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WHAT IS AN IDEAL HOST FAMILY?
A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON HOST FAMILIES
OF YOUTH EXCHANGE STUDENTS IN TAIWAN

1. Introduction

Host families host persons from another country and play a vital role in achieving a successful international exchange because host families immerse exchange students into the private life system of native residents[1]. Moreover, because the host family is also a good way to foster global understanding and unofficial diplomacy, how to be an ideal host family is an important issue.

Host family systems have been established for years in Taiwan and around the world. Not only does the Taiwanese government place an emphasis on host family programs[2], but non-governmental organizations are also dedicated to establishing host families. In 2009, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan established the program called "Warm family: Host family program for foreign students"[3].

Even though host family systems have been established for several years, host families have received different appraisals. As a research educator for exchange students for five years, I have heard many kinds of interactions between host families and exchange students. Some exchange students had wonderful times with their host families, while others had daily hassles, even serious friction, with their host families. With these experiences, I became curious about the factors of an ideal host family.

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[1]   N.M. Doerr, *Damp rooms and saying 'please': Mimesis and alterity in the host family space in study-abroad experiences*, "Anthropological Forum" (2013) 23(1), p. 58-78.

[2]   Taiwan Host Family Program (2015), *About us*, http://www.hostfamily.org.tw/en/node/Aboutus (11.11.2015).

[3]   Ministry of Education in Taiwan, *Warm family: Host family program for foreign students*, "E-paper of Ministry of Education" (2009, May), 357, http://epaper.edu.tw/topical.aspx?topical_sn=320. (01.09.2009).

However, there is little research about host family in both the Taiwan and the world contexts. Using "host family" as a key search term, I was only able to find three theses[4] in Taiwan's on-line research data base ("Airiti Library" and "National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations in Taiwan") and four journal articles[5] on the EBSCO host Web. Half of these studies focused on language learning. The other half of the research mainly focused on the host family, but from the views of host families, host parents, teachers, administration staff or classmates. Only Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart[6] explored the conditions from the student's point of view to enhance interaction with the host families. Yet, those participants in Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart were American students who studied abroad, in Mexico or Spain; there seems to be no research from student's view of host families in Asia.

In the light of the interaction problems of host families and the lack of research about host families, this study aims to use an ecological systems theory framework to explore the opinions of what constitutes an ideal host family in order to better understand the student's perception of an ideal host family. The study findings offer implications for the better interaction between students and host families in the future.

2. Literature and previous research review

2.1. The host family

The family is a social unit composed of a mutual life that consists of marriage, blood and kin relationship. As a basic unit of society, the family plays the most important role in the socialization of an individual[7] and

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[4]   Q. Chen, *A study on L2 Chinese learning of exchange students of Rotary Club in Taiwan*, Unpublished master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei City, Taiwan 2006; C. Y. Lin, *Inquiry of Chinese acquisition and host family language planning of international high school exchange students,* Unpublished master's thesis, National Kaohsiung Normal University, Kaohsiung City 2015, Taiwan; C. H. Yang, *A study of hosting foreigner students practice in the elementary school---Take a Taipei City Elementary School as an example.* Unpublished master's thesis, National Taipei University of Education, Taipei City 2009, Taiwan.

[5]   N.M. Doerr, *Damp rooms and saying 'please': Mimesis and alterity in the host family space in study-abroad experiences*, "Anthropological Forum" (2013) 23(1), p. 58-78; A.M. Grieve, *The impact of host family relations and length of stay on adolescent identity expression during study abroad*, "Multilingua" (2015) 34 (5), p. 623-657; S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79; F. Riegelhaupt & R.L. Carrasco, *Mexico host family reactions to a bilingual Chicana teacher in Mexico: A case study of language and culture clash*, "Bilingual Research Journal" (2000) 24(4), p. 405-421.

[6]   S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

[7]   N. Y. Huang, *Education and family life*, in: N.Y. Huang, J.P. Lin, S.M. Tang, & F.J. Chen (eds.), *Family Introduction*, pp. 196, Taipei County 2001, National Open University.

serves the following types of functions: biological, psychological, economy, political, education, religion, entertainment[8].

Besides the basic meaning and functions of family, the host family also has the added function of hosting by offering accommodation and daily life interactions[9]. According to the youth exchange program in Taiwan, a host family hosts for a period of at least four months and has the four responsibilities: of providing food and accommodation, maintaining discipline responsibility, communicating general knowledge about the family and local environment, and notifying exchange counselor of any difficulties or emergencies.

2.2. Language

Increasing their language skills is the primary goal in studying abroad for the majority of students[10]. The key factor which can enhance language acquisition is the host family[11], with research indicating that there is a direct link between host family relations and language acquisition[12]. Exchange students also confirm the role of the host family for helping in learning a language. Whether or not exchange students can get help from host families to learn a language depends on the motivation and goals of exchange students applying for the exchange program[13].

However, some local host family members are unable to speak English, so it is sometimes difficult for these families to interact with foreign exchange students[14]. On the other hand, since some host family children often talk in English with exchange students, it is sometimes difficult for

8   C. L. Zhu (1983), *Family function*, in: C.Y. Chang (ed.), *Chinese Encyclopedia Online: 1983 Collector's Edition*, http://ap6.pccu.edu.tw/Encyclopedia/data.asp?id=5393 (15.11.2015).

