sometimes move back and forth among different stages, experience several stages simultaneously or skip some stages in the model. Interestingly, some of the participants emphasize that the living conditions affect themselves especially in the way of thinking but not change their nature. I use the frames of reference to explain their development of intercultural sensitivity and note that those who have loose frames of reference will move to ethnorelative stages faster and develop intercultural sensitivity more quickly. Nonetheless, this does not guarantee they will reach the highest level of DMIS (integration) if they do not construe bicultural or multicultural identity. The shift in one's frames of reference prominently affects his or her adjustment to the host country (which stages they are at in Bennett's model). When living abroad, an individual's own frame of reference might be in contact with new and different thoughts. Upon the level of cultural differences between the new and old environment, shifting frames of reference will be either mild or drastic. The movement in one's frames of reference partly contribute to the development of his or her intercultural sensitivity.

Among the three participants are three different results. The first participant shows the clearest evidence that she partly reaches the integration stage since she better realizes the cultural difference, but also partly distances herself from the influence from external factors. The first participant still finds some cultural differences as frustrating situations which partly affect her behavior, but her thinking patterns seem to turn into the patterns of seeing the separation from living environment to the self. In contrast, the second and the third participant still insist on the strong influence from living conditions (the environment) on constructing their behavior such as criticism from the laid-back attitude from the second participant and depression from the third participant. They still view the coordination between themselves and environment mostly in the way the environment affects their behavior and thinking but not the other way around. The second participant seems to stand still at the adaptation stage while the third participant has a tendency to go back the ethnocentric stages. Here, I will present each participant in relation to the theoretical framework.

### 6.1.1 THE FIRST PARTICIPANT AND RELATION TO THE THEORIES

Loan generally shows her positivity in lived experiences in Finland regardless of some cultural differences described in three themes: Kindness and Closeness, Hierarchy and Relationships, and Respect for privacy and Individual freedom. The combination of two aspects - her personality and her living conditions in Vietnam - indirectly affect which stage in Bennett's scale she has reached when living in Finland more than three years. Together with Bennett's model, cultural frames of reference are also in use for examination of central foci in her narrative.

In the first theme Kindness and Closeness, kindness from the people Loan has met is the impressive aspect of life. Based on Mezirow's transformative learning, her fixed frame of reference from the beginning, about Western people as cold and indifferent, has changed dramatically after having close contact with local people (her kummi and her current flatmate). So, here, a new frame of reference is set about the kindness of people. Another interesting frame of reference in viewing mutual interaction is also mentioned in Loan's story. Loan still believes that people should interact and get others involved in their group, showing her preference for blending harmoniously with the group. However, Finnish people such as her coworkers tend not to disturb other people's private space if not necessary. Her frame of reference about closeness through mutual communication has not shifted considerably because of her mild discomfort to certain situations. As compared with descriptions from Bennett's model, Loan is likely moving between the adaptation and integration stage because she came to understand a separateness and uniqueness of each Western person but was still partly concern about the relationship between her surroundings (coworkers) and herself.

In the second theme, the cultural difference regards Hierarchy and Relationships. Loan's frame of reference has not changed or shifted strongly in this aspect during her time in Finland because of previously knowledge about low and high hierarchy in different countries from a certain study. Loan recognizes both positive and negative sides of hierarchy in a Vietnamese context. Hierarchy can make people give more respect to a superior but also causes the constraint as fear in expressing what people truly want and need. It means Loan's frame of reference about this aspect has been construed in Vietnam but reconfirmed when she moved to Finland. Therefore, Loan seemingly skips all ethnocentric stages and goes straight to ethnorelative stages in Bennett's model.

The third theme, Respect for Privacy and Individual Freedom, obviously presents another dimension on cultural difference. Vietnamese culture tends to be in favor of a preference for collective action whereas Finnish culture seems to be favorable to the freedom of individual action. Loan seems to have a deep shift in frame of reference. Especially, the thinking of “care” referred to emphasis on relationships among people in Vietnam has changed into respect for one’s privacy in Finland. The interesting statement Loan made is about a correlation between how other people’s behavior has an influence on her cognitive process. Loan can turn her thinking patterns in and out of another culture and give high degree of cultural empathy and nearly immerse herself in the surroundings through showing her strong preference in the way it works in Finland.

