

Sleeping with strangers

Dreams and nightmares in experiences of homestay

Phil Benson

Macquarie University

Based on narratives from Hong Kong students on one-semester programmes at universities in Australia, Britain and Canada, this study focused on the emotional charge of expectations and day-to-day realities of homestay. It showed how, for many of the students, this emotional charge was related to the adoption of imagined identities as family members within the homestay. It also showed how a corresponding sense of inclusion or exclusion could arise from recognition or non-recognition of these imagined identities. The students' experiences of homestay were often shaped by an expectation that a degree of emotional intensity within a family environment would lead to a successful language learning experience. Paradoxically, emotionally disturbing experiences could also contribute to a positive overall experience from the student's perspective, if they led to a stronger sense of emotional inclusion. The experience was least satisfying overall in homestays where students were unable to feel this sense of inclusion.

Keywords: study abroad, homestay, emotion, foreign language learning, family

1. Introduction

When university students go to study abroad for a semester or longer, finding a comfortable and secure place to sleep is likely to be among their first priorities. While many international students prefer on-campus accommodation, others opt for homestay as an alternative that provides not only a bed and regular meals, but also opportunities for language and cultural immersion. Students whose goals include improving foreign language skills are said to benefit from a "homestay advantage" (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004, p. 254). Despite mixed findings, studies have tended to show that homestay leads to better language learning outcomes than on-campus accommodation. Much depends, however, on the quality of the homestay experience, which can vary greatly. Kinginger (2009) has

highlighted marked individual differences in the outcomes of study abroad, which are partly related to the unique environment that each student experiences. As a consequence, there has been a shift of emphasis away from studies that compare outcomes for different types of groups towards qualitative studies of what individual students actually do during study abroad (Coleman, 2015; Jackson, 2008; Benson, 2012; Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown, 2013). Within this area, there is a clear need for more research that examines the quality of homestay experiences as an individual difference factor in study abroad.

Based on data from a series of studies of one-semester overseas programmes for Hong Kong university students, this exploratory study examined participants' small story narratives on expectations and experiences of homestay. It was especially concerned with the emotional charge of students' expectations and the sometimes disturbing realities that they encounter, or what we might call the 'dreams' and 'nightmares' of homestay.

2. Homestay

In the context of international education, Chaseling (2001) defined homestay as "an arrangement whereby international students live in homes as members of families and become involved in family activities" (p. 114), while Akbar, Van Bael, Hassan and Baguley (2004) defined homestay providers, often called "hosts", as "individuals or families, who offer their homes to international students for part of, or the duration of their stay" (p. 1). Most studies of homestay concur with Bachner and Zeuschel's (2009) assessment that "[t]he host family experience is a singularly important and influential aspect of exchange" (p. 14). A number of recent studies have focused on homestay as a factor in language learning during study abroad (Allen, 2010; Cook, 2006; Di Silvio, Donovan & Malone, 2014; Iino, 2006; Kinginger, 2015; Kinginger, Wu, Lee & Tan, 2016; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, 2010; Magnan & Back, 2007; Rivers, 1998 Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Shiri, 2015).

Among these studies, Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) highlight the 'homestay advantage', describing homestay as an arrangement that provides students with "an immediate entrée into the cultural and linguistic environment while protecting them in a smaller 'caring' unit" (p. 254). While some studies have questioned this advantage (Crealock, Derwing & Gibson, 1999; Magnan & Back, 2007; Rivers, 1998), the balance of research indicates that homestay is more conducive to language interaction and learning than on-campus accommodation, provided the homestay provides a supportive living environment for the student (for a detailed review, see Kinginger, 2015). Mitchell, McManus and Tracy-Ventura (2015)

did not find a relationship between accommodation and language development among university students studying abroad in Europe, but they did highlight the importance of students' social networks. Despite concerns about the quality of language interaction, in many programmes homestay may be the main or only setting in which students form close ties with speakers of the target language and interact with them at length (Allen, 2010; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Shiri, 2015). In a study of US students on semester-long programmes in Spanish, Mandarin and Russian, Di Silvio et al. (2014) found a significant relationship between homestay satisfaction and oral language proficiency gains; they suggested that even if there is no inherent homestay advantage, "there is an advantage to be found in a happy homestay" (p. 180). In Hong Kong based research, Crew and Bodycott (2001) argued that homestay is "crucial" to the success of study abroad (p. 145), while Murdoch and Adamson (2003) reported that the homestay family "was widely perceived [by students] to be the most single contributing factor" in positive outcomes (p. 110).