9   Q. Chen, *A study on L2 Chinese learning of exchange students of Rotary Club in Taiwan*, Unpublished master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei City, Taiwan 2006; C. H. Yang, *A study of hosting foreigner students practice in the elementary school---Take a Taipei City Elementary School as an example*. Unpublished master's thesis, National Taipei University of Education, Taipei City 2009, Taiwan.

10 S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

11 Q. Chen, *A study on L2 Chinese learning of exchange students of Rotary Club in Taiwan*, Unpublished master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei City, Taiwan 2006.

12 A.M. Grieve, *The impact of host family relations and length of stay on adolescent identity expression during study abroad*, "Multilingua" (2015) 34 (5), p. 623-657.

13 C. Y. Lin, *Inquiry of Chinese acquisition and host family language planning of international high school exchange students*, Unpublished master's thesis, National Kaohsiung Normal University, Kaohsiung City 2015, Taiwan.

14 C. H. Yang, *A study of hosting foreigner students practice in the elementary school---Take a Taipei City Elementary School as an example*. Unpublished master's thesis, National Taipei University of Education, Taipei City 2009, Taiwan.

exchange students to the learn local language[15]. Therefore, research has recommended that host families put more effort into taking the initiative to use the local language more to talk to exchange students.

2.3. Interaction

Research has shown that host families should respect the principles of foreign students and that both family and student strive to accept each other's differences[16]. The host family network was established and is led by the host parents in order to show how cultures can be both distinctly different but also similar. When host parents recognize a situation as a cultural difference, they would make an effort to understand foreign students, whereas no such effort would be made when they recognize a situation of cultural sameness. The recognition of cultural difference inspires more tolerance to students and more accommodation on the part of host parents. The key to discussing difference is not to have the assumption of a pre-existing difference. Host parents and students just need to ask how the difference is recognized and what is being affected by this recognition[17].

It has been found that when many exchange students return home, they wish they would have spoken more and participated in more activities with their host families. The causes of above situation may be an overly busy schedule, a shy personality, or lack of language skills[18]. Therefore, an ideal host family should try to do the following to help exchange students: show concern, talk in the local language, avoid prejudices, strive to get along with the student, ensure their habits do not disturb the exchange students, provide a suitable environment for hosting, lay down reasonable rules, and positively apply various methods to help students enhance their language skills[19]. Host families should also make an effort to comfort homesick foreign students by giving them some activities[20].

[15] Q. Chen, *A study on L2 Chinese learning of exchange students of Rotary Club in Taiwan*, Unpublished master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei City, Taiwan 2006.

[16] C. H. Yang, *A study of hosting foreigner students practice in the elementary school---Take a Taipei City Elementary School as an example*. Unpublished master's thesis, National Taipei University of Education, Taipei City 2009, Taiwan.

[17] N.M. Doerr, *Damp rooms and saying 'please': Mimesis and alterity in the host family space in study-abroad experiences*, "Anthropological Forum" (2013) 23(1), p. 58-78.

[18] S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

[19] Q. Chen, *A study on L2 Chinese learning of exchange students of Rotary Club in Taiwan*, Unpublished master's thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei City, Taiwan 2006.

[20] C. H. Yang, *A study of hosting foreigner students practice in the elementary school---Take a Taipei City Elementary School as an example*. Unpublished master's thesis, National

2.4. Training

Preparing to be a host family covers the three dimensions of eating, accommodation and activities on the weekend. During the exchange process, host families take the responsibility for exchange students, including the provision of meals, accommodation and family life, joining school activities, preparing lunch for school, driving them to and from school, and arranging activities on the weekend[21].

Training can enhance the interaction between students and host families. An informed commitment on the part of the host family has been observed to enhance communication between the host family and the exchange student[22]. However, the host family is not the only insight into native residents' life for students to learn about the host society's culture. Other dynamics within the host family also influence the study-abroad experience[23], which generally comprises the student, family and school - these three parts interconnect with each other[24].

Some research has shown that an interactive curriculum can help students prepare for the conversations with host families[25]. Other research has concluded that the main mission of a host family training workshop should include enhancing the hosting quality of the host family, gradually offering elementary and advanced curriculum, explaining cultural differences, and reducing the anxiety of the first time hosting[26]. All of the above-mentioned elements can be included in host family training.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research purpose and question

This is a preliminary study on student perceptions of host families of the Youth Exchange Program in Taiwan. The purpose of this study is to explore the opinions of what constitutes an ideal host family in order

Taipei University of Education, Taipei City 2009, Taiwan.

[21] C. H. Yang, *A study of hosting foreigner students practice in the elementary school---Take a Taipei City Elementary School as an example*. Unpublished master's thesis, National Taipei University of Education, Taipei City 2009, Taiwan.

[22] S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

[23] N.M. Doerr, *Damp rooms and saying 'please': Mimesis and alterity in the host family space in study-abroad experiences*, "Anthropological Forum" (2013) 23(1), p. 58-78.

[24] S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

[25] S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

[26] C. H. Yang, *A study of hosting foreigner students practice in the elementary school---Take a Taipei City Elementary School as an example*. Unpublished master's thesis, National Taipei University of Education, Taipei City 2009, Taiwan.

to better understand how students view the ideal host family. Based on this purpose, the research question of this study is: What would the ideal host family be like?