#### 6.1.2 THE SECOND PARTICIPANT AND RELATION TO THE THEORIES

Minh possibly experiences the denial and defense stage in Vietnam because he has recognized many aspects of cultural difference in Vietnam even before moving to Finland. His previous frame of reference has confronted different thinking patterns and likely construe a new frame of reference in Vietnam. Moving abroad seems to further elaborate his existing frame of reference. Four themes presented in his narrative are Correlation between Nature and Architecture, Comfort and Creativity, Hierarchy and Equality, and Freedom of Choices. Mezirow’s concept of frame of reference will be employed to further explain their possible position at a certain stage of Bennett’s model.

In the first theme, Correlation between Nature and Architecture, Minh better understands that the author’s thoughts are likely influenced with the living environment since he witnessed nature all around Finland. His confused frame of reference about nature has been tackled and a consolidated one has been established. In this aspect, Minh directly steps into the minimization and acceptance stage in Bennett’s model without any hesitation.

In the second theme, Comfort and Creativity, Minh’s frame of reference in different cultures of creativity has been fluctuated due to working with two completely different working cultures back in his city in Vietnam. This new viewpoint of creativity has been shaped since working in a Japanese company. Moving to Finland makes that point of view become a habit of mind. Again, Minh seemingly skips all the ethnocentric stages and moves straight to the ethnorelative ones; because he recognizes both good and bad sides of both cultures and their influence on himself. Cohesively thinking about different concepts of creativity in both



cultures and certainly noticing the influence from the culture he lives in prove his position at the acceptance stage.

The similarity happens with the third and fourth themes, Hierarchy and Equality, and Freedom of Choices. Minh tends to embrace all cultural differences with full satisfaction about life in Finland. However, Minh's frame of reference about the environment and the self is still affected by the way people are in relation to the environment but not a separated object from it. If Minh is currently satisfied with his stages without seeing there is still a small gap to fully integrate into society, he might stop at the adaptation stage in Bennett's model without noticing that his intercultural sensitivity does not make any progress.

### 6.1.3 THE THIRD PARTICIPANT IN RELATION TO THE THEORIES

In general, Thanh had limited intercultural contact in Vietnam because all his relationships at work or in social life were surrounded with local Vietnamese. His strong satisfaction and limitation with foreign contacts back in Vietnam made his fixed frames of reference inherently more embedded into Vietnamese culture, which certainly effects his adjustment to living in Finland. There are four main themes in his narrative: Kindness and Closeness, Gender Equality and Seniority, Openness to Knowledge or Academia, and Feeling of Depression. Bennett's model with the help from Mezirow's concept of frame of reference accounts for Thanh's adjustment.

In the first theme, Kindness and Closeness, Thanh starts recognizing the difference from Vietnam and Finland in terms of insistence on freedom of individual action and a preference of collective action. His fixed frame of reference is in favor of thinking that people should be more connected to each other, such as relationships among coworkers. Thanh comes to understand those differences without stating any strong opposite opinion but noticing that it depends on personal choice. This particularly demonstrates that he is not in denial or the defense stage in this aspect.

The interesting fact in his first theme is the close relationship among Vietnamese counterparts. Thanh's fixed frames of reference seem to view Vietnamese people not as a separate individuals but as a community of people with the same values. This actually reflects another different dimension in both societies; about desire for individual distinctiveness versus a preference for blending harmoniously with the group. With his

previous frames of reference, Thanh still insists on focusing on relationships and viewing it as easier to make friends with people from the same culture. This actually marks a thought-provoking point in that relationships among people from the same culture living abroad can be counted as cultural difference. There are two possible assumptions: (1) Vietnamese people who he has contacted with live in Finland for a while; therefore, their frames of reference are not the same as the beginning but shifted into the mixture of understanding of both or (2) his fixed frame of reference about viewing Vietnamese people as a group of alike people is deeply hard to be changed. Thanh could position himself at Denial stage in Bennett's model in this regard because he did not realize that people from the same country can have greatly different thinking patterns.

