INTENTIONALLY INTERCULTURAL: THE EFFECTS OF INTERCULTURAL LIVING ON CULTURAL PERCEPTION

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Communication, Culture, and Technology

By

Katherine R. Dale, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 25, 2011
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way. A very special thanks to my advisor, Mirjana N. Dedaic, for all of her outstanding guidance and support over the past two years; to my reader, Jeanine Turner, for her words of wisdom regarding both thesis and life-related issues; and to Megan Anderson, Meredith Clements, Yuan Tian, and my family for all of the encouragement along the way.

Many thanks,

Katherine R. Dale
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1. Introduction

This thesis investigates the major components that contribute to the success and failure of community building within the institutionalized Intercultural House (icHouse) at a major US institution for higher education. Such houses are frequently found in American universities, but their overall success has not previously been discussed. My study followed the student participants in the icHouse for seven months during one school year as they went through all of the phases of community building - from the initial meeting of participants, through all of the icHouse events, including both formal and informal gatherings, to the concluding events of the year. I maintained a participant observer status and followed all of the individuals involved including the students who lived in the icHouse and the university staff members assigned to work with the community.

The theoretical approaches I chose to apply to the icHouse include major theories from the fields of intercultural communication, interpersonal communication and social psychology. With these lenses in mind, I posed my main research question: how does living in a designed community affect participants’ views on the cultural other?

This question breaks down into three more specific issues which guides my exploration: 1) What role does “culture” play in the icHouse? 2) How do students in the icHouse use culture to build community? And ultimately, 3) Are programs like the icHouse worthwhile endeavors for universities?

My conclusion about the efficacy of the icHouse is that the success of the community depends on five contributing elements: (a) the selection of motivated students; (b) the
commitment of the participants; (c) the natural emersion of leaders from within the group; (d) successful pairings of roommates and suitemates; and (e) a maintained interest in cultural issues by participants.

Before discussing these issues in-depth, I begin with a literature review (chapter 2) which covers previously conducted studies on culture, cultural identity, assimilation, roommates, and other International Houses. I also discuss the Contact Hypothesis and the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) which inform my approach to understanding the effects of intercultural living on the icHouse participants. My literature review is followed by an explanation of my methodology and a description of my data derived from ethnographic observations, interviews and surveys (chapter 3). Here, I also discuss the difficulty in labeling the students and explain that the cultural labels established in the past might not work as well in the new globalized world. Chapter 4 contains my analysis, and focuses on the specific elements that contribute to community building in the icHouse. I specify the importance of student selection, roommate assignments, student participation, and programming, and I explore the complex interaction of these influences. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings and concludes my thesis.

2. Literature Review

Although researchers have been studying undergraduate communities for many years now, surprisingly little information has been gathered regarding designed intercultural living communities like the icHouse. This study aims to fill that gap. However, due to the unique characteristics of this program, issues such as problems with identity, assimilation, and the influence of roommates must be explored in order to truly understand the community. Together,
these areas provide important insight into how the icHouse works. In this section, I cover previous research done in these areas, and illustrate the research gap where my study fits.

First, I examine literature concerning issues of defining culture and cultural identity. This is particularly important because the community is designed with the intention of increasing cultural dialogue. Additionally, because so many of the participants have issues defining their own cultural identity, understanding previously completed cultural identity studies is essential. Next, in order to further explore the problems that students in the icHouse face, I discuss studies that have dealt with assimilation issues. Personal contexts are an essential part of the assimilation process. Thus, I discuss studies on the interpersonal issues faced by roommates in general. Following this, I examine the “Contact Hypothesis,” a social psychological theory that deals with intergroup relations. I discuss this specific hypothesis in order to further illustrate past research conducted on the role of personal relationships and experience between culturally dissimilar individuals. The Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM), which takes the contact hypothesis one step further, also lends itself to studying the icHouse. In conclusion, I address the few studies that have dealt directly with other International Houses before discussing the major research gap concerning International Houses and how this study aims to fill this gap.

2.1 Culture & Cultural Identity

Before I can discuss the effects of intercultural living on the perception of culture, I must first consider the nature of culture. As Isar (2006) explains, definitions of culture have become widely varied. The fact that culture is a slippery concept makes the task of defining “culture” even harder. It is easy to point out the attributes of culture, and yet it is so difficult to actually
define. Schneider (1976: 197) defines cultures as “a system of symbols and meanings.” Although this definition is general, it is solid because it encompasses all of the possible definitions of culture. Within this system, cultures everywhere share similar qualities. For this paper, I use Hall’s defining characteristics in conjunction with Schneider’s overarching definition in an attempt to further explain culture. According to Hall (1976: 13-14), culture “is not innate, but learned; the various facets of culture are interrelated – you touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected; it is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups.” All three of these characteristics are vital to understanding the idea of culture as a whole, particularly as it relates to the icHouse.

If we accept the idea that culture is learned and affected by change at every level, we can take the next step and determine that culture is malleable (Adler, 1998; Ivanova, 2005). This means that culture can change depending on the forces acting upon it. This can be thought of in the broader sense such as generational cultural shifts where different generations have different cultural beliefs, traditions and values. Or, on the other hand, it can be considered on the individual level as a way of explaining the cultural changes a person experiences over the course of his or her life.

However, it is important to note that this does not imply that cultural changes are instantaneous or frequently made. Instead, it says that a person’s cultural identity can shift over time. For instance, a person who spends a significant portion of his or her time away from his or her native culture might be influenced and changed by the host culture. As people become increasingly mobile throughout the world, this issue becomes all the more pertinent. As Adler (1998: 250) explains, we are collectively approaching a time when people who are “socially and
psychologically a product of the interweaving of cultures” may appear. Discussing the cultural identity of this “multicultural man” is the first step in understanding the cultural identities of those in the iHouse.

As much as cultural identity is a personal issue, it is also influenced by society. As De Korne, Byram & Flemming (2007: 291) explain, culture and cultural identity are negotiated. They say that “although belonging and identity may be frequently politicized or nationalized, they are ultimately negotiated in individual lives (Croucher, 2004: 186)”. This means that cultural identity is ultimately a personal issue that is determined by a number of forces.

Ivanova (2005) discusses this negotiation of identity in the social sense. She says that identity, as a whole, is a “social construct” (p. 74), arguing that identity is constructed for us and by us. She explains that individuals actually seek out an understanding of their social identity by asking themselves a series of questions, including “Which community is mine?” and “Where are its boundaries, and how is it connected with other communities” (p. 74). Ultimately, social identity is an individual concept that is fully and completely tied to the place a person holds in the world.

The same argument could be made for cultural identities. Since we have established that culture is changeable and exists within a larger context, it makes sense that our cultural identity is both defined by and for us. Oritz (2000) explains that part of being a member of a cultural group means dealing with that group’s location within society. This argument implies that no cultural group exists outside of the grander societal scheme. Every culture is interconnected and influenced by every other culture, making cultural identity tied to an extraordinary number of factors.
This means that as a whole, identity is fluid (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). “It is not a straightforward, easy to measure concept. It is a journey rather than a destination” (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009: 757). Cultural identity is the same way: no one dominating factor determines cultural identity. It is the sum total of cultural and life experiences; it may or may not be based on familial cultural values, societal cultural values, or any number of other issues. It is fluid, changing, and difficult to define. And yet, it is vital that we understand cultural identity because “there is a direct connection between cultural identity and worldview” (Oritz, 2000). Because of this, as researchers, we frequently need to tease out the details of cultural identity in order to understand inter- and cross-cultural communication. Labels make things both easier and more difficult when it comes to research. For this reason, I discuss the problems associated with labeling the members of the icHouse both from the research perspective and from the individual perspective in the methodology section of this paper.

One such label used by researchers to further define individuals who have experience with more than one cultural background is “Third-Culture Kids.” Third-Culture Kids, or TCKs as they are called by Polluck & Van Reken (2009: 15), are young people who “spent a significant part of [their] developmental years outside of the parents’ culture.” A number of researchers have addressed the issue of TCKs and have found that they are quite different from people who grew up in a consistent cultural setting (Bowman, 2001; Hervey, 2009; Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). While the idea of TCKs is useful in understanding the icHouse, Polluck & Van Reken’s idea of Cross-Cultural Kids may be even better.

The term Cross-Cultural Kids (or CCKs) can include individuals who stayed in one place their whole life but who were somehow culturally different from the people around them
(Polluck & Van Reken, 2009). This can be applied even more broadly than TCKs, which are sometimes considered more narrowly as children of missionaries, business people, or diplomats. Where TCKs are often thought of as individuals who have moved around during their childhood, CCKs are not necessarily characterized by this same mobility. Instead, children who are brought up as extreme racial or cultural minorities are included in the CCK category. This is the case with a number of students in the icHouse, and presents unique discussion opportunities when looking at intercultural living and working situations.

2.2 Assimilation Issues

One place where the topic of CCKs, TCKs and other individuals with intercultural experience is interesting is when considering issues in assimilation. For instance, Sodowsky & Plake (1992) researched the acculturation of various cultural groups within university students. Using mailed questionnaires, the researchers examined acculturation across ethnic and cultural boundaries. They found that Europeans experienced more acculturation and perceived less prejudice than those of other cultural origins. The order of greatest to least perceived prejudice was: Africans, Asians, South Americans, and Europeans.

Additionally, Sodowsky & Plake discovered a correlation between the status of the international students (ex. Permanent resident, visiting student) and their perceived prejudice or attempts at acculturation. They found that permanent U.S. residents were more likely to use English and less likely to be connected to those of similar cultural background (both signs of acculturation, according to the researchers). Sodowsky & Plake explain that, “From these results, one may hypothesize that the permanent U.S. residents and naturalized citizens seemed to have
chosen the integration option of acculturation in the relationship to the White U.S. society, whereas the international students tended toward the rejection option of acculturation (pp. 57-58). This means that individuals differed in their acculturation experience depending on their intended stay in the United States.

This research is particularly applicable to studying the icHouse because of the variety of backgrounds among the participants. As I discuss in section 3.6, some icHouse members who consider themselves international students are actually U.S. permanent residents. Others international participants are in the United States as exchange students and therefore only plan to stay for one year.

Al-Sharideh & Goe (1998) also support taking intended length of stay into consideration when discussing acculturation. However, while the intended length of stay is important to consider when thinking about acculturation, it is also vital to note the cultural composition of a student’s social group. Al-Sharideh & Goe (1998) researched the cultural adjustment of international students studying in the United States and the role that their social circles played in the process. They found that the cultural adjustment of an individual (as measured in terms of their self-esteem) is best supported by a mixed social group; the presence of strong ties to other coculturals (those who share a similar cultural background) was important to the individual’s adjustment. However, they also found that this was only true up until a certain point. The adjustment process was actually hindered by too many cocultural friends. As a result of these findings, Al-Sharideh & Goe suggest that there is an ideal balance where individuals have cocultural and American friends.
As these two studies demonstrate, the acculturation process can be complicated and difficult to study. While it is certainly important to examine the ways that international students adjust to American culture, it would be naïve to claim that American students do not also go through some sort of adjustment process when attending college. The focus on only the international side of the adjustment process is one limitation found in acculturation literature. This study includes the additional perspectives of American students when discussing adjustment and acculturation.

2.3 Roommate Issues

The adjustment process is perhaps most noticeable when considering the development of the roommate relationships in college dormitories. This is because “Roommate relationships require interactions not just when the roommates are rested, calm, and thoughtful, but also when they are tired, aroused, preoccupied, or just plain irritable” (Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2006: 704). Living in such close quarters with another individual can be a considerable adjustment for some students. One of the most unique characteristics of the IcHouse is the fact that individuals are intentionally paired with a roommate who is culturally different from themselves, which can increase the difficulty of the adjustment process. As such, it is important that we discuss the issue of roommates in the university setting.

The IcHouse roommate setting is unique because the students are technically randomly paired; however, the community is also partially self-selected. Stern, Powers, Dhaene, Dix & Shegog (2007) looked at the success rate of random selection on university roommate relationships. In this study, the random roommate assignments were done by members of the
housing staff while the self-selected student sample chose their roommates from a Facebook-type online application. They found that, overall, when students chose their roommates instead of being randomly paired, the relationship was more successful. One of the reasons the researchers used to explain the success of the self-selection process was that “People prefer similar others because they tend to substantiate each other’s personal attitudes and beliefs” (p. 54). In other words, we like others who reinforce our own ideas.

While the icHouse roommates are paired by staff members at the International Program Office, the application process to be a part of the community tends to draw like-minded individuals. We can reasonably expect that some of the effects of the Powers et al. findings will be seen in the icHouse because of the potential for this like-mindedness.

However, there is still an element of randomness to the roommate assignments in the icHouse, and students do not actually have a choice in their pairings. This means that we can also expect there to be some friction between roommates, especially when we remember that these pairings all have some sort of intentional intercultural element to them.

A number of roommate experiments have been conducted concerning race, and many of them are discussed in the Contact Hypothesis section (2.4). Before we explore those issues, however, it is important to look at the work of Towles-Schwen & Fazio (2006). This study examines the effect of the “automatically activated racial attitudes” of White students on the success of interracial roommate pairings. These researchers did two studies, the first of which looked at the connection between randomly paired, interracial roommates and whether or not the roommates remained together at the end of the study. They found that randomly paired,
interracial roommates (one White and one African American student) were less likely to remain together than randomly paired White-White roommates.

In the second part of their study, Towles-Schwen & Fazio (2006) discovered that the pre-existing racial biases of the White students affected the roommate pairings, regardless of how much students reported wanting to make things work with their roommate. “In other words, White participants who had negative automatically activated racial attitudes but desired to prevent them from influencing their actions were no more successful in developing enduring relationships with their Black roommates than were those who were less motivated” (p. 703).

However, Shook & Fazio (2008a) found that these “automatically activated racial attitudes” improved over time. While they were careful to establish a causal line between having a roommate of a different race and decreased prejudice, they found a clear correlation between the two issues.

This finding is especially applicable to understanding the IcHouse because it implies that preexisting attitudes affect roommate situations more so than intent, but that attitudes can change. However, the Towles-Schwen & Fazio and Shook & Fazio studies looked only at the White perspective; this study of the IcHouse takes the roommate issue further. Not only do I add different cultural backgrounds to the mix, but I also examine the majority group (Americans) in terms of the minority group (internationals).
2.4 Contact Hypothesis

While Stern et al. (2007) and Towles-Schwen & Fazio (2006) looked at the success rate of interracial roommate pairings as determined by their dissolution, there is another popular angle from which to determine the success of an interracial/intercultural pairing: whether or not prejudice has been reduced between dissimilar individuals. At its most basic level, the Contact Hypothesis, as originally envisioned by Allport (1954), suggests that having contact with a person belonging to a racial/ethnic group different from your own will positively alter your view of that group. Intercultural communication, or “intergroup contact” as many studies phrase it, can be defined as “actual face-to-face interaction between members of clearly defined groups” (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006:754). In order for the reducing of prejudice through intergroup contact to occur, there are four main criteria that the situation must fulfill: (1) the individuals involved have to be of equal status, (2) they must have goals in common, (3) there should not be competition between their groups, and (4) their relationship needs to have support from some sort of authority (be that institutional, lawful, etc.) (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew, 1998)\(^a\).

When considering these required criteria, university roommates fulfill most of them very well, making them an ideal source of information (Nesdale & Todd, 2000; Van Laar, Levin, Sinclair & Sidanius, 2005). As Shook & Fazio (2008b: 426) explain, “A real-world situation that meets most of the conditions indicated to benefit intergroup contact is a dormitory roommate relationship. In this situation, individuals are generally considered to be of equal status. It is a

\(^a\) For an excellent review of Contact Hypothesis literature, see Pettigrew & Tropp (2006). This study provides a meta-analysis of 515 studies testing the Contact Hypothesis. While there has been a great deal of contradictory information published about the hypothesis, Pettigrew & Tropp (2006) find that overall, there is clearly support for the theory of contact.
cooperative environment, and students have to work together to achieve a suitable living situation.” The icHouse, specifically, fully meets all four requirements, making it an ideal situation for considering the Contact Hypothesis.

One crucial piece of the Contact Hypothesis is that reduced prejudice toward an individual will lead to reduced prejudice toward their ethnic/cultural group, and in turn to reduced prejudice overall. Van Laar et al. (2005) found general support for this argument. However, Pettigrew (1998) suggests that these changes may only truly occur when the roommates have a chance to become friends; contact alone between groups may not be enough. Amir (1969) came to similar conclusions. “Intimate contact… tends to produce favorable change. When intimate relations are established, the ingroup member no longer perceives the member of the outgroup in a stereotyped way but begins to consider him as an individual and thereby discovers many areas of similarity” (Amir, 1969: 334). This focus on friendship as the great connector is already found within the icHouse programming ideals. In fact, these ideals specifically support bonding and friendship formation as a large group, under the icHouse identity.

2.5 Common Ingroup Identity Model

While the Contact Hypothesis has received a great deal of support (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), some researchers view it as incomplete. The Common Ingroup Identity Model proposes to fill some of the gaps with the hypothesis (Gaertner, Dovidio, Bachman, 1996). The CIIM

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Van Laar et al. (2005) found support for this argument in all cases except one. While they found that having a White, Latino, or African American roommate who is different from oneself leads to decreased prejudice toward all of the groups overall, they found that having an Asian American roommate increased prejudice toward other minority groups. See article for speculation as to why that might have happened.
suggests that developing a common ingroup identity among individuals from different backgrounds will have the most beneficial effect on reducing prejudice and increasing understanding (Gaertner et al., 1996). “We believe that the development of a common ingroup identity does not necessarily require each group to forsake its subgroup identity. It is possible for people to conceive of two groups (for example, parents and children) as operating interdependently with the context of a super-ordinate (family) entity” (Gaertner et al., 1996: 273). This means that the larger group identity can tie together individual identities in a unique and powerful way (Brewer, 1996).

As Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann & Snider (2001: 172) explain, “In summary, we have found consistent evidence across a range of laboratory experiments and field studies that encouraging a common, one-group representation can diffuse stigmatization by perceivers.” This is the driving idea behind the CIIM: that an in-group identity can bring together people with unique individual identities and backgrounds.