3.2. Research Method

As mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, because research about host families is lacking in both Taiwan and the world, a preliminary opinion survey is a suitable way in this study to create a basis of information.

On-line non-synchronous messaging was applied in this study as a way of conducting unstructured interviews. One reason for this is that it can overcome the limitations of time and space, with both the interviewer and respondents being able to cross national borders and time zones. This can also overcome the language barrier of oral expression and listening comprehension. Both interviewer and respondent can use clear English typing to communicate.

3.3. Participants

This study focused on long-term youth exchange in Taiwan. The long-term youth exchange program generally arranges an exchange period of 10 to 12 months and one host family every four months for an exchange student. In this way, students have the opportunity to live with several host families and thus have enough experience to share opinions about this research topic.

From a convenience sampling from the personal network of the researcher, 11 youth exchange students were enrolled as participants. They had

Table 1. Background of Participants

Code	Gender	Nationality	Age when exchanging	Age when replying mail
An	M	Hungary	17-18	21
Au	F	France	18-19	22
Be	M	Switzerland	18-19	22
Bo	F	America	15-16	17
De	F	Belgium	17-18	21
He	M	Germany	17-18	20
Jo	M	Canada	18-19	24
Ma	F	America	17-18	19
Mi	M	Mexico	16-17	18
Re	F	Hungary	17-18	19
St	F	America	17-18	20

participated in an exchange program to Taiwan before and had gone back to their countries. Five males and six females were included, and their nationalities were American, Belgian, Canadian, French, German, Hungarian, Mexican and Swiss. The detail background is as following.

3.4. Research tools

Two research tools were used in this study. The first was the researcher, who was an educator for exchange students for five years, twice a host family and an exchange member once. These experiences led to sensitive insights into host family issues.

The other tool was an unstructured interview opinion survey mail (See Appendix). On-line non-synchronous messaging was used to ask the exchange students to give opinions about what an ideal host family would be like. With an unstructured interview consisting of only one question, participants could respond freely, and as a result, a more diverse set and larger number of answers could be expected.

3.5. Research process

The entire research process was performed through the computer and on the internet. First, the researcher wrote an opinion survey in English to make it easier for exchange students to understand and express their thoughts.

Secondly, the researcher sent the mail to the exchange students by a message on the social networking site Facebook. A Facebook message will not make participants feel the survey was too formal, so it was felt that they could reply in a relaxed mood and in a convenient way. This encouraged exchange students to reply and express themselves more openly. The researcher also used this medium to inform the exchange students of the topic, purpose and question of this study.

Thirdly, the exchange students replied to the Facebook message with their opinions. Upon receiving the student's replies, the researcher conveyed her thanks and copied the message contents into a Microsoft Word document for analysis.

All of above took place between July to August, 2011. The researcher sent out the opinion survey mail on 15 July 2011. Many exchange students replied the next day, which indicates their high interest in the issue of host families. Only one participant replied later, at the beginning of August.

3.6. Analysis strategy

All analysis was based on the opinion replies of the survey mail text. All of the text was typed by the exchange students and they also included emotion icons and modals, so there was no difficulty of transferability.

Each of the exchange students was given a code in this study, in order to offer them anonymous protection. From the individual as a unit, the researcher picked the key meaningful words of the sentences and paragraphs. Then, the researcher abstracted them into concepts.

The researcher next used an ecological systems theory framework to categorize these concepts into a system with five levels: macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem and individual. Ecological systems theory is conceived as a set of nested structures, with each one inside the next. The center of the nested structure is the individual, which refers to the exchange student themselves. Surrounding the innermost level of the individual is the microsystem, which is the immediate setting that affects the individual, such as the home, school, and office. The next level, which is called the mesosystem, is the relations between the settings of the microsystem, such as the interaction between home and school, home and office. The third level, which is called the exosystem, is the settings in which the individual is not present, but the events occurring in that setting may affect the individual, such as the conditions of parental employment for young children, mass media, and governmental policy. The fourth level, which is called macrosystem, is the blueprint for all the above settings, such culture and values[27].
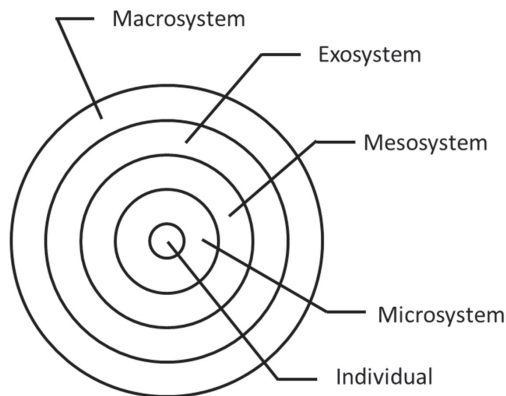

Figure 1. Concepts of ideal host family in ecological systems theory

By using an ecological systems theory framework, the researcher could categorize the students' opinions into different layers to form a holistic view of the host family issue. Due to the unmanageably large number of concepts at the microsystem level, similar concepts were clustered into

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[27] U. Bronfenbrenner, *The ecology of human development,* Cambridge 1979, MA: Harvard University Press.

topics. Refining the content of the opinion replies will be treated in following Discussion section. Researcher analyzed those refining materials carefully to keep more dependability.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Macrosystem level

At the macrosystem level, some macro phenomena were mentioned and can be divided into the topics of culture shock, norm concept and parenting customs.

