

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Conformity Experiences in Acculturation to University

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explored the experiences of conformity in acculturation processes with students transitioning to university. The author completed interviews with 15 students (2 men and 13 women), ages 18-28, who were in their first year of study at the University of Calgary. Using phenomenological methodology, students' descriptions were categorized into themes that fit into a structure of internal factors, external factors, and outcome factors. Internal factors related to *school readiness, changing values, expectations, motivation, priorities, initiative, and feelings*. External factors related to *school helpfulness, social networking, school difficulties, social pressure, social support, family values, and workload*. Outcome factors related to *balance, feelings resulting from experiences, social influence conflict resolution, and hindsight*. The results were discussed with reference to theory on development and motivation and placed in the context of the literature. Implications for research, policy, and counselling practice were also provided.

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able to share this gift with other much deserving students, or his enthusiastic presence with those who were lucky enough to be close to his heart. It is my hope that his written works that remain are able to pass along his influence into the world, where not enough people have escaped the boundaries created through their typical socialization. As Dr. Nonnekes has had such a profound influence on me and even supported me through my education with token letters of reference, I do not feel that I have had the opportunity to express my gratitude enough.

DEDICATION

I am dedicating this thesis to my mother, who was the first in my family to attend college, and who encouraged me to pursue education and surpass even my own expectations. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to all of the great and inspirational teachers and professors who I have had the privilege of studying under, and who influenced my personal and professional development in magnificent ways.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of individuals attend postsecondary education, undergoing a significant transition that for many occurs within a critical period of identity development. This transition is further complicated by the often very different social expectations, norms, and values that universities place on students compared to what most experienced in high schools or in work environments. While these individuals are simultaneously exploring who they are and what they want to be and do in their future lives, they are confronted with the challenges of succeeding in this new environment and adjusting to university life. This study seeks to understand the experience of students regarding conformity and acculturation to university during their first year of undergraduate studies in order to inform resources and supports for this population.

Terminology

Acculturation and Culture

To define acculturation, it is important to understand the meaning of culture. In her article, *Critical psychology of acculturation: What do we study and how do we study it, when we investigate acculturation*, Chirkov (2009) critiqued the methodologies and definitions researchers used in their studies of acculturation. She argued that often in this research, the study of culture is lacking from the study of acculturation. For example, only one study in her review defined culture by comparing cultural values between the culture of origin and the destination culture, while most defined culture by ethnicity or nationality. While the location of a culture or identification with the culture may offer

some representation of a culture, it is entirely too vague to be a useful construct. Thus, for the purpose of this study, I define culture as the “shared ideas, norms and rules that constitute cultural reality and set up the normative meanings of various events and actions” (Chirkov, 2009, p. 99) of a particular group.

The concept of *socialization* recognizes the reflexive process of influence that culture has on the social development of individuals, who then contribute to the society as a whole (Roer, 2009). The study of individuals, then, can be reflective of the study of their culture. Yet units as small as a nuclear family can hold shared meanings, norms, and values that differ from other groups of individuals within the same society. Each individual incorporates aspects of their culture that they include in their identity, which Roer (2009) described can be explored through their self-narrative. Culture is integral to the identity development of individuals (McAdams & Olson, 2010; Roer, 2009), and then these individuals, developing within a particular culture, comprise a group that exists as the culture (Roer, 2009).

Acculturation is the adaptation of a group or an individual to the differences in cultures (i.e., their culture of origin and the destination culture), whether by accepting the differences as differences or by changing one’s values or meanings to coincide with those of the destination culture. Acculturation needs to be differentiated from *adaptation* here, as adaptation is a construct that is less restrictive and is simply an adjustment to new conditions; acculturation differs in the existence of the cultural component (Chirkov,

2009). Berry (1997) provided a model for describing how individuals may approach acculturation (see Table 1) that is frequently used in the literature.

Table 1

Four Approaches to Acculturation by Berry (1997)

Approach	Description
Assimilation	To maximize contact and participation in the new culture and minimizing the degree that one maintains their original culture.
Separation	To limiting contact and participation in the new culture so as to maximize culture maintenance.
Integration	Individuals hold on to aspects of their culture that they value, while they experience the new culture and chose aspects from it to integrate into their values and identity.
Marginalization	Occurs when individuals have no desire or ability to maintain their culture of origin or to experience or participate in the new culture. Often marginalization would result when individuals experience pressures from others of forced separation (i.e., segregation) or assimilation.

Weinreich (2009) described another important element that relates to identity development within the acculturation process: *enculturation*. Enculturation refers to the incorporation of aspects of culture into one's identity, whether originating from one's heritage culture, the mainstream culture, or subcultures (Weinreich, 2009). As discussed below, one's racial/ethnic identity, as is often formed during the identity development stage in emerging adulthood, is also important to consider in the acculturation process, especially if these processes overlap for the individual.

To Conform or Not to Conform

Taking on any of the approaches to acculturation requires making the choice to conform to aspects of the new culture or to not. For instance, the choice to take on the

shared meanings and values of the new culture requires conforming to specific norms and rules of the destination culture. Conformity to group norms is an adaptive approach to securing one's place in the group (Klick & Parisi, 2008; Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008). In some ways, it may be easier to conceptualize the approaches of acculturation by exploring micro-level experiences of individuals in terms of conformity.

While coming into contact with a new social situation or culture, individuals are confronted with the reality of their norms, values, and meanings. Even the presence of individuals from the new culture can be influential. The choice of whether to conform or to not occur in the face of social influence. *Social influence* is when an individual's behaviours, thoughts, and/or emotions are affected by perceived pressure from others. This perceived pressure can be that which actually occurs in reality, but also can be imagined by the individual (MacDonald, Nail, & Levy, 2004). The current paper uses *social influence* and *social pressure* interchangeably.

There are various ways of defining conformity found in the literature. For example, Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) broadly differentiate between conformity and compliance in their review of the literature. For the purposes of the current study, the *Social Response Context Model* (SRCM) by MacDonald et al. (2004) provides a thorough model from which to draw upon. They describe that the SRCM offers 16 possible responses to social influence, depending on the individual's private and public positions before exposure to the social influence and after. Due to the complexity and length of explanation of this model, the current paper does not discuss all of the responses in detail.

However, it is important to highlight some of the most common responses that may help in understanding the positions held by the participants in the current study. The approaches to social pressure that are useful in understanding aspects of this study are *congruence, conversion, compliance, independence, anticonformity* and *disinhibitory contagion* (see Table 2).

Table 2

Terms from the Social Response Context Model

Response Type	Response Approach	Description
Conformity		Types of social responses in which the individual has a public agreement following exposure to social influence.
	Congruence	Public and private agreement both before and after social influence exposure.
	Conversion	Public and private disagreement prior to influence, followed by public and private agreement post-influence.
	Compliance	Public and private disagreement prior to influence, followed by public agreement and private disagreement post-influence.
Non-Conformity		Disagreement both publicly and privately following exposure to social pressure.
	Anticonformity	Non-conformity following private and public disagreement with the pressure prior to exposure
	Independence	Non-conformity following previous agreement, or increased disagreement following previous disagreement.
Inhibited Desires	Disinhibitory contagion	Occurs when social influence alleviates an individual of inhibitions to publicly agree with something that they previously privately agreed with, but believed was not socially acceptable.

Note. A complete description of the social response context model is provided in MacDonald et al. (2004).

Transitions

Students acculturating to university are undergoing a life *transition*. They may be transitioning from high school to university, from work to university, from living with their parents to living on their own or in residence, and/or from one career path to another.

Transitions, as described by Bridges (2001), can be developmental or situational. A *developmental transition* occurs when one's psychological development outgrows the status quo and inspires a need for change. An example of this would be when an adolescent or young adult is moved to explore her identity and undergo the transition process led by the need for identity formation. Alternately, an individual may find that he is outgrowing a particular career path and then decide to return to university to pursue an alternate career.

A *situational transition* is when an external change prompts an internal adjustment (Bridges, 2001). For example, when a student leaves high school and enters university, he may experience changes within himself as a result of this experience. Situational changes are not always associated with transitions. For example, it is possible for one to move into a new home and not experience a transition. However, if this person is moving in with a boyfriend or girlfriend, this change may trigger a significant transition for them. Students in the current study may be undergoing one or both types of transitions during their adjustment to university.

Bridges (2001) described that transitions have three stages and that these may occur simultaneously and overlap: *endings*, the *neutral zone*, and *beginnings*. Often

grieving is characteristic of the *endings* stage, as this is when individuals experience letting go of the old. Individuals in the *neutral zone* stage are creative and exploratory in looking for what new they may wish to embrace; however, within this stage they may experience feelings of disenchantment, disorientation, and disidentification as well. Individuals in the *beginnings* stage look toward the future, identifying with a new way of being. Regardless of whether students are experiencing a situational transition or a developmental transition, they experience these three stages (Bridges, 2001).

Because individuals undergoing a transition can experience significant changes, both internal and external to themselves, they may need support from others in order to facilitate this process. Factors affecting the transition process, such as homesickness during the transition to university (e.g., Fisher & Hood, 1987), can be related to the grief that comes with the endings stage. Implications associated with the transition to university, such as those identified in the following chapter, may relate to the experiences of disorientation and disidentification that occur in the neutral zone. Feelings of anxiety are normal for individuals to experience during a transition (Bridges, 2001). Supports can help individuals draw out strengths by guiding individuals through these aspects of the transition and in looking toward the future.