Support for this theory can be found in the work of Eller & Abrams (2004), who conducted two longitudinal studies on intercultural relations. Through these two studies, Eller & Abrams found that contact between groups, and an attempt at a common ingroup identity were beneficial for those involved, provided that certain criteria are met. Mostly, “quality of contact (i.e. friendship potential) appears to be pivotal…” (2004: 250). As a result of these findings, the researchers further suggest that the CIIM and Pettigrew’s contact hypothesis model work well together.

This common group identity can be difficult to achieve though. Many groups try to accomplish this task but never reach the ultimate goal of creating a new group identity.
(Pettigrew, 1998). However, this is no reason to disregard the theory. Within the IcHouse, the goal of the organization is to create a new, intercultural community, making CIIM an important theory to discuss.

2.6 International Houses & the Research Gap

Despite the fact that an icHouse situation meets the requirements set forth by both the Contact Hypothesis and the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) for increasing intergroup understanding, little research has been done specifically on these programs. Ryba & Williams (2004) examine an organization called the I-House, but this organization is distinctly different from the icHouse. The I-House in Ryba & Williams’ study, while meant to bring international and American students together, does not provide students with a chance to live with someone from a different cultural background. This particular I-House is more of an international student center instead of a place for intercultural living. Additionally, Ryba & Williams (2004) looked at the ways the I-House can better serve the general university, and did not examine its impact in terms of the Contact Hypothesis or CIIM.

Other researchers such as Bochner & Orr (1979) and Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham (1985) have studied international houses in terms of friendship formation. These “international houses” are actually dormitories designed to mix international and host students. However, they lack the intentional aspect of the icHouse community, and offer no intercultural programming to the students. In Bochner & Orr (1979), these researchers conducted an experiment to see which students were friends within the dormitory, and which group memberships these friends had in common. For instance, did the friends share a common race? Were they the same year in school?
They found that race was a significant indicator among friendship pairs. Academic status also played a role, but was not regarded as being as important among the older students. Also, they found that the number of interactions between those who were different on both accounts was very low. They explained that ultimately, “…racial similarity was shown to be a major determinant of affiliation. However, the race factor did not have the overwhelmingly compelling force that some previous authors have attributed to it” (Bochner & Orr, 1979: 44). This is particularly important because it suggests that race, while sometimes influential, is only one of the determining factors in friendship formation.

Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham (1985) also studied an international house where foreign and domestic students lived in close proximity to each other. Their description of the living situation is vague, and it was not possible to determine if the students shared a room or simply a floor. However, regardless of the exact details, their findings are significant. They found that, regarding the international students, “Friendships of the foreign students with other nonconational foreigners predominated, followed by bonds with compatriots” (Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham, 1985: 692). For domestic students, the most common friends were other domestic students. This is important when considering the icHouse because of the nature of the community. These findings imply that the American students of the icHouse would be more likely to be friends with other Americans than with international students.

One major difference between this I-House and the icHouse, however, is that there was no intentional intercultural aspect to their program. These students did not necessarily join the I-House in order to increase intercultural understanding. It is the introduction of programming and
participants who actively sought out intercultural living conditions that makes it likely that the findings in Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham might not apply to the icHouse.

Another researcher who studied intercultural living situations was Vollhardt (2010). While she looked at families hosting international students in a study abroad situation, her findings are still helpful when considering the icHouse. She wanted to see if extended contact with a foreigner changed the way a person understood that individual. She found that those who had “…experienced close intercultural contact in their everyday lives, over a prolonged period of time, are more likely to make external and culturally sensitive attributions for ambiguous behavior of out-group members (specifically: from other cultures), compared to people who lack this experience” (Vollhardt, 2010: 376). In other words, extended contact changes the way people view members of other cultures.

Although she was not studying an undergraduate living community, this finding is still significant. It suggests that the perceptions can be changed through contact. Interestingly, she also found that specifically discussing culture was not as strongly associated with a change in attributions as spending casual time together. If this holds true within the icHouse, it would mean that the most effective way to increase cultural understanding would be through the students’ interactions.

This is where the icHouse programming becomes important. This programming serves a dual purpose and is designed to provide students with both time to interact and a chance to discuss intercultural issues. Nesdale & Todd (2000) also studied the effect of intercultural programming on interactions. In their study, they surveyed two dormitories (one experimental, one control). One of the dormitories participated in a series of discussions on intercultural issues
while the other did not. They found that those domestic students who received the intercultural programming showed increased cultural awareness. However, they also found that there was no difference between the international students in the two different dorms.

While this study supports the idea that programming increases intercultural awareness, at least for domestic students, it still does not present a comprehensive understanding of the issue. In this dormitory, the programming was mostly passive. In the icHouse, the students actively plan and execute the programming themselves. With the exception of the retreats, all of the programming is designed exclusively by the participants. Additionally, the dormitories in the Nesdale & Todd study were not necessarily intended to create the same kind of community as the icHouse. As a result, this study does not fully answer all of the questions associated with intercultural living communities.

My research hopes to fill this gap. While there is already a wealth of information concerning intergroup/intercultural living situations, very little is known about how designed communities with intentional programming aspects affect perceptions of culture. As I noted earlier, many researchers use randomly created or assigned communities, or study communities without intentional programming. Adding an intentional element to the community, along with the programming makes the issues even more complex. However, because many universities sponsor programs similar to the icHouse, these programs must be examined for their influence and effectiveness.

In the following section, I address the reasons for the selection of this particular community. Additionally, I explain my specific approach to this study as well as the basics concerning the icHouse procedures and composition.
3. Data and Methodology

The review of literature dealing with intercultural communication shows that researchers have taken a variety of approaches in their studies. For this study, I used three main methods for collecting data: ethnographic observations, surveys, and personal interviews. Before explaining the methods and the reason for their selection, I first introduce the icHouse. For the protection of the members, I have left out personally identifying data concerning the specific location of the community and the individual cultural backgrounds of the community members. However, the information presented in this section gives the reader a sense of what being in the icHouse entails.

After introducing the icHouse, I briefly explain my own personal history with the community. Then, I introduce and explore the three methods used in this study. Finally, I address the issue of labeling participants as “international” or “domestic” students.

3.1 Introduction to the Community

The icHouse is an undergraduate living community at a private, mid-sized, American university. It is one of approximately 7 living communities (or LCs) on campus, and is the only one funded by the International Programs Office (IPO). It is comprised of 21 students who live together in one wing of an undergraduate dormitory. The dormitory houses other undergraduate students as well and is considered a desirable place to live. The building is co-ed, and the rooms are designed to be suites. This means that, for the most part, there are two students per room, and two rooms share a bathroom (three of the rooms have privates bathroom though and are therefore
not part of a suite). In a normal year, the icHouse holds 22 people; however, due to a variety of reasons, this particular year was an exception with 21 students.

During this study, there were 10 females and 11 males in the icHouse. Also, 12 of the students were considered international while 9 were considered American. The issues related to such labeling of the students are discussed in section 3.6. This meant that one male, international student had a room to himself (although he still shared a bathroom with his adjoining suitemates). It also meant that, due to the specific group of students selected this year, two international females shared a room instead of the traditional American-international pairing.

Because the icHouse is housed in an on-campus dormitory, members of the icHouse are subject to university housing policies and restrictions. In order to be considered for a space in the icHouse, all members must retain housing eligibility according to the university. As a result, membership in the community is restricted to only those students who meet this requirement. Additionally, only those who are sophomores or older are allowed to apply to become part of the community.

In order to join the icHouse, interested students must go through a selection process. The community is overseen by the International Programs Office (IPO), and receives funding for their activities from the university. Students do not pay additional fees to be a part of the icHouse, but they do have to go through an application process. This process involves writing an essay explaining why they want to be a part of such a community and sitting for an interview.

\(^c\) During this study, this policy regarding housing eligibility was changed. This means that the students who interviewed for next year’s icHouse will not be affected by the eligibility constraint. In fact, if a student wishes to live on-campus but does not have eligibility, he/she can sign up on a special list indicating he/she wants to join a living community. If selected for the living community, he/she will automatically be given a space, regardless of eligibility. This has interesting implications for the selection for next year’s community, specifically when considering the motivations of students who wish to join the community. However, the participants of this particular study all joined under the old rules requiring eligibility, making them a part of a smaller pool of applicants.
The interviews are conducted by the two IPO staff members responsible for overseeing the community and any current icHouse members interested in helping with the process. These interviews are held in the fall for rising juniors and older and in the spring for rising sophomores and older.

Once students have been selected to join the community, the two IPO staff members who conducted the interviews assign roommates. Ideally, each room contains one international student and one American student. There are no co-ed rooms or suites. These roommate pairings are based on both similarities and differences. This means that although the students are paired based upon their cultural differences, the IPO staff is mindful of matching students based upon personality similarities. An example of a suite might be: 1 American female and 1 international female sharing a bathroom with another American female - international female pair. The students are not able to request a roommate, and they are intentionally paired with people with whom they have not previously lived.

As such, the community is other-designed and contains both self-selected and other-selected students. Self-selected means that students must first choose to apply to the community; they are not randomly chosen. However, not everyone who applies is accepted, and the community is therefore other-selected as well. Additionally, because the community is designed but the students have no choice in roommates, it is other-designed.

It is important to note the role of the IPO and residence life staff in the icHouse community. As explained above, there are two IPO staff members who are highly involved in the selection process of icHouse participants. Of these two people, one is extremely active with the icHouse and attends all required icHouse events as well as some non-mandatory social events.
Additionally, the icHouse has a special Residence Assistant (RA) assigned to their floor. This RA performs the duties of a traditional RA as compared to RAs in other dormitories, and must undergo the standard training process. However, she has additional responsibilities with the icHouse and attends every possible event sponsored by the community. She is also in charge of the monthly business meeting where icHouse members discuss formal and informal plans for the following month.

This business meeting is just one of the required events for icHouse members. They are also required to attend the fall and spring retreats, and host and attend a monthly faculty dinner. This faculty dinner is a time for the community to come together and discuss important global issues with their choice of university faculty members. The icHouse participants organize the entire event, and IPO provides the money for food. The students are assigned small groups, and each small group plans a different faculty dinner. While the goal is to organize the groups in such a way that the students each only have to plan one dinner, some students inevitably end up planning more than one.

Additionally, the icHouse community members plan at least one official (though not mandatory) event per month, for a total of three per semester. Each semester usually involves a social event, a community service project, and a cultural experience. The events for the fall semester are tentatively planned during the fall retreat, and the spring events are discussed during the spring retreat.

These retreats are planned and led by the IPO staff advisor and the RA. These two people play an active role in guiding and influencing the community from the beginning. However, because the staff advisor does not live in the icHouse, the students are responsible for
maintaining the sense of community throughout the year. It is at this point that I should explain my own personal experiences with the IPO and the RA for this year’s community.

3.2 Personal Experience with icHouse and Biases Explained

I first became acquainted with the icHouse while working as the graduate intern at the International Programs Office (IPO) during the fall preceding this study. I worked directly with the icHouse staff advisor during my semester at IPO, and simultaneously conducted a preliminary ethnographic study of the icHouse for my graduate methodology class. Through this preliminary study, I saw an opportunity to further explore issues related to the icHouse. While I only spent one semester as an intern at IPO, I maintained close contact with the staff members involved with the icHouse.

After obtaining permission from IPO to study the icHouse for the following year, I found out that the staff member with whom I had worked decided to leave the office. The new hire attended the icHouse fall retreat in order to make the transition between people as seamless as possible. I also attended the fall retreat, and stayed with the staff members, learning a great deal about the behind-the-scenes aspects of the retreat. IPO paid for my retreat-related expenses in exchange for my help during the retreat. This help included teaching get-to-know-you games and making sure everyone was accounted for during the events.

Throughout this study, I have been as open as possible with the study participants about my past experience with the icHouse communities, and with my intentions with this study. This means that the icHouse members were well aware of my positive inclination toward the community. I intentionally told them of my experiences in order to begin building a relationship
with them. Because my study has been so involved (as I explain below), I wanted the participants to feel comfortable around me. I knew that asking them to let me into their community with the intention of studying it was intimidating, but informing them that I am pro-intercultural communities helped them understand my intentions.

As Agar (1996) explains, all researchers have certain inclinations and previously-held beliefs. By being entirely open about my own history with the icHouse, I hope the reader will be able to see that these experiences have provided me with valuable knowledge and the tools necessary to understand the nuances of the community. Through being involved with the community for an extended period of time, I have been able to gain more insight into what is actually going on than any entirely quantitative methodology would have allowed for. In order to counteract any potential biases I may hold, I chose three different methods for completing this study: ethnographic observations, online surveys and interviews.

3.3 Ethnography

Ethnography, like any method, has its strengths and weaknesses. As Saville-Troike (2006: 3) explains, “‘Doing ethnography’ in another culture involves first and foremost field work, including observing, asking questions, participating in group activities, and testing the validity of one’s perceptions against the intuitions of natives.” In this study, the “natives” are the icHouse participants. For this study, ethnography allows an exploration of situations which are “invariable local and situated” (Fitch, 1994: 52). This means that I can provide insight into this specific icHouse situation at this specific point in time. Where previous studies have failed to
consider the personal, my study focuses on the details and back story in order to fully understand a situation.

However, as previously mentioned, some researchers argue that ethnography also allows for more personal biases and potentially more error. As Agar (1996: 41) explains, “The task is an impossible one. At best, an ethnography can only be partial.” However, this is true of even more quantitative methods, and should not discredit ethnography as a method. Instead, it is important to be upfront with any potential personal biases, and to recognize that ethnography alone may not be enough. In fact, in an attempt to fully understand the icHouse, I have supplemented my ethnographic observations with three surveys and personal interviews, which I explain in sections 3.4 and 3.5.

The vast majority of studies presented in my literature review used statistical methodology and other more quantitative forms of exploration. The Sodowsky & Plake (1992) study involving acculturation, for instance, used mailed surveys with Likert scale questions. Shook & Fazio (2008b) used archival data to determine a correlation between GPA and roommate relationships. Even Van Laar et al. (2005), who did perhaps the lengthiest experiment (a five year longitudinal study) also used surveys with numerical rankings in order to statistically demonstrate changes in the population.

However, these studies are all missing a crucial piece: the qualitative aspect. A number of researchers, including Shook & Fazio (2008b) and Rubin & Shaker (1978), discuss the limitations of their own use of quantitative methodologies, stating that their studies lack the personal dimension. Other researchers such as Eller & Abrams (2004) and Kudos & Siskin (2003) similarly noted this shortcoming and began introducing qualitative methodology into the
discussion of intercultural issues. However, many of the past qualitative studies conducted were brief and limited. And while Haloclone (2008) conducted a study that lasted roughly 3 years, the results were based almost entirely on interview data. My study picks up where all of these studies stop; by spending a great deal of time with the members of the icHouse and conducting a lengthy ethnography, I was able to discern various underlying issues and concerns.

During this study, I took field notes as suggested by Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995). Immediately after each event, I took rough field notes in a notebook in order to keep the events fresh. I did not take notes in front of the participants; this was consciously done in order to make them feel as comfortable as possible. I later went back to my notes and fleshed them out, adding details and making sure they were complete. During longer events (such as the fall and spring retreat), I took notes during the breaks between sessions. For these events, there was also always a schedule, which helped in recalling important details. I also copied down the notes taken by the students (either during their small group discussions or during the whole group activities) in order to help inform my study.

These ethnographic observations lasted for approximately seven months, starting from the first week the students lived together (in August) and ending after the spring faculty dinner (which occurred during the first month of their second semester together in February). I was present at every event, including their very first floor meeting, and was able to start the study at the beginning of the school year. This is important because I was able to begin observing the group from the very first time they all met, which means I was able to get to know the community as it was being formed. I attended a total of 15 events. One of these events (the fall retreat) lasted three days, although most ran for roughly two hours. Nine of these events were
mandatory, and four were optional. Two of these events were staff-only observations (one was a logistics and goal-setting meeting for the fall retreat). The group size at the student events ranged from roughly three students to all 21 students plus the staff advisor and RA. Additionally, I sat in on the interviews for next year’s community, and was able to gain valuable information regarding what the staff and current icHouse participants look for when choosing new members.

During these interviews and all other ethnographic experiences, I maintained a “participant observer” status. This means that I joined the participants in their activities, but also maintained a reasonable distance from the students. For instance, I directly participated in the get-to-know-you games during the fall retreat, but not in the map game described earlier. This was done so as not to influence the natural flow of the cultural discussion that occurred. Another example of my participation was during the business meetings. During these meetings, each student was expected to share something with the group about their week (sometimes they were asked to share a specific piece of information such as “what are you doing for winter break?”). In these situations, I always joined the discussion in order to be seen as a part of the group. However, I did not participate in the question and answer sessions with the faculty speakers because it was much more acceptable for me to observe only and not speak.

This status as a participant observer allowed me to become a part of the community. In fact, when I announced to the group that my last official observation would take place during the beginning of the spring semester, the students asked if I would still join them for their meetings and dinners. Although I did not actually live on the floor with the students, I was still able to become a part of the community. And while the ethnographic observations constituted the bulk of my study, I also supplemented the information with both surveys and personal interviews.
3.4 Surveys

In addition to the ethnographic observations, I also chose to do three surveys throughout the course of the semester. These surveys were administered anonymously online through Survey Monkey, an internet-based survey creation tool. For each survey, students were contacted via a mass e-mail and invited to participate. They were reminded of the optional nature of the survey, and sent a link. For copies of the questionnaire, please see Appendix I.

These surveys were used as a way for participants to reveal more personal thoughts about the community. The anonymity of the platform allowed the students to share both positive and negative thoughts, something some did not do in person. Also, because all of my ethnographic observations were group activities, the surveys were a chance for me to hear what the individuals thought in a more private way.

The first survey was administered during the first week of September, before the fall retreat. The main goal of this first survey was to establish where the students were in their cultural understanding of their roommate. 16 of 21 students responded (10 internationals and 6 domestic), and I closed the survey the day we left for the fall retreat. The survey was open for about one week, giving students ample time to respond. I chose to close the survey at the fall retreat point because I did not want the events of the retreat to influence the answers to the first survey.

The second survey was administered at the mid-way point in the semester, at the end of October. 17 of 21 students responded (10 internationals and 7 domestic). I waited just past the true mid-point in the semester in order to avoid midterms, and the survey was open for just under two weeks. I intentionally left the survey open for responses slightly longer for two reasons: (1) I
had hoped to gain more responses and (2) I knew that the students’ midterm schedules were not consistent and I wanted to give everyone a chance to work on the survey without interrupting their study time. The goal of this second survey was to check in with the students and see how they were feeling about the icHouse.