An important point to emerge from this research, however, is the degree to which homestay may contribute to individual differences in study abroad outcomes. Benson's (2012) case study of a female Hong Kong student's experiences in Australia, for example, showed that homestay was a key element in the construction of a complex and unique ecology of learning in the study abroad environment. Salient features of the homestay included the composition of the homestay family and the affordances for interaction that it offered. They also included personal relationships among family members, their attitudes toward the student and her attitudes toward them, and the proximity of the homestay to the university and her fellow Hong Kong students' homestays. Language learning outcomes could not be attributed directly to any particular element in the study abroad environment. Instead, they were seen as emerging from interactions between homestay experiences and experiences elsewhere as the student's learning environment evolved over time and in response to her agency. In a study of US students in China, Kinginger (2015) argued that the success of homestay as a learning environment does not only depend on "whether or not the students are received as persons of consequence". It also depends on "how students position themselves in their adopted households" (p. 56). From this perspective, second language learning outcomes emerge from an evolving interaction between the student's agency and the particular circumstances of the homestay. The student's agency is also "jointly dependent on the initiative of the learner and the reception of others in the learner's environment" (Allen, 2010, p. 3).

In the light of Coleman's (2015) call for more research on what students actually do during study abroad, there is an evident need for more in-depth studies of experiences of homestay. Coleman (2015) equates the idea of language

“immersion” with the folk notion that the best way to learn something is to “eat, drink, and sleep” it (p. 34). Homestay appears to offer the opportunity of, almost literally, eating, drinking and sleeping a language and culture. Students’ expectations of study abroad and homestay, thus, tend to be high and their actual experiences are often conditioned by these expectations (Allen, 2010; Jackson, 2016; Shiri, 2015; Benson et al., 2013). Expectations of study abroad are also apt to be emotionally charged and, indeed, some degree of emotional intensity may be vital to learning outcomes (Gutel, 2008; Klapper & Rees, 2012). A survey of US students who opt for homestay in study abroad related this preference to three beliefs: (1) homestay offers a high degree of cultural immersion; (2) cultural immersion makes for a successful learning experience; and (3) a degree of emotional intensity is a necessary ingredient of cultural immersion (Gutel, 2008). Unsatisfactory homestay experiences often lacked this emotional intensity.

3. Emotion and identity in study abroad

The importance of emotions in second and foreign language learning has long been recognized (Arnold, 1999; Stevick, 1976). However, research has tended to emphasise the negative influence of anxiety and the positive influence on success in language learning of integrative affective orientations towards the target language and target language speakers. More recent research has focused on emotion within second language learning and use and, in particular, its relationship to language identity. Learning an additional language involves emotional investments in desired identities and imagined communities, which may be reinforced, questioned or threatened by situated experiences of second language learning and use (Bown & White, 2010; Garrett & Young, 2009; Oxford, Acuña, Hernández, & Smith, 2015; Pavlenko, 2012; Piller & Takahashi, 2006). Study abroad research that has incorporated participants’ narratives has often revealed an interweaving of the intensely emotional character of second language interaction with issues of identity (Benson et al., 2013; Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2004, 2008; Patron, 2007; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005).

Pavlenko (2012) posits a theory of language embodiment based on the different roles of emotion in primary language socialization and foreign language learning later in life. Primary language acquisition in early childhood involves conceptual development, in which emotion categories are formed using all of the senses. It also involves affective linguistic conditioning, in which “words and phrases acquire affective connotations and personal meanings through association and integration with emotionally charged memories and experiences” (p. 456). Pavlenko proposes a continuum from the emotional and highly contextualized experience

of primary language acquisition to the more decontextualized experience of foreign language learning in the classroom later in life. In the middle of this continuum we find additional language learning in naturalistic contexts, which may involve additional conceptual development and affective linguistic conditioning, and a perception of embodiment in the later learned language. The experience of study abroad evidently corresponds to this mid-point for many participants. This is especially so when study abroad represents a first experience of contextualized use of a second language outside of educational settings.