Transitions to university and adulthood. Developmentally, individuals undergo various transitions throughout their lives – several theorists have identified important changes at particular ages and stages (e.g., Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson) – including the *transition to adulthood*. The transition to adulthood is viewed by

researchers and theorists “as an integral part of a biography that reflects the early experiences of youth and also that shapes later life” (Shanahan, 2000, p. 668). Research on current developmental trends indicate that there is greater variability in how individuals take on adult roles (Shanahan, 2000) and in what defines adulthood in this modern society, where the period of emerging adulthood often extends into the mid-twenties (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Research has identified differences amongst populations (e.g., culture and genders) on factors used to define one’s emergence into adulthood; for example, role markers, individualism, and norm compliance (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006; Donoghue & Stein, 2007; Rankin, & Kenyon, 2008).

Further, this developmental transition is one that often occurs simultaneously with the *transition to university*. This is a time when many students arrive at university, often from high school, or from working for one or two years following high school. However, the transition to adulthood may be complete prior to the transition to university, with the increase in adult students attending university (Hardin, 2008; Schaefer, 2010).

The Phenomenon of Interest

The majority of research on the transition to university tends to stem from concerns about student attrition and university reputation (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). For example, prompting a recent study at another Canadian university, Wintre and Bowers (2007) reported that a third of the students who had originally enrolled did not graduate and were no longer enrolled in the university 6 years later. However, an alternative perspective argues that this approach limits the focus

and understanding of the transition to university to that of the managerial perspective. A student focus requires consideration of students' needs and exploration of the student experience, which allows for a greater appreciation of their transition (Palmer et al., 2009).

Theory and research that explore students' experiences in the transition to university can be important for informing supports, resources, and even policy for students during this transition (Guiffrida, 2009). This study seeks to explore the experiences of students acculturating to university. Exploration of experiences of cultural adjustments within the university setting will add to the literature related to the transition to university and may be useful for better understanding the support that students need during their transition.

Acculturation literature suggests that while it can be important for adaptation purposes for individuals and groups to take on some mainstream values and follow the norms (Berry, 1997; Bogdan, 2005; Güngör, 2007; Roccas, Horenczyk, and Schwartz, 2000), it can also be important for them to not assimilate entirely and maintain valued aspects of their culture of origin (Berry, 1997; Güngör, 2007; Roccas et al., 2000). The question of whether to conform plays an important role in acculturation: it can influence how well individuals adapt and function in their new setting.

Students entering university experience unique pressures to conform, some depending on their stage of individual development (e.g., pressures related to being of legal age to drink), but others are universal for the student role (e.g., pressures to study,

achieve, and be successful). Some pressures can be more difficult for an individual to manage than others, and this may be related to the individual's values as well as the values and norms of those in the destination setting (Berry, 1997).

The Student Population

The student population is increasingly more diverse (Clark, Severy, & Sawyer, 2004), encompassing adolescents fresh out of high school, emerging adults returning to school after one or several years off, and those of various other age groups, cultures, and ranges of experience (e.g., those coming out of the work force, and perhaps those who remain in the work force while taking on this role, those who are single, those who continue to be a part of their parents' nuclear family, or those who have their own families). This population includes individuals identifying with various cultural groups, and within this, deriving from various life paths and experiences.

The transition of students to university often coincides with changes other than the occupational. Many students move away from their parents' home, many move into an independent living environment, and others into the university residence. Some are moving to a new city, often from a smaller city or town. While some students are adults returning to school and perhaps balancing work, school and family; a large proportion are undergoing the transition into adulthood. These changes bring the challenge of identity development, whether occupational identity or due to the developmental stage of many students. A change in cultural influence during this time – the influence of university life – is significant.

During the fall of 2009, when interviews were completed with the participants in this study, the University of Calgary welcomed about 6,600 new students. Approximately 3,600 of those students were first year undergraduates, making the university's total population about 29,000 (H. P. Weingarten, personal communication, September 8, 2009). Of those 3,600 students, 15 participated in interviews describing their experience conforming and acculturating to university for this study.

The Statement of Purpose and Research Question

The study of the psychology of acculturation typically has been limited to large groups of individuals of a particular race or country of origin, and often in the situation of relocation to a new country. The current study seeks to understand acculturation in perhaps an even more common circumstance; that of individuals entering their first year of university. In exploration of the current literature, this review found that while many acculturation studies seek to understand the ways in which individuals integrate into new environments, including into university, few have explored this phenomenon by asking participants about their experience of conformity within the acculturation process. The current study seeks to explore this phenomenon using qualitative methods to better understand what this experience is for this population in order to inform resources and supports to better assist students during this transition. This study explores the commonalities in experiences that occur among students during this process by asking the question, *What is the experience of first-year University of Calgary students conforming and acculturating to university life?*

Epoche

Beyond my own interest in the specific psychological phenomena, such as transitions, acculturation, and conformity, I have had personal experience with becoming a student in university and college. While I doubt that everyone that enters university identifies the experience as acculturation, I personally felt a significant culture shock at the event. This is despite the largely migratory existence I have experienced throughout my life, for which I tend to think I have developed exceptional skills in adjustment.

I definitely have strong feelings about adjustment and transitions, and although I like to think I have had enough experience to power through these times with skill, these feelings still and probably always will remain mixed. I have attended 15 different schools and moved every year or two my entire life. Some of the changes that resulted from or caused these moves brought major transitions, and all of them required adjustment.

I have developed an appreciation for skills in adaptation, and also for the power of life to throw one through a loop despite attempts to slide through smoothly. It was not until I began reading theories and literature on transitions that I was able to understand the process in an organized way; however, I imagine that it is common knowledge that transitions come with loss and a new beginning, and often a difficult time in between that requires adjustment.

One thing that my own transition into adulthood taught me was that this can be done and experienced in many different ways. Various rites of passage can be experienced at different times and at a different pace for one person than for another. I

suppose one reason I recognize this is because one common task for adolescents and those in early adulthood is to find their own unique identity. I cannot imagine that anyone had similar experiences to what I had during this time. Nonetheless, it is ironic to think that we all had similar developmental tasks that suggest that we will feel a strong need for others to understand us, for us to feel different from others, but also to somehow belong. For me, this was a time when I learned many lessons about social influence and choices, and what these meant with relation to my ongoing development of sense of self and personal values.

As a result of experiences in my own life, I expect that responses to social pressure are highly associated with one's priorities and values. However, I can appreciate the ability of social influence to manipulate which values and priorities are attended to at a given time. I believe that it is adaptive and likely common for individuals to align themselves with groups who have like values and priorities. It is also likely that members of these groups do not always have another member's interest at heart. For instance, it is the case that my best friend and I have similar priorities (e.g., school achievement, physical wellness, life balance); yet the timing of when either of us pursues each of these does not often sync up, and we end up working to convince each other of the value of doing specific activities in order to join in common ventures. I suppose it is less common that one experiences great conflict with social pressures that are in a direction dissimilar from one's values and priorities.

There are a couple important differences from my situation to that of students acculturating to postsecondary life at the University of Calgary. I was able to attend college in what, at that time, approximated my home town. It was a small city with one main college, and the class sizes were relatively small (e.g., 20-30 students, with introductory courses not exceeding 85 students). I was lucky in the sense that I had already adjusted to living in this town and living away from my parents. I had taken three years off after high school and set myself up with furniture and a small apartment. I imagine that having to adjust to more than just returning to school would be something else.

I did, however, have a new roommate move in at the beginning of September to help pay the rent after I quit working full time and had to take on my first student loan. I discovered within the first semester that there are some people you just cannot live with. That experience was the first of many throughout my education that had me reeling from stress about covering rent when the living situation did not work out. Something else that I was adjusting to while beginning college was the new relationship I had going at the time. I was balancing adjusting to this relationship, stressing about finances, learning to learn, and adjusting to my new life goals. Major themes that I can recall from this experience are life balance, expectations, confusion, shock, excitement, hardship, struggle, and empowerment.

Having moved so much throughout my life, I have had the privilege of experiencing a variety of cultures – all within Western Canada. Some of these cultures seem to have

little differences at first glance – for instance between communities in the same province – but then turn out to have major fundamental differences in core values and expectations for its members. One major example that I have experienced is between the cultures of those in college and of those where I worked in the job I performed for two years previous to attending college. I worked in a job that was labour intensive, required little or no education, but valued manual skill. This environment contained many individuals who were either fresh out of high school or who had immigrated to Canada (some of whom had education or skills that were not recognized by our government). During my time at this job I learned to speak in partial sentences, disregarding grammar, and had to re-examine interpersonal boundaries (i.e., because I was a young lady in a job that was traditionally male dominated).

When I initially entered college, I experienced culture shock. I was surprised by this because I assumed it would be easy to return to school as I was a strong student in high school and I had always enjoyed learning. Even so, I had to relearn how to speak in a manner appropriate for the educational environment, and again re-adjust my views on interpersonal boundaries.

I see college and university as similar in culture, with differences mainly related to size and prestige. The professors are very similar, and I found in my experience that most were very approachable in both settings. Nonetheless, I assume that having had smaller class sizes in both settings – because I entered university in the fourth year of my degree – helped this dynamic.