The third and final survey was administered at the end of the semester. 15 of 21 students responded (9 internationals and 6 domestic). This survey was open for nearly three weeks (from mid-December until the beginning of January) due to the fact that it first went out during finals. I wanted to give the students ample time to complete the survey, and again, did not want to interrupt their finals. Also, because so many students traveled immediately after finals, I left the survey open so that they would be able to complete it. The goal of this final survey was to see how the students’ cultural perceptions had changed over the course of the semester, and what role the icHouse may have played in this change.

Each survey consisted of less than 10 multiple choice questions. The participants were able to choose one of the offered responses, and participants could choose one or more response, depending on the question. For samples, please see Appendix I for an example of a questionnaire. Each question also had an open-ended question space where students could expand upon their answers (though this field was not required). Neither a Likert scale nor any other rating systems were used for any of the questions. Because all of the response options were provided for the participants, there was no need to do a detailed analysis of the responses.

The goal was to make the surveys as informative but as brief as possible. Because my study was so involved, I did not want the students to feel overwhelmed with questions and simply give up on taking the surveys. The questions were short, to the point, and limited in their
scope. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the individual perspective, I decided to also conduct interviews with the participants.

3.5 Interviews

Upon completing both the ethnographic observations and the surveys, I invited the icHouse participants and the International Programs Office (IPO) staff to participate in interviews concerning their experiences. I contact the students via e-mail and requested their participation. The students were made aware that I would be asking them for interviews prior to beginning this study, and I spoke with the group again during the spring retreat. I requested interviews with the students during the spring semester via e-mail, and was ultimately able to conduct 7 student interviews and 3 staff interviews. Each of these interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted on-campus in either a private office or a private study room.

The interviews were casual, and the students offered insights into their own icHouse experiences, their cultural backgrounds, and what they believed could be improved with the program. For a list of the interview questions, please see Appendix II. In addition to the questions presented in the appendix, I also allowed the students to introduce any issues they thought were important to discuss. Many of the students were eager to talk about their experience, and felt it was important to cover a variety of topics. The interviews were not recorded in an attempt to make the participants feel more comfortable discussing the potentially personal topics of roommates and the role of the IPO staff in the community. However, I took extensive notes on my computer throughout the interviews. When quoting information from
these interviews, I have placed direct quotations within quotation marks (""") and italicized any comments that are very close quotations (but which are not word-for-word what was said).

While only 7 out of 21 students were willing to participate in the interview process\textsuperscript{d}, these interviews still provided invaluable insight into the inner workings of the community and the opinions of the students. Discussing icHouse issues with students individually allowed me to not only gain new information about the community, but to also confirm my own observations about the group dynamics.

These three methods of data collection - ethnography, surveys, and interviews – compliment each other and each provided unique insight into the icHouse. The ethnographic observations allowed me to get to know the participants on a personal level and see how they truly interact with each other. The surveys gave the students a chance to share their experiences anonymously, which was valuable because it gave them the opportunity to tell me things they may not have said during group interactions. I followed the observations and surveys with the interviews, which allowed me to discuss specific topics with the students one-on-one. Through these interviews, I was able focus on the individual experience within the community. These interviews also gave me a chance to hear the personal cultural histories of the students, which a limited online survey or a large group activity alone would not have allowed me to do. Combined, these three tools gave me a more complete picture of the icHouse than any one of these methods could have provided on their own.

\textsuperscript{d} It is important to note that these interviews took place just before midterms during the spring semester. Because the icHouse students are typically very involved with extracurricular activities while simultaneously taking heavy course loads, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of them were unavailable for interviews.
3.6 The Problem with Labels

3.6.1 The Problem with Labels: The Research Perspective

As previously mentioned, room assignments in the icHouse are based on a seemingly simple dichotomy: international and domestic. Typically, each room has one international student and one domestic (American) student. For some of the students, this identification is easy. For others, determining whether they ought to be considered an international student or a domestic student is much more difficult. In fact, identifying the cultural background of students in icHouse situations is a common issue among scholars researching these types of communities. Bochner & Orr (1979) faced similar difficulties in their study of an Australian International House (which was an international dormitory, but without special intercultural programming). They encountered problems with their data when trying to determine the significance of students’ cultural background in their findings. In fact, during their analysis, the issue of cultural labels was so problematic that they ultimately decided to remove students who were too culturally ambiguous to be clearly labeled from their data set.

When looking at a designed community like the icHouse though, where administrators have the advantage of choosing the participants, it would be easy to assume that the International Programs Office (IPO) could use citizenship status as a determining factor when assigning labels. However, while citizenship might be a valid factor in some cases, it does not always reflect cultural identity. There may be some students who hold American passports but who have spent the majority of their lives abroad. Or, as was the case with this particular community, there may be students with non-American passports who have been living in the United States since they were very young. Therefore, citizenship status is rarely used as a determinant. As such,
deciding who should room where becomes a difficult process. Ultimately, when the cultural background of a student cannot be adequately determined, IPO staff members ask them what they would like to be considered. This presents its own challenges, both from the personal side (as I discuss below) and the staff and research side.

From the point of view of the IPO staff, these labels are most important when considering roommate assignments and participant selection. As one staff member explains, the difficulties in choosing students for the community are often associated with trying to balance the community.

She had the following to say about participant selection:

*We want to try to balance the areas of the world. But international is not just where you are from. A lot of our students self-identify as international. My own work in immigration is clear with visas, but sometimes American students live their whole lives abroad, and we want those students who are exploring their own identity. They are on a “cultural heritage tour” – they are now away from their parents and they want to explore their identity and see the benefits of being unique. Overall, we are looking to balance cultures so there are not too many of one. We’re looking to balance religion (Jewish American, Muslim American, etc); we want those who feel a strong connection to religion and those who don’t. That’s almost like a culture in itself. In terms of dispersion, I want geographic diversity even in American students.*

Because the staff members are actively trying to balance the community, the issue of labeling is very important. However, the labels can sometimes be flexible from the staff side. The staff members are restricted in the selection process by the pool of applicants, so they sometimes change the labels to better suit the community.

What this means is that, sometimes, even when a student asks to be labeled in one way, staff members must make an executive decision to change that label. While this was not the case with the community in this study, it has come up before. For instance, one IPO staff member explains that during the selection process one year, there was an extraordinary interest in joining

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*The italicized words in this quote are paraphrased statements from the interviewee. Anything that is placed in quotes and not italicized is a direct quote from the interviewee.*
the community among American females, and a much smaller interest among the international female population. There was one culturally ambiguous female who asked to be labeled as an American student due to her experience living in the US for a significant portion of her life. However, because the interest was so high among American females, it made the most sense for the IPO staff to categorize this young woman as international in order to open up another “American” space for a student. In this case, the IPO staff members placed a higher importance on building the community as a whole than on labels.

While this situation took place during a different community selection process, it is important to discuss in order to illustrate the applicability and flexibility of the labels used by the IPO staff. In the community observed for the current study, at least one student was culturally ambiguous enough that IPO staff members needed to ask him his preference. This student comes from an international background but had been living in the United States for an extended period of time prior to applying to live in the icHouse. He ultimately chose to be labeled as an international student and was paired with an American roommate. However the fact that he has extensive experience with American culture makes him considerably different from the international students who arrived only weeks before moving into the icHouse.

These international students who recently arrived are at a much different place in their acculturation process than those who have been in the United States for a while. However, these two types of students are still labeled as “international” by the campus community. And yet, the students of the icHouse recognize that there are different levels of distinction; there are “shades” of both international and American-ness. In the second survey, one of the questions specifically asked participants what they had learned thus far about their roommate’s culture. One
international student indicated that they had learned “a little about his/her culture” and explained by saying “Primarily because we both are basically from the same culture.” Another international student wrote, “I have been in this country since high school years, so I did not expect as much ‘learning’ as some of my peers.” In these cases, the international students have extensive experience with American culture, which complicates the research in terms of understanding the levels of acculturation that each participant has undergone.

Another issue with labeling the participants is the fact that, from the university’s standpoint, there are technically two kinds of international students: degree seeking and non-degree seeking. The first distinction, degree seeking, indicates that the student is attempting to earn a degree at the university. This means that the student intends to be in the United States for roughly four years. Because the icHouse requires members to be at least sophomores, degree seeking international students have typically already been students at the university for a full year. This changes their perspective considerably. We can no longer discuss adjustments to American life and roommates in the immediate sense; these students already have at least a year’s worth of adjusting.

Non-degree seeking students, on the other hand, face different issues. Also referred to as international exchange students, these students are at the university for only one year. They are pursing degrees at international universities and have come to this university for only one or two semesters. This year, all four of the international exchange students who were living in the icHouse are full-year exchanges, and participated in the full year of programming (this is not always the case). Of these students, some have traveled in the US before, some participated in previous exchange programs, and some have never set foot outside of their home country. This
makes generalizing about the international exchange students difficult in the same way that
genralizing about the degree-seeking students’ acculturation is hard. Ultimately, they are all
individuals with unique backgrounds, and I cannot assume they bring the same experiences to
the community. However, this is not necessarily a problem; instead, it allows for an even richer
understanding of the iHouse experience. Where previous studies have lumped together all of the
international students in an attempt to make grand generalizations about intercultural
communication, discussing the nuances of each unique background offers new insight into both
the difficulties of this kind of research and the reality that human subjects are always going to
bring different experiences to the table.

One might assume that the American students would be an easier group to describe.
However, this is hardly the case. Within this particular group of students, a number of the
students grew up in highly unique American subcultures. Some of them moved around a great
deal, and some of them are part of minority cultures so rarely found outside of specific areas that
they are vastly underrepresented in this particular university. In a sense, these students have had
to culturally adapt to being a part of the dominant university culture as much as the international
students have.

For instance, one student spent her entire life within a very unique American subculture.
Going to college was the first time she had ever lived outside of her community or with people
different from herself. She explained during her interview how difficult the adjustment period
was. Where international students often have other conationals to associate with, she was the
only student from her subculture. While she is by all standards considered “American,” she faced
an acculturation phase similar to that of an international student. And yet, she was the “American” within the roommate pair.

Ultimately, the best way to handle the issues of labels in this paper is similar to the way IPO typically addresses the roommate issue; the participants have to be the ones to define their cultural identity. The labels used in this study are loosely defined, and the participants’ individual explanations are the most important identities to consider. However, self-identifying can be a difficult issue for some of the students. I will now address the problems many of the icHouse members face when determining their own cultural identity.

3.6.2 The Problem with Labels: The Personal Perspective

Some of the members of the icHouse can explain their cultural identity with certainty. They are strictly international students who grew up in only one location or they are third or fourth generation US citizens who confidently identify themselves as Americans. Yet, for many of the icHouse participants, determining their cultural identity is a struggle.

A few of the students who identify as Americans grew up as first generation Americans, with their parents strongly identifying with a different culture. As a result, a number of the “American” students include their parents’ cultural background or their ethnic heritage in their own cultural identity. This means that the American students differ from each other in many ways. For instance, one student identified her ethnic heritage as her cultural background, listing all of the countries from which her ancestors came. When asked to clarify what culture meant to her, she had difficulty describing what separates culture from ethnic heritage.
Many of the students discussed this issue of cultural/ethnic backgrounds and the difficulty in explaining them during the fall retreat. The problem of labeling arose during a game designed to increase cultural awareness. Each student was given a printed copy of a map with their country (for the international students) or their state (for the American students) prominently displayed. When the facilitator handed out the maps, she made apologies to a few of the students. *I chose a city for you because I wasn’t sure where you wanted to call your hometown*, she said to them. All of them graciously accepted their maps, and one responded with, *This is fine. I don’t even know where I’m from.* This comment sparked a discussion among the participants about what it means to be from a place, and a handful of the students admitted that they have difficulty answering that question. Either they moved around too many times to consider one place their hometown, or they have been reconsidering their cultural identity due to major life changes (moving to the United States during high school, for instance). Interestingly, this phenomenon was not limited to one type (international versus domestic) of student. Instead, it transcended the boundaries.

For instance, one American student could not describe her cultural background in only a few words. When asked about her cultural background, she responded by saying:

“*I’m still trying to figure out who I am culturally.*” *My family all looks very different. We have a lot of different races. When people come to my house, sometimes they say ‘Oh, I didn’t know you were having guests for dinner.’ But we aren’t; that’s just my family. And so I don’t really know what I am. I’m very comfortably with my mom’s culture. I just don’t know anything about my father’s or anyone else’s.*

For this student, having a multicultural, multi-racial background makes self-identification complicated.
This example illustrates the difficulty that can sometimes be associated with self-identification. As discussed in the literature review, a handful of the students in the icHouse can be defined as “Third Culture Kids,” or TCKs (Polluck & Van Reken 2009: 15). A few of the international students in the current icHouse fit the description of TCKs. One student moved away from his home country to the United States during high school. This major move left him without a solid cultural “home,” and made it even more difficult for him to describe his cultural identity.

Additionally, a number of the participants could be considered the product of two distinct cultures, making them bi-cultural. One such student identifies himself strongly as an American, but also as a part of a subset of American culture. He prefers to hyphenate his label (Korean-American, for example) in order to describe his cultural background more effectively. In his interview, he explained that living in his parents’ home country during elementary school greatly affected his identity. While he was only there for two years, he still strongly associates with his parents’ culture. And yet, it puts him in an awkward situation where he is between worlds; he can’t always relate to others who label themselves as bi-cultural but who have not actually lived in two locations. And on the other side, he does not consider himself to be fully a part of his parents’ culture because of he has spent the majority of his life in America.

When the students like this one have trouble defining their cultural identities, it becomes even harder for a researcher to understand the complexities of the situation. However, because the icHouse is designed to foster intercultural communication, these particular students were very open to discussing labels. They tended to be reflective of the impact of labels, and were quite frank during group events and their personal interviews. This made it much easier for me to
understand what forces were at play during the semester and the nuances of each student’s cultural heritage.

3.6.3 The Problem with Labels: Some Final Thoughts

As I have explored throughout this section, labeling cultural identity is an important issue when discussing inter- and cross-cultural communication. From the research perspective, I risk the chance of over-generalizing about a group of highly diverse students when I refer to them as international or domestic students. From the personal perspective, the participants are often the products of multiple cultures and varied life experiences. As such, they sometimes have a difficult time defining their own cultural identity. This can be expected considering the fact that cultural identity is a fluid, malleable concept that is constantly subject to outside influence.

As a result, the terms “international” and “domestic” or “American” are used with caution throughout this study. While generalities can be made in some cases, this group of participants is so diverse that ignoring their own unique cultural identities would do them a great injustice. This is particularly the case with the international students, where I am using one single term to identify students from almost a dozen different countries or cities. It is important to understand that the term “international” is not being used as a sweeping generalization of anyone not from the United States; in a way, it is simply the “best of bad” terminology. Every effort is made to explain the complexities of specific situations, but all identifying characteristics of the students are removed for the protection of the participants. This means that, in some cases, the labels “international” or “domestic” must be sufficient in order to protect the students’ identities.
However, if a detail is particularly pertinent to understanding a situation, I provide more information.

While labeling participants presents complications, some of the problems can be explained through simple clarifications. For others, I indicate that a generalization is being made. Ultimately though, readers must recognize that no matter how the labels are applied, there will always be exceptions.

4. Intercultural House Community Building

The icHouse is, at its most basic level, a community. This is true in both the physical and the emotional sense. The icHouse participants share communal space and live together in a dormitory, thus making them a part of a physical community. However, they also share an ideology and participate in organized activities together, making them a community in the emotional sense.

McMillan & Chavis (1986) lay out four things required for a person to be fully a part of a community: “membership” - individuals need to feel like they are part of the group; “influence” - they must feel like they can influence the group; “fulfillment” - individuals need to be fulfilled by participating in the community; and “emotional connection” - they need to share a connection with other members in the group (p. 9). The icHouse is designed in such a way that all four of these requirements can be met under ideal conditions. The fall retreat encourages students to bond and begins to create a shared history, the International Program Office (IPO) staff members encourage students to be involved, and the programming aspect allows students to take control of
their experience. However, as I explain in this analysis section, the participants chose to be a part of the community to varying degrees.

These different levels of commitment and interest among participants greatly influence the community as a whole. However, I demonstrate in this chapter that the success of the icHouse is ultimately influenced by five factors: the motivation of the students; participant commitment to the community; leadership; roommates and suitemates; and the desire of participants to actively discuss cultural issues.

4.1 Shaping the Community

Although the icHouse can generally be thought of as a community, it is specifically a community of practice (CoP). Communities of practice are defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002: 4). These characteristics are seen throughout the icHouse. In fact, the explicit goal of the community is to create a dialogue about intercultural communication through both organized activities and cohabitation.

Researchers differ, though, on whether a community of practice is characterized by an organic evolution (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) or an intentionally designed creation (Jones & Preece, 2006). However, this second argument (that a CoP is typically designed) is less widespread; the idea of a gradual, organic development is much more popular (Amin & Roberts, 2008; Seaman, 2008; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). In the case of the icHouse, both approaches would apply.
The icHouse is a designed community where the International Programs Office (IPO) staff selects members who they believe will positively contribute to the group and the discussion of cultural issues. In this way, it is intentionally created to be a community of practice. However, the development of a true community that extends beyond the formal meeting times is organic. As much as the IPO staff tries to encourage students to bond, this can only happen naturally. While there are certain events designed to help the students build a common history (the fall retreat, for example), the students must choose to continue building the community on their own.

Another important aspect of CoPs is the “practice” element. As Seaman (2008) explains, the key characteristic of CoPs is that they “…focus on improving the practice that defines the community and brought about its existence” (p. 270). In the case of the icHouse, this can be seen in the continued focus on cultural issues during both formal events and informal roommate interactions. In this way, the focus on “culture” is one of the main topics that bond the community together; it is the driving force behind the continued development of the community.

While the icHouse can certainly be defined as a community of practice, it is also important to note that it is a community within a community. Wenger & Snyder (2000) point out that this is a common occurrence. According to these scholars, communities of practice are often found within other communities. The icHouse in this study is situated within a larger university community, and the students hold multiple identities and community memberships within this larger community. Because the participants must be at least sophomores, most of the students have had at least a year to become a part of the larger university community. The exception to this is the international exchange students who arrive at the icHouse fresh from their home.
countries. While these students similarly hold multiple community memberships, they simply have not had a chance to develop an identity specific to this university.