Benson et al. (2013) highlighted the sense in which study abroad challenges second language identities, suggesting that the difficulties of using a second language to project and gain recognition for desired self-identities lie at the root of critical incidents that lead to identity development. Pavlenko (2012) observes how learners with lower levels of proficiency in a second language experience difficulties in comprehending emotional expression and in conveying their own feelings. This may lead to them “feeling frustrated, powerless, vulnerable, and ashamed of themselves and their inability to express their feelings” (p. 459). In narratives of study abroad, such feelings are often closely related to the reduced sense of self that participants experience as they struggle to project what they see as their real selves in second language interaction (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005). Feelings of frustration and powerlessness are not necessarily a consequence of low levels of target language proficiency. They can also be a consequence of heightened communicative demands in new and unfamiliar environments. Hong Kong university students who study overseas typically acquire relatively high levels of English proficiency through English-medium education. Yet interactional episodes are likely to arouse strong emotional responses in two study abroad settings: in public places, where, for example, participants feel that they have experienced discrimination or harassment; and in homestay, especially when personal relationships with household members are placed at risk (Benson, 2012; Benson et al., 2013; Chik & Benson, 2008). Disturbing homestay experiences present a particular emotional challenge as participants confront the difficult task of using the target language to resolve the difficulty that has arisen and to maintain good relations with their hosts.

In the context of emerging research that has thematized relationships between emotion and identity in study abroad (Galucci, 2013; McGregor, 2014), this study explores the emotional charge of the expectations and day-to-day realities of homestay and its potential impact on language learning outcomes. As an exploratory study, it was guided by the question of how emotion is linked to identity, specifically within the homestay experience.

4. Methodology

The study adopted a narrative approach to the analysis of data collected from Hong Kong university students who studied on a one-semester overseas programme. Narrative inquiry was used as a means of gaining insight into the subjective meaning of homestay experiences as participants recount them. Narrative methods were used in two ways. First, they were used as a means of constructing individual students' stories of their study abroad experiences from interviews and online communications (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). Second, they were used in the analysis of participants' "small stories" (Barkhuizen, 2010; Vasquez, 2011), or the short and often fragmentary narratives that emerged within this data. This paper is based on a systematic analysis of small stories on the topic of homestay gathered from more than 200 students over a period of five years.¹

The participants in the study were English-language students studying at an English-medium Hong Kong university, who studied abroad for one semester of their four-year degree at a partner university in Australia, Britain or Canada. The study abroad semester fell either at the end of their second year or beginning of their third year of study. At this point the students had achieved advanced levels of English proficiency, although they typically had little experience of using spoken English outside the university setting. Approximately 95 per cent of the students were female, which reflected the demographic composition of the programme. The participants were interviewed in Hong Kong before and after the overseas semester and around half were also interviewed on-site during monitoring visits to the overseas universities. Other students provided on-site data in the form of English-language blogs they had used to communicate with friends and family. Most interviews were conducted in English, although students were given the option of being interviewed in Cantonese when a Cantonese-speaking interviewer was available. In this circumstance, most participants elected to be interviewed in English, especially in post-experience interviews.

Short narratives on the topic of homestay were extracted from these data and systematically analysed to generate a picture of shared and individual homestay experiences. Stories that were salient to the issue of emotion and identity were then extracted for further analysis and discussion in this paper. All but one of the data

1. The data for this study is taken partly from internally-funded projects at the Hong Kong University of Education and partly from a project entitled 'Second language identity and study abroad: A Hong Kong-based study', which was fully funded by a grant from the Hong Kong Research Grants Council General Research. I am grateful to Gary Barkhuizen, Peter Bodycott, Jill Brown, Philip Hoare, and Tim Taylor for their permission to use data from these projects in this paper.

extracts in this paper were spoken or written in English by the participants and are reproduced verbatim. The exception to this rule was translated from Cantonese by the bilingual research assistant who conducted the interview. Participants are identified by pseudonyms. English names are used as the participants all identified themselves using an English given name or nickname in the Hong Kong university and in the study abroad setting.

5. Findings

5.1 Homestay: The shared experience

Homestay providers are often referred to as host “families” (e.g., Chaseling, 2001). The picture that emerged from our data, however, was one of diversity of household circumstances, in which identities such as host ‘mother’ and ‘father’ may be ambiguous or blurred. Students were often accommodated in single-person or single parent households and, in some households, the homestay parents were closer in age to the student’s grandparents. They were often accommodated in the rooms of adult children who lived away from home, and in some homes the study abroad participants outnumbered the host family members. The composition of the homestay family rarely corresponded to that of the student’s own family, which was often a matter of concern to departing students.