4.1.1. Culture shock

Unsurprisingly, culture shock was mentioned by the exchange students, and it influenced the relationships between exchange students and host families.

*De: I unfortunately didn't get along very well with my host families, but I don't really know why. I guess it was the **culture shock***.

4.1.2. Norm concept

Culture shock may be present in different explanations of norms, especially regarding interpersonal interaction norms. The differences may be small, but may nonetheless easily lead to conflict, such as the concepts of respect or obedience.

*He: **Respect**, though, does not mean **obedience** only. Host families should know that most exchange students grow up to be more free than Taiwanese students at the same age.*

4.1.3. Parenting custom

Exchange students may have been treated differently in Taiwan than in their home country, which is a situation that was sometimes due to different parenting customs towards teenagers.

*He: Many exchange students are able to handle things successfully more **self-depending***.

*Mi: The host famliy have to understand that we know how to **organize ourselves,** they don't have to always be behind us asking for everything.*

4.2. Exosystem level

At the exosystem level, exchange students mentioned some good characteristics of the ideal host family and some characteristics of a not-so-ideal host family. Joining the family's interpersonal network was seen as a good characteristic, but a busy schedule with no time for the student, being unwilling to host, and rigid rules were seen as negative.

4.2.1. Host family's interpersonal network

Exchange students enjoyed connecting to the host family's interpersonal network, regardless of whether the exchange student was male or female.

St: *They got me **involved with** kids at school, with parts of their extended family, with their coworkers, with other Americans, with Rotary and with the community itself. Because of them I was **introduced to every network** they knew and it gave me lots of things to do and made me **feel included**.*

4.2.2. Host parents' time schedule

The exchange students mentioned that the host families were busy. This was considered as acceptable in the later stages of an exchange, but not good at the beginning to the middle stages of the exchange.

Jo: *If both the parents are very **busy**, then they will have less time to help the exchange student adjust to their surroundings. This is probably fine in the later stages of an exchange, when the student is more independent. But in the beginning to middle stages, it is probably not ideal.*

4.2.3. Host parents' host intention

Busyness might be an objective limitation, but unwillingness is a more subjective restriction. The exchange students could feel it and it was not pleasant to live with.

He: *A host family should be **a host** family because they **really want to** be one. They should not be a host family just to be able to send their own child abroad. The base of a good interaction is a good start and if the family is **motivated and willing** to host someone, it will be easier for both parties to get along.*

4.3. Mesosystem level

At the mesosystem level, there were also good characteristics and bad ones for the ideal host family. Having children of the same age as the exchange students to help the host parents was perceived positively. The cooperation between the organization and the host families requires careful attention. Whether or not the host parents allowed the exchange students to hang out with friends was an issue for them.

4.3.1. Same age children to help host parents

The exchange students liked to have same age siblings in the host family, because they could also act as hosts when the host parents were busy.

Jo: *The family structure should probably have a child or children of similar age to the exchange student. This **takes pressure off the parents,***

*because the **host sibling** can help the exchange student e.g. introducing them to the culture, language, etc.*

4.3.2. Host parents and hanging out with friends

Exchange students wanted to explore this new life in a new country. This also included that sometimes they wanted to hang out with friends to party.

*Mi: We want to know about the culture, that **we want to party too**, ... **let us go out,** know the place and do stuff in the city, because that's the unique way we can fully and really know the culture, and in the end, that is the reason why we are in the new country.*

4.4. Microsystem level

At the microsystem level, five topics were mentioned. The most frequently mentioned topic by participants was affection, the second one was rule, then came entertainment, education, and last but not least was protection.

4.4.1. Affection
4.4.1.1. First impression

Exchange students described many impressions during the exchange process. In the very beginning, host families should make a good first impression which could soothe exchange students' feelings and make them relaxed.

*Mi: My first host family was excellent at that point, they made me feel that they care about me, and that I will be safe, all of these **just at the first impression**, because we have to remember that we as exchanges students, we are going to a unknown country, and to see that they all (the family) also makes you trust in them, and it is very important to have a good relationship between the host family and the hosted.*

4.4.1.2. Personality

The personality of the host family was mentioned several times by the exchange students. Host families should be easy going and friendly, and patience and understanding are essential characteristics. Furthermore, respect and trust in each other are quite important.

*An: The **friendliness** is the most important thing I think ... My 2nd host mom wasn't really friendly so it was not too cool :(*

*He: A host family should make clear that if the exchange student **respects** them, he will be respected as well….Talk to the exchange student and say: 'You are here as a guest and this is how you should behave. We host you voluntarily, so respect us. In exchange to the respect you give us, we will respect you and if we can trust you, than you can be more independent.'*

4.4.1.3. Similarity

Exchange students thought it was easy to interact with host families, when there were similar character members in the host family.

*Jo: The family structure should probably have a child or children of similar age to the exchange student. … Two people of **similar age** are likely to have more things in common.*

*Re: I think the best situation is when a host family's **habits, temper and opinions** on things are **similar to the student's**. …… Having something in common is necessary to maintain a good relationship i guess.*

4.4.1.4. Unfamiliarity

However, it was very difficult to live with new people in a new country. The host families needed to spend time with exchange students, which can make the students feel comfortable.