Within this university, there are a number of communities that are important to understanding the icHouse. There is the undergraduate community, the international student community as a whole, the smaller cultural and language communities, the grade-related communities (freshman, sophomore, etc.), the housing communities (dormitories) and the school communities (school of arts and sciences, business school, etc.). All of the icHouse students fit into these different communities; some of their interactions overlap and some of them do not. In order to understand the icHouse, it is most important to examine two of these communities: the international student community, and the cultural and language communities.

At this particular university, the international students represent over 100 different countries. As explained in the methodology section, there are two different kinds of undergraduate, international students: degree-seeking and exchange. All of these students, regardless of their classifications, are required to go through an international student orientation offered by the International Programs Office (IPO). Many of the international students in the icHouse referenced this orientation as a time when they met some of their closest friends. The friendships made during international orientation were cited numerous times throughout the study by multiple international students; the orientation was clearly influential for friendship formation.

This is a common finding among researchers, including Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham (1985) who studied an international dormitory in England. During this study, they found that the
most common friendships for international students were with nonconational foreigners. In fact, these researchers found that “An internal analysis revealed at 16 (70%) of the foreigners did not have any English friends at all after at least a year in the country, further confirming how socially isolated from the host society these students were” (Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham, 1985: 692). While this is not likely the case with the students in the icHouse, it is still important to consider the place of international students in the university as a whole.

Another important set of communities within the university are the smaller cultural and language communities. These involved the variety of ethnicities, cultures and languages represented on campus. Some of these communities are represented by official organizations, while others are simply unofficial groups of students. A great deal of research has been done on campus communities, and Halualani, Chitgopekar, Huynh, Morrison & Dodge (2004) conducted research to examine who exactly is interacting among these groups. They found that, although their campus of study provided ample access to other cultures, the true number of interactions between groups was low. They speculated that “… these individuals are not engaging in actual contact because of already entrenched racial/ethnic fragmentation and insular enclave formation throughout the US and even in culturally heterogeneous ‘Majority of None’ areas” (Halualani et al., 2004: 369). In other words, the students were not interacting with “others” because of the strong presence of similar people.

The university used in the icHouse study has a strong presence of national and cultural groups. Many of the students in the icHouse are very active in their respective groups. However, by applying to live in the icHouse, they are suggesting that they would like to broaden their

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These researchers did not present length of time in England as a variable among participants.
cultural circles. Their decision to apply indicates that they want to be a part of a more intercultural community.

It is always important, however, to remember that the icHouse is a designed community; these intercultural interactions are an intended outcome of a selection process and community programming. Therefore, at this point, I discuss the role of the IPO staff in the selection and development of the community.

### 4.1.1 Selecting the Community - The Role of the IPO Staff

The International Programs Office (IPO) staff is responsible for selecting the members of the icHouse. While current icHouse members are able to help with interviews and voice opinions concerning who should be accepted, the ultimate decision is made by the IPO staff members involved. These two people review all of the applications, attend all of the interviews, and meet to discuss the applicants.

When asked about the selection process, one staff member explained that they try their best to create a balanced community. This means that they look for a balance in cultures, races, and personalities in order to make the community as intercultural and successful as possible. This staff member explained:

> I have a limited involvement in the final community, but big role in choosing them. I sit in on the interviews and I get a chance to get beneath the façade that these university students are good at showing. It’s hard to get beneath that in interviews that are 15 minutes long. I don’t think I take any credit for when it goes right, but I feel horribly when it goes wrong. While this staff person has a limited involvement once the community has been selected, she realized what a large role she played in the creation of the community.
As I explore below, a great deal of the success of the community depends on the individuals involved. However, as this staff member said, it is difficult to discern the true intentions of an applicant from a short interview. She further explained the situation by saying:

I’ve found that the current icHouse students who come to the interviews realize that it’s very hard to hand-pick a community. Part of it is that applicants are gung ho and ready to commit, and you don’t know how it will go until they are in the thick of things. In other Living Communities, things are created for them, but not here. It’s hard to know if they will gel. After years of interviews, I’m still not sure who creates the best mix. Some people surprise me for good, and some people astound me for bad.

With roughly ten years of experience working with the icHouse, this staff member has a great deal of experience with the community. She has seen communities that were highly successful, and others that were not. After all of this experience though, she is still unsure of the “best mix.”

However, both of the staff members involved in the selection process explained that they look for certain things in applicants when selecting a community. Aside from the obvious desire to balance culture and ethnicities, they also consciously choose a balance between givers and takers, leaders and followers. During a break in the applicant interviews, the staff members explained that a good community has a balance of people who will lead and those who will follow. Without this, the community does not gel as well. This is an important concept, and I further explore the effects of leadership on the community in section 3.3.4.

One of the staff members further explained the interview process and what the IPO staff looks for in members by saying:

We read the essays, and this year interviewed almost everyone. But normally it’s whoever looks like a good candidate. During the interview, we ask them what kind of priorities and commitments they have for this year and next, what their experience has been when it comes to culture shock or international experience, what they can contribute to the community, what they can learn from the community. And then, they are selected based on that, plus their background.
As you can see, the IPO staff takes their role in participant selection seriously. They do what they can to ensure they are choosing students who would be committed to the community, receptive to cultural differences, and interested in sharing their own culture with others.

This makes the icHouse a unique situation, different from most other International House studies. We learned from the literature on intercultural houses that most other I-House and contact hypothesis studies examine naturally or semi-naturally occurring communities. The icHouse, however, is a designed community. As a result, the IPO staff is hugely influential in the initial creation of the community.

Aside from influencing the community through participant selection, the IPO staff also leads both of the retreats. These retreats are important for the community because they provide both the first chance for group bonding and a mid-point meeting time to discuss the issues going on in the community. During the fall retreat, one of the IPO staff members leads the weekend and is responsible for organizing, planning, and executing the event. The retreat involves get-to-know-you name games, cultural discussions, planning sessions and general bonding times (such as a bonfire, a nature hike, and active games like “tag”). As a facilitator, the IPO staff member has the power to influence the conversations. However, all of the IPO staff involved in this year’s retreat spoke of being cautious during this time. They each explained that the fall retreat was meant to be a time of bonding and growth for the group; they only wanted to positively influence the students in this pursuit.

During the spring retreat, the IPO staff plays a similar role as during the fall retreat. However, because the spring retreat is only one day and on-campus (the fall retreat involves traveling to a secluded campground), the influence of the staff is lessened. They still act as
facilitators, but the work and planning time takes more precedence over the group bonding and reflection.

When examining the icHouse, it is vital that we remember that it is a designed community, influenced by the IPO staff who select and lead the members. However, the IPO staff only has a role in official community gatherings. That means that during the majority of the time, the students are left alone, and encouraged to interact on their own. Daily lives and interactions are generally not influenced by the staff members unless the students seek them out. However, because the IPO staff is a part of the community at all, it is important to understand their role.

4.2 Structuration & Communication Accommodation Theory

While the International Programs Office (IPO) had a significant influence on the community, actions of past community members (including those who also participated in this year’s group) helped shape the current icHouse community. Official policies were already in place to guide this particular group’s actions, and community members with experience brought ideas to the group. As such, Giddens’ (1979) Structuration Theory provides an interesting lens through which to view the icHouse experience. West and Turner (2010:26) summarize Giddens’ theory which states that organizations are guided by “structures,” which “refers to the rules and resources members use to create and sustain the system, as well as to guide their behaviors.” These rules, which were established and reinforced by icHouse members, helped shape the overall community experience.
One of the rules that developed over the course of the semester was that icHouse members should take an interest in understanding the cultures of those around them. Additionally, they should help others understand their own culture. In doing this, community members often adapted to each other in conversations and interactions. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides another interesting way to examine the icHouse community. CAT says that, in an interaction, people will adapt their communication styles to the styles of those around them (West & Turner, 2010).

This section examines the ways that Structuration Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) can help us understand the interactions of icHouse members in order to determine the variety of issues that influenced community development. Structuration Theory allows us to look at the ways rules and resources affect the community, while CAT helps us take an in-depth look at one of these rules. When CAT is used as a subset of Structuration Theory, these two theories allow us new insight into the icHouse experience.

4.2.1 Structuration Theory and the icHouse

One way of examining the procedures and evolution of the icHouse is by looking at the community through structuration theory. At its most basic level, structuration theory says that there are underlying social and organizational structures in interactions that both guide and reinforce our behavior (Giddens, 1979). These structures can be either formally outlined (icHouse members must attend all floor meetings) or adopted informally (icHouse members should greet one another other when they pass each other on campus) (West & Turner, 2010). One of the key points of this theory is the idea that the repetition of actions, the following of
rules, actually reinforces the idea that these actions are correct. Additionally, choosing not to follow a rule will affect the way the rule is viewed and used as well. As West & Turner (2010) explain, “…the fact that the individual has chosen either to follow a rule or to alter it will result in a change in that rule or resource in future communication interactions” (p. 266). As such, the rules and resources of a group should never be viewed as fixed; they are constantly being affected and even changed by those who use them.

In many ways, the icHouse is similar to a corporate organization; there are established ways of doing things, handed down from previous experiences. There are required meetings, budget forms, standards for official gatherings, and mandatory events. There are a number of explicitly stated rules that govern the behavior of members. And yet, as much as the icHouse can be seen as an organization, it is still a living community that students of various backgrounds call home. However, this dual role of the community is exactly what makes the application of structuration theory so interesting. Not only can we examine the ways that the group creates and reinforces rules, we can also see what happens when we look at the bigger picture; we can examine the way that different larger cultural structures interact when forced together.

First, let’s examine the icHouse as an organization. As previously explained, icHouse members are chosen through a mutual selection process; those who want to be a part of the community must also be chosen by IPO staff. Members of the previous icHouse also have a say in who is able to join the next icHouse community, mainly through their involvement in the interview process. This creates an interesting selection process, and one that has not changed very much over the past few years. By repeatedly selecting members in the same way, the IPO staff has created a structure for interviews, and reinforced the idea that this is the correct way of
doing things. Because a number of the staff members have done this many times, and because a handful of the icHouse members have been in the community for more than one year, the selection process seemed firmly set.

However, due to a staffing change, one of the most influential voices in the selection process was recently replaced with a new IPO staff member. This new staff member brought with her new ideas and new ways of doing things. Suddenly, the “rigid” selection process was much more flexible. This can be understood through a key part of structuration theory. By repeatedly doing things the same way, the IPO staff had created a structure for how things were supposed to be done. And yet, that structure was not impossible to reform. The rules described in structuration theory are ever-changing, ever-flexible (West & Turner, 2010). While they may seem to be outside influences, the truth is that the rules that govern our interactions are actually held within our minds (Giddens, 1984). Walsham (2002) explains that “The crucial point here is that structure, defined in this way, is seen as rules of behavior and the ability to deploy resources, which exist in the human mind itself, rather than as outside constraints” (p. 361). Meaning, even when things seem like rules set by outside forces, they are actually rules as understood within ourselves.

This is a complicated part of structuration theory, and requires a slightly different understanding of the word “rules” than one is normally used to. Instead of being an outside set of laws established by others, rules are actually something we are personally involved in creating; they exist inside of our minds, and are reinforced by our behavior. Let’s return to the example of icHouse member selection to understand this further. In this situation, what seemed like strictly fixed rules of selection were actually changeable, requiring only that someone enforce a new
way of doing things. This is a simpler example than say, the structural rules guiding a culture, but it essentially says the same thing: rules and resources can change, and are affected by those using them.

Another example of the way the rules are created, reinforced, and changed can be seen in the way the iHouse members organized and executed their monthly lectures. These lectures, organized entirely by the iHouse members, involved a dinner where a university professor was invited to speak on issues of interest to the community. The fact that the iHouse members were required to attend these events is an example of an explicitly stated rule. However, a number of lesser rules emerged over the course of the semester.

The first lecture was put together quickly, as it came early in the semester. The organizing group of students (roughly four iHouse members) decided that the dress code would be formal, and that the topic would be internationally relevant. They planned for it to be in an IPO conference room, and ordered an “international” cuisine. When the second lecture came around, a different group of organizing students planned an almost identical event, except with a different professor. This was an excellent example of structuration at work. As West & Turner (2010) explain, “Rules and resources for communicating and arriving at decisions are typically learned from the organization itself and from members’ past experiences and personal rules” (p. 261). In other words, the decisions made by the second group were directly influenced by the decisions made by the first group. By choosing to hold a similar event, the second group strengthened the idea that the first group made the correct decisions.

While the third organizing group could have continued on this path (certainly the path of least resistance at this point), they decided to do things differently. They saved some of the ideas
(the internationally relevant topic and the international food), but changed many of the other ones. The third event was informal, and located in an entirely different section of campus. Here, the group decided to change the rules established and reinforced by the second group, and instead set up a new collection of rules.

However, it is vital to note that at least one of the third organizing group members had previously been a part of the icHouse. These group members had a resource that other group members had lacked: expert power. This meant that these group members were seen as having special knowledge of past icHouse events (West & Turner, 2010). Returning to the above quote from West & Turner, it is important to point out that the “past experiences and personal rules” can come from any point in life. Meaning, icHouse members who had been a part of the community for two years brought resources and structures from their past experiences to the present one. This was obvious in the fact that the third group chose to use a room for the lecture that had been popular among the previous year’s members. Additionally, the casual dress style reflected the third group’s personal style and preferences.

These examples are just a few of the ways that the icHouse was affected by structuration in the organizational sense. However, structuration theory can also be applied to the community in a much more intercultural sense. We can examine how the cultural structure each member brings to the group affects group interactions as a whole. Walsham (2002) looks at a similar concept when discussing cross-cultural environments. As he explains, cultural norms are different across cultures. These cultural norms, which seem so natural to the members of that culture, are actually structures created and maintained by those in the group. These differences between structures are just one thing that can cause conflict in a cross-cultural setting.
In the icHouse, there are 21 individuals, each with a unique cultural background. While 9 of these people are considered American, each of them still has a distinctly different background; in fact, many of them are first generation Americans and closely tied to their parents’ native culture. As such, every single person in the icHouse brings a different cultural structure to the community. Walsham (2002) explains this kind of situation well when he says that “… the structural properties of cultures often display enough systemness for us to speak about shared symbols, norms, and values, while recognizing that there will remain considerable intra-cultural variety” (p. 362). This is exactly what the members of the icHouse faced when it came to cultural interactions; they knew enough to converse about the issues but also recognized that there would be some fundamental differences in worldviews.

During the semester, the members of the icHouse made a conscious effort to learn about the cultures around them. One of the rules that emerged was the idea everyone must respect the culture of the others in the icHouse. In fact, this might even be considered the most important rule for many of the group members. At each gathering, individuals were given the chance to talk about how their culture views and does things while others listened attentively. The more frequently participants injected information about their own cultures, the more acceptable this action became. As a whole, the icHouse members actively tried to accommodate everyone in the group, and made a real effort to build a community.
4.2.2 Communication Accommodation Theory as a Rule in the icHouse

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) fits well within structuration theory. When seen as a rule adopted by the group, CAT provides yet another way to understand the actions of icHouse members. CAT was originally conceived of as Speech Accommodation Theory by Howard Giles (West & Turner, 2010). It says that individuals will change the way they communicate during an interaction to either align with or delineate themselves from their communication partner (Heinz, 2003). Individuals do this through accommodation, which West & Turner (2010) “...define as the ability to adjust, modify, or regulate one’s behavior in response to another” (p. 467). This behavior can include modifying both verbal and nonverbal behaviors, as well as conversational behaviors.

According to West & Turner (2010), there are a number of ways speakers can adapt their behaviors: convergence, divergence and overaccommodation. Convergence is often used to highlight similarities while divergence is used to point out differences. Overaccommodation is when a speaker attempts to accommodate another, but may ultimately come across as feeling superior. Both convergence and divergence were frequently seen among icHouse community members. In fact, the use of these strategies became a sort of rule.

Before discussing the appearance of these two types of communication accommodation, it is important to examine why overaccommodation was not a noticeable issue in the icHouse. When members interacted, there was very little overaccommodation, even when a native English speaker spoke with a non-native speaker. Zuengler (1991) suggests that overaccommodation can sometimes take the form of talking down to a person, often making one participant feel lesser. However, this was not explicitly seen in the icHouse interactions. In fact, native English speakers
spoke to the non-native speakers in the exact same way as they spoke to native speakers. This may be due to the fact that everyone in the community had some sort of experience with cultures outside of their own. Living in this community was not the first exposure to intercultural issues for the majority of those in the community. As such, everyone had some sort of base level for dealing with people who were different from themselves.

Additionally, these icHouse members underwent an extensive application process; many were selected for their cultural openness and communicative skills. Combining this open-mindedness and the desire to learn about other cultures with their previous intercultural experiences, and the tendency some people might have to overaccommodate virtually disappears.

Also, it is important to note that all of the non-native English speakers were required to have some level of proficiency in English before being allowed to attend this university. Whether they were degree seeking students (who intend to spend four years at the university) or non-degree seeking students (international exchange students who are typically only here for one year), all non-native speakers had to demonstrate proficiency in English. This means that every person in the icHouse had a solid grasp of the English language prior to joining the community.

Convergence, however, was frequently seen in the icHouse community. One of the most interesting ways that the members adapted their communication behaviors was apparent when comparing the informal gatherings to the mandatory lecture nights. During the lecture nights, the students accommodated the professors; they spoke and acted considerably more formally during

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8 All international exchange students studying at universities where English is not the primary language of instruction were required to take the TOEFL (an English language proficiency test) in order to attend the university. The required scores for admission were as follows: 570 for the paper based test, 230 for the computer based test and 88-89 for the internet based test. International degree-seeking students are admitted to the university through the same process as domestic students. As such, the TOEFL is recommended but not required for admission for these students. However, because they are required to take the same admissions tests as domestic students (SAT or ACT), a high level of English proficiency can be expected among admitted international degree-seeking students.
the lectures than during informal gatherings. In fact, there was a noticeable difference even between the “official” lecture times and the periods immediately before and immediately after the lecture.

For instance, the students were often jovial and joking before the lectures. They used casual words and phrases, and were generally more informal. However, once the lectures and dinner began, they immediately switched to a more formal setting. They used more academic words, lessened their joking, and became much more formal in their interactions. They waited to be called on instead of volunteering ideas, and they were considerably more “academic.” However, once the lecture was dismissed, they immediately returned to their pre-lecture communication format.