From the students’ accounts of their expectations and experiences a pattern emerged that might be described as a typical shared experience of homestay, from which individual experiences diverged to various degrees.

1. Homestay was seen as the site where the students were most likely to improve their English and their expectations of it were high. As students at an English-medium university in Hong Kong, they had correspondingly lower expectations of the university environment.
2. Homestay also proved to be the site where they interacted most frequently with English speakers and reported the best language learning outcomes.
3. A good homestay experience depended largely on the personal relationships that students built, which often hinged on forming a friendship with a particular individual in the household.
4. Some students reported that the quantity and quality of interaction in the homestay was limited, but nevertheless judged the overall experience to be a positive one.
5. The students tended not to blame their hosts for limited interaction and often found other opportunities to use English by, for example, linking up with

other students' host families or spending more time with English-speaking peers outside the homestay.

The overall picture of the students' experiences of homestay was, therefore, a positive one. While they expected a great deal from homestay, they also took a good deal of the responsibility for making homestay work as a learning experience. Two additional patterns will be discussed in more detail in the following sections: first, the emotional investment in homestay that was evident in the data, and, second, the construal of homestay relationships as family relationships in spite of the diversity of household arrangements.

5.2 Expectations of homestay

Although most students looked forward to homestay in pre-departure interviews, many were apprehensive on a number of points. Their concerns, often passed down from senior students who had already studied abroad, centred on unfamiliar food, restrictions on bathroom time, limited access to the Internet and television, going to bed and getting up early, unfamiliar household rules, local politeness norms, and their hosts' willingness to interact with them. These apprehensions, when combined with high expectations of homestay as a site for English language use, heightened the emotional charge of their expectations. Many students also hoped to develop lasting personal relationships with their hosts. An interesting aspect of their stories, however, concerns the way in which their expectations and apprehensions were invariably articulated in terms of imagined identities within the host family households.

At the time of the pre-departure interviews, the students had usually received some information about their homestay and they typically talked about their "host family", "host mum" and "host dad" as people of whom they had some knowledge. Apprehensions were heightened when students were placed in homestays that did not match their own family circumstances. One student, who had been placed with a 65 year-old single woman, wondered whether she could "get along with that old lady." Another worried about "communicating with the two children in the host family because I am not used to getting on with children." A third, placed with a single woman, worried that topics for conversation would be limited. These concerns were intensified by the students' expectation that they would spend much more time in their homestays than they were accustomed to spend in their own homes. One student said that it would be important to establish a good relationship with her hosts because she would spend more than half her time in the homestay. Another observed, "if they are nice people then that will be fine, but if they ignore me then I will be very lonely at home."

Female students, especially, emphasized relationships with their ‘host mum’ and tended to adopt an imagined identity of ‘daughter’ within the family. When the student occupied the room of an absent adult child, even a single-person household could be construed as a family if the student played out this identity of daughter. Equally striking was the absence of other representations of the students’ imagined identities: for example, friend, lodger or paying guest. Concerns about fitting into the homestay ‘family’ far outweighed concerns about living in a different culture or communicating in a different language. For many students, the dream homestay experience was one in which their identity as a family member would be recognized and they would be involved in family activities, taken out on trips and family visits, and introduced to other family members and friends. The nightmare experience was one in which they would not fit in with the family, or where there would be no family at all.

5.3 Dreams come true

In online communications and post-programme interviews, most students reported a positive homestay experience, and attributed much of their progress in spoken English to interaction with their hosts. However, the degree to which they were able to build desired interactional relationships varied. Annie’s was a typical experience of homestay in which relationships were comfortable but not close:

Most of the time I would try and communicate with my host family at the dinner table. Because they need to work and their daughters are working or studying. So we just try to find something to talk about, or daily encounters or what our friends do in school or what we do in school. We share around the dinner table and we will chat. Actually I don’t have any problem with my host family and I like the food very much. (Annie, post-experience interview)

Like many of the students, Annie acknowledged that her hosts were busy with their own lives and accepted that interaction would be limited to dinner table chat. This most often occurred in families with young children or in homestays where there was more than one study abroad participant. Sandra explained that her host mum was friendly and treated her well, but was busy as a single mother and as a teacher with a heavy workload. “I only can see them during the dinner time,” she said, “but she tries her best to communicate with me.” Provided the hosts treated the student well, this kind of relationship was seen as understandable, if less than ideal.