The second and the third theme both show Thanh's high recognition of cultural difference and fully accept the cultural difference without any negativity. In the second theme, Gender Equality and Seniority, Thanh's frame of reference has changed in viewing the hierarchy in the workplace in Vietnam as unprofessional after working in Finland. Also, Thanh's preference for the independence of women in Finland as attractive shows that his previous frame of reference about a specific role for each gender has become unfavorable. In the third theme, Openness to Knowledge or Academia, Thanh's frame of reference has been in a deep shift from viewing from limited to limitless knowledge thanks to his discovery of using scientific papers in the learning environment in Finland. Thanh seemingly moves into adaptation stage in this regard.

The last theme, Feeling of Depression, is the main unpleasant incident Thanh is experiencing in Finland due to his fixed and strong frame of reference about human connection. Based on the theoretical framework, Thanh still keeps viewing the in-group people (Vietnamese students) as the common group not as a separated individual and makes a certain distinction with the out-group people. Moreover, through his story, Thanh frequently looks for the close attachment among the in-group since seeing them have much more in common in beliefs and viewpoints than people from out-groups. After confronting those situations, Thanh does not continue viewing them as someone from the same country with shared values but more of an individual. I assume that this frame of reference has deeply shifted. His story strongly proves that friendship (close connection among like-minded people) is a truly important part in his social life and finding an intimate friend to share with is really challenging in the new environment. Therefore, even though there is a deep shift of his frame of reference, Thanh

still prefers his previous frame of reference about close relationships among people, which seemingly shows his gradual movement back to Denial stage in Bennett's model.

#### 6.1.4 CONCLUDING ACTIVITY IN RELATION TO THE THEORIES

The Statement Order Activity in the last part of each interview is used to summarize their lived experience in Finland up to now. For the first participant, the analysis of those themes highlights that she is likely to perform different stages at the same time, and seems to be currently at ethnorelative stages. Loan can coherently see cultural difference from both sides and adjust her way of thinking and behaving through observing the environment. She arranged pieces of statement into five columns to account for her stay in Finland. At the beginning, she experienced denial and defense stage at the same time but then moved straight to acceptance level. However, in the next phase, she still feels some characteristics from defense and minimization stages but gradually embraces some aspects of integration. At the last phase, she reaches a higher degree of integration and acceptance stages with only one statement about the minimization stage. This can be explained by the movement of some of her frames of reference. The way of thinking about hierarchy already exists since she is at home and moving here just seemingly reinforces what she believes. Thus, staying in Finland make existing frames of reference stronger. However, in the other two themes, the way of thinking about relationships among people has altered with the way of thinking about individuality. Loan clearly states this deep shift in her frame of reference through viewing the silence in Finnish culture as comfortable and enabling her decision making by herself without being affected by any person. Loan's arrangement of statements also shows that beliefs about controllability of the environment has been changed from an Eastern view to a Western one when she believes more controllability of her own life and decisions are separated from the environment.

The order of the statements the second participant arranged additionally supports my analysis. Minh does not divide the statements in a clear order like the first participant but mingles them together. This order presents his lived experience is more linear and more stable way than the first participant without any major shift in frames of reference. There are not many statements represented for denial, defense and minimization stages but mostly acceptance and adaptation stages. Minh moves quickly into acceptance and adaptation stages since he had more intercultural encounters at home country, which shapes his broader and shaper view on cultural difference. In other words, Minh's development of intercultural