Important for me to recognize, as I have been a student for seven years now, is that I have many presuppositions about various aspects that go along with the role of a student. My experience has me assume that most often students experience financial struggle, that they are dream driven, and have high motivation to achieve. I suppose there are always exceptions, and I need to suspend my own idea of what a student is and what their experience is.

I believe that there are some values that can remain constant for many people, but that in general values are adjusted and changed as a result of experience. I also see priorities and values as moving together in this way. For instance, before I entered college, I valued hard work and my priorities related to that were to create a home for myself, to be financially stable, and to be free. In entering college, I still valued hard work, but I had to adjust what this meant. Hard work now meant that I study hard, work to understand new concepts, and work to reflect this learning back; working hard meant accumulation of knowledge, goal achievement (albeit this means a lot of delayed gratification), and dream fulfillment.

Because my priorities dictated that I was tied to a long-term goal, and that I had to shelf my comfort with financial stability and my plans for a continuing effort at creating a home, my values had to be adjusted as well. The biggest change to my values was that I had to place less importance on feeling free – which I could describe as similar to how a nomad or a gypsy would feel, the freedom that comes with having few commitments – so that I could pursue the dreams that I had just made a very long term commitment to. This

value I sort of had to put on hold; it is less important at the moment, because it will be more important to be doing what I want, and be free again, later when I have completed my education.

The above section details various preconceptions that I have brought into awareness and have worked to recognize and bracket throughout this investigation.

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

The aim of the methodology in this study is to obtain deep descriptions of students' experiences with the phenomenon, conformity and acculturation to university. A qualitative approach is appropriate for topics, such as the study of the psychology of acculturation, that are under-researched (Chirkov, 2009). This study follows Chirkov's (2009) recommendation that studies on acculturation be exploratory in nature in order to describe the culture and discover the meanings that individuals place on their experiences. Qualitative methodology allows the participants' voices to be heard by using the participants wording as much as possible. Also, this increases the fidelity of the results (Creswell, 2007).

Potential Significance and Practical Implications

As this study explores the experiences of students entering their first year at the University of Calgary, it will add to the literature that describes the experiences of students transitioning and acculturating to university. This study expands the focus in that it explores students' experiences of social pressure and their responses. As such, this study will inform resources and supports for students entering university, emphasizing the

need for consideration of cultural differences and social pressures in this transition. This knowledge can be applied in helper roles to work with individuals from this population, as well as to public policy related to education (Berry, 1997) and to school policy for students.

Further, duplication of aspects of this study, such as consideration of theories of transitions, personality development, and responses to social influence may benefit other studies on acculturation.

Organization of the Thesis

The following outlines the structure of the remainder of this paper:

Chapter 2: Critical review of literature relevant to the topic

Chapter 3: Methodological background and procedure for the study

Chapter 4: Resulting descriptions and examples from interviews that support the analysis

Chapter 5: Discussion of the results in the context of relevant literature, limitations, implications of the findings, and conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies combining conformity in acculturation research with students are rare. Consequently, this review introduces acculturation and conformity and then explores pertinent theory and literature on the transition to university, including literature related to the transition to adulthood and to returning adult students. Discussion of acculturation to university, cultural influences, and conformity are integrated throughout this review.

In following the recommendation made by Guiffrida (2009), this chapter reviews theories applicable to topics relevant to the current study (e.g., theories on personality development, including identity development). Subsequent to the theoretical conceptualization, review of the current literature on the respective topics will follow. Even though there is often significant overlap between theories and literature on the transition to university and on the transition to adulthood, this review explores these topics separately as it is not necessarily the case that students undergo these transitions simultaneously. The section on returning adult students will illuminate this point.

McAdams and colleagues (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006) and Guiffrida (2009) reviewed various theories that can be helpful in conceptualizing the transition to university during emerging adulthood. Guiffrida (2009) critiqued the current literature that focused on students undergoing this transition. In doing so, he established the importance of including developmental and motivational theories in research on this topic. In looking at the framework of personality development described by McAdams and colleagues (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006) and the

recommendations by Guiffrida (2009), various aspects of emerging adulthood are highlighted as important to consider when researching this population. For instance, emerging adulthood is characteristic of changes related to identity development, and these changes can be further complicated by ethnic/racial identity. Identity development is primarily reviewed in the section on the transition to adulthood, while theory regarding motivations and goals is reviewed in the section on the transition to university.

A summary synthesizes the topics discussed in this literature review, and then the final section highlights how the present study will provide a significant contribution to the literature and inform future research, practice, and policy.

Acculturation

The research looking at acculturation began in the 1880s, with the study of Polish settlers in the United States by Thomas and Znaniecki (as cited in Chirkov, 2009). This research has become increasingly important as the majority of societies in the world are progressively more diverse and mobile. Within these diverse societies, groups and individuals find themselves acculturating to various cultural groups and sub-groups.

The complexity of the acculturation process can be appreciated when one imagines the number of life roles each individual performs, the various settings and groups in which these roles are performed, and the various immediate regions that are important to each role. Further, consider that in each of these groups and settings, there are often subtle, but unique norms, rules, and values that individuals follow in their participation there. Thus, moving an individual or a group to a new location requires

adjustment to numerous aspects of life and culture. The acculturation of the group and of each individual are important to consider (Berry, 1997) as the response of each individual will likely differ, and this will in turn affect the overall acculturation of the group.

While the study of acculturation has progressed over the last century, Chirkov (2009) critiqued the field and made an important differentiation between the study of “immigrant adjustment” and the study of the psychology of acculturation. While much research has explored models and variables used to predict successful functioning, Chirkov reports that there are few studies that explore the culture and processes of acculturation.

As such, Chirkov (2009) suggested that this field remains new and argued that studies that do explore acculturation have prematurely moved into a logical positivism paradigm with quantitative studies that seek to verify laws and models of process. She cited, in review of the most recent literature (including 46 articles between 2001 and 2006), that few studies could be found that were exploratory (22.5%), rather than confirmatory, and that even fewer studies were descriptive in nature (one article).

Due to the complexity and the nature of the phenomenon of interest, Chirkov (2009) argued that research in this field should consider the values, norms, and rules that make up the culture of origin and the destination cultures. However, in her review, she found that along with one qualitative study with methods including an open-ended interview, only one other study performed a cultural analysis with which to extract variables. Thus, in following the recommendations of Chirkov, the current study looks at

the experiences of individuals during the process of acculturation to university, including their experience of cultural differences and of responding to these. The following section reviews the important role of conformity in the acculturation process.

Conformity in Acculturation

Socialization is the first experience of cultural adjustment and conformity. While children pretend to cook, to be mommy or daddy, to be a waiter or waitress, and to buy and sell items in their pretend stores, they are practicing various roles that society expects its participants to take on. This is socialization and cultural adjustment to the society that they are being integrated into as they develop. This process requires conformity to rules, norms, and expectations; and is inevitably adaptive for when individuals grow up to begin taking on these new roles. Young children are taught about the expectations of their culture, sometimes directly, but often through modelling. Pretend play is one way that a child tries out these values, roles, and norms, and in this way pretend play can be a “creative exercise in cultural conformity” (Bogdan, 2005, p. 192).

Numerous authors have written about the adaptive nature of conformity (e.g., Bogdan, 2005; Cartwright, 2009; Gungor, 2007; Klick & Parisi, 2008; Lakin, 2003; Renkema, Stapel, & van Yperen, 2008; Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008). Conforming to social norms, values, and beliefs is adaptive for an individual as it facilitates entrance into groups and maintenance of group status (Klick & Parisi, 2008; Lakin, 2003; Yamagishi et al., 2008) and is linked to motivations of belongingness (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008; Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Maguire, & McMillan, 2007). For instance, Yamagishi and colleagues

(2008) found that while studies have consistently found that the preference in the East Asian culture is toward conformity as “a default strategy to avoid accrual of negative reputation” (p. 579), the cultural differences in this behaviour disappeared “when the possibility for negative evaluations in a given situation was clearly defined” (p. 579). That is, regardless of culture, when individuals are aware of risks to their group status, they are more likely to conform.

Various factors that influence whether one conforms provide evidence for the idea that conformity is adaptive. For instance, positive mood has been found to increase the tendency to conform, while negative mood decreases it (Tong, Tan, Latheef, Selamat, & Tan, 2008). Also, individuals were found to be more likely to conform when their mortality is salient (Renkema et al., 2008). Findings such as this suggest that we have an adaptive and possibly instinctual reaction of whether to conform. Conformity, then, is a significant factor involved in adapting to cultural expectations, and is important in the process of acculturation.

Transition to University

Integrative Personality Theory

Situating the transition to university within the life course of an individual is useful for understanding students' experiences within the context of their lives. This chapter reviews an integrative framework of personality development (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006) and critiques its usefulness in lending perspective to this study. In following this foundation for theoretical examination, a similar review of Deci and Ryan's

(2008a) self-determination theory (SDT) explores the usefulness of this theory in understanding the motivations of students.