Melanie was one of a small number of students for whom homestay arrangements turned out to be ‘a dream come true’:

I think about how the host family helped us to improve our English and to get into their lives. Because I just expected that I would just be a visitor in their family. But

they just treated us as a family member. They brought me to other places to visit, to other houses and parties. So it was better than what I expected. I think that the experience in church has left a good impression on me. The people there are very, very nice. They are sincere and they would like to talk to us and help us. They also organized some meetings and activities for the international students especially.

(Melanie, post-experience interview)

Another student, Penny, explained how, because her host father was busy, she spent most of her time with her host mother who took her to church and introduced her to friends. For Penny, the best thing about her homestay experience was that she found it “very relaxing.... we did a lot of things, but not hurried.” Tara enjoyed her homestay because the “host family would include me in their family,” eating slowly with her, chatting when she came home late, taking her out for lunch with “grandmother,” and taking her to their daughter’s school concert. The ideal homestay, therefore, provided an experience of family and a degree of emotional intensity that came from a sense of being included. Students in such homestays were popular with their friends, who sometimes abandoned their own homestays on weekends to come over and enjoy the warm family atmosphere.

5.4 Homestay nightmares

In our data, homestay nightmares were rare, but instructive in pointing to certain risks in the construal of homestay as an experience of family. Lawrence shared his homestay with a Japanese female student. His host family were “quite different,” because their working hours meant that “they weren’t around very much even at night time.” Although Lawrence did not have much chance to talk to his hosts, he made the best of things. He explained that it was not really necessary for him to talk to them every day, as he could talk to his university classmates instead. He helped out around the house as a way to start conversations. He also made use of the difficulties experienced by his Japanese housemate, by interpreting for her sometimes. Lawrence described as the most valuable part of his stay: “Being caught between the devil and the angel – I enjoyed being the medium.” Unfortunately, the Japanese student ran into problems with the host family by spending too much time in the bathroom and breaking the shower. After she left for another homestay, Lawrence said, “there were even more problems, like the house is empty, one person is missing and you can talk less, there are less distractions in-between.” Toward the end of his stay he was deeply affected by a new problem:

At first I didn’t know anything at all. It was like I heard my homestay parents arguing. I wasn’t quite sure what happened, but then one night my host mum came and told me that they had been having such an argument because of certain problems.

Actually it was like an affair. She thought I would be scared. And then that was the kind of problem that was more like an emotional problem with language.

(Lawrence, post-experience interview)

Emma also experienced family arguments:

It is quite difficult for me to get used to this family. Individually they are all good. They are nice. But when they come together, they start to quarrel. They quarrel and argue a lot. Sometimes we just start a discussion for one or two minutes and then they start to quarrel.... At first I thought it would be okay because I thought different families may have different lifestyles. And maybe with the mid-term coming things would get more restful. But then I found it started to become a disaster for me. Now I have my headphones on when I am doing my assignments. Because sometimes they will even quarrel just outside my door and then it is just so disturbing.... Sometimes the words are very hurtful, my heart just can't get used to it.

(Emma, on-site interview)

Emma did not find this experience entirely negative, however, because it brought her closer to her host mother. "My host mum will have some tea time," she said, "because she loves drinking tea at night, so we will have a nice time together then."

Winnie's nightmare began when she was placed with a single mother, who worked as a teaching assistant in a local school, and her young son. Winnie's main difficulty was communicating with her "host mum."

Sometimes I would feel a bit worried, because my host mum was not that talkative. And sometimes she seemed a bit strict. So I was so afraid that I will make a mistake, not a language mistake, but about the rules at home. Like I need to clean up the basin, every drop of water, I need to clean it up before I leave the bathroom. So I was kind of afraid that she was going to complain or something. So when I talked to her, I felt a little bit nervous. At the time I was thinking about some appropriate words. Later on it was all right. Actually she is a very caring host mum. She just can't express herself. Maybe she is taking that as a job, not taking it as a pleasure, honestly.