sensitivity has increased smoothly and quickly when moving abroad thanks to his initial intercultural contacts in Vietnam. It means that his previous frames of reference start their transition in Vietnam and those frames of reference more strongly become consolidated and concrete since he moved to Finland. His story demonstrates that he mostly skips ethnocentric stages and directly positions at ethnorelative stages but does not fully reach the integration stage. There are very a few statements for integration stage compared with total statements he chose to describe his living situation. This means he might mostly stop at the adaptation stage. Knowledge of cultural difference through many intercultural contacts in a home country can be considered as a trap for his development of intercultural sensitivity. Because he knew too much about cultural difference, Minh firmly declared that it is better to just accept those differences he knows but forget to be careful of the unknown ones. These obscure differences can be sometimes too contrasting to be accepted in his values and beliefs. Instead of accepting all cultural differences, Minh should recognize relativity of acceptance towards certain cultural difference so that he can further make progress in the development of his intercultural sensitivity.

The order that the third participant has arranged from all the statements is truly interesting. Thanh clearly divides all of them into four phases. At the beginning, Thanh steps into ethnorelative stages but the more he lives here, he moves back to ethnocentric stages with only one statement from integration stage. This clearly shows that even though he stays here long enough, he keeps moving back and forth between ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages partly due to his satisfaction at home, his personality and his frames of reference. His frames of reference are strong and stable in Vietnam because of their lack of being challenged with foreign contacts. However, Thanh also states that he does not deal with culture shock, and living environments affect his personality lightly. This part shows his thought that his true nature will be the same in every place he stays. If Thanh stays longer in the country, there will be arguably two possible responses under intercultural contacts: his frames of reference will start shifting into ethnorelative stages or more obviously become alienated with the host culture.

## **6.2 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY**

About validity, narratives from storytellers should follow the main theme (based on the researcher's aim and structure) and what methods for narrative research need to be consistent

(interviews with the same questions). Validity can only be established if researchers collect enough data in narrative descriptions of the teller, interpret participants' stories comprehensively and coherently, and the data and narratives should be consistent. Also Polkinghorne, (2007, p. 479) mentions that the general notion of validity concerns the believability of a statement or knowledge claim.

Larsson and Sjöblom (2010, p. 277) suggest that personal narratives do not reveal the past 'as it actually was'; instead, they give us the truth of experiences only to be understood through interpretation, by paying careful attention to the context that shapes them. Narrative research, as well as conventional research, most often involves two performances: (a) the collection of evidence and (b) the analysis or interpretation of the evidence. The "truths" sought by narrative researchers are "narrative truths," not "historical truths" (Spence, 1982). Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories.

My research allowed me to put myself in their shoes so as to understand their living conditions abroad, but even though my context is similar (from the same country and to the same country) the way we interpret and live the life in Vietnam and Finland might be different. Therefore, I can easily feel the similarity and difference in their story. At the same time, I can still distance my own thoughts from their narrative. It seems to be unrealistic to create my own theory or model based on three narratives from my research participants. Instead, what I could successfully focus on is to present a deep insight of three individual living stories to partly gauge DMIS and cognitive dimension of people from a different cultural background.

About ethical issues, Larsson and Sjöblom, (2010, p. 277) say that when focusing on in-depth descriptions of inner worlds, cognitions and emotions may be evoked that may have been more or less submerged by the teller, and this requires great sensitivity on the part of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher's interpretations of those narratives need to be presented very perceptively in order not to undermine the teller's self or identity construction. Personally, I have carefully paid attention to each research participant's story to detect their positive or negative attitude towards life abroad. Additionally, I have promptly asked clarifying questions about some of their unclear sayings or expressions to further refine their narratives with better clear-cut meaning. Also, narrative researchers need to have ethical responsibilities to "*protect the privacy and dignity of those whose lives we study to*

*contribute to knowledge in our scholarly fields*” (Josselson, 2007). In the context of my research, all the participants agreed to sign the consent forms for their identity protection. All the terms and objectives of the study were presented to the participants clearly, and clarified if needed. I am concerned with privacy and flexibility in the research, reassuring the participants that their personal information will not be revealed without their permission and they can stop the interview whenever they want.