McAdams and colleagues (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006) provide a useful framework for integrating the major personality theories, describing that there are three perspectives on the study of personality in the literature: (a) the focus on *temperament* and/or *traits*, (b) attention to *characteristic adaptations*, and (c) looking at *self-narratives*. They describe these perspectives as providing explanation of three layers of personality that make up a whole individual. Traits are dimensions of personality that relate to consistencies in one's behaviour, thoughts, and feelings. Characteristic adaptations relate to "motives, goals, plans, strivings, strategies, values, virtues, schemas, and a range of other personality constructs that speak mainly to the motivational aspects of human life" (McAdams & Olson, 2010, p. 524). Self-narratives provide meaning and understanding for an individual of who he is due to life experiences (McAdams & Olson, 2010).

This theory has two additional principles that are important and useful for the current study. It posits that culture and evolution play important roles in the development of individuals, and influence traits, characteristic adaptations, and self-narratives. The impact of culture on traits may be less significant than other layers of personality, as traits have been shown to be relatively stable and that genetics account for a large portion of the variance in traits. Culture's influence on traits is primarily revealed in the way that traits are expressed in a given cultural setting (McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Characteristic adaptations are defined by their ability to allow individuals to adapt to cultural expectations (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Culture's impact on this facet of personality is evident in the way that goals are considered, where collectivist cultures may stress more avoidance type goals (e.g., to prevent what is not socially acceptable), while individualistic cultures may promote more approach type goals (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Further, motivations and goals, such as to grow up, complete one's education, obtain a career, get married, and have children, all within a specific time frame, are all ascribed by one's culture (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Importantly, McAdams and Pals (2006) highlight that individuals may, or may not, choose to conform to these cultural expectations. As such, characteristic adaptations are implicated in the current study.

Self-narratives are formed within the context the individual lives, and may be the most influenced by culture; this is demonstrated in the way that self-narratives say much about the context in which one lives (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006).

This framework is summarized by McAdams and Olson (2010):

For reasons that are cognitive, social, cultural, and existential, the person eventually becomes an author of his or her own life, constructing and living within a narrative identity that spells out who he or she was, is, and will be in time and culture. Stories are layered over goals, which are layered over traits. It is expected, nonetheless, that dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity should relate to each other in complex, meaningful, and perhaps predictable ways; for after all, this is all about the development of a whole person. (p. 14)

Literature on personality relative to motivation styles and traits are significant to the review of the transition to university, as they may relate to factors that affect

students' successful acculturation. For example, McAdams and Olson (2010) report that research in modern societies show that young adults typically have goals related to intimacy, relationships, education, and careers. Some of these goals may be the initial motivators for students furthering their education, while motivation styles may influence how students go about these goals. Deci and Ryan's (2008a) SDT (discussed below) is an example of a theory on motivation that would fit in the layer of characteristic adaptations.

While research has yet to build significant support for this integrative framework, one study by Sheldon and Hoon (2007) provides evidence to support the separate levels of this theory. Sheldon and Hoon recruited a convenience sample of 533 students from the University of Missouri (114 men and 192 women) and the National University of Singapore (133 men and 94 women; ages were not reported). Using hierarchical regression analysis, Sheldon and Hoon found incremental variability of each aspect of personality that cannot be accounted for by the others. In other words, each aspect of personality was found to be predictive of students' subjective well-being separate from the influence of the other factors, supporting a framework that integrates these aspects as separate constructs. Sheldon and Hoon suggested that this theory provides a useful framework for organizing and integrating theories of personality, and also for use with the diverse theories of subjective well-being. A limitation was that the internal consistency of 3 of the 12 scales used in the study did not exceed .69, meaning that these measures were only marginally reliable. Replication of this study may provide verification of these results.

This integrative personality theory is relatively new, and has received criticism from several personality theorists. For example, Wood and Joseph (2007) and Maddi (2007) questioned the ability of this theory to include and integrate all of the grand theories of personality. Wood and Joseph (2007) suggested that instead it allows for comparing theories that clearly have dissimilar foundations. McAdams (2007) agreed that while the framework is useful for integrating many of the best theories, many are not reconcilable, and thus their intention was not to create a framework that integrated all. Nonetheless, the framework is useful in providing conceptual clarity and in offering a model that can be empirically tested (Maddi, 2007).

Self-Determination Theory

One theory that relates to characteristic adaptations, and has been prominent in the literature for conceptualizing the success of university students, is Deci and Ryan's (2008a, 2008b) self-determination theory (SDT). SDT describes that the basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are associated with human motivation, development, and well-being. These basic needs are related to each other and are met within social contexts. Relationships that provide autonomous support increase positive outcomes by meeting the three basic needs.

In the context of university, SDT indicates that learning is facilitated when the push to learn comes from the interest in the task (*internal motivation*) rather than rewards that are given from outside the task (*external motivation*), resulting in greater autonomy and less external control. External controls such as rewards and punishment provide the least

motivation. SDT also differentiates between internally and externally focused goals. Internally focused goals fulfill the needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence more so than externally focused goals, and are associated with greater well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

While SDT posits that internal motivation provides for the greatest degree of autonomy, external motivation can be internalized, identified with, and integrated into one's values, resulting in gradually greater autonomy and motivation. Similar to this, positive feedback as an external reward can be motivating in that it meets the need for competence. It is an external reward that is internalized, and so long as it does not undermine the need for autonomy, it is motivating (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

Deci and Ryan (2000) describe the concept of external motivation in relation to conformity. Individuals can feel pressured by external motivations, and may comply despite internal beliefs being in conflict; this situation is one of external control rather than autonomy. Alternately, if individuals internalize, identify with, or have integrated the values related to the external pressure, congruence is greater, resulting in greater autonomy. They further describe the implications of this with respect to cultures that value conformity (e.g., collectivist cultures) over independence, and vice versa (e.g., individualistic cultures). For example, those from individualistic cultures may view conformity as more of a threat to their autonomy than those from collectivist cultures. However, this dynamic is made more complex through consideration of egalitarian versus hierarchical cultural values. Further, this dynamic has implications for identity integration

in development and acculturation. SDT suggests that egalitarian norms would be more easily internalized than hierarchical norms, because they would allow for greater autonomy.

With over 30 years of research, studies that validate this theory are extensive (Deci & Ryan, 2008b). Even so, this theory has received criticism for not accounting for cultural differences in needs (Guiffrida, 2009). However, Deci and Ryan (2008a, 2008b) maintain that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are universal and that evidence supports this.

For example, Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan's (2003) study explored influence of the need for autonomy on motivation in cultures that differ in their values of independence and individualism. They recruited 559 locally born students from universities in Russia ($n = 159$), Turkey ($n = 94$), Korea ($n = 111$), and the United States ($n = 195$), ages 18-44, in exchange for bonus credits or a small financial reward. They administered a survey including cultural orientation and behaviour measures. The authors analysed the data using means and covariance structure analyses to ensure comparability between samples, and multiple regression to determine main effects. Chirkov et al. found that their study differentiated autonomy from individualism and independence. Regardless of cultural differences in these values, autonomy was found to be associated with psychological well-being.

Chirkov et al. (2003) identified that as their sample was taken from university settings in each of these countries, their participants may have more of a global culture

than individuals in the general population of each country. Further, the study only tested participants from four countries. Further studies replicating these methods in other cultures will increase the generalizability of these results, demonstrating the universality of the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence as associated with motivation. In addition, studies exploring the causality in cross cultural contexts can verify the directionality of these associations.

In another study, Downie, Koestner, ElGeledi, and Cree (2004) applied SDT in exploring identity integration in acculturation in a multi-cultural Canadian setting at a Quebec university. They analysed data from 111 participants (48 men and 63 women, $M = 20.5$), 60% of whom were first generation immigrants. Participants were provided monetary compensation. Using multiple regression methods, Downie et al. replicated many of the findings of Chirkov et al. (2003). Further, they expanded their study and found that individuals from egalitarian cultures were more autonomous and competent with respect to those cultures, and were more likely to have an integrated multi-cultural identity. Having an integrated multi-cultural identity was associated with autonomy, competence in the form of environmental mastery, and relatedness in the form of positive relations with others. Thus, meeting the need for autonomy motivates identity integration, which predicts positive adjustment outcomes (Downie et al., 2004).

Evidence supporting this theory across cultural contexts is limited; however, the studies that do exist provide promising results. This theory is useful for the current study because it takes into account the dynamics of social interactions and is descriptive of

implications to motivation, including identity integration and well-being, thus making it useful in acculturation research. Further, this theory has been studied extensively with student populations (Guiffrida, 2009), which makes it compatible with the current study's population of participants.

Transition to University Literature

As described in the introduction chapter, a transition is an important life process. How this process is studied can have implications for the helpfulness of the results. In review of the literature on the transition to university, Palmer et al. (2009) critiqued the trend of most studies, regarding the transition to university, that focus on managing attrition and the university's reputation. They argued that this approach tends to ignore the students' experiences of the transition to university in favour of meeting the needs of the institution. Then, in their critique of the literature that explores the *student-side* of the transition experience, Palmer and colleagues suggested that researchers need to recognize the importance of transition theory; specifically, understanding the importance of the phenomenon that this thesis has defined as the *neutral zone*. It provides a lens for exploration of students' experiences and coping during the transition to university.