This change in behavior can be explained by CAT. During the pre-lecture time, icHouse members accommodated each other by acting in a typically friendly, albeit American-style of friendly, way. As a group, they established what a friendly environment involved through structuration, and then accommodated to that. Then, once the lecture started, they immediately adapted to behavior that is expected in an American classroom (also a result of structuration, especially when considering the larger educational system structure at work). By accommodating either way, the icHouse members were showing solidarity and oneness.

Divergence, on the other hand, was seen in the icHouse community when certain members wanted to maintain their distinctive cultural identities. This is a common finding among CAT researchers (Ayoko, Hartel & Callan, 2002). This divergence was most frequently seen among international students through their use of languages other than English. Within the icHouse community, there were three sizable groups of people who spoke languages other than
English. Some of these group members were native speakers of these languages while others had simply been studying the language for an extended period of time. Heinz (2003) explains that “Language choices by bilingual speakers are considered conscious or subconscious conversational strategies which will affect listener responses” (p. 1127). A number of the icHouse members were bilingual (and some were trilingual), and the issue of language choice was very important to understanding many icHouse interactions.

While many of the icHouse members were bilingual, there were also a number of members who spoke only English; it was the only language that every member had in common. This is otherwise known as the lingua franca. Whenever two members who spoke the same non-English language chose to speak English to each other, they were making a conscious effort to include the group as a whole. For instance, there were three students who spoke the same non-English, native language in the group. Sometimes, they would end up having a conversation just among themselves. This code switching was very telling, and it was important to note when they chose to speak English versus when they chose to speak their native language. Often, if any non-native speaker showed even the slightest interest in their conversation, they would speak entirely in English. However, if they were somehow isolated from the group, they would revert to their native. They made a real effort to accommodate those around them by converging, but also diverged when they felt the need to retain their own language identity.

In a way, all of these rules and accommodations came together to help the members of the icHouse create their own kind of culture. If we consider the icHouse community to have its own culture, we might even take a step further and consider it the “host” culture. While Gallois & Callan (1991) are obviously speaking on the grander cultural scale in the following quote,
their thoughts can certainly be seen as applicable to the mini-culture of the icHouse. They say:

“In order to function effectively and happily in a new culture, people must gain cultural skills and knowledge about the communication-based norms that facilitate daily interactions with people in all aspects of the host culture” (p. 246). If we see the icHouse culture as a “host culture,” then it makes sense that the community members would adapt their communication styles to match the others in the community.

4.2.3 Structuration and Communication Accommodation Theories – Applicability & Limitations

Both structuration theory and CAT provide unique ways of understanding the interactions of the icHouse members. Structuration theory, which is considered a critical theory, helps us understand the underlying power structures and the ways that they are developed and maintained by community members. When we see communication accommodation within the framework of structuration theory, and as a standard required by the community members, we are able to understand an additional aspect of the icHouse.

Structuration is a particularly useful theory in this situation because it can be applied at so many levels and in so many ways. It is helpful when examining the IPO regulations, and yet can also be used to understand the more natural developments within the community. Overall, it provides an excellent way to dissect the structure of the community.

Like structuration theory, CAT is easily applied to the icHouse community. It is a useful theory specifically because it can take intercultural conversational issues into account. In fact, a number of researchers have examined specifically inter- and cross-cultural situations to see how
CAT can be applied (Ayoko, Hartel & Callan, 2002). While it provides an incredibly valuable tool for understanding the icHouse, one additional issue must be considered.

On many levels, CAT seems to be designed for micro level interactions, how participants adapt their communication behavior in a single exchange. This has certainly been evident in icHouse conversations, but CAT is much more valuable to this study when applied at a broader level. This stretches the theory a little, but it is still applicable. Because the goal of the paper is not to dissect individual conversations for the way participants accommodate using speed or tone, restricting CAT to this level does not make sense. Instead, enlarging the theory to help understand much broader interactions that occur over longer periods of time is a much better route.

Ultimately, both structuration and communication accommodation theory can help us understand the icHouse community in a new way. Applying these integrated theories to the icHouse together allows us to discuss the underlying structures that guide and shape the community. Structuration theory guides us among the rules and resources of the community members as they affect the development of the community. Within structuration theory, we can see that communication accommodation becomes a rule for the group. Through this lens, we can further understand why this rule was so important: it allows the group to create a new kind of culture, and yet also supplies members with a way to make themselves distinctive within the group.
4.3 The Importance of icHouse Participants

While structuration and communication accommodation theory can both be applied to the icHouse in order to further understand the community, there are still many other important issues to discuss. In fact, one of the most important issues is the role that the students themselves actually played in shaping the community.

Throughout the year, the students repeatedly referenced the idea that “the community is what you make it.” Again and again, the students presented this concept in their survey answers, their interviews, and their discussion topics. While the IPO staff plays a large role in the creation of the community, the students still hold the majority of the power when it comes to the actual community development. And, as one student explained in her interview, In the icHouse, you really only get what you give. In other words, the community is only as strong as the individuals involved.

4.3.1 The Role of Student Motivations

Perhaps one of the most effective ways of beginning to explore individual involvement levels is to start by discussing the reasons why the students joined the community. For the most part, their motivations for joining the icHouse help explain their varying degrees of commitment to the community. While a number of the students joined in the hopes of finding a “family” or in order to explore intercultural issues, others joined for a myriad of reasons. Perhaps not surprisingly, the students who wanted the family atmosphere or the intellectual challenge of living in an intercultural community were the most involved while those who expressed ulterior motives were less involved.
One of the most involved students explained during her interview that she joined the icHouse because she had heard it would be a beneficial experience. As an international exchange student, she knew people who had previously lived in the icHouse and who enjoyed the community feeling. She also had American friends from the university who were studying abroad at her home university who knew about the community as well. However, these students were against her joining the community. When asked about her decision to join the icHouse, she explained:

*So we received an information brochure about the icHouse. I was so interested. To see this picture with all of these international students, and this list of events. So I asked my American friends and they said I shouldn’t do it because it’s a “sect” and they are always together. And my parents were worried – in my home country, we have this “sect” and it isn’t good - But then I told my friends where the dormitory was located, and they changed their minds. And my friend who did it before said it was a great experience and that I should join. But yeah, the American friends weren’t that positive about it. It seemed like a wonderful concept to me though, and so I joined.*

This explanation illustrates a few important issues. First of all, it demonstrates that the icHouse has a reputation for being a close-knit community among the American students at the university. While I can by no means claim that this is a campus-wide belief, there are at least a few students who believe this to be true. In fact, according to participants who have lived in past icHouses, the community has sometimes had the reputation of being cliquey. However, the idea of being a part of a close-knit community has actually been seen as a positive thing by many of those who joined the icHouse this year.

Second, this excerpt explains that past international participants had such positive experiences with the community that they would recommend the icHouse to other students. This is very telling of the overall experience, and suggests that past positive experiences from others
motivate new students to join. In fact, at the spring retreat, a number of the current participants
cited past participants as influencing them to look at joining the community.

Finally, the above quote shows that this particular participant was interested in both the
international issues and the programming parts of the community. In her interview, she further
discussed the influence of the events on her decision to join; she was intrigued by the
programming and wanted to be a part of a community with specific events. As a member of the
community this year, this particular student stood out as a leader among the students. She
attended every single event, and regularly made plans for unofficial icHouse events. At one
point, she explained to me that, as an international exchange student, she wanted to be as
involved in the icHouse community and the larger university community as much as possible. I
don’t have to worry as much about my grades because I am an exchange student, she explained.
Instead, I can be really involved. I’m only here for one year, and I want to make the most of this
time.

This example illustrates just one set of reasons why a student might join the icHouse.
When these motivations are taken into consideration when thinking about the actions of this
particular student, it becomes clear that the motivations for joining are closely tied with how
involved the student will be later in the community.

This is also clear with another one of the students who has actually been a member of the
icHouse for three consecutive years. In fact, she lived in an LC every year of her college
experience (her freshman year, she lived in a different LC). This student, and American who is a
member of a minority group that is vastly underrepresented on campus, said the following when
asked about her motivations for joining:
I was interested in the whole multi-cultural idea. Really, I was seeking out other minorities. The first thing I asked in the admissions office was how many [other students from my minority group] go here. There were only two others. It was really hard, and I just wanted to be a part of another community to make myself feel like a part of a bigger group. I wanted to be somewhere where I felt comfortable rather than just being... I’ve heard where you can just live in a dorm and you didn’t really know anyone on the floor, and they’re just people you pass by. I really didn’t want that. I wanted to be part of something.

This student further explained that she was looking for a family-type community, and felt that she had found that during her years in the icHouse.

Throughout her years in the icHouse, this student was highly involved with the community. Like the student previously discussed, this young woman attended every single event and actively tried to bring other students together. Because she wanted to be a part of a community so much, she worked hard to bring people together; her motivations for joining clearly translated to her involvement.

While these two examples illustrate what happens when students join the community with the intention of being involved, it is perhaps more telling to look at what happens when a student joins the community for other reasons. During the spring retreat, two of the students revealed that they did not join the community for the common reasons of seeking a family-type group or in order to increase cultural awareness. The first student, an international student with extensive experience in the United States, boldly stated that the only reason he joined was in order to live in the dormitory where the icHouse is located.

This student only attended a handful of the icHouse events, and often missed the mandatory meetings and lectures. As far as I know, he did not attend any of the optional informal gatherings. Because there is no formal punishment for those who do not attend events, and

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h In this excerpt, I have preserved the original wording used by the participant in order to allow readers to get a more accurate feel for what she said. However, because the answer has been reconstructed from my notes, I did not place quotation marks around the response.
students are not removed from the community mid-year, this student faced no consequences by
not participating. Once he achieved his goal of living in this particular dorm, he expressed no
real interest in the community.

This is an interesting problem that further illustrates the power of the students. By not
being involved, this student took himself out of the mix; he chose not to be an active part of the
community. His personal attitude affected the way he related to the other students in the
community and the way the other participants viewed him. In fact, other students referenced
joining the icHouse for the appealing housing as “joining the community for the wrong reasons.”
Many students implied that if this was the motivation for joining, then the student was less likely
to be involved and less likely to have a positive experience.

Another student revealed during the spring retreat that she only joined the icHouse
because she thought she was required to. As an international exchange student, she received a
great deal of e-mails, paperwork and communication regarding the year she would spend at the
university, and she misread the information about the icHouse. Instead of understanding that it
was an optional living community, she believed that all international exchange students were
required to live there. When she contacted the IPO staff, they thought she was genuinely
interested in the community when she really just did not understand the situation.

This illustrates a potential flaw in the participant selection process. While this student had
a mastery of English sufficient enough to participate in the exchange program, there was clearly
still a language and culture barrier. She ultimately said she was happy with the way things turned
out, but the IPO staff faces a great deal of difficulty when dealing with international exchange
students. Because they do not always go through the formal interview process, these kinds of
misunderstandings are possible. However, as demonstrated by the student who joined the icHouse purely for housing, the interview process is far from perfect.

In addition to these students, another American female explained that joined the icHouse with mixed intentions. During her interview, she explained that she and one of the other American students applied to live in the icHouse together. She had the following to say about her motivations:

*I wanted to live in the icHouse because I liked the idea of living with international students. But I also applied just because the freshman housing thing was such a mess. I was going to room with [another icHouse student] but we didn’t get an apartment. Just in case, as backup, we had applied to live in the icHouse. [The other student] had a friend who did it last year and recommended it. I knew I didn’t want to be in a regular dorm. While this student was partially motivated to join in order to avoid the normal difficulties of finding housing, she also had an interest in being a part of a community. This is a different viewpoint than the male student previously discussed who wanted to join solely for the housing aspect, but also an example of a different kind of motivation from the two previous females discussed as well. Ultimately, this particular student spoke highly of her icHouse experience, and was involved in community events. She generally attended things, and was engaged while there. She was not especially a leader, but she contributed to group events and made a genuine effort to get to know other students in the community. Yet another reason why students were motivated to join the community involved the idea of seeking out a personal identity. One student, for instance, explained that she joined the icHouse hoping to learn more about her own cultural heritage. She said: *I wanted to know more about other cultures and I was hoping to meet someone of my similar descent to learn more about my cultures and other cultures.* This student also mentioned that she has trouble
understanding her own cultural identity. She hoped that being a part of the icHouse would help her to sort through these identity issues.

These examples illustrate the most common reasons why students said they decided to join the icHouse: in order to be a part of a community; so that they can grow in their personal and cultural understanding; for the housing; and for any combination of these reasons. While the students may have joined for different reasons, everyone seemed to agree that the icHouse was what you made it. Students who joined for housing were typically less involved with the community, and did not make as many attempts at creating friendships within the group. Students who joined for the community feeling tended to be more involved with the events and more interested in getting to know the other members. This was seen when they gathered for both informal and formal events, and through the many attempts they made at getting people together (organizing outings, for instance). The students who joined for a combination of reasons were involved in the community to a variety of degrees. Ultimately, as the students themselves explained, the community was what each individual made it out to be.

This idea that the community is only as strong as the individuals make it is supported by McMillan and Chavis (1986) who explain that “Personal investment is an important contributor to a person’s feelings of group membership and to his or her sense of community” (p. 10, emphasis in original). When considering the larger question of the efficacy of the icHouse, the excerpts presented in this section show that the students are the largest determinant of success. Just like in other communities, the students need to be invested in the community.
4.3.2 The Effect of Emerging Leaders on the Community

This idea that the community would only ever be as close-knit or involved as students wanted it to be was a prevalent theme throughout my observations. During the fall retreat, many of the students expressed the hope that others would want to build a strong sense of community. On the first night of the retreat, the International Program Office (IPO) staff held an evening debriefing session where the students shared what they wanted to get out of the retreat and the year as a whole. One student said that she wanted to get to know people on a different level. Another student who agreed said that she hoped that, as a group, they would find that they all had “more similarities than differences.” This early on in the study, many of the group members expressed the sentiment that they would like to be a part of a “real community,” one that is closer than a traditional floor.

However, as the year progressed, it became clear that building a community would take a lot more time and effort than many of the students expected. Upon returning to campus after the fall retreat, the students began to go their own ways, leading their own lives. As a whole, the group was highly involved in the larger university community, and the students had few organizations in common among themselves. At the first required dinner lecture, which occurred approximately two weeks after the retreat, many of the students had not seen community members aside from their roommates, suitemates or immediate neighbors since the retreat. This was surprising to the IPO staff, but not unheard of. As the RA and IPO staff members explained, sometimes the ichouse community takes a little longer to form. Because each year brings a vastly different group of people together, the IPO staff likes to give the group the benefit of the doubt; sometimes these things just take longer than others.
It was apparent at this lecture, however, that no real leaders had emerged from within the community. As a whole, the students seemed to want to be closer, but nobody had taken the initiative to organize informal or impromptu events. Even on the individual level, many of the students were so busy with classes and other commitments that they had not reached out to students outside of those easiest to reach. This observation fits well into Kudo & Simkin’s (2003) research on intercultural friendship development. These researchers interviewed foreign students at a university in Australia. They found that proximity was very important in determining whether students would become friends. In fact, frequent contact was one of the four most commonly cited reasons for friendship among their participants.

However, proximity is certainly not the only factor influencing friendship and community development. Multiple times, the IPO staff and RA discussed the need for a leader or small group of leaders within the community. In past communities, there have often been individuals who emerge as the social leaders within the group. They were the ones who went door to door each night, inviting icHouse members to eat dinner together. They were they ones who regularly sent out mass e-mails asking students to attend the events important to other icHouse participants. While none of these events had specific objectives attached to them, the IPO staff and icHouse participants both suggested that these kinds of organic activities were important when establishing a group bond. In general, the IPO staff cited individuals who were willing to organize these informal events as vital to the development of a sense of community.

Some of the students expressed similar feelings during the spring retreat. And while many of them seemed interested in doing things together, few of them actually expressed the desire to be that leader. By this, I mean that it seemed that everyone wanted there to be a leader,
but nobody wanted to take the initiative and do that job. For instance, during the initial
debriefing of the spring retreat, a handful of students expressed disappointment in the level of
commitment some individuals had demonstrated during the fall semester. They were extremely
respectful while sharing these feelings (and certainly no one was singled out by name), but were
quite clear that they had expected more out of the community.

This lead to a discussion of how everyone can make an effort to improve the quality of
the “community” feeling within the group. One American student made a general statement
saying, *I eat dinner at 5:30 every night. Anyone who wants to is welcome to join me.* Another
international student then made the joke that, *And, if you are like me and don’t want to eat at
such an American time, then you can join me for a normal dinner at 7pm.* Everyone seemed to
agree that eating dinner together would be a good idea, but none of the students actually made
any plans. As a result, the open-ended dinner invitations had been put out to the group, but none
of the students acted on them. Had the students nailed down specifics such as, “I will meet you
tomorrow at 5:30 in the common room,” they may have been more likely to follow through with
the plans.

This is entirely a speculation, of course, but one that was supported by IPO staff members
as well. During one of the breaks at the spring retreat, the IPO staff member in charge expressed
the idea that the group really needed a small core of leaders who were willing to put themselves
out there when it came to making plans. Instead of just offering out a general time for dinner, it
would be better if there were at least one student who was willing to reach out and solidify plan-
making. Without leaders, the community would likely continue being a loose collection of
people instead of a tight-knit group.
In general, the unhappiness with the lack of community feeling among the students was most seen when the students sat in on the interviews for next year’s icHouse. One international student explained that she believed the biggest issue the community faced was a lack of leadership and involvement from students. By involvement, she meant involvement in the non-mandatory, informal events. While most of the students attended the mandatory events, the largest optional event had roughly ten students who participated.

During the interview process, which occurred mid-way through the fall semester, the potential new members interviewed for approximately ten minutes each. In between these interviews, the IPO staff members and current icHouse participants discussed the potential new members and how they might fit in to a community. During this time, the icHouse member mentioned above explained that she was very excited to participate in the interview process in the hopes that she might influence the community for the following year. She explained that in her opinion, students should be selected for their ability to commit a large amount of time and energy to the community. She viewed this year’s community as being comprised of students who did not have enough time and who were not interested in initiating group activities.