### **6.3 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Through my research, living abroad through study or work can be an important threshold of one’s life with the development of intercultural sensitivity. Each response from my research participants to the new living environment is unique, but the most interesting thing is they recognize that there is no dominant or the best culture of all. Three participants have all agreed on not experiencing any major shock from cultural difference. One of my possible hypotheses is that all of them come from a non-dominant culture, which views other cultures as inferior to theirs. Despite identifying several unsatisfying parts in their culture, three research participants never denied where they were born and brought up because “it is the principal component construing who we are today”, as stated by the second participant. Furthermore, I recognize that all the research participants have moved to ethnorelative stages at a certain extent, showing acceptance orientation as ‘predominant experience’ (as cited in Bloom, 2015).

However, there is lack of examination in behavior and emotional responses reflected in Bennett’s model which is an unseparated part from one’s development of intercultural. After analyzing the data, I assume that intercultural sensitivity can be perceived on a much larger scale containing all cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions. All of those dimensions interact with each other and modify each other when they encounter challenging situations in different intercultural contexts in order to create a higher degree of tolerance towards cultural differences of life abroad. Also, their ‘development’ goes in spiral, not linear like the Bennett’s model since each of my research participants shaped different forms of the development and experienced multiple stages at the same time.

The scope of my study is limited with three participants, so I cannot generalize what happens to all the Vietnamese students and create any new model for their adjustment. However, I notice further research should be done on the correlation between personality, working

experiences, initial intercultural contact at home country, satisfaction degree with one's own culture and adaptive responses to a new living environment. Also, communication and critical reflection in the research participant's narrative should be paid more attention to because they are likely the main components accelerating the development of one's intercultural sensitivity. The influence from the duration and the goals of study abroad towards an individual's integration to the society, should be further examined because Coll (2001, p.110) brings up the point:

Those who view their stay in a new culture as temporary, such as sojourners or short-term migrants, retain a stronger identity with their culture of origin and a weaker identity with the culture of contact, compared with those who plan for their residence to be more permanent.

The differences in patterns of thinking, in my research, significantly affects one's adjustment to a new country which they live in. Bennett's model forgets to view different patterns of thinking shaped by different culture, which in my opinion remarkably affects their adaptation in the host country. It can be that in Vietnam, the pattern of thinking is closer to Eastern view, so finding the Middle way or living in harmony with other people is one of the most important goals, when encountered with cultural difference. Another interesting aspect which is not mentioned in Bennett's model, is that differences with sub-cultural groups within one country can even create stronger and deeper development of intercultural sensitivity, since the shift in frame of reference about in-groups and out-groups can be challenged tremendously as in the case of the third participant.

I hope my research will partly contribute to fulfilling the lack of study on Vietnamese students who study in Finland and give a voice to this neglected group in the current literary agenda. Hence, people are able to gain further understanding of the lived experience about how Vietnamese students blend themselves in a new environment. One relevant quote from Walter Mosley, *Killing Johnny Fry: A Sexistential Novel* seems to be ideal for the closure of my thesis:

Freedom is a state of mind, I said wondering where I'd heard it before, not a state of being. We are all slaves to gravity and morality and the vicissitudes of nature. Our genes govern us much more than we'd like to think. Our bodies cannot know absolute freedom but our minds can, can at least try.

The living environment unquestionably makes an impact on people's personal growth, and shapes their own thoughts. People seldom cast doubt towards what they were taught by society, family and school, and views they have obtained during the course of their life as an ultimate truth to themselves. Their firm beliefs are prone to fluctuate or even be 'flushed away' by contrasting notions that they confront on a daily basis at work, in study or when they move to a completely different country. The more they progress through life, the more independent from their own culture they may become. Especially, mobility to another country can help them recognize that their inherited cultural patterns of thought are just one of many possible patterns of thinking and acting from which people could choose (Triandis, 1994). Significantly, mobility can even provide individuals with the notion of freedom of choices in their cultural patterns of thinking, which can set their mind free.