(Winnie, post-experience interview)

Winnie was disappointed with her homestay, saying that she thought she would have "more family life." Because her host mother was "job-oriented," Winnie became a student who visited other students' homestays on weekends. She also maintained an ambivalent attitude towards her host. Having said that she was "caring" but "could not express herself," Winnie later said that she was "responsible" in taking her role "as a job," but "not that caring." In an interesting exchange her host asked Winnie (who was training to become an English teacher in Hong Kong) why she wanted to be a teacher. Winnie answered that she wanted to get to know more people and make friends with them. "No! No!" her host replied, "It's impossible. It's illegal in the UK. You can't make friends. You have your own

friends, why would you make friends with the students?'' Winnie was stung by this comment, which she interpreted as an expression of her host mum's feelings toward her, but finally she reflected that, "it's nice to have this argument – practice my English anyway."

Joey's story, reported in her blog a few weeks after she had settled happily into her homestay, gives particular insight into how students' identities within the homestay family could interact with the emotional charge of day-to-day experiences.

They argue again: It was 8.30 in the morning. They were arguing. Again, again and again. I was awake, but I did not dare to leave the bedroom. It would be a bit embarrassing to be in the battlefield. I went out after the dad went to work. 'I am sorry for that...Are you OK?' the mum asked. 'Yes, it's fine. I am OK...but are you...OK?' I struggled between expressing my concern and not stepping into their private life. She cried. We chatted when we had breakfast. I listened and tried to comfort her, even though I am not apt at comforting others and doubted how much I should say. I hesitated for a second, but I did say something which I wanted to say. Obviously, she needs more rest. She is so busy that sometimes I do not dare to start a conversation with her. She needs her own time for herself, not for the family. She considers too much for others. She bears too much. I don't think I can help anything, but I said I will vacuum the floor for her. You know, when one is tired, one gets depressed easily. Yes, I am willing to. She is a tough, lovely, kind-hearted and hard-working woman.

(Joey, on-site blog entry, original in English)

This story followed several weeks during which Joey felt that she was fitting into what appeared to be a happy family, in which she adopted the identity of older sister to her host family's young daughter. But when arguments broke out between the parents, like Emma, Joey felt that she was isolated in her bedroom. Significantly, she also stepped out of her 'daughter' identity; while she had hitherto referred to her host as "my host mum," in this blog entry she used "the mum" and expressed her concern at stepping into her "private life." The experience of a family argument was not only distressing, but also excluding. Both Joey and Emma resolved their sense of exclusion, however, by re-inserting themselves into family identities. Joey first attempted to console her host mum and then took on the role of a good daughter by helping with the housework. Emma, similarly, took on a daughterly role by finding time for an evening cup of tea with her host mum. In each case, the homestay nightmare created a degree of emotional intensity that was clearly unwelcome at the time it occurred. At the same time it opened up opportunities for a different kind of emotional intensity in interaction that eventually led to positive evaluations of the overall homestay experience.

Lastly, Priscilla's story provides some evidence of the emotions that can be aroused when students have difficulty in matching desired identities within the homestay to their perceptions of how their identities would be projected and recognized in their own homes.

I was living with a retired professional couple, whose children had already left home. I felt that my home in Hong Kong is such a small place. In Hong Kong, six of us are living together but their house is twice the size of mine with only two people living there. I felt so happy when I saw that every room is big and everything is so pretty there. I envied them at the beginning, but then I felt like I couldn't get used to living there. The kitchen and the toilet were downstairs and I had to walk a long way in the dark for a cup of water in the middle of the night. Then, I started missing my home, where it's just few steps to the kitchen. At the beginning, you would think the houses there are great. Afterward, you would think that, in fact, living in Hong Kong is not so bad. You just need to find a place that suits your life style.... And then I had a terrible experience. My host likes to use a lot of body language. In fact, he asked me if I would feel uncomfortable if he put his arm on my shoulder at the very beginning and I thought it was okay. But then on my last day there, he gave me big hug with his hand moving around on my back. He put his arm around my waist tightly to take a picture, and you can see that my top was pulled down and my bra strap was showing. All my friends in Hong Kong were so shocked, but then some of them told me that maybe the culture there is like that. Still, even my father would never do this to me.