*Au: It is hard to live with **complete strangers from a different country**.… it is the host family's job to make the student **feel comfortable** by **spending time** with him.*

4.4.1.5. Care

Exchange students felt themselves being cared for when host families showed concern. The feeling of being cared for and receiving someone's concern makes the students feel valued. It is good for the development of the student's self-esteem.

Mi: For example if they are gonna pick you up at the airport, the family (or at least the most part of it) should go to the airport, so you, as hosted, can feel that you are going to a family, that is something formal, and that you are someone who they care about……my first host family was excellent at that point, they made me feel that they care about me, and that I will be safe, all of these just at the first impression…

*St: They asked me about my day after school… I **never felt unwanted or uncared for** and I also never felt trapped.*

4.4.1.6. Belong

Host families should try to include the exchange students as a part of the family. Host families could show them around in the house and allow them to use anything they want, give them things to do that made them feel included, etc.

*Mi: It is really nice when you arrive to the house and they make you **feel like you were in your own house**, by showing you the place and by telling you that you can use anything at anytime you want/need is something very important, it can be from the washroom, to the TV, from the phone to the fridge, it makes you feel that you are part of*

the family too and that you will always be **treated as one of the family**.

St: *It gave me lots of things to do and made me feel included. They never overcrowded me though, they let me have the space to reflect and absorb…. gave me enough chores to make me feel like part of the family but not a servant.*

Exchange students liked to be well taken care of and treated as a real child of the family, yet host families cannot expect them to behave like the real child of the family.

An: *I think an ideal host family should be like a real family, I mean they always have to **care about the host student as their own child**.*

Mi: *They have to respect that **we are NOT their own children** and that we need privacy and freedom to do our things.*

4.4.1.7. Communication

Talking was a good suggestion for communication given by exchange students. Just talking with someone could be very comforting for exchange students.

Au: ***Just talking** to him so the student and its host family can get to know each other.*

Bo: *My host sister **just kept telling** me over and over again, "It's okay." Having that reassurance helped me get through the really hard times where I could only understand a few words of the language or when I cried over being homesick.*

Talking to each other was considered essential when there was a problem or conflict. Likewise, listening to each other was also important. When the host families talked and listened to exchange students, and built up good channels of communication, then they could expect honesty from exchange students.

Be: *Everybody **talks with each other** when there is a **question or a problem**. Like that, mis understandings won't happen and they can all manage the time they live with each other =)*

St: *They **listened** when something was **bothering** me and adjusted accordingly.*

Re: *I think you can expect honesty from someone, only if you don't shut the door on him/her immediately when she/he wants to go out or asks for something.*

4.4.2. Rule

Exchange students, as teenagers, cared a lot about rules. It was felt that the rules should not be too strict, and that the rule should be appropriate for each of the host parents and exchange student by means of

a consensus. The age gap between the host parents and exchange students could create differences that make a consensus on rules become even more difficult.

Be: They **should not be too strict** with them…the host family is always a volunteer, so the exchange student should conform to the life in the host family and its country. Rules, which should be **established with common sense**, should be abided by the exchange student, even if it's not easy.

Jo: The parents should be old enough that they are mature adults, but if they are **too old they may have a slower-paced lifestyle** e.g. going to bed early, that the exchange student is not used to.

4.4.3. Entertainment

Exchange students really enjoyed being taken out for trips and traveling. They had a lot fun during these times.

St: They were pretty much the best family I could have asked for. …They even **took me on trips** that were beyond the requirements of a host family.

The exchange students also suggested that host families could arrange some common activities.

An: They should organize **common activities**… Like my host mother and I cooked a lot together and I went to meet with her friends **together** … you know :)

4.4.4. Education

Learning is one important topic between exchange students and host families. The host family is like a family - the most important unit of socialization for the individual and also the first school for a child. Exchange students expected that host families could teach them the local language.

Ma: I think a good host family should try to **teach them more Chinese and encourage them to speak it** around the house.

Whereas it was hoped that the exchange students could be taught Chinese, the students did not expect to practice speaking in English with them.

De: My other two families **just spoke English to me** because they found it interesting to practice it, but that wasn't the purpose of my exchange, which made it disappointing.

Exchange students also expected that host families could teach them about the basics of the local culture and laws.

Mi: To tell you also **what is legal and what is not,** I am not saying that the family have to read you the whole constitution, but it is important that they tell you the **basic stuff,** for example, …to do drugs, just for

saying some, and in other parts in the world it is illegal, so it is impor-
*tant to point it out. Also to say **what is not nice to do,** like in some*
parts in the world is not necessary to say thank you always, but in
*other parts it is a very important rule, so the little and **BASIC cultu-***
***ral** things that we have to know not to bother the people in the new*
country.(always just the basic, we don't want to know everything in
*the first day we arrive, **we want to discover the new culture too**).*

4.4.5. Protection

Exchange students enjoyed to be taken good care of by the host fami-
lies, which further intensified their positive feelings for the host family.

De: I did like my second host family a lot though. I think it's because they
***took very good care** of me.*

However, exchange students strongly emphasized that the host fami-
lies should not be over protective. They could often tell whether some-
thing was dangerous or safe, and they really wanted to be able to explore
by themselves.