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1 – NARRATIVE INTERVIEW FOR MASTER’S THESIS

Study abroad can be a threshold of someone’s life and their experiences in a host country are invaluable. I would like you to think about your time before and during moving and settling a new place for study abroad now. You can write anything on a piece of paper about your first impression of the period you have been through during study abroad. After a short reflection, I will be asking you several questions about your stories of oversea study.

#### **Theme A – Students’ background before coming to Finland**

Tell me a bit about yourself before coming to Finland.

#### **Theme B – Decisions to study in Finland and lived experiences during their stay**

Tell me the story of your coming to Finland. Since you moved and stay here for a while, tell me your story/ experiences from the beginning until now about what you have been through

#### **Theme C – Probability of their adjustment to the host country (to know whether they adjust to the environment or not)**

Do you feel you have adjusted/transformed? If so, please tell me about your experiences of this process.

Activity: Statement Order: Make 6 pieces of paper with some descriptions of 6 stages of Bennett’s model without mentioning the name of stages. Then, ask an interviewee to arrange them in order according to their own story and reflection about the period they are living abroad from the beginning until now. He/she can omit stages or add stages to their will. At the end, ask them why they arrange them in such an order.

Any comments or questions?

*Thank you for taking your time to the interview!*



## APPENDIX 2 – STATEMENT ORDER ACTIVITY FROM THE INTERVIEW

(Selected sentences from Milton J. Bennett, 1986, 2004)

### Denial Stage

With my experience, I can be successful in any culture without any special effort.

As long as we all can speak the same language, there's no problem.

I live isolated in my homogeneous group, and I am uninterested in experiencing difference.

All big cities are the same.

All I need to know about is politics and history - I can figure out the rest of it as I go along.

There is no reason to know something about foreign culture.

I'm not aware of any cultural differences.

I don't believe in cultural difference

### Defense Stage

My way is the best

My culture is 'true' culture

Other cultures are superior to my own.

I wish these people would just talk the way we do.

I wish I could give up my own cultural background and really be one of these people.

When I go to other cultures, it makes me realize how much better my country is

When I go to other cultures, it makes me realize how much worse my country is

I am embarrassed by my compatriots, so I spend all my time with the host nationals.

My own culture is superior to foreign culture in many aspects.

Finnish are so strange and cold. They don't talk at all and it's hard to communicate with them.

These people don't value life the way we do.

### Minimization Stage

What we have in common is much more important.

Differences between cultures are inconsequential.

I have this intuitive sense of other people, no matter what their culture.

No matter what their culture, people are pretty much motivated by the same things.

We humans have all the same physical characteristics: we must eat, procreate, and die.

Whether we know it or not, deep down all humans share basically the same universal values.

All human beings are similar despite some superficial differences.

While the context may be different, the basic need to communicate remains the same around the world.

As different as people are, they are still more similar than dissimilar.

Customs differ, of course, but when you really get to know them they're pretty much like us.

### **Acceptance Stage**

People's values and behaviors are different.

The more difference the better- more difference results in more creative ideas.

I always try to study about a new culture before I go there or interact with the people.

The more difference the better - it's boring if everyone is the same.

People in other cultures are different in ways I hadn't thought of before.

I always try to study about a new culture before I go there.

The more cultures you know about, the better comparisons you can make.

I still may find some of these behaviors hard to deal with or accept, but are not threatened by them, and don't judge them as wrong or bad.

When studying abroad, every student needs to be aware of relevant cultural differences.

Differences among people are not a problem, they are interest of me.

I am curious and respectful toward cultural difference.

### **Adaptation Stage**

I'm adding new behaviors to be more effective.

I adapt my thinking and behavior to be relevant in different cultural contexts.

I can maintain my values and also behave in culturally appropriate ways.

I greet people from my culture and people from the host culture somewhat differently to account for cultural differences in the way respect is communicated.

I'm willing and able to change my own behavior to conform to different norms.

I know they're really trying hard to adapt to my style, so it's fair that I try to meet them halfway.