(Priscilla, post-experience interview, original in Cantonese)

It is not entirely clear from Priscilla's story, or from the photograph that she shared, whether or not the host father had intentionally touched her inappropriately. Priscilla, herself, appeared to be unsure about this and commented on the differing reactions of her friends. Nevertheless, the incident left her feeling ambivalent about the homestay experience as a whole. Priscilla attributed much of her learning to the time that the host father had spent interacting with her, but this incident led her to question his motives for spending this time with her. In terms of the themes of this study, two points stand out in the way that the story is told. First, Priscilla prefaces her story with comments on the difference between the sizes of Australian houses and Hong Kong apartments. In doing so, she articulates a sense that her emotional response was related to a difficulty in fully inhabiting the identity of daughter in the homestay. Second, in her concluding comment that her own father would never have touched her in this way, she appears to resolve the question of whether this was a matter of cultural difference or not, by removing herself from this identity altogether.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to explore links between emotion and identity in Hong Kong university students' narratives of homestay. These narratives confirm Gutel's (2008) observation, based on a large population survey, that students expect a degree of emotional charge from homestay experiences. It also adds two observations. First, for these Hong Kong students, the expected emotional charge is very much tied up with the imagination of identities as family members within the homestay. Second, emotional responses to the day-to-day realities of homestay are tied up with projection and recognition of these identities, and they are dominated by experiences and perceptions of inclusion and exclusion. The title of this paper hints that homestay is, essentially, a matter of 'sleeping with strangers': a potentially threatening experience that is mitigated by its construal as an experience of 'family', in which participants are able to draw upon familiar categories of identity. In our data, the identity of 'daughter' was especially salient, and we have seen how this identity allowed students to open channels for interaction within the homestay. Even emotionally disturbing experiences can be turned to advantage, in this sense, if they allow the student to reinforce an identity as family member. In Joey's case, a family argument strengthened her relationship with her host mother. Emotionally disturbing experiences may only have a lasting effect, it seems, if they lead to a sense of exclusion from the family. In Priscilla's case, her host father excluded her from an imagined daughter identity by failing to act as her own father would have done.

The findings of this study suggest that, for many Hong Kong students, the emotions associated with the ideal homestay are a feeling of warmth, of fitting in, and of being treated as a family member. When hosts take the student on a trip or to a family event outside the house, it is not so much the trip or the event that counts as the feeling of having been included. This feeling of inclusion tends to separate out what they see as genuine homestay "families" from those who "take it as a job." One student, Mandy, explained that good hosts "cared for" their student guests. To illustrate the point, she mentioned that a female co-student had been harassed by a group of adolescent boys on her way from the university to her homestay. When her co-student told her own hosts about the experience, she felt that they had shown a lack of care by not taking her seriously and suggesting that the incident was not as serious as she felt that it was. Mandy's host family, on the other hand, had shown their care by sympathizing with her friend and offering advice. Homestay nightmares, on the other hand, often involve exclusion, which in this case arose less from an experience of harassment, but more from a lack of sympathy that would not be expected from one's own family. In Joey's case, the sense of being excluded by overhearing a family argument from her bedroom

was mitigated by a sense of being re-included as confidant to the host mother. In retrospect, this was by no means the most disturbing event in Joey's homestay experience, which came one Sunday morning when the family took off for the beach without her. They had not invited her, they said later, because they knew that she had to finish an important university assignment for the next day. Although Joey would probably have refused an invitation to join them for the same reason, she found this explanation difficult to believe and was left with a sense that she was not, after all, to be treated as a family member. Other students struggled to achieve a sense of inclusion, simply because it was difficult to construe their experience of homestay as an experience of family at all.

In regard to the potential impact of homestay on language learning outcomes, it is important to recognize that the work that goes into constructing and maintaining family member identities is conducted in the target language. It is, therefore, interesting to observe how linguistic and personal anxieties are interwoven in the students' narratives of homestay nightmares. Joey, for example, was "not apt at comforting others" and doubted how much she should say to her host mum after the family argument. She "hesitated for a second," but finally said something that she "wanted to say." Lawrence described coping with his hosts' arguments as "an emotional problem with language" while Emma commented that her host's words were "very hurtful." Ironically in the context of a foreign language study abroad programme, Emma found herself using her headphones to shut out her hosts' language when they quarrelled outside her door. Winnie was concerned by her host's rather strict bathroom rules, but she was also "kind of afraid that she was going to complain" and so felt "a little bit nervous" when talking to her. And in the end it turned out to be Winnie's host, rather than Winnie herself, who could not "express herself." Language also played a role in the resolution of difficulties: Joey and Lawrence both reported quiet moments of "chatting" with their hosts after arguments, while Winnie's reflection that it was "nice" to have an argument with her host because it practiced her English says much about the students' capacity to turn difficult moments to linguistic advantage. Homestay nightmares raise both the emotional and linguistic stakes of study abroad. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which some students are willing to maintain imagined family identities to the point where they become active participants in domestic conflicts.