Re: If they don't let you do tiny little things after bringing it up more than
*four times, such as going out and discovering the city, **because "it's***
***dangerous"** then it's pretty rough to get along.*

4.5. Individual level

At the individual level, the personality of exchange students was men-
tioned. The exchange students also explained about adaptation strategies
they used, such as being patient and understanding, abiding and com-
promising. Moreover, they even started to ponder some more profound
life lessons, such as reflecting and determination.

4.5.1. Personality

4.5.1.1. Shyness

Although exchange students, as teenagers, were enthusiastic about
the idea of traveling overseas alone, they may still have a shy personality.

Au: When I was with my host family, the hardest thing to do was to talk
*to them because **I was very shy**. It is hard to live with complete stran-*
gers from a different country.

4.5.1.2. Motivation

The motivation of exchange students decided their relationships with
the host families.

Be: I think there is not only one right solution how a host family should be.
It depends always on how the way of life of all the family members
*is, **how high the interest of the exchange student is** and how his*
behaviour might be.

4.5.2. Adaptation strategies

4.5.2.1. Patience and understanding

Exchange students mentioned strategies of patience and understanding. It took time, but it was only a question of time.

Bo: ***Understanding and patience both play such a huge factor in the host family/exchange student relationship***. *Adjusting to a new home, to a place where you can't understand one thing and nothing looks familiar takes time. Simply time. With time comes the need for patience. And that should come from both the exchange student and the host family.*

4.5.2.2. Abiding and compromising

Exchange students felt they needed to do the first step to adapt yet they still expected that their efforts would earn positive feedback from and interaction with the host families.

Be: *The host family is always a volunteer, so the exchange student should conform to the life in the host family and its country's rules, which should be established with common sense, **should be abided by the exchange student**, even if it's not easy.*

Re: *I tried to **make compromises** on several topics with several host parents, but none of them were open to them……*

4.5.3. Reflection

4.5.3.1. Keep Trying!

Exchange students learned from the everyday life of their host family, learning some deeper life lessons.

Bo: *The one thing that I learned on my exchange is this: every day will not be the greatest day you have ever lived (that wouldn't be natural, right?). But you just have to **keep on going**. **Keep trying** to talk with your host grandmother who knows as much Chinese as you do. And keep trying to make yourself eat the new food and visit the new places...*

4.6. Summary

This study uncovered several concepts related to the ideal host family. All of the findings were categorized into a system using the ecological systems theory framework that consists in the levels of macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem and individual. The following figure demonstrates the findings in terms of all concepts of an ideal host family through the ecological systems theory framework.

5. Conclusions and Implications

In the light of the interaction problems that happen between host families and exchange students, and, also, the lack of research about

Macrosystem
- Culture shock
- Norm concept
- Parenting custom

Exosystem
- Host family's interpersonal network
- Host parents' time schedule
- Host parents' host intention
- Rotary rule.

Mesosystem
- Same age children to help host parents
- Host family and Rotary cooperation
- Host parents and hanging out with friends

Microsystem
- Affection
- Rule
- Entertainment
- Education
- Protection

Individual
- Personality
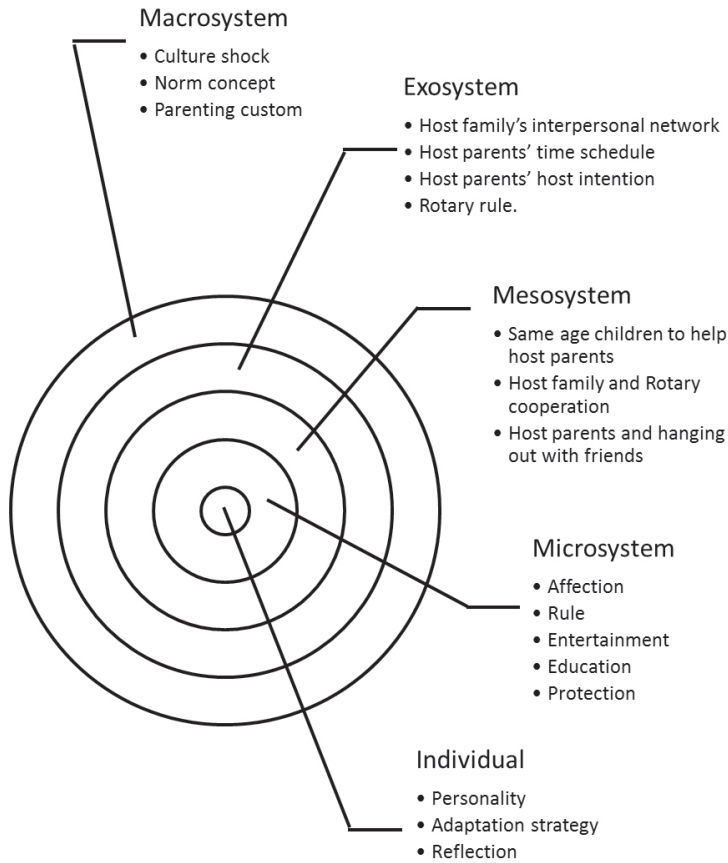- Adaptation strategy
- Reflection

Figure 2. Concepts of ideal host family in the ecological systems theory framework

host families, this study aimed to explore the opinions of what an ideal host family is by using an ecological systems theory framework to better understand students' perceptions of the ideal host family. The research question of this study was, therefore, 'What is the ideal host family like?' This study focused on long-term Youth Exchange students in Taiwan. The interview findings reveal a number of implications to improve the interaction between students and their host families in the future.