This discussion was enlightening, as it illustrated what this particular student believed to be the biggest problem with the current group. Throughout the interview process, she also disclosed that she did not feel there were any leaders within the current group. Interestingly, towards the end of the fall semester, this student began making attempts at getting everyone together for informal gatherings. This was seen through the multiple mass e-mails she sent to the group with distinct invitations to join her and a small group of other icHouse members for lunch, dinner, and general outings. At the spring retreat, she reported that a number of students had
taken her up on the offers, and that she enjoyed the outings very much. By the end of this study, this student and a co-national friend (who was not her roommate) emerged as clear leaders within the group. While they were not the only ones, they were certainly the most vocal about the issue of group bonding.

Although it may have taken longer than it previously had for leaders to emerge within the community, it is important to note that a small group of students eventually did come forward. This is consistent with Wenger & Snyder’s description of communities of practice. They explain that a community of practice generally “…has a core of participants whose passion for the topic energizes the community and who provide intellectual and social leadership” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000: 141). In the icHouse, the small group of students who emerged as leaders who were typically responsible for most of the informal gatherings were also the ones who specifically stated that they joined the community for the family-type feeling they hoped to gain. It seems then, that there is a connection between motivation for joining the community and the role of leader within it. Those who wanted a close connection with other members were the ones who actively sought out these encounters; they were willing to commit more time and energy than those who were not as interested in the icHouse as a community.

One participant who had previously lived in the icHouse explained that this particular group of people was very different than the year before. When asked about the group dynamics of the icHouse, he said the following:

“It all comes down to personality.” There was a sort of heightened dynamic last year with specific people who were involved in the community. “It seemed we were readier to be open and be vulnerable with each other last year and that’s probably how we bonded much more.” I don’t know, maybe it just conspired that people with similar personalities got together more last year, did more things together.
He further explained that last year, there was a core group of people who always made an effort to organize the group. There were clear leaders, and while not everyone participated in every event, the fact that certain people tried to organize things made a huge difference.

This has important implications for future icHouses. First, it suggests that the community is limited in potential by the amount of effort the involved students are willing to put into the community. This is very important because it suggests that even with intentionally designed programming, the success of the icHouse also depends on the efforts of the students involved. Without students who actively make the community a success, it has the potential to become just another dormitory within the university.

Second, the issue of leaders and the role of the students in the community shows that each icHouse will develop differently. While some of the IPO staff members were worried that this community would not gel, the fact that leaders began to emerge and pull the group together in the spring semester suggests that some groups simply take longer to come together than others. Now, this is not to say that a community feeling will always develop given enough time. Instead, it suggests that, depending on the students, the group dynamics will develop in unique ways each year.

Finally, it reinforces the idea that the motivation of students for joining the community will have an effect on the way they interact within the group. It is difficult to draw a direct connection between motivation and actual leadership potential, for this ignores the role of personality in the likelihood that a person will fulfill a leadership role. However, in the current icHouse, those who joined the community with the intention of interacting with others were much more likely to end up in a social leadership role.
4.4 Roommates & Suitemates

Another very important factor in the development of the community is the role of roommates and suitemates. As previously explained, roommates and suitemates are assigned by the IPO staff members based upon the perceived compatibility of the pairs. For this particular community, the IPO staff member who did the roommate matching had had fairly extensive experience with most of the international, degree-seeking students. As a result, she knew their personalities pretty well. Through the interview process, she met all of the students she did not know, and did her best to choose successful roommate pairs.

Overall, the students were generally positive about their roommate pairings. One student said: *I don’t know how she did it. I mean, I’m more of the quiet, constantly always studying and never move from my desk kind of person. The first two roommates I had, it was like it fit perfectly. I honestly don’t know how she did it.* Another student explained that he was very happy with the way things worked out, saying that being paired up by an IPO staff member was “better than if I chose to find some random roommate or went to another living community.”

Another student was similarly impressed by the IPO staff matches. When asked about her roommate, she said:

*It’s been good. I wouldn’t say we’re best friends, but we’ve definitely done things together. We are similar kinds of people in the room. Personality wise it’s been really well. I don’t know how they did that. Most pairs worked out really well. Some have had conflict, getting into fights, but most have done really well.*

While this student was not quite as close with her roommate as the student quoted above, she was happy with the match overall.

However, as this student explained, not everyone was happy with their roommate pairing. In fact, one student who was generally very positive about the icHouse felt that her roommate
was the worst part of the experience. She explained that their personalities were very different from each other, and that they had had a number of arguments over things ranging from family issues to sleep schedules. She said: *Our values are quite different, but it’s not a cultural thing. As an individual she’s quite different than me, but our cultures aren’t that different. I’ve loved the icHouse, but I just have a problem with my roommate.*

Both this less successful set of roommates and the successful pairings illustrate just how influential a roommate can be. Where some students cited their roommate as the best thing that happened all semester, others believed their roommate was the main thing keeping them from having a perfect icHouse experience. Therefore, it is important to examine the issue of roommates and suitemates more closely.

### 4.4.1 Before/After Living Together – Stereotypes vs. Realities

One of the goals of the icHouse is to increase cultural awareness and understanding through interaction with others. International and American students are paired together intentionally with this goal in mind. Because this idea of decreasing prejudices through contact is so prominent within the icHouse, it is important to look at the idea of stereotypes within the roommate pairings.

The students receive their icHouse roommate information in the spring if the pairing is an international, degree-seeking student with an American roommate; if there is an international exchange student involved, then the information is released in the early summer before the roommates will live together. As a result, most of the students are able to meet their roommates before living together.
During the interviews, everyone who was part of an American/international, degree-seeking student pair (meaning everyone except those living with international exchange students) said that they met with their roommates at least once during the previous spring to discuss living together. A small handful of students knew their roommates casually, but none knew them very well. In fact, some of them had never met at all.

One of the students who had never met his roommate had the following to say about his expectations regarding his roommate:

Before living with him, I knew where he was from and had heard that he was nice and philosophical. I like to think I knew a lot about his home country, but not really a lot. I knew people didn’t live in huts or things. I wasn’t one of those people. But I do have my own perceptions about international students here. They tend to be the more affluent from their society. But my roommate seemed different.

This particular student was American, and seemed willing to admit that he did had some previously conceived notions about living with an international student. However, he was intentional about making it clear that he was not “one of those people” who had stereotypical images of international students. This is important because it shows that he was a self-aware individual, and capable of thinking critically of his own biases. However, he still had certain ideas about what it meant to be biased and how important that may or may not be.

When asked how living with his roommate compared to how he thought it would be, he said: Actually, living with him is a lot like I expected it to be. But I was surprised about how open he was about sharing things with me. He just assumes that whatever he has I can use. This student was hesitant about defining differences in cultural terms later in the interview, although he certainly believed differences were present. He mentioned multiple times that he did not think
that certain differences were cultural. However, many of the differences he listed (world-view, openness, personal habits) could be considered cultural differences as well.

Other students were more explicit about cultural differences. One female student said the following about her expectations for her roommate:

“I was very afraid.” From what I knew about people from her culture, they’re very cautious people. I was afraid that she would not tell me things, and that she would not tell me when she’s upset. I mean, it’s kind of true; she would never tell me something directly. But it’s not a problem like I thought it would be. I’ve been happy with the way things turned out. We never fight: in her culture some things can be misunderstandings. She has had problems with other people, but not me – or at least, she wouldn’t tell me if she did.

This student clearly believed that her culture was quite different from her roommate’s, and she was worried that these differences might cause friction between them. She anticipated problems, but was pleasantly surprised by the results. Although she was initially hesitant about her roommate pairing based upon what she had previously known about her roommate’s culture, this student was generally happy with the pairing. In general, she said that she had learned a great deal about what it was really like to live with a person from that culture.

Perhaps the most successful roommate pairing came from an international exchange/American female pair. Before rooming together, the pair had virtually no contact. One of the roommates initiated e-mail contact, but did not hear back until the week before they moved in together due to the fact that the other roommate had no internet access in her home. When asked to reflect on the incident, the international roommate who reached out said:

I was afraid because I’ve never had a roommate before. And I was afraid because she didn’t answer my e-mails. I thought “what is happening?” At first it was a bit – I was a bit worried. Everyone told me it would be a wonderful experience though. I was sure it would be okay. [This same student later explained]: I knew a girl from the icHouse last year. She helped me a lot, and told me about the icHouse. She knew [my roommate] and told me

1 This paraphrased quote comes from the answers to two different interview questions concerning the initial contact between the roommates.
“you are lucky” about living with her. I knew nothing about her background though. I just saw her face from Facebook and knew she was a fan of baseball. In this situation, the worry over the roommate issue came from the uncertainty associated with the e-mail situation, instead of from cultural issues. Additionally, this student had apprehensions about the situation due to the fact that she had never lived with a roommate before. If she had any cultural apprehensions, she did not express them. This suggests that she believed the problem involving the initial contact attempt and the idea of dealing with living with another person for the first time were much more worrisome to her than the idea of living with someone from another culture. The other roommate said the following about the same incident:

Each year, I have been really nervous having a new roommate. I was like “What if this roommate has people over all the time and they like to drink or party?” Every year. And then I always said, no it will be okay. I will adapt to it. And so, [the IPO staff person] told me who would be my roommate over the summer, and I honestly had no idea. I didn’t even think about what it was going to be like. At home, we don’t have internet access, I have to go out of the area to check my e-mail. My roommate was e-mailing me trying to figure things out, and I didn’t email her back until the day before coming back. And I felt so bad! Similarly to her roommate, this student was worried about the e-mail miscommunication. However, in this example, it is clear that she was also worried about potential personality and cultural conflicts. She was specifically worried about having a roommate who is much more social than she is, and who might drink or party excessively. This quote also shows us that this student intended to make the best of the situation, regardless of what happened.

Ultimately, she reported being extremely happy with the roommate pairing. When asked about the reality of living with her roommate, she said:

When we got here, we were talking about what we like and don’t like, and she was really worried and scared about liking me. And when I first, the first couple of months, we didn’t have any problems. We went with the flow, and were flexible with what we wanted to do. We started with the roommate agreement, and it’s just been really nice. It really has. We help each other out a lot.
While she was initially hesitant about having a new roommate, this student was extremely happy with the way things turned out. Between these two roommates, both reported that they had learned a great deal about the other’s culture throughout the experience. This revelation is significant because it suggests that the icHouse model was successful in helping these participants learn about other cultures.

4.4.2 Roommates as Cultural Ambassadors

In situations like the one explored in the previous section (4.4.2) where both roommates report learning about the other’s culture, the importance of roommates can be clearly seen. However, the effects are not always so clear. Therefore, it is important to discuss the idea that roommates can additionally be viewed as cultural ambassadors. In discussing this, the issue of defining the cultural other comes up. By this, I mean that the students did not always associate differences with cultural issues. Even within the roommate pairs, some students considered certain disagreements or issues as being cultural differences while their roommate did not. I discuss the difficulties the students had with defining cultural differences below in section 4.4.4.

For now though, it is important to discuss the instances where the students felt they either learned from their roommates or taught them about culture. In one interview, the student explained that she had learned virtually everything she knows about her roommate’s culture from living with her roommate. When asked about the experience, she said:

It’s been wonderful. The most amazing experience. Nothing, not even a little thing that I would say was not perfect. I’ve learned a lot about her culture. Over spring break, I’m going to [her region] to do community service. I’m reading a book about her culture right now. Honestly, before coming here, I knew one thing about her culture. I learned so much about her, about her culture this year.
This student further explained during multiple events that she would not have known anything about her roommate’s culture without this experience. In this instance, it is important to point out that the roommate was the same student discussed earlier who comes from a culture that is vastly underrepresented at the university. In fact, it is very rarely portrayed in media either. Therefore, it is unsurprising that an international student would have had previous contact with or knowledge about this particular culture.

However, she still credits the icHouse experience as the reason why she learned so much about the culture this year. Without her roommate, she would not have had a chance to get to know a person from this culture, and it is highly unlikely that she would have learned about them in her native country. And when asked if she would choose to live with her roommate again, she responded by saying, Yes, oh yes. She’s the most wonderful person I’ve ever met. I would like to bring her to my country with me to be roommates again. I hope to keep in touch. Clearly, this student felt that her roommate pairing worked out for the best.

Another student who felt that she learned about her roommate’s culture explained that she and her roommate had actually debated what constitutes culture. When asked to explain her roommate’s culture, she said the following:

She doesn’t drink cold things (laughs). I’ve learned that her traditional medicine is different from American. Which is part of culture. My roommate says it’s not, but it IS. I’ve learned lots about traditional medicine from living with her. I feel like I’ve learned quite a bit. We don’t sit down and say let’s compare cultures, but little things come up. This student explained that she and her roommate talk about differences in terms of culture even thought they do not always agree on what actually constitutes “culture.” However, she still felt that she learned about her roommate’s culture from living with her, from being around her so
often. The “little things” that came up were generally the most informative, and this student felt she benefited from the experience.

While many of the students felt like they learned from their roommates, other students expressed the idea that they were also cultural ambassadors. One student specifically spoke about being a cultural outsider, and educating others on his cultural background. He said:

*There are two kinds of thoughts about my country. On one extreme, people really think it is, and the news helps with this, but they think it is nothing but a messed up place full of tribal warfare and ‘my god how did you make it out of there?’ To the other extreme, they ask, ‘Are you a prince? Is your father the president?’*

He further explained that he felt Americans as a whole were very interested in learning about his cultural background and asking questions. When discussing the differences between his freshman year experience in a traditional dorm and his icHouse experiences, he said:

*My freshman year, I didn’t feel connected with anyone. I must say though, even up there, there are people who are really interested in where I’m from and what I’m doing here. I should have been more interested in where they are from – It was good, but maybe I just hadn’t adapted to the way socialization is done in America.*

Here, this student highlights an important issue discussed before: the idea of acculturation. As a freshman, he points out that his attitude might have been shaped by the lack of adjustment he had experienced. As a junior this year, however, he now feels like he knows what is going on culturally in this country. However, that has not stopped him from trying to be a cultural ambassador.

This is further seen in his interactions with his roommate regarding cultural differences. One particularly important thing to note is that this student had previously lived in the icHouse. While he said that he enjoyed his experience with the current icHouse, he also said that the previous year was what felt like his real icHouse experience. In fact, for his senior year, he has
chosen to live with his icHouse roommate from his first year. He said the following about the decision:

_Last year, I lived with [roommate A]. My social circles are ill-defined, but I knew [roommate A] as an acquaintance before living in the icHouse. We had things in common. For instance, [roommate A] has adopted siblings from [a country near mine], so he has more of an understanding of my culture than [my current roommate]. So he probably understood me a bit better than [my current roommate]._

What is notable about this excerpt is the fact that this student chose an example of cultural understanding to express compatibility. While many of the students cited things like sleeping patterns and study habits as sources of discord or harmony, this student suggests that his previous roommate was a good match because he “understood me a bit better.” This is not to say that this understanding is the sole reason why he wishes to room with the previous roommate next year; however, it is an interesting choice of examples.

Another student who felt he had learned about a different culture through his roommate said the following:

_Through living with him, I’ve gained a different perspective on how he views the world. I didn’t know that people from his country would want to focus on what he really cares about like on history and philosophy and theology… instead of things like medicine like I thought they would._

Here, this student reveals his previous biases while also clarifying what he has learned from the icHouse experience. In this statement, the student explains that he previously believed that people from his roommate’s culture would be more interested in issues surrounding medicine (or more specifically, public health) than abstract, less “real” issues. He further explained that he was surprised by his roommate’s interest in philosophical issues because he did not anticipate someone from that background to care about such things. However, living with this particular
roommate showed him how diverse a person’s interests can be, regardless of their cultural background.

In these examples, cultural discussions served as ways for roommates to get to know each other and bond over their newfound understanding. In this way, the students actively used culture as a way to build relationships. Ultimately, it was clear through the interviews and observations that the roommates served as cultural ambassadors to each other, whether they intended it or not. As most of the students explained, the icHouse experience is strongly influenced by the roommate experience; most of the true development of cultural understanding occurred at the roommate or suitemate level.

4.4.3 Roommates as Friends – Who do you define as a cultural other?

Many of the residents of the icHouse had difficulty to describe their roommate as a cultural other. Halualani (2008) also noticed this phenomenon in her study on intercultural contact. Her study examined the ways in which 80 different students define intercultural contact. Overall, she found that the students were reluctant to qualify their daily interactions as being “intercultural.” She explains that “interviewees primarily define intercultural interaction to be exchanges between individuals of different national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds but delineate such exchanges to take place completely out of their own personal friendship or social networks” (Halualani, 2008: 2). The students in her study more commonly separated out personal relationships as being not intercultural.
This phenomenon was definitely seen among icHouse members. One particular set of roommates was especially careful about “othering” each other. For instance, when asked about their relationship, one roommate explained:

_He has been very different than what I expected, particularly how he identifies himself culturally. We do talk about race and culture issues, but we don’t talk about selves… cultures… but about issues that come up in the news. He maintains an interest in immigration affairs, things like that – him being in his major influences his interests. We talk about those kinds of things. I have learned more about how he views things from an American perspective._

In this explanation, this student implies that the cultural discussions he had with his roommate were not triggered by personal experiences, but instead by current events and news stories. This may be true, but what is more interesting is that this student felt the need to clarify that “we don’t talk about selves… cultures.” He wanted to make it clear that they do not sit around their room discussing their own personal cultures.

Kudo & Simkin (2003: 101) found that the students in their study were similarly reluctant to consider interactions with friends as “intercultural.” They explained that, “They [the students] maintained that they and their friends had associated with each other as individuals with unique characteristics rather than as representatives of different nationalities.” This was also frequently seen in the icHouse, as demonstrated by the student above who made a point to say that he and his roommate talked about cultural issues, but not as representatives of that culture. His roommate confirmed this, but also explained that culture really did play a role in their discussions. He told a story about how they once got into a fight over a discussion involving a country (one where neither of them has lived). He explained that his roommate was mad at him for a number of days over a comment regarding the country, but that it all turned out to be a
misunderstanding. He attributed some of the misunderstanding to cultural factors though, instead of saying it was an unrelated misunderstanding.

Halualani (2008) offers one explanation for why the students in her study were reluctant to identify their friends as cultural others. She said that “If they were to frame their friends as culturally different examples of intercultural contact, it would suggest that they were overly conscious of culture and thus select and seek out individuals to befriend (and not) based on those individuals’ culture, ethnicity, or race. Hence, student interviewees may resist being perceived as culturally conscious and culturally selective for fear that they will be viewed in an extreme way: as prejudiced and racist” (p. 12). This theory makes a great deal of sense, except that it can only be applied to the icHouse to a limited degree.