I'm able to empathize with people from different cultures.

The more I understand this culture, the better I get at the language.

I understand that difference must always be understood within the context of the relevant culture.

I use different standards for evaluation of situation in foreign cultural context.

### **Integration Stage**

I can move in between cultures.

Whatever the situation, I can usually look at it from a variety of cultural points of view.

Sometimes I don't feel like I fit anywhere.

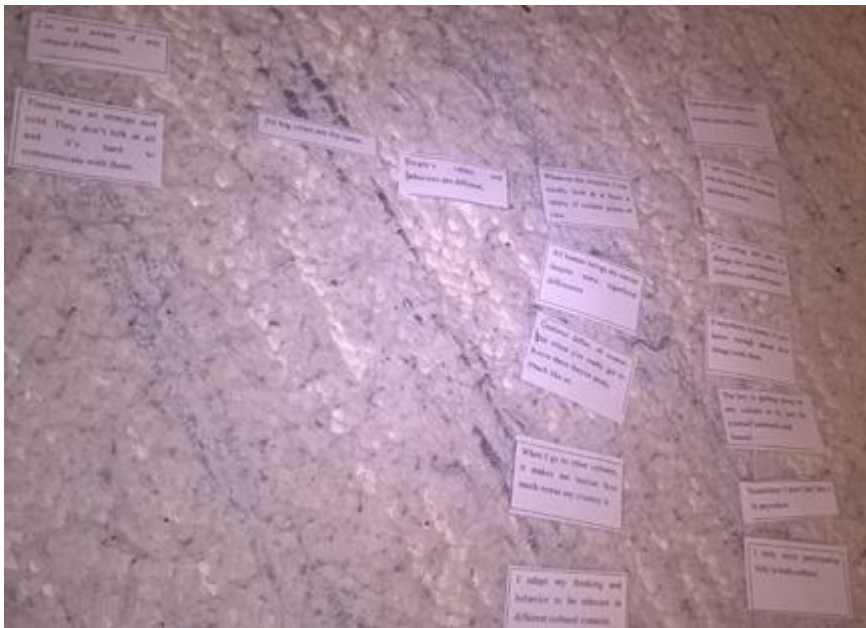
I almost feel as comfortable in another culture as I do in my own culture.

Whatever the situation, I can usually look at it from a variety of cultural points of view.

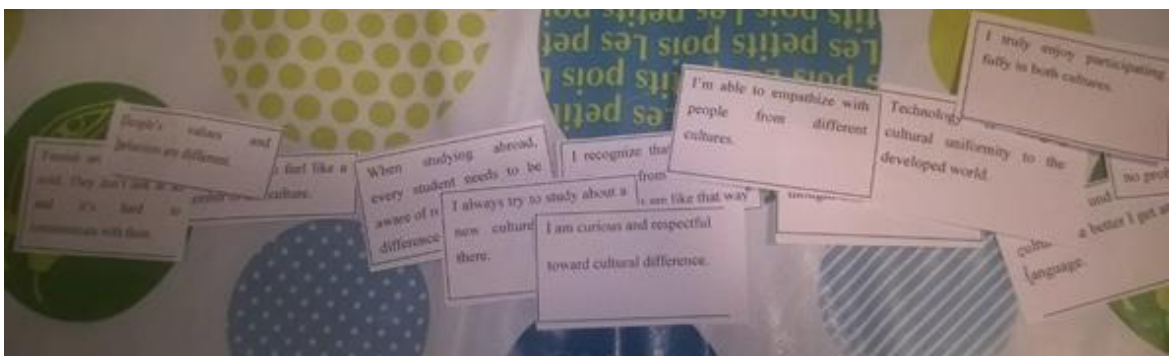
Everywhere is home, if you know enough about how things work there.

I feel most comfortable when I'm Bridging differences between the cultures I know.

### The Order of the Statements from the First Participant



### The Order of the Statements from the Second Participant



## The Order of the Statements from the Third Participant