5.1. Conclusions

Several concepts of an ideal host family were found and categorized into the five levels of an ecological systems theory framework.

5.1.1. Macrosystem

The macrosystem level consisted of the three topics of culture shock, norm concept and parenting customs. Firstly, exchange students mentioned that culture shock also led to poor relationships with their host families. Secondly, different norm concepts between exchange students and host families created misunderstandings and unhappiness. Thirdly, parenting customs and expectations were also different between exchange students and host families, and conflicts between teenagers and parents may become even worse.

The macrosystem is the blueprint for all the lower level settings. The influence of the macrosystem is therefore omnipresent, but also deep and hidden. Seldom did the exchange students mention views on the ideal host family at the macrosystem level. However, this level remains a key point for an ideal host family. Exchange students and host families often held different worldviews. Different rules or different concepts of the same rule revealed differences between Taiwan and western society, even for words that seem very similar, such as respect. Host families and exchange students both need to reframe their view of culture, norms and customs, and become more sensitive about issues at the macrosystem level. Being more sensitive about culture, norms and customs is also the spirit of international exchange.

5.1.2. Exosystem

The exosystem level was related to the four topics of the host family's interpersonal networks, host parents' time schedule, host parents' host intention, and rules. Firstly, the exchange students really enjoyed being connected to their host families' interpersonal network, which made them become more deeply immersed in the native life network. Secondly, exchange students were displeased if their host families were too busy to spend time with them, and this was seen, in particular, as a barrier for the host families to help exchange students acclimatize in the beginning to middle stages of the exchange. Thirdly, host families should be sincerely willing to serve as hosts otherwise it is hard for exchange students to get along with host families. Fourth, organization set rules for the host families to follow, yet exchange students hoped there could be more flexibility for exchange students and hosting family to discuss and negotiate, at least some, of their own rules.

Although the exosystem is the setting in which the exchange students are not present, events occurring on that level may affect the individual. Issues at the exosystem level were not reachable by the exchange students. Therefore, the exchange program organizers have a huge responsibility to manage and supervise the quality of host families at the exosystem level in order to offer an ideal host family. As mentioned previously, other dynamics within the host family also influence study-

abroad experiences[28], so the student, family and school need to cooperate together[29].

5.1.3. Mesosystem

The mesosystem level was composed of three topics: the host family's same age teenage children can help the host parents, cooperation between the host families and organization, host parents and hanging out with friends. Firstly, the exchange students thought that it would be good if there were same age family members in the host family. Same aged children can help the host parents to look after the exchange students. Secondly, cooperation between the host families and organization needs wisdom, because it can either help or harm. Thirdly, whether t the host parents allowed exchange students to go out with friends was a very important issue for exchange students, who wanted to explore the life of the new country.

The mesosystem comprises the relations between the settings of the microsystem. Hence, it is about the interaction between the host teenagers and host parents, host families and organization, host parents and friends. Host families can benefit from this in some situations. For instance, the teenager hosts could help the host parents to better care for the exchange students. Yet in some situations, the host families could suffer from this 'in-betweenness'.

5.1.4. Microsystem

The microsystem level has the 5 topics of affection, rule, entertainment, education, and protection. Firstly, affection is related to the first impression when exchange students meet host families, the personality of host family members, similarity between host families and exchange students, unfamiliarity with the new surroundings, being cared for by the host families, the feeling of belonging to host family as a real member, communication to soothe negative feelings or to solve conflicts. Secondly, exchange students, as teenagers, were very sensitive to rules. Thirdly, besides learning, exchange students also need entertainment. Fourthly, it was perceived as important that the host families can help exchange students to learn the local language, culture and laws. Although the relevant literature has pointed out that exchange students are focused on learning the local language[30], the interviews of this study uncovered other

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[28] N.M. Doerr, *Damp rooms and saying 'please': Mimesis and alterity in the host family space in study-abroad experiences*, "Anthropological Forum" (2013) 23(1), p. 58-78.

[29] S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

[30] S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

topics which exchange students seem to be even more concerned about. Lastly, the protection offered by host families should be moderate, with too much or too little not being appreciated.

The microsystem is the immediate setting that affects the individual, and the host family was one of the settings which affected the exchange students mostly. The exchange students mentioned many points relating to the interactions with the host families at the microsystem level. All of these points related to the family functions[31]. Besides the functions of economy and religious function, five other family functions were described by the exchange students. Affection was related to the psychological function, rule was related to the political function, entertainment and education were directly categorized as two kinds of family functions, and protection was related to the biological function. This clearly shows that the topics in the microsystem were no different from those issues of a family. Even though there might be some issues specifically relating to hosting, such as being a part of the host family as a real member, the functions were mainly similar to family relationships, parenting and family management. Therefore, in the microsystem, the principles about being an ideal host family are the same as being an ideal biological family.

5.1.5. Individual

The individual level consisted of the three topics of personality, adaptation strategy, and reflection. For the first topic, the exchange students were introspective about their own personality traits, like shyness, which was seen as possibly influencing the interaction with the host families. Previous research has found that shyness can cause exchange students to neither speak nor participate much in activities with their host families[32]. Secondly, the exchange students demonstrated an effort to implement adaption strategies, like patience and understanding, abiding and compromising. Thirdly, exchange students could learn from the exchange and keep trying to improve the relationships with the host families.