Palmer and colleagues (2009) explored the transition to university with specific interest in students' turning point experiences and feelings of belonging. They interviewed a convenience sample of 18 students (14 men and 4 women), ages 18-27, in their first year of study and employed thematic analysis methodology. The authors explored the relation between the *endings*, *neutral zone*, and *beginnings* (as described in

the introduction), using slightly different theory and terminology, by asking students about turning point experiences in their first year of university that led to them feeling a sense of membership in university life. Students in their study described that these turning points came from *feeling like an outsider*, not being able to *speak out*, being *shaken by surprise tests*, *a new appreciation of knowledge*, *rebuilding social ties*, *dawning of independence*, *a new girlfriend*, *prejudices of university*, and *diversity & ability to multitask*.

Students described coping with the turning points by *face saving*, feeling an *appreciation of diversity*, thinking of the *threat of dead end jobs*, having *someone to lean on*, *avoidance*, *lashing out*, *sleeping*, *relationships and friendships*, *tenacity*, and having familiar *objects*. The students described that these turning points were carried forward and used by having a *feeling of guilt* that motivated a shift in behaviour, having a *thirst for learning*, *developing character*, having a *happy-go-lucky attitude*, *(re)discovering maternal connections and roots and a sense of place and identity*. Palmer et al. (2009) described that placing these results in the context of a theory on transition helps for understanding students experiences.

The study by Palmer et al. (2009) provided insight into students' experience of the transition to university by providing a voice to students in the challenges they face with this experience and with respect to self-narratives and characteristic adaptations (i.e., their resilience in this process). However, this study was missing important aspects of personality. For instance, while the results highlighted the process of identity formation,

values and culture that are challenged during this transition were not discussed.

Characteristics identified in this student population were that of first or second generation students from middle or working class. It would be interesting to know what value/culture differences exist in this sample and whether there are differences in resulting experiences of the transition to university.

Research on the first year experience of students in post secondary education is extensive, stretching over the past 45 years. Harvey and colleagues (2006) provide a thorough review of over 750 publications over the prior 40 years. They identified four recurrent themes – several which reflect the managerial side of the inquiry as coinciding with the observation by Palmer et al. (2009):

1. Performance and retention, including predicting success, assessing performance, and withdrawal and retention.
2. Factors impacting on performance and persistence, including institutional, personal and external factors
3. Support for the first-year, including induction, adjustment and skill support.
4. Learning and teaching, including new techniques for first-year groups and first-year learning behaviour (Harvey et al., 2006, p. I).

Conclusions from their review indicate that “withdrawal is the result of a complex combination of student characteristics, external pressures and institution related factors” (Harvey et al., 2006, p. II). The paper describes that the primary theory found in the literature in the U.S. is the social and academic integration theory. This suggests that a

lack of social and academic integration results in withdrawal in the first year. However, Harvey and colleagues (2006) report that this model is criticized for being based on the white, middle class, residential college student experience. As such, there have been augmentations that incorporate cultural and capital components into the model.

Alternatively, the paper indicates that in the U.K., greater focus is on expectation and satisfaction with the quality of experience, and preparedness for first year of university (Harvey et al., 2006).

The following excerpt from the summary regarding student adjustment in first year is especially pertinent to the current study:

Research suggests that students need help in adapting to university life and becoming autonomous learners and that feeling positive and having a friendship group greatly aids social and emotional adjustment to higher education. It is also noted that students shift emphasis from one source of support to another as they progress through the year. Students adjust quicker if they learn the institutional “discourse” and feel they fit in. Integration, through supportive interaction with teachers, greatly enhances adjustment, as does access to learning resources and facilities. Some research has explored how different types of student adapt. Males and females adjust differently. Mature students often find adjustment difficult, especially when they are a tiny minority. Adjustment is a particular problem for students from local authority care. External influences, such as family and friendship groups (outside university) can impact significantly on adjustment in the first year. The difference between those who think about leaving but persist and those who leave appear to be motivational factors such as goal orientation and self-efficacy. (Harvey et al., 2006, pp. III-IV)

Harvey and colleagues (2006) described concerns in the literature about the university culture, to which students experience *culture shock* and then face “issues of assimilation and absorption of values” (p. VII). They argue that changes in the institutional organization and culture need to occur to take on more of a student focused approach.

Thus far, much effort has been placed on supporting students in assimilating to the university culture, rather than on improving the students' experiences of the university.

Harvey and colleagues (2006) cited two articles that specifically explored the transition to university with respect to culture:

Lawrence (2001) argued that the contemporary Australian university constitutes a new and unfamiliar culture for the increasing numbers and diversity of students accessing it. Adopting a postmodernist perspective she suggested that students can achieve familiarity with the 'multiple discourses' of university life, thereby facilitating their successful transition to university culture. Furthermore, academics also have a responsibility in this process, collaborating with students to help them access and negotiate the unfamiliar discourses. (p. 78)

And,

Paxton (2001) thought adjustment was a deeper problem and explored the ways in which students from different communities and cultural practices began the process of adjusting to the new discourses and cultures of the university... She pointed to the need to understand more about students' life histories and to conduct more detailed discussions with them around their written texts. (p. 78)

While the transition to university naturally involves adjustment on the part of the student to the university culture, focus on this does not necessarily meet the needs of all students. For example, adult students are less likely to benefit from this approach (Harvey et al., 2006; also see below for discussion regarding adult students). Harvey and colleagues (2006) argue for a more inclusive, rather than exclusive, university culture.

It is interesting that with all of this discussion regarding culture, few studies were cited that explored the acculturation of students to university. The following section provides a review of literature that expands the focus from the transition to university to include acculturation and provides comment on conformity.

Conformity in Acculturation to University Literature

In searching for literature on the topics relevant to this thesis, the following terms were used in the Summon library search tool, accessing all of the databases simultaneously: (acculturation or sociocultural change or ethnic identity change or sociocultural adaptation) and (university students or college students) and conformity. Limiting the search to peer reviewed articles published from 2001 to the present (i.e., 2011), the search resulted in 48 articles. Due to their lack in relevance to the study of conformity in acculturation with a student population, 19 articles were discarded. Content analysis on the remaining 29 articles revealed 10 themes according to the central concern/research question: Aspects of culture in acculturation processes (1 article), career decision making (2 articles), counselling implications (3 articles), cultural influence on behaviour (5 articles), degree of acculturation (1 article), education implications (2 articles), identity (9 articles), mental illness (1 article), sociocultural processes (3 articles), well-being (2 articles). The majority of articles discussed conformity as a value typical in a collectivist culture (18 articles) and many of these did not inform the current literature review.

The following are three studies that related to the topics of acculturation, conformity, and students. Although the following studies have the three elements of this search, only the last intentionally chose to explore acculturation and conformity experiences with students. The first, while using the term conformity, did not provide useful results regarding conformity, although culture and identity development were

implicated; the second intended to explore students acculturation experiences using a developmental perspective (similar to the current study), and conformity was discovered in the resulting descriptions; and the third intended to explore acculturated conformity with students.

Watson (2009) explored the association between racial identity and college adjustment. A convenience sample of 76 college students, most aged 18-24, were recruited and administered a survey testing their adaptation to college, and their racial identity attitude. Using simultaneous multiple regression analysis, Watson found that three of the four identity stages were related to college adjustment; however, the fourth, conformity, was not.

Watson's (2009) results provided evidence of the influence of culture and identity as important factors in the transition to post secondary education. However, the term conformity, as used in Watson's study, may inadvertently mislead readers into believing that conformity is not relevant to college adjustment. Taking a closer look, conformity in this measure represents the initial racial identity status of belief in the racial status quo. However, this stage is more in line with the term socialization, as this mindset develops early on before the individual is able or ready to evaluate their identity. While conformity occurs in socialization, it can also be argued to occur in the immersion-emersion stage and the internalization stage of racial identity development outlined in this study. Using Phinney's (1989; see below) term for the first stage of ethnic/racial identity in its place, this study would likely find *unexamined ethnic identity* to be not associated to college

adjustment instead of *conformity*. Confusions such as this demonstrate the usefulness of an open-ended interview to give the participants a voice regarding their experiences, regardless of the terms we superimpose on them.

Weiner-Levy (2008) used phenomenological narrative methodology to explore students' experiences. In review of relevant theory, she described ways in which the culture of university influences individuals' identities: "Academic studies constitute an encounter with knowledge, society, culture and practice that is critical to individual identity framing" (Weiner-Levy, 2008, p. 499).

Through purposive sampling, Weiner-Levy (2008) interviewed 34 Druze women, age 20-39, who were the first in their communities to obtain higher education. The author asked them about their experience as the first women in their communities to obtain higher education in Israeli universities. The major changes in these women were associated with interrelated facets, including *thought processes* and a *new self-awareness*. Thought processes were characteristic of asking *questions, challenging, and exercising analytic ability*. *New self-awareness* included a *desire for independence and equality*. Interestingly, the women described these changes as occurring by conforming to conceptions of individualism, a value in the university culture, which motivated them to consolidate and differentiate their identities from that of their family and community (Weiner-Levy, 2008).

While the methodology employed by this study limits generalization of results, Weiner-Levy (2008) posits that this study highlights the need for more research that

explores identity and cultural changes resulting from higher education. Findings in this study support the argument that university, whether through attainment of academic knowledge or participation in university life, promotes identity (re)formation. Further, these findings support the arguments in the current thesis that identity formation and acculturation to university require some conformity to cultural norms, beliefs, and values.