Within the icHouse, the students have already outwardly expressed the desire to be around cultural others. Many of them explicitly joined the house for this. Culture and “otherness” is brought to the forefront at almost every event. While Halualani’s explanation may be true of some individuals, it is less likely to be applicable to the students in the icHouse simply because they have already chosen to actively seek cultural others. It is possible that by bringing culture so much into the forefront of the icHouse, the participants have become aware of its importance, and begun to interact with it in a different way. The interactions illustrated above show that the issue of culture never goes away; however, the icHouse seems to encourage the continual examination into the role culture plays in everyday life.
4.4.4 The Addition of Suitemates

As I have demonstrated above, roommates play an important role in the icHouse experience. However, because of the way the floor is set up, most of the students must deal with the issue of suitemates as well. Or, if they do not have suitemates, they must handle the lack thereof.

The majority of the students, however, are matched with suitemates in addition to their roommates. These students share a bathroom that joins the two rooms. This means that the suitemates had easy access to each other’s rooms, and many students reported using that to their advantage.

One student mentioned during the spring retreat that he and his suitemates regularly had debates about international issues. The suitemates joined in the discussion, and all of them joked about their suite as a place for heated but friendly arguments. They reference inside jokes and gave one another a hard time about their cultural beliefs. The student then offered up their suite to the whole group as a place for cultural discussions. It was clear that this particular group of suitemates was very close, and considered the arrangement beneficial to all involved.

This kind of situation is exactly what the IPO staff hopes for when assigning suitemates. While roommates are likely to play the biggest role in satisfaction with the icHouse, suitemates are almost as important. This is due to their close proximity and the potential challenges of sharing a bathroom. The issue of the bathroom can be a problem both because everyone comes from different cultural backgrounds, and also because of simple personal habits.
One student mentioned that the bathroom is the biggest source of tension among her and her suitemates. Overall, she was extremely positive about her suitemates, but she explained that they often have issues with how clean the bathroom should be. She said:

*The bathroom is a big source of conflict in our suite – some people are used to things being very clean in their countries – others are not. I shared a bathroom with 3 boys so I’m kind of oblivious to it being a little dirty. And my roommates will say ‘get your hair out of the sink!’ But everyone learns each others preferences.*

Here, this student specifically points out that cultural preferences may play into cleanliness habits regarding the bathroom. This may play into the issue for her because she and her suitemates have specifically had discussions about bathrooms in various cultures. They have also had discussions about their own cleanliness standards in their countries, so it seems likely that she would draw a connection between the bathroom conflicts and cultural differences.

Within this same suite is a set of international/international roommates. This pairing was highly unusual for the icHouse. While the IPO staff was unhappy with the pairing, there was little they could do as far as balancing the roommates considering the pool of applicants and accepted students from last year. And while one of the students said she was very upset upon initially hearing that she would not be paired with an American roommate, she explained that she was very grateful for the presence of suitemates. She said:

*I’ve mostly interacted with my suitemates and roommate in the icHouse. I’m close with my suitemates. Our doors are always open. I talk to them every day. She then further explained: I wanted to learn about American culture through having an American roommate. I just wanted more contact. We interact in class, but it’s not the same. But I have an American suitemate, which is like having an American roommate.*

Although she was initially disappointed by not having an American roommate, she explained that having an American suitemate made up for the situation. In fact, she went home with the American suitemate for Thanksgiving in order to experience a “real American Thanksgiving.”
This example illustrates the power of suitemates in influencing a student’s icHouse experience. However, not every set of roommates has suitemates. In one instance, where the roommates were very close, this was not a problem. In fact, one of the students in that room explained that it was nice to have their own bathroom instead of having to share. However, in another room, where the roommates did not get along quite as well, one student said that she wished that they would have had suitemates. She said: *It would have been a different experience with suitemates. Maybe they could have intervened when we fought. Plus, I would have come in contact with more cultures, which I would have liked.* This student pointed out that having suitemates means you have that much more exposure to cultures other than your own; you have two more people to learn from and live with. Additionally, there are two more people to help diffuse tension between roommates.

This student even went so far as to suggest that the icHouse require students to change rooms after one semester, just so that they can be exposed to more students through living with them. However, the IPO staff member pointed out how difficult that would be logistically, especially considering the fact that university housing would be involved. This shows just how influential this student believes roommates and suitemates can be in the icHouse.

In fact, during the interviews, two females from the same suite independently cited a recent “suite dinner night” as one of the highlights of their icHouse experience. It was an impromptu event where the suite decided to go to dinner together. One student explained that the dinner conversation turned towards cultural issues, and they all made jokes about how proud the IPO staff would be of their conversation. She explained: *We are always having “cultural dialogue.” We joke that the staff would be so proud of us.* This is interesting because it suggests
that even when the students are in the most informal of settings, they still associate being with each other with the icHouse. While this label may not define their relationship entirely, being members of the icHouse certainly bonds them together.

Ultimately, suitemates play a very important role in the icHouse. They are almost as influential as roommates, and have the power to make or break the experience. The vast majority of the students in this icHouse were either grateful for their suitemates, or wished that they had been given a chance to have them. They bring additionally cultural elements to the students’ daily lives, and can serve as a buffer for roommates who have problems.

4.5 Cultural Self-Disclosure in Group Settings

While roommate and suitemate interactions serve as the most influential relationships within the icHouse, they are certainly not the only ones. Through mandatory and optional programming, students have a chance to interact with the floor as a whole, and are not limited to interactions with their roommates. During these times, the issue of culture often came up. In fact, as the “practice” of choice in this community of practice, cultural discussions served a vital role in community building. Sometimes, culture was brought up by the International Programs Office staff members in charge of events in order to open up a cultural dialogue. Other times, the students initiated the conversations, often in an attempt to further bond with each other. During these discussions, the students often served as cultural ambassadors, representative of their own cultural heritage. They were encouraged, both officially and casually, to teach others about their cultural background. Because of the demographics of the current icHouse, many of the students were the sole representatives of their cultures. As such, it is important to look at the role of
cultural self-disclosure, or the telling of personal cultural information, in group settings. For this, I consider anything involving roughly four or more icHouse members to be a “group setting.” In other words, conversations between just two people are not included.

4.5.1 Individuals as Representatives of their Culture

Throughout this study, students often entered into cultural discussions covering everything from politics to eating habits. These discussions often took place at icHouse sponsored events, whether they were mandatory or optional. During these discussions, students often took on the role of “cultural representative” for their own culture; they tried to educate others about their own culture.

During the fall retreat, the majority of the discussions were focused on learning about culture and the personal histories of everyone in the icHouse. This was done through a series of pre-planned group activities, as well as through the unstructured down time. First, let’s discuss the group activities intentionally designed to encourage cultural discussions.

At one point during the retreat, the IPO staff led an activity called “concentric circles.” During this game, the students were divided into two groups. One group made a small circle, facing out. The other group made a circle around this circle, facing the first group. The effect was that pairs of students stood facing each other. The IPO staff member then gave the students topics and told them they had two minutes to answer the question before they would switch partners and be given a new topic. The topics ranged from “Who is your hero?” to “How does your family celebrate holidays?” to “What kind of food is your culture known for?”
The students seemed to greatly enjoy this activity, and requested that the staff ask more questions and let the conversations go for longer. They explained that they appreciated the time to talk one-on-one with almost every member of the icHouse about their culture and personal background. Many of the conversations went past the superficial level, and a few of the students were emotionally moved. For instance, a few of the students were brought to tears discussing their heroes and their families. It was a high point of the fall retreat for many students, and they all seemed to like talking about their own cultures.

Later during the same retreat, the staff also led a game referred to as the map game. This game, mentioned previously in the discussion section about labels, encouraged students to work through the stereotypes they associated with different cultures. Each student was given a piece of paper with the outline of their home on it. For international students, it was a picture of their country; for American students, it was a picture of their state. These pages were then hung on a wall, and the students wrote notes on each one about what they thought of when they thought about that particular country. These comments were serious, sometimes funny, and generally informative about what the stereotypes students believed about people from the places represented.

After the students finished commenting on the maps, they all came together to discuss the items written on them. Each student brought his or her map back to the group. Then, either individually or with the one or two other students from the same place, the students went through the comments. They were able to dispel myths and answer any questions that came up about their culture. It was clear that the students enjoyed talking about their home cultures, and as a
result, the whole process ended up taking much longer than the IPO staff expected. The students were very respectful of each other, and asked a lot of questions when the others were talking.

Also, the students seemed to enjoy taking on the role of cultural representative for their own cultural heritage. Regardless of whether they were international or American students, everyone took pride in talking about where they were from. Some of the international students who are in the extreme minority at the university enjoyed being able to dispel myths about their countries or culture. Similarly, many of the American students from underrepresented minorities and geographical areas enjoyed the process as well.

During these formal events, the students all served as cultural representatives. To some extent though, this position was encouraged by the IPO staff and the programming implemented at the time. It was certainly not required, but the students may have felt the need to step into that role. However, it became clear at different points during the study that many of the students were more than willing to voluntarily step into the role of cultural representative. In this way, the students viewed their role as cultural ambassador important to the success of the community. They recognized the fact that the icHouse was created to encourage cultural discussion, and actively tried to build the community on this principal.

This was especially clear when looking at the events the students planned and executed for the spring semester. For the first lecture, for instance, the food served was a collection of traditional dishes from the various cultures of the students in charge. Although the food did not necessarily “go together,” the students decided that they wanted to expose the other icHouse members to their traditional foods anyway. They could have chosen any food for the event, and yet the students wanted to share a piece of their culture with the group.
Another example of the students serving as cultural ambassadors can be seen when considering the community service events the students planned for the icHouse. During the fall semester, one student stepped forward and shared information about an organization that she has been involved with for a long time. This particular organization has a very strong culture associated with it, and influenced this student greatly. She decided to organize an event for the icHouse in order to raise awareness about the organization, and to give back to the community. During the event, she spent the majority of the time discussing the cultural nuances involved with the organization, and educating the other icHouse members about her background. Those who volunteered for the event were very interested as evidenced by their questions and commitment to learning about this student’s background.

A similar situation occurred with the spring community service event. Because the fall event was so successful, the students organizing the spring event wanted to maintain the same level of excitement. However, they lacked a clear idea of what they wanted to do. Ultimately, one international student stepped up and asked the group to support an organization in his home country. Coincidentally, their independence day fell during the month set aside for the community service event, and the student suggested they organize the event for that day.

The rest of the students agreed immediately, and many of the members of the icHouse joined the event. The student who organized the event sent out numerous e-mails with information concerning his country, his culture, and the organization they were planning on supporting. The icHouse members cooked a traditional food from his culture, and sold it as a fundraiser. In fact, the organizing student got a number of co-nationals who were not members of
the icHouse involved as well in an attempt to further educate the icHouse members and to make the event even more successful.

These two community service examples show times when students actively chose to take on the role of cultural representative. In both of these situations, the students involved were the only representatives from their culture in the icHouse, and were eager to share their heritage with the community. In another instance, a group of co-nationals who were all in the icHouse decided to hold a social event based upon their culture. These students organized a time for the other icHouse members to learn how to make traditional foods from their culture and watch a traditional art demonstration. This event roughly coincided with a cultural holiday, and the other students were eager to learn more about the traditional celebration.

In this situation, the students had complete freedom to choose what kind of social event to hold. The IPO office provides a small amount of money for each of the social events, and it could be spent however the students choose. For instance, past icHouses have gone to the movies, gone to dinner, gone apple picking, or done other “standard” activities. However, these students chose to hold a cultural event, focused on educating the icHouse members on their cultural traditions. This suggests that the students were not only comfortable being in the role of cultural representative when asked to by the IPO staff, but also that they enjoyed the role during unofficial times as well.
4.5.2 Intentionally Intercultural – Working Culture into Everyday Conversation

It was also clear that students enjoyed the role of “cultural representative” during casual interactions with other icHouse members. While it is important to discuss the ways the students serve as cultural representatives during officially sanctioned icHouse events, it is even more revealing to see how the students take on this role during informal, unofficial events. Working cultural issues into casual conversations suggests the students think and care about these issues.

One such instance involved a casual outing to a cultural event. One student invited the icHouse members to a local craft fair where relatives of hers would be selling traditional crafts from her culture. A handful of students decided to go to the fair together, and then decided to eat lunch afterwards. Throughout the craft fair, the students asked the organizing student questions about her culture, her family, and her personal history. However, the lunch conversation was perhaps even more indicative of the students’ interests in each other’s culture.

During lunch, the students began to discuss eating habits and cultural customs from around the world. Specifically, they discussed the idea of “carry out” food. Each student explained what would happen in their country if someone decided to take home food from a restaurant. Everyone shared their personal views on the issue, and the students laughed a great deal when discussing the cultural faux pas that could occur if a person did not know how a host culture handles carry out. The discussion then turned to traditional foods and table manners of each culture.

While this might seem like a small side conversation, there were a few unique things about it worth mentioning. First, the students were very intentional about taking turns discussing their own culture and asking about everyone else’s traditions. No one student dominated the
conversation, and everyone was interested in learning about other cultures. Each student asked questions of the other students, and the conversation veered in and out of cultural issues naturally.

Another instance of culture coming up during casual conversation occurred at the fall retreat. After each day of programming, the students were given time to use as they wanted. This meant that the students were free of programming obligation. One evening, the IPO staff built a fire and the students gathered around to spend time together. At the fire, one student informed the group that another student was a particularly good singer. Everyone else requested that he sing a song, and obliged. He sang a traditional song from his culture, and soon, everyone else was sharing traditional songs from their own cultures. Eventually, the students decided that they should all learn a song from each of the cultures represented. For the next few hours, the group sat around the fire, teaching their songs to everyone else, regardless of the language. This was obviously difficult, and took a great deal of patience on the part of the teacher. However, the students involved made a real effort to learn the songs from each culture, including songs in English as well.

This is especially indicative of the nature of this community because it shows that many of the students, even when given free time to be away from the group, chose to participate in a distinctly cultural activity. These activities were not necessarily designed to be cultural, although even non-cultural activities often took on a certain cultural aspect when they led to discussions of how each student does or views things “back home.” It is important to point out though, that not every student chose to be a part of this singing group. However, the group was still quite large, and many of the students participated for at least some portion of time.
4.6 Evaluation of the icHouse – The Contact Hypothesis & The Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM)

All of the examples presented above show that there are a multitude of issues influencing the development and success of the icHouse community. The International Programs Office (IPO) staff, roommates, suitemates, motivations for joining, and a host of other issues all play a role in this community. Making sweeping generalizations about the community and the effectiveness of the icHouse on intercultural communication is impossible. However, by examining many of the influences on the icHouse, and by discussing the various issues that arose during this study, it is possible to evaluate the program and the contact hypothesis in terms of its applicability to the icHouse community. Ultimately, both the contact hypothesis and the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) are conditionally supported by the evidence found in the icHouse. This means that, although the theories are generally correct in saying that contact between individuals and the development of a common ingroup identity will lead to reduced prejudices, the interplay of influences on a community such as the icHouse is so complex that these theories should not be applied uniformly to all situations.

4.6.1 The Contact Hypothesis

The contact hypothesis proposes that contact with “others” under certain conditions can lead to reduced prejudices (Allport, 1954). The icHouse operates under this assumption, and places individuals with cultural or ethnic others in an attempt to encourage intercultural dialogue. It makes sense to study the icHouse using the contact hypothesis because it fits all four of the criteria established for optimal contact. These criteria state that: (1) the individuals involved have
to be of equal status, (2) they must have goals in common, (3) there should not be competition between their groups, and (4) their relationship needs to have support from some sort of authority (be that institutional, lawful, etc.) (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew 1998).

As university students, the icHouse participants can be considered of equal statues. This same conclusion was reached by Nesdale & Todd (2000). Choosing to join the icHouse gives them both a common goal (intercultural dialogue) and support for that goal by the university. Finally, there is no real competition within the icHouse because it is simply a dormitory with programming aimed at uniting the group. For these reasons, applying the contact hypothesis to the icHouse makes a lot of sense.

However, the icHouse presents its own unique challenges, as I have explored in chapters 3 and 4. This influence of the IPO is impossible to ignore, and the partial self-selection of the participants is very important. These issues are not covered in most of the traditional contact literature. And yet, they are an integral part of understanding the development and function of the icHouse.

While these issues may make understanding the icHouse seem more complicated, in the end, they only add to the understanding of how intercultural contact works to reduce prejudices. Understanding the true effects of contact requires understanding all of the minute details involved. As my analysis above has shown, these details are crucial to analyzing the icHouse. Ultimately, the contact hypothesis is supported through the icHouse, with a few caveats.

First, the contact hypothesis is supported by the large body of evidence presented above. The students who participated in this year’s icHouse reported gaining a greater appreciation for the cultures of the other individuals in the icHouse. This was done through intentional
programming efforts (the fall retreat, the faculty lectures, the community service events, etc.) and through the informal downtime the students experienced (living with their roommates, suitemates, neighbors, etc.). These interactions helped the students to learn about cultural others as individuals. While some researchers such as Brewer (1996) might suggest that this level of cultural acceptance is best achieved when the prominence of culture is lessened, the understanding of the icHouse I have presented above suggests that cultural acceptance can also be achieved through focusing on culture. By being intentionally intercultural, the students in the icHouse bring the sometimes taboo issues of culture and race to the forefront of their daily lives. This allows them to talk frankly and openly about conflicts and other issues that arise.

Secondly, the most influential aspect of the icHouse is not the programming efforts by the IPO staff. The majority of the students enjoyed this programming very much. In fact, a number of the students said that the highlights of their icHouse experience have been during officially organized events. However, this being said, most of the real change in the participants came through interactions with their roommates and suitemates. This suggests that, while the programming is helpful in establishing a community feeling, the pairing of roommates and suitemates is the single most influential part of the icHouse. A bad roommate can make a person regret their decision to live in the community while a good roommate can spark an interest in a previously unfamiliar culture. The bonds between roommates and suitemates are what make the icHouse experience so powerful.

Finally, the icHouse experience is only as positive as the students make it. While contact appears to have an influence on the students regardless of their evaluation of the icHouse as a whole, those who enjoyed their experience were more likely to have positive contact
experiences. In their interviews and during the observations, the students who were most active in the icHouse seemed to gain the most from the experience.

This is one of the major caveats associated with applying the contact hypothesis to the icHouse. The original contact hypothesis does not involve the idea of motivation. However, the motivation for joining had a direct correlation to how much the students were involved in the community. This link cannot be ignored, and suggests that those who want to gain increased cultural awareness will actively try to do so. Those who don’t may absorb something along the way, but it will be to a lesser degree.

Ultimately, the contact hypothesis is an excellent tool for studying the icHouse. However, it should not be applied uniformly to all situations; we must always look to underlying issues within a community to truly understand what has happened.

4.6.2 Evaluation of the CIIM

Like the contact hypothesis, the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM) aims to help us understand how prejudices can be reduced across groups. It suggests that prejudices will be reduced when people from different backgrounds come together under a common identity (Gaertner et al., 1996; Dovidio et al., 2001). For the students in this study, the identity was that of an icHouse member.

However, as Dovidio et al. (2001) suggested, this new common identity does not have to replace the old individual identities. In fact, in the icHouse, the common identity of icHouse participant was built upon the unique identities and background that each member brings to the house. As Dovidio et al. (2001: 179) explain, “… the development of a common ingroup identity
does not necessarily require each group to forsake its less inclusive group identity completely. Recategorization can also take the form of a dual identity in which subordinate and subgroup identities are both salient.” This is especially true in the icHouse.

Each of the students in the icHouse were selected because they bring something unique to the group from their background. Even the American students who are most likely to be culturally similar (based solely upon their numbers) each has a unique upbringing. Contrary to what many CIIM researchers say, it is these distinct identities that actually helps bring the icHouse closer together. Having a unique cultural identity is encouraged.

In fact, one international participant said that she felt more foreign in the icHouse than ever before, and that it was a good thing. She said that being a part of the icHouse made her love her culture and her country even more. Through the icHouse, she began to feel simultaneously more like those around her (through the common identity of icHouse participant) and less like the others (when considering background).

This suggests that the CIIM is helpful, but that the common identity can exist at the same time as unique identities. And actually, in the case of the icHouse, these unique identities can strengthen the bonds of the group. This is especially important when considering the implications for programming in the icHouse.

One of the main purposes of the fall retreat is to allow the icHouse students to bond. As previously explained, this bonding is encouraged through specific programming (lectures, games, discussions, etc.), and influenced by the IPO staff. The analysis presented above suggests that the programming does in fact play an important role in the way the group develops a common identity.
The IPO staff recognizes the power of this programming and constantly reevaluates the effectiveness of the group activities. One staff member explained:

*The programming has changed over the years. In the beginning, you had the retreats, and the lectures and one culture night per month. A few years ago, the students were not meeting those goals, and when asked, they said they were so busy and couldn’t do it. And so it changed from culture nights to having one extra outings that you can do. Sometimes it gels organically and sometimes you need programming. The lectures have always been here – students like the intellectual thing – it’s the other stuff that they felt it was too much and so we took it out. And then other years we get feedback that says it’s not enough. We try to set up structure so that they understand that it’s their community and they can get what they put into it.*

This explanation of the icHouse programming shows that the IPO staff is dedicated to making the community as effective as possible. It also reinforces the idea presented above that the community is reliant on the students; the more the students put into the community, the more beneficial the experience can be.

As a result of this, the CIIM is not entirely perfect. Like the contact hypothesis, it does not include motivation when considering group formation. That being said, the CIIM provides a strong way to evaluate the icHouse experience.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The development of the icHouse community was influenced by the interplay of five major factors: participant selection, student commitment; leadership; the role of roommates and suitemates; and the focus on cultural issues by participants. When consolidated, these five factors fall under three umbrella categories: participants, the International Program Office (IPO) staff, and programming. While it might be easy to suggest that the students had the most influence on the community development, my analysis demonstrated that these three components are actually
intertwined within the icHouse. The IPO staff selects the members, the members create the programming, and the programming, in turn, influences the members and creates historical depository for the staff’s future planning. These three factors are cyclical in their influence, and must be considered in connection to each other.

In fact, the subtle complexities of the program are what make this an important group worthy of further study. Unlike some “international houses” which bring together people from multiple cultures but offer no intercultural programming (Ryba & Williams, 2004; Bochner et al., 1985), the icHouse operates as an educational experience under the umbrella of the International Programs Office. As a result, the IPO staff plays a real role in the shaping of the icHouse. This role begins when they choose the student participants through a mutual selection process and continues as they govern the community from a slightly more removed standpoint.

The icHouse participants are selected through an interview process where they are required to undergo a short interview process intended to provide the IPO staff with the information needed in order to make participant selections. However, these interviews rarely give staff members enough insight into the true personalities, motivations and desires of the interviewees.

From these short interviews, the IPO staff must try to determine the motivations of applicants in order to decide if they would positively contribute to the community. These motivations for joining the community greatly influenced the icHouse experience. Students who joined the community in order to increase their exposure to other cultures and grow in their intercultural understanding were generally more involved than those who joined for the housing. Students who later admitted to joining only for the housing were less likely to remain active in
the community. Additionally, those who joined for what some students described as “the wrong reasons” (i.e. for housing) tended to be viewed by others as negatively influencing the community. This is because the students used the issue of intercultural understanding as the cornerstone for community building. If students were uninterested in this issue, they were far less likely to become active members in the community.

While the IPO staff played a crucial role in the selection of the icHouse participants, the students themselves also had a large influence on the actual development and cohesion of the community. Specifically, the relationships between roommates and suitemates were generally the most important influences within the icHouse. Living with a roommate from a different culture gave many of the students the unique opportunity to learn about someone different from themselves. As evidenced in my analysis, the most powerful changes in perception experienced by students typically happened as a result of these relationships. Regardless of whether they became close friends or not, the relationships with their roommates and suitemates had a profound impact on many of the icHouse participants.

This is consistent with the research conducted on interracial roommate relationships by (Stern et al., 2007; Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2006). These studies, however, focused almost exclusively on the effect of race on these relationships. This is problematic not only because racial heritage is not always the most important aspect of a person’s identity; cultural background plays an equally important role. This study fills the gap in this area of research.

In addition to serving as the most important relationships within the icHouse, roommates and suitemates also bring up a number of other interesting issues. The students often talked about their roommates in diametrically opposed ways. On the one hand, they were able to easily
articulate the idea that their roommate and suitemates came from different cultural backgrounds. However, many of the students were reluctant to actually attribute differences to culture. They tended to imply that they were cognizant of culture but that it rarely played a role in their daily life.

This may have been due to the natural selection bias that occurs within the icHouse. By this, I mean that the icHouse naturally draws applicants who are interested in learning about culture, cultural identity, and intercultural issues. It also means that these students tend to be more aware of potential pitfalls associated with cultural stereotypes. Perhaps these students were hesitant to attribute problems to cultural issues for fear of seeming like they have cultural stereotypes. This would be consistent with the research of Halualani (2008), who suggested that the students in her study might have been less likely to define friends as cultural others in order to avoid seeming racist.

However, the other possibility is that these students simply do not believe that cultural background plays a huge role in their relationships with their roommates and suitemates. After living with them for an entire semester, perhaps they have become accustomed to living with this other person, even if he/she was previously an “other.” Evidence for this argument can be seen in students’ statements that said they learned a lot from their roommate about culture, and ultimately became friends.

While students may have grown to see their roommates and suitemates as more than just representatives of different cultures, many of the students still saw themselves in the role of cultural representative for their culture. During faculty dinners, official outings and informal gatherings, the majority of the students tried to educate others about their own cultural
background. In doing so, they kept the issue of culture at the forefront of icHouse events. Even when the conversations turned toward less “cultural” issues like classes and homework, the students still found a way to work cultural heritage back into the conversation, which reveals their persistent cultural awareness in communication.

It is this intentional aspect of the community that makes the icHouse so interesting. The majority of the students joined the icHouse in order to learn about other cultures. Through programming designed by the IPO staff and implemented by the students, the participants were able to have discussions and debates about culture. However, it was up to them to carry these topics over into daily life. Through observations, surveys and interviews, I found that they did in fact do so; the students were intentional in their attempts to understand culture and the role it plays in everyday interactions.

Ultimately, the community was considered a success by the majority of the students involved. Even the student who was unhappy with her roommate (as explained in the analysis) thought that the icHouse was a beneficial experience. In fact, she has already applied and been selected to participate in the community again next year. This is particularly important because it suggests that she finds value in the icHouse even though she did not have a positive roommate experience. The number of repeat applicants each year (roughly 1-3) also supports the idea that the students view the community as beneficial.

However, it is clear from my analysis that the community will only ever be as successful as the students make it. Although the IPO staff can create and implement programming designed to foster intercultural discussions, the students must support these efforts. The students are the most important and influential part of the community.
5.1 Weakness in the icHouse Model: Implications and Suggestions for the Future

While the majority of the students in the icHouse considered the community successful, there is still one major weakness in the set-up of the community which could potentially lead to complications within the community: participant selection. Because the students are so important to building a successful community, the selection process is a crucial component.

Although it would be impossible to suggest that the IPO staff could accurately predict how every applicant might behave if selected for the community, there are certain things that the IPO staff can do during the selection process. When asked about ways to improve the community, most of the students suggested one of two things: (1) choose participants based upon their willingness to commit to the community; (2) make it clear to applicants that the community requires time and effort. These two suggestions show that the students were happy with the general role of IPO in the community; by suggesting only changes to the applicant selection process, the students indicate that they were otherwise happy with the level of IPO staff involvement in the icHouse.

These two suggestions are not to be taken lightly, however. They show that the students recognize the importance of individuals within the community. It also shows that they believed that the IPO staff could have done a more effective job choosing students for this year’s community. Often, after making one of the two suggestions listed above, the students then went on to explain why they believed these things were not done in the previous participant selection process. They frequently referenced the other students who they did not believe were as committed to the community as themselves. This suggests that the students are aware of the
amount of effort put into the community by each member. “Effort,” as defined by the students, often meant showing up for events and outings, regardless of whether they were mandatory or not, and volunteering to organize events. The IPO staff had a similar definition of effort, and also recognized the importance of selecting students who intended to be involved in the community.

Because the selection of students is so important to the success of the icHouse, the IPO staff should continue to make every possible effort to discern the real motivations students have for applying to be a part of the community. However, I recognize that this is often easier said than done. One way that the IPO staff could improve the selection process is by further emphasizing the level of commitment that is actually expected from the members. This might help applicants decide whether the icHouse is really a good match for their interests.

This focus on selecting participants who are truly interested in building a community based on intercultural understanding would only strengthen the icHouse. Because the students actively used the issue of culture in order to build community, it is important to select students who want to subscribe to the belief that culture is important. By doing this, the IPO staff encourages participants to keep culture at the forefront of the community.

This is often encouraged through the programming, which students overwhelmingly judged positively. Virtually all of the students interviewed cited the fall retreat and the faculty dinners as enjoyable icHouse experiences. This is particularly notable considering the fact the one IPO staff member mentioned that the programming aspect had, in the past, been criticized as being too demanding of the students. The level of commitment expected from the students was adjusted, and seemed to fit this community perfectly.
This programming, specifically the fall retreat, was important in helping the students establish a common identity as icHouse participants. As I explored in the analysis section, this common identity was helpful in the bonding process of the community. While I determined that it was not the most important aspect of the icHouse experience, it certainly helped the students create a more cohesive group. This common group identity should be encouraged by the IPO staff through activities during the fall retreat. This retreat provides students with their first real chance to bond as a community, and is a valuable experience for many of the participants.

Another important issue brought up by multiple students in the icHouse is that of funding. Throughout the interviews, students referenced the fact that their LC received funding that other LCs do not. This money, which comes from the IPO, was viewed as especially helpful. The students appreciated the extra funding, and recognized that it was a major benefit for this community. Future icHouses will hopefully continue to receive this level of financial support from the IPO. Without it, the dynamic of the community would certainly have been different had there been a fundraising aspect associated with the icHouse.

5.2 Participant Selection Bias: Does the icHouse preach to the choir?

To some extent, the icHouse suffers from a participant selection-bias. Because students must seek out the community and the community is designed and advertised as a place to encourage intercultural dialogue, only students who are interested in these issues tend to apply to the icHouse. This self-selection issue is common among communities like the icHouse (Eller & Abrams, 2004). The argument against these kinds of communities is that they only influence
students who are already more culturally aware than their peers. Although this may be true to some extent, it is not necessarily a bad thing.

All of the participants belong to multiple communities, whether they are actively involved or not (Wenger, 1998a; 1998b). While the main goal of the icHouse is to increase cultural awareness among its members, the secondary goal is to shape individuals who can share their newfound cultural understanding with other communities. In this way, the influence of the icHouse experience extends far beyond the immediate participants.

This is where the true value of the icHouse lies: in the ability of the community to change perceptions of culture among individuals, who will then influence the other communities to which they belong. The icHouse provides a small group of individuals a safe place to wrestle with cultural issues in the hopes that they will eventually bring others into the conversation.

This was seen in this year’s icHouse when the students decided that their last lecture should be open to the general university population. After a series of closed events, the community decided that they wanted to share the icHouse experience with as many students as possible. While this does not necessarily compare with the experience of actually living with a person from another culture, it is certainly a starting point for cultural dialogue.

5.3 Limitations of this study and Possibilities for Further Research

This icHouse study provides a great deal of qualitative data that has been missing from many previous studies of international houses. However, there are a few limitations to this study as well. These limitations are comprised in the length and geographic constraints of study.
While the icHouse community was followed for a total of seven months, which is slightly shorter than a school year, I judge that a much more complete picture could be derived from longitudinal studies. Additionally, the icHouse used for this study is just one version of the “International House” model used by universities. Because the observations in this study are so specific to the time and place of this situation, it is difficult to draw conclusions about international houses at other universities, or to project the findings onto larger intercultural communication issues. However, while this study is especially localized, it still provides an excellent stepping stone for future intercultural communication research.

The most reliable results would be those derived from longitudinal studies conducted at several selected universities with no geographic limitations. This could include icHouse examples from around the world. Such ambitious projects will, hopefully, be possible in the future with the help of scholarship funding.

The future research could take one of three approaches: increase time, increase scope or increase both time and scope. This first approach, increasing time, would involve studying a number of icHouse communities consecutively. In other words, I would like to study multiple years of icHouses at the same university to fully understand how the communities differ based on the people involved while all other variables stay the same.

A longitudinal study of multiple icHouses would enable me to compare situations that are virtually identical with one major exception: the students involved. This would shed even more light onto the role of the students in the community, and would allow me to see how things change based upon the composition of the community. Additionally, studying multiple years of the community would allow me to follow the participants as they progress from interviewees to
community members to participant selectors; I would be able to trace the whole chain of events. Furthermore, studying multiple years of communities would solidify the observations made regarding programming and the role of the IPO staff.

The second approach, increasing scope, would involve studying icHouses at other universities. This would allow for a diverse selection of students, programming and staff members. This could provide valuable insight into how the larger university community affects the icHouse, and how students differ across campuses. Additionally, studying a diverse selection of icHouses would allow me to determine how programming differences affect the community participants and experience. For instance, a community that relies entirely on an IPO staff for programming would likely be different from a community like this icHouse were the students play an active role in planning events for the community.

The third approach would involve increasing both the time and the scope of the study. Examining multiple years of a variety of icHouses would allow me to see how these communities change over time and across regional boundaries. Although a study like this would require enormous resources, it would be incredibly valuable to universities that support programs like the icHouse.

Finally, future research would benefit from a closer examination of the effects of roommates on cultural understanding. This might be accomplished by widening the study group to include people who unintentionally find themselves in an intercultural living situation. Although this might be difficult to track and observe, having students who did not actively choose to participate in an intercultural roommate pair would provide even more insight into understanding the influence of close personal contact on perceptions of culture.
Appendix I

Survey Questions

1. Do you consider yourself:
   a. An American student?
   b. An international student?

2. So far, my experience in the icHouse has been:
   a. Very positive.
   b. Okay.
   c. Disappointing.
   d. Other. Please explain.

3. My biggest challenge has been:
   a. Getting along with a roommate from a different culture.
   b. Finding my place among such a diverse group.
   c. Balancing my schoolwork with my icHouse duties.
   d. Other. Please explain.

4. So far, my roommate and I:
   a. Are very close. We spend a lot of time together.
   b. Are friends, but we don’t hang out a lot.
   c. Do not get along. We are completely different people.
   d. Other. Please explain.

5. After living with my roommate, I feel like I have learned:
   a. A lot about his/her culture.
   b. A little about his/her culture.
   c. Nothing new about his/her.
   d. Other. Please explain.

6. The other members of the icHouse and I are:
   a. More alike than I originally anticipated.
   b. About as similar/different as I expected.
   c. Less alike than I originally anticipated.
   d. Other. Please explain.

7. Overall, I feel like I have learned:
   a. A lot about the cultures of the other people in the icHouse.
   b. A little about the culture of the other people in the icHouse.
   c. Not very much about the culture of the other people in the icHouse.
   d. Other. Please explain.
Appendix II

Student Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about what the word “culture” means to you?
2. How would you define your own cultural background?
3. Before this year, how “intercultural” would you consider your group of friends?
4. What can you tell me about your roommate’s culture?
5. Can you tell me about your relationship with your roommate? Did you know each other before this experience? Would you have chosen to live with this person on your own?
6. If not, can you tell me what you expected living with him/her to be like? What did you previously know about his/her culture?
7. What has living with him/her actually been like?
8. Do you feel like you have gained anything from living with him/her?
9. Have you met anyone else from your roommate’s culture through your roommate?
10. Let’s talk about the icHouse more generally. Have you made any close friends in the community besides your roommate?
11. If yes, can you tell me about them? If no, why do you think that is?
12. Why did you want to be a part of the icHouse?
13. Was this experience what you thought it was going to be?
14. What has been the best/worst part of this experience?
15. What would you recommend the IPO staff do to make this community better/more effective?

Staff Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me why this university has a program like the icHouse? What value do you think this programming has?
2. Can you tell me a little about the financial support given to the icHouse through your office and through the university in general?
3. What is your involvement with the program? Years? Extent?
4. Let’s talk about the selection of the current members. What can you tell me about last year’s interview process? What were you looking for in members? What about the year before or any other years?
   a. How has that changed this year?
5. Can you tell me a little about past communities? How did students feel about the outcomes?
Bibliography