The individual level refers to the exchange students themselves. They understood that they also shared the responsibility to make an ideal host family. Being a visitor to a new country was difficult at the beginning, but eventually it brought about the growth of the exchange students. They reflected about their weakness and could motivate themselves to keep trying. They also developed adaptation strategies. Exchange students going on this journey learned to be independent.

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[31] C. L. Zhu (1983), *Family function*, in: C.Y. Chang (ed.), *Chinese Encyclopedia Online: 1983 Collector's Edition*, http://ap6.pccu.edu.tw/Encyclopedia/data.asp?id=5393 (15.11.2015).

[32] S.M. Knight & B.C. Schmidt-Rinehart, *Exploring conditions to enhance student/host family interaction abroad*, "Foreign Language Annals" (2010) 43 (1), p. 64-79.

5.2. Implications

The research question guiding this research was 'What are the characteristics of an ideal host family?' Conclusions from the opinion survey interview, within the ecological system theory framework have several implications. Being an ideal host family requires not only the effort of the host family, but also depends on factors at every level of the ecological system.

In the macrosystem, both host family and exchange students regard culture, norms and customs as main factors which affect whether or not host families will be ideal. These factors are not only internal to the host families themselves, and both the host family and exchange student need to take responsibility to reframe the macrosystem and foster more sense of the macrosystem. Therefore, it is culture, norms and customs within the macrosystem that should be emphasized, and not simply focusing on the host families or exchange students, or their interactions, at the individual level. More training workshops focusing on culture, norms and customs at the macrosystem are required for both host families and exchange students. Furthermore, the key contents of culture, norms and customs as described in this study can serve as a reference for training program designers.

The exosystem contains resources that the exchange students cannot reach, or barriers that exchange students cannot change. However, the host families are the insiders of the exosystem, so they cannot clearly manage their problem. Therefore, the exchange program organizers play an important role as an outsider to manage the quality of host families, reminding them to lower the barriers and offer more resources to exchange students.

Within the mesosystem, cooperation and conflict between settings exist. Host families need the wisdom to balance the conflicts and facilitate the cooperation between settings, and although it is not easy, host families have to try. Host parents can lead the family interaction dynamic of host families[33]. Once the host families lead well with wisdom, an ideal host family is not far. Some group meetings for host families to share successful experiences of managing cooperation and conflicts between different ecosystem settings is recommended.

In the microsystem, almost all topics can be related to the functions of a biological family (except for belonging to host families as a real member). An ideal host family may mean that they are also not an ideal family in eyes of their real children. Because being an ideal host family is just a reflection of its reality as an ideal biological family, normal parenting

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[33] N.M. Doerr, *Damp rooms and saying 'please': Mimesis and alterity in the host family space in study-abroad experiences*, "Anthropological Forum" (2013) 23(1), p. 58-78.

education is essential here. Giving the host families parenting education, focused on microsystem issues, can both benefit the exchange students and real biological children. This could also be helpful for host families to diminish the daily hassles and friction with exchange students. In this way, good long-term relationships between host families and exchange students can be expected.

Last but not least, at the individual level, this study's findings showed that exchange students understood that they also have a responsibility contribute to the realization of an ideal host family. Host parents should be made to understand this. When host families understand exchange students more, host families may have more tolerance and encouragement about the responsibility of being mature toward exchange students. This is the start of a virtuous circle.

5.3. Contributions

First, this study focused on what an ideal host family would be like because of the obvious lack of research about host families, not only in Taiwan but in the world. A number of key factors were brought to light in this study.

Second, the researcher focused on the exchange student's perception of the ideal host family which offered a brand new vision on host family issue especially in Asia, in Taiwan.

Third, by using an ecological systems theory framework, the factors related to the ideal host family were analyzed in more detail and thus offered a better understanding. Categorizing the factors of an ideal family into an organized concept structure also makes it easier to apply the ideas in practice or for training programs. For instance, a training workshop can focus on culture, norms and customs from the macrosystem, managing quality of host families from the exosystem, sharing experiences in group meetings from the mesosystem, giving host families parenting education from the microsystem, and encouraging exchange students' responsibility and expanding the host parents' understanding from the individual level.

5.4. Limitations

This study used convenience sampling from the personal network of the researcher by an on-line non-synchronous message written in English as an unstructured interview. However, no Asian exchange students answered this message. The reason of this situation might be that the message was written in English, and it was easier for exchange students from the American or European continent to express their opinions in English. Future research should invite more Asian exchange students to share their opinions.

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Appendix: Unstructured interview opinion survey mail

Hi~ (exchange student's name):

Long time no see! How have you been recently?

I am still a student of family study.

If you have some opinions about what an ideal host family should look like, please tell me, because recently I am doing a research about "the host family interaction relationship".

I have wanted to write an essay about the "host family" for a long time.

The reason why I am interested about this topic is: I have had the experience of getting to know you.

I also hope I can help Taiwan's host families get better and better.

So… If you have some opinions, please share them with me.

You can help other exchange students to have a wonderful host family

Hope one day you can come to Taiwan again and we can meet again^^!!