In their review of the literature, Levette-Jones and Lathlean (2008) cited previous exploratory studies that took place in the context of nursing students and their practicum placements. They describe a trend in the literature on nursing students of exploring belongingness and conformity to the placement culture. The authors described that historically nurses were expected to take on a role that required obedience, and that this may continue to influence the culture of nursing today.

As such, Levette-Jones and Lathlean (2008) explored nursing students' experiences of acculturated conformity. They recruited and interviewed a purposive sample of 18 third year nursing students, aged 20-47 from 2 universities in Australia ($n = 12$) and the United Kingdom ($n = 6$) and utilized thematic analysis methodology. These authors found that the following themes fit into a category of *conformity and compliance*: *Don't rock the boat*; *getting the RNs offside*; and *speaking up*. In instances where students felt insecure in their placement, they were more likely to conform even to poor practice behaviours, as directed by the RNs, that had potential to harm patients.

The study by Levette-Jones and Lathlean (2008) provides an example of student contexts in which there were strong norms that often required conformity to the culture

of the placement, but also to those in superior positions to the students. While it is possible that in the current study, these dynamics of conformity to cultural norms were less pronounced in the context of first year undergraduate study, these dynamics will be there non-the-less.

University Interventions

Programs and interventions to help university students in their transition have been studied in various ways (Ames et al., 2011; Harvey et al., 2006; Tieu, 2008). For instance, Tieu (2008) studied the efficacy of a transition to university program in regard to its affect on identity and university adjustment. Through random advertisement of the study, she recruited 148 students (56 men and 91 women) who were transitioning from high school to one of three universities in either Ontario, Canada, or North Carolina, United States. Students were either assigned to the control group ($n = 86$) or the intervention group ($n = 62$). Those in the intervention group participated in nine sessions of the transition to university program, and both groups completed questionnaires in August, November, and March. The questionnaires measured identity status, identity processing style, mechanisms of identity, self-esteem, stress, depression, loneliness, and university adjustment. Monetary compensation was provided for completion of the follow up questionnaires.

Tieu (2008) identified that sample size and story length were limitations to achieving sufficient power with the methodology used. She indicated that only 56 participants provided stories in the final administration of the questionnaires, and that

these stories tended to be shorter than those in previous research on narrative identity. Despite these limitations, the study provided some significant results.

Using repeated measures analysis of variance methods, Tieu (2008) found that the program significantly affected better university adjustment for women and higher scores on identity status for participants as compared to a control group. Participation in the transition to university program was related to the development of a sense of industry, which mediated the development of identity processing style. The second part of the study showed that the program influenced greater students' narrative exploration of the future and that this was associated with greater university adjustment (Tieu, 2008). This finding is important for those undergoing identity formation in their transition to adulthood (discussed below). However, it is likely that it applies to all students in the transition to university, as aspects of identity (e.g., occupational identity) may need to be adjusted for the majority of students.

As this study is an example of, the research on programs supporting students in first year suggest that these supportive activities benefit students (Harvey et al., 2006). Further, programs such as this that facilitate identity development may support students through aspects of the acculturation process as well. The discussion below provides more detail on identity development and acculturation to university.

Transition to Adulthood

Identity formation is the main psychosocial task in the transition to adulthood (Guiffrida, 2009), particularly with respect to authoring a narrative identity (McAdams &

Olson, 2010). In consideration of theories related to the transition to university, this section reviews the identity development theories of Erikson (1968), and of Marcia (1980), as well as the ethnic/racial theory of identity development by Phinney (1989). While identity development occurs especially during the transition to adulthood, it can be helpful to think about it occurring in general in the transition to university as well, especially with respect to occupational identity.

Theory

Similar to McAdams and Olson's (2010) description of characteristic adaptations, within the context of the transition to adulthood Shanahan (2000) described the importance of agency. *Agency* is the individual's ability to planfully involve himself or herself in relationships with others and institutions that correspond to his or her values, goals, and strengths.

In his review of the literature on the trends in the transition to adulthood, Shanahan (2000) found two important themes: (a) a trend toward condensing the accomplishment of life tasks in early adulthood, and (b) a tendency for individuals to accomplish these tasks in increasingly unique patterns. He described that agency, in combination with social organizational constraints and opportunities, influences the variability that individuals have in the transition to adulthood.

While this observation is primarily viewed through a sociological lens in this study, it has important implications for studies in the psychological realm involving emerging adults. For example, the expectation of young adults in society to accomplish so much in

a short time frame may create an increased experience of social pressure. Also, the diversity in timing in which individuals pursue certain goals, such as attending university, makes it unlikely that the process of transitioning to university is the same for all students; this is especially apparent in the situation of returning adult students.

Exploration of students' narratives that describe the timing of important life tasks can provide researchers with insight into what pressures these students experience due to these choices and to expectations they feel related to the timing of these activities. This research may also be interesting in respect to developmental changes of this population. According to McAdams and Olson (2010), the transition to adulthood is characterized by changes in life-narratives that suggest identity integration, personal growth, and psychosocial maturity. For instance, individuals' life-narratives become more complex and include more themes.

Erikson and Marcia. In his theory of identity development, Erikson (1968) based his conceptualization of the transition to adulthood on the premise that genetics and environment both influenced personality development, and that individuals must transition through stages of development. He believed that the stage that was important during the transition to adulthood was the identity formation stage, and that not successfully transitioning through this stage would result in *role confusion*. Religious and political beliefs, as well as occupational decisions are now central concerns. Erikson described that society provides emerging adults with opportunity to explore new values and beliefs, and that social relationships provide them with feedback in testing these out.

Marcia (1980) expanded Erikson's (1968) theory, to include other central concerns, such as gender role, sexual expression, and family/career conflict. He also categorized and operationalized dimensions of identity development that Erikson outlined. *Identity-confused* and *foreclosed* individuals have not had an identity crisis or explored their identity, and *foreclosed* individuals have prematurely committed to identity characteristics picked up through socialization. *Moratorium* individuals are in the process of exploring their identity. *Identity-achieved* individuals have transitioned through the previous dimensions and resolved their identity through integration of various identity characteristics.

Much research supports this theory; however, one of the more commonly cited limitations found is the age period ascribed to this stage of development (Guiffrida, 2009). While Marcia (1980) found this stage to primarily occur in adolescence, around age 18-21, numerous researchers now agree that identity development occurring in the transition to adulthood is often drawn out, and may occur until the late 20's and early 30's (e.g., Guiffrida, 2009; Shanahan, 2000).

Other criticisms of this theory is its applicability to various cultural groups. While Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1980) took into account typical environmental influences on individuals in the mainstream culture, some suggest that this theory underestimated the impact of culture on identity development (Guiffrida, 2009; Phinney, 1989). For the purposes of the current study, the impact of cultural identity development is important as it may influence one's acculturation to university.

Culture in identity development. McAdams and Olson (2010) describe that culture plays a significant role in identity and personality development. For instance, the way that individuals express particular personality traits can differ by culture. Also, during this period of development, individuals' increased ascription to social roles and cultural norms are reflected in decreases in neuroticism and increases in agreeableness, conscientiousness (McAdams & Olson, 2010), social dominance (a facet of extraversion), and emotional stability (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). McAdams and Olson (2010) describe how cultures influence the development of a self-narrative:

Culture may exert its most profound influences at the level of life narratives... Stories capture and elaborate metaphors and images that are especially resonant in a given culture... Identity choices are constrained and shaped by the unique circumstances of persons' social, political, and economic worlds; by their family backgrounds and educational experiences; and by their dispositional traits and characteristic motives, values, and goals. A person authors a narrative identity by selectively appropriating and personalizing the stories provided by culture. (p. 15)

Ethnic/racial theories of identity development, such as by Phinney (1989), bring attention to challenges in identity development that can be brought on by cultural influences. Phinney developed a model of ethnic/racial identity development that could be applied across different ethnicities and races. Influenced by theorists before her, she operationalized the following stages of racial identity development:

1. *Unexamined ethnic identity* is characterized by a lack of having explored identity related to ethnicity, and by holding either a pro-ethnic identity due to initial socialization, a preference for the dominant culture, or a lack of interest in defining one's identity by ethnic terms.

2. *Exploration* is characterized by an event that triggers an identity crisis, followed by evaluation and exploration of the ethnic identity.
3. *Achieved ethnic identity stage* is when the individual has accepted their racial identity.

In determining the evidence for this theory and applicability to research on the transition to university, Guiffrida (2009) reviewed literature related to ethnic identity and academic achievement. Beyond finding research that supports this theory, he also cited research that shows aspects of ethnic identity is linked to educational outcomes (e.g., greater social integration in university life, academic achievement).

While racial/ethnic identity development is a useful construct to consider in identity development, it is only one facet of identity. This theory does not provide for other important facets of identity (e.g., gender identity, sexual identity, occupational identity) that may be implicated in the process of acculturation to university. For the purposes of this thesis and due to limited space, other theories on aspects of identity are not reviewed. As such, Phinney's (1989) theory may provide a conceptual template for understanding the development of facets of identity in the absence of further review.

Transition to Adulthood Literature

Research has identified differences amongst cultures and genders on factors used to define one's emergence into adulthood. For example, belief in the importance of role transition markers that define adulthood has been found to be associated with more traditional or collectivist values (Rankin & Kenyon, 2008). Badger and colleagues (2006)

found that Chinese students tended to consider themselves adults more often than American students, and also to place more importance on *obligations toward others* in defining adulthood. Also, Donoghue and Stein (2007) found that females were more likely than males to believe individualism and norm compliance were indicators of adulthood, and that non-whites were more likely than whites to believe that role transitions were important indicators.

Cultural expectations regarding normative transitions may facilitate the transition to adulthood. For example, Bell and Lee (2008) found that during the transition to adulthood, normative transitions were not associated with high levels of stress, but that deviations from expectations were. Alternately, disadvantaged communities and families have an increased risk of transitions to adulthood occurring too early, which are associated with depressive symptoms (Wickrama, Merten, & Elder, 2005).

Both internal and external resources have been found to be helpful in the transition to adulthood for students. For instance, adults other than parents can be influential social resources in the adjustment of emerging adults following high school (Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010). Religious beliefs and practices affect emerging adults' self-esteem and self-perceptions (Barry & Nelson, 2008). Also, adaptive resources in emerging adulthood (i.e., planfulness/future motivation, autonomy, adult support, and coping skills) have been found to be associated with successful transitioning to adulthood, even for those who demonstrated a lack of these

resources prior to emerging adulthood, but then proved to be resilient (Masten et al., 2004).

Various studies have explored important aspects of identity development with university students. For instance, Bell, Wieling, and Watson (2007) explored the micro-processes of narrative identity development. They applied ontogenic and micro analysis of repeated interviews with 10 university students (6 women and 4 men), age 17-19 at age of entry, over a period of 2 years. They found that greater maintenance or change themes in the micro-process analysis reflected “a time of uncertainty, struggling, and questioning of existing meanings, and perhaps initial attempts to formulate new meanings” (Bell et al., 2007, p. 24). Also, Bell and colleagues found these to be linked to developmental change in emerging adults in their first two years of university.

This study showed that micro-processes can be useful indicators of developmental change. For the purposes of the current study, these findings are important as they suggest that themes of changing values, for example, may indicate the student is undergoing a developmental transition. In exploring transition theory and identity development together in relation to self-narratives, the current study may provide more insight into this.

In their study, Johnson and Nozick (2011) studied how first year students attain stable self-concept clarity and identity commitment, as previous research suggested that these are important factors contributing to greater well-being, perseverance, and effectiveness. They recruited 160 students (123 women, 37 men), aged 17-20, from a

Canadian university, who participated in exchange for course credit. Just over one third of the sample identified as a race other than Caucasian. Using multiple regression analysis, they found that self-concept clarity was facilitated by positive self-esteem, but hindered by the tendency to avoid planning and making life choices relevant to one's identity. They found identity commitment to be related to engaging in self-reflection and adhering to social norms. Johnson and Nozick described that these results are "consistent with the diversity of ways that identity is achieved and expressed in locating the individual within the ever-widening matrix of family, culture, and society" (p. 43).

While this study used methods that looked at associations and not causality, it is uncertain whether adhering to social norms is a result of identity commitment or whether it was a factor that facilitated identity commitment. These results coincide with those discussed in McAdams and Olson (2010; described above), who suggested that adhering to social norms is reflected in personality traits during this developmental stage. The discussion below describes the role of conformity in identity development for emerging adults acculturating to university.

Cultural Conformity in Identity Development

As discussed earlier, culture and socialization are important in identity formation. As such, conformity also plays a role in identity development (Armour, 2009; Asencio, 2011; Mahalik et al., 2005). Whether conforming to one group or another, individuals adopt values and beliefs from groups when forming their identity. Duck and Fortey (2003) explored adolescents' conforming behaviour with peers in relation to their needs for

distinctiveness and inclusion. When adolescents either had a high need for inclusion or perceived their peer group as distinctive, they were more conforming to their peer group (Duck & Fortey, 2003). This has implications for those individuals undergoing identity formation during the transition to university. Contact with new peer groups can mean influences from different sub-cultures holding a variety of norms, values and beliefs. Those with a high need for inclusion, and those who see these groups as distinctive may be more conforming in this new setting.

In addition to conformity influencing identity, identity can also influence conformity behaviour in return. For example, when individuals are primed to think about their independent selves, their conformity responses favour this aspect of their identity; however, when individuals' interdependent selves are primed, their conformity responses favour this part of their identity (Torelli, 2006). This suggests that priming independent versus interdependent identities in the transition to university may affect academic adjustment and/or acculturation in this setting, with conformity being a moderator.

The impact of culture's influence on an individual and the individual's responses within the culture suggests a complex interaction between culture, identity, conformity, and as a result, acculturation, taking place during the transition to university. This interaction is further complicated when conformity is considered as a value that someone may hold as a part of the individual's identity. For example, one commonly identified value found in Asian cultures, using a nationwide survey, was conformity to norms (Chung, Kim, & Abreu, 2004). Also, numerous acculturation studies describe conformity as a value

held in collective cultures (e.g., Chao & Otsuki-Clutter, 2011; Chung et al., 2004; Goldston et al., 2008; Gonzales et al., 2008; Hardin, Gupta, & Leong, 2010; Holleran & Waller, 2003).

Germán, Gonzales, and Dumka (2009) found that, for example, in the Mexican culture, internalized family values can be protective factors in preventing conformity to peer deviant behaviour. Also, conforming to traditional or religious cultural values have been found to be protective factors in preventing problem externalizing behaviours (Gonzales et al., 2008), and to be related to resilience in adolescents (Holleran & Waller, 2003).

However, in the process of acculturation, the impact of valuing conformity is not so straight forward. To explore this further, Roccas and colleagues (2000) recruited 100 students in Israel (almost half were men and half women), aged 17-28, who had emigrated from the former Soviet Union. In analysing correlations between the variables, they found that the degree that individuals valued conformity moderated the degree of subjective well-being they felt when integrating into a new culture. These students tended to perceive that the dominant culture expected them to assimilate more than they themselves were ready too. Further, for the students who valued conformity, this discrepancy affected their well-being. Thus, the more importance individuals placed on conformity, the poorer their well-being when they perceived a large discrepancy between their own and the dominant culture's attitudes toward assimilation (Roccas et al., 2000).

Unfortunately, the authors did not indicate what methods they used in analysing the results. Further, their measure of conformity values offered marginal internal

consistency and only two of the six scales measuring acculturation attitudes exceeded marginal internal consistency. While this study seems to provide useful information on the impact of conformity values in the acculturation process for students, replication of the results with measures that provide evidence of cohesive constructs is necessary.

Kurman, Eshel, and Sbeit (2005) performed a similar study with measures that provided at least moderate internal consistency, and replicated some of their results; unfortunately, they did not include a measure of conformity values. They also did not calculate the effect of the discrepancy between the perceived attitude of the majority culture and the participants' acculturation attitude.

Even so, if the results by Roccas et al. (2000) are valid, it may suggest that students acculturating to university who value conformity may experience lower well-being if they perceive that they are expected to assimilate to the university culture and yet they are not able or willing to do so. This may have implications for adult students, for instance, who maintain a significant portion of their life roles outside the university (see below). These results bring up the question about how this and other discrepancies influence students acculturating to university (e.g., compatibility between old and new identities; Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Hassam, 2009), and also how other factors related to identity are associated (e.g., a high need for affiliation or for distinctiveness) in addition to valuing conformity more or less.

Adult Students

Theory

Mature adult students, defined here as age 25 and over, generally have completed the identity development phase. Identity development, however, does continue throughout one's lifespan (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Adult students experience less identity restructuring compared to younger students. However, adult students may encounter challenges in assimilating new aspects of their occupational identity, including their new identity as a student. The transition to university for adult students includes the aspects of transition described above, such as letting go of previous career paths or lifestyles (whether temporarily while in school, or permanently), exploring and trying on various occupational identity options while experiencing uncertainty, and looking forward to new beginnings.

In the past, the return to education later in the life course was thought of as a deviation from the norm, where education completion was once thought of as a marker indicating emergence into adulthood. However, current trends indicate that returning to education has become increasingly common (Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007). For example, students 25 and over made up 42% of students enrolled in degree granting institutions in the US in 2009, and growth in this population in these institutions is expected to continue to be higher than the growth in the population of students under age 25 in these institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In Canada, students age 25 and over made up 35% of the student population in universities, in 2007, and 31% in colleges, in 2006 (Dale, 2010).

In consideration of this trend, Hostetler and colleagues (2007) described that the return to education should instead be thought of from a life course perspective. This perspective looks at the return to education in the context of current motivations, past decisions, as well as constraints and resources that include career, the self, and family. The timing and sequencing of past events influences future events in the life course.

This perspective takes on the assumption that constraints, resources, and motivations exist in the context of culture, which influences factors such as age and gender. For instance, strong cultural norms that socialize women and men differently, men to uphold the breadwinner role and women to ensure the care of the children, impact their decisions, resources, and constraints in this endeavour. For example, men are more likely to describe a self-conscious, self-focused narrative of personal transformation in their decision to return to school. Alternatively, women's narratives emphasize more family and relationships as factors in their return to school (Hostetler et al., 2007). In exploring this theory, Hostetler and colleagues (2007) found that early marriage and the availability of childcare were found to be significant factors influencing women's return to work, but not men's.

Other social factors influencing adults return to school relate to the changes in the workforce and economic trends:

Today's changing and unpredictable economy appears to be reshaping the career strategies of younger men in particular, some of whom are deciding to return to school. As further indication of these changes, individuals with bachelor's degrees were no less likely to be currently enrolled than those who lacked this credential, which suggests the importance of continuing human capital development,

irrespective of education level, in the current economic climate. (Hostetler et al., 2007, p. 100)

Literature on Adult Students

Given the above perspective, challenges have been found regarding the individual-institution fit – such as feelings of belonging as a student and the need for assimilation from the university – for adult students (Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005; Hardin, 2008; Hostetler et al., 2007; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). These concerns are reflected in retention, as adult students are the most likely to drop out in the first year of study (Hardin, 2008). The circumstances surrounding the lives of adult students – such as living at home, family commitments/social life with one's children and/or spouse, full-time or part-time work commitments, etcetera – often leaves these students with little motivation, or belief in the feasibility, to fully integrate themselves in the university community (Christie et al., 2005). With this challenge, adult students have identified that they perceived university rules and procedures to undermine their sense of belonging and identity as students (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). However, the discourse from the university often positions these students as deficient in their unwillingness to adopt a student identity, lacking preparedness, and lacking understanding of the university structure (Christie et al., 2005). The study by Christie and colleagues (2005) shows:

A much more complex picture of the relationship between these students and their universities, where the definition of what it means to be a student and the desirability of becoming immersed in the university environment is consciously considered and weighed up... In many instances there is a conscious rejection of the assumed norms of a middle-class student life and a clear sense that they should have a right to establish a different way of being a student in the 21st

century – and that the institution should provide more support for them to do this. (p. 23)

Adult students' needs – particularly of having their approach and way of being a student considered as valid – were often found to be unrecognized and unmet (Christie et al., 2005). These concerns lead the issue of greater isolation and a lack of support for adult students who need at least as much support as younger students (Christie et al., 2005; Hardin, 2008; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Adult students often have much to balance and, even with efficient time management skills, this disconnect from university community supports leaves them vulnerable (Christie et al., 2005).

In addition to the institutional and situational barriers, adult students may experience psychological and educational barriers. For instance, students undergoing the transition to university often go through an identity crisis (Hardin, 2008). Also, students that have had little experience with post secondary will likely need to learn about the higher education process. This issue is further complicated if students need to upgrade or learn study skills that they have not needed in their previous occupations (Schaefer, 2010).

Along with the challenges that often surface, adult students demonstrate many strengths. Their lifestyle and need for “success in spite of the institution” (Christie et al., 2005, p. 25) drives adult students away from irresponsible student behaviour (Christie et al., 2005). Being an adult student has been associated with perceived mastery (Hostetler et al., 2007). Adult students expect to take responsibility for their decisions, and so are self-directed. Professors have often described adult students as more committed, eager,

and motivated, which encourages faculty to be enthusiastic about teaching these students. In turn adult students learn best with teachers that take on the role of facilitator (Hardin, 2008).

Given this, adult students likely have challenges that differ from younger students in their acculturation to university. For instance, as the literature above suggests adult students may have a higher need for autonomy in learning (Hardin, 2008) and in decision making (Chao & Otsuki-Clutter, 2011) than younger students. As such, they may be more sensitive to pressures from faculty and staff, and may be more likely to experience these as undermining their autonomy.

SDT suggests that if adult students experience the university as egalitarian, this can facilitate integration of their student identity; however, universities are generally set up with a hierarchical structure, and while this can undermine the autonomy of any student, adult students may be particularly vulnerable. The pressure from home to remain primarily external to the university, and the pressure felt from hierarchical structures in the university, may encourage these students to be less conforming. Thus, these social constraints, and likely others, can influence separateness in acculturation to university for adult students, preventing them from being motivated to integrate fully into university culture.

Acculturation research shows that those who separate and as a result acculturate less, while they are more likely to have lower psychological well-being, are also less likely to seek professional help (Hamid, Simmonds, & Bowles, 2009). This coincides with the

finding that adult students may be less likely to access community supports in their transition to university, even though they often have greater complex situational, institutional, psychological, and educational concerns (Hardin, 2008). The similarities in research on the different topics of acculturation and the transition to university reveal important possible influences on students in their experience of transitioning and acculturating to university, and highlight the need for more research that includes these variables together.

Summary

Studies combining conformity in acculturation research with students are rare. The literature reviewed in this chapter outlines the importance of conformity as a factor in various aspects of acculturation to university, such as with identity development and meeting social expectations. While much literature describes the importance of identity development and acculturation on positive outcomes for students, few studies have explored the influence of conformity in acculturation processes.

The reviewed literature suggests that well-being may be affected for students that hold conformity to norms as a value if they perceive expectations to conform as requiring a loss of their heritage cultural identity. Perceptions of conformity as undermining students' autonomy may be associated with a lack of motivation to integrate, and this dynamic is worsened by hierarchical structures in universities that also undermine autonomy. Thus, challenges can arise from university cultures that lack flexibility in

allowing for a diversity of ways of being in the student role, as this pressures students toward assimilation into the traditional role of a student.

Alternately, conformity as it plays a role in identity integration and the student meeting social expectations can be adaptive and is required for success as a student. Student roles are multifaceted and most often are not limited to academic expectations. The current study is interested in what students experience in managing the various roles of being a student as they transition developmentally, socially, culturally, and occupationally in acculturating to university.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodology used in this study. Under two major sections, I describe the research design and the research procedure. The research design includes a brief description of phenomenology and my rationale for choosing it. The research procedure extends the description of this approach in a discussion of how it is applied to the current study, and also provides a description of methods for data collection and the data analysis process, including self-reflection, data reduction, quality of data, and ethical issues.

Research Design

Methodological Approach Rationale

The current study explores what individuals experience in acculturating to university and the role that conformity plays in this process. This exploration will lead to the creation of descriptions which will inform our understanding of the contextual and particularistic nature of this acculturation process and the meaning individuals ascribe to it relative to the role of conformity. The methodological design of this investigation stems from the research question: *What is the experience of first-year University of Calgary students conforming and acculturating to university life?* The methodology is determined by the question asked (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Turner, 2009). Asking “what” leads to the need for qualitative methods in order to produce a descriptive response (Creswell, 2007), and asking about “what” in terms of individuals’ experience leads to the

need for phenomenological methods in order to describe the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative research. Qualitative research is an interactive process between the researcher, co-researchers, the phenomena being investigated, and the world (in the sense that research is applied). This process is inductive – that is, it involves categorizing patterns and themes from the bottom up – and is used to investigate and describe the meaning that groups or individuals place on a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Turner, 2009); it does not impose predetermined categories on participants or analyse data using statistical treatment, as is the case with quantitative research, which relates more to deductive reasoning (Eckartsberg, 1998; Turner, 2009).

The experiences of the researcher, his/her worldview, and application of a theoretical approach are influential in qualitative research (e.g., interpretations/understanding of phenomena; Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). Because of this, qualitative methods of data collection are sensitive to the natural environment, the phenomena, and the possibility of influence (Creswell, 2007).

A variety of methodologies exist that are qualitative in nature (e.g., grounded theory, narrative, ethnographic, case study, and phenomenological; Creswell, 2007). However, a discussion of alternate methodologies is beyond the scope of this manuscript. The phenomenological method will now be discussed.

Introduction to phenomenological research. Hegel defined phenomenology as a scientific process of describing what one knows, perceives, and senses within their

consciousness of *lived experience* (Moustakas, 1994). Given that the aim of this study is to explore the meaning individuals place on the experience of the acculturation process and conformity within this process, a research paradigm that explores meaning of experience is needed. The phenomenological approach does just that; it attempts to ascertain the phenomenon or essence of that which is being studied (Burch, 1990; Creswell, 2007).

Explanation of the term *lived experience* can facilitate our understanding of the methodology of phenomenology:

Its lived quality is of the very essence of experience and in some vague average way is always already understood within experience itself. The fact that the term "lived experience" also sounds evaluative may be taken as a preliminary indication that from the full range of possible self-feeling, lived experience amounts to something distinctive, a class of significant or memorable events, whose true meaning (if we listen to the past participial tone of the adjective) is something we come to recognize in retrospect. (Burch, 1990, para. 15)

This paradigm requires reflection of lived experiences as a *unity of meaning*, as it is represented in conscious awareness, and conveyance of these understandings by those participating in the research. The researcher in turn attempts to gain full understanding of these experiences (Burch, 1990). The paradigm allows the researcher to explore similarities among several individuals' experiences and create a conceptualization of what the common essences of these experiences are. Within this conceptualization, the "what" is identified (Creswell, 2007). Thus, this paradigm allows for exploration of meaning with students about what the acculturation experience is for them, and what they experience with respect to pressures to conform.

Foundations of Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological methods of research were created out of the need to capture the meaningfulness of human experience – as understood through language, perception, and cognition – of which the full sense cannot be grasped using quantitative methods (Eckartsberg, 1998). These methods precede empirical, experimental, and statistical treatment of phenomena, and allow for exploration that lowers the risk of premature selection of categories and methods (Moustakas, 1994).

These methods formed out of the philosophical existential/phenomenological movement, which was influenced by those such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998). Ideas from these philosophical approaches were applied and further influenced by those such as Giorgi, Vaan Kaam