Given that homestay is increasingly an economic arrangement made among strangers, however, we may well ask whether this is the most productive approach. In a conversation analysis study of American students in French homestays, Wilkinson (2002) observed that far from being 'naturalistic', homestay interaction often drew on classroom pedagogical routines. Wilkinson viewed this as a limitation of homestay as a context for language immersion. While the students in this study were older and more proficient in their L2, they also found that their hosts

took on teacherly roles. Yet in our data hosts' attempts to teach their homestay guests were viewed in a more positive light. Good hosts, it seemed, spoke slowly and more clearly to the students than they did to other family members. They were tolerant of repetition, helped students understand local TV programmes, and initiated talk about cultural differences. They taught new words and tested them and willingly served as "walking dictionaries." Ivy praised her hosts' two teenage children:

They are very kind and treated me as one of the members of the family... And they also taught me some English like idioms. When I was in the period of doing my assignments they taught me a lot. Sometimes if I didn't know how to express an idea then I would ask them, and they would give me some advice.

Ivy's hosts, in other words, did rather more than treat her as a family member; they also played valued pedagogical roles that would not necessarily be expected in the family environment. Like Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight's (2004) study of Mexican and Spanish homestay *señoras*, our data suggests that good hosts are skilled and experienced in their roles as homestay hosts, which they do not necessarily construe as parental.

7. Conclusion

In reflecting the experiences of Hong Kong students in Australia, Britain and Canada, this study raises a number of questions about the cultural specificity of homestay experiences. As Mendelson (2004: 43) observes, students' beliefs in the value of "immersion" echo the views of educators and administrators, which are in turn "fostered and reinforced by prior research that emphasizes the favourable learning outcomes of study abroad." In this sense, the view that homestay offers the best opportunity for language immersion and the best language outcomes has a universal character. At the same time, homestay circumstances vary from country to country. Shiri's (2015) study of homestay in Egypt suggests a typical experience of inclusion in extended families with interaction focused on the mother. Kinginger's (2015) case studies of US high school students in homestays in China also suggest a more traditional experience of inclusion in a nuclear family environment. From this perspective, the variety of household circumstances among homestay providers in English-speaking countries is striking and merits further research.

Our data also suggests that Hong Kong students may be particularly family-oriented in their expectations of homestay, with many attempting to maintain the family metaphor, even when it was patently not justified. Overall, they were

highly positive in their evaluations of homestay. In contrast, several US students in Allen's (2010) study reported reticence about homestay and the prospect of being treated as "children." The suggestion that high school students may be more amenable to homestay than university students (Kinginger, 2015) was not borne out by this study. This may reflect a difference between non-Asian students travelling to Asia and Asian students travelling to non-Asian countries. Although the Hong Kong participants in this study were adults, they seemed happy to fit into the role of child in the host family. Gender may also play a role. As females made up 95 per cent of participants in this study, there were too few male participants to make meaningful comparisons. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the identity of 'daughter' was central to many of the female students' experiences of homestay. Lawrence was typical of the few male participants who mentioned homestay, in that he seems to have seen himself more as a guest, than as a family member. The influence of the cultural background, gender and age of the students are, thus, important factors to be investigated in future research on variety in homestay experiences. What I hope to have contributed through this study is a sense that, independently of the influence of these variables, it is important to view homestay as a situation that carries an emotional charge. We also need to understand how this emotional charge is interwoven with the identity work that goes into study abroad, and with the quality of study abroad for many students.

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Author's address

Phil Benson
Department of Linguistics
Macquarie University
Room 514, Building C5A
North Ryde, NSW 2109
Australia
philip.benson@mq.edu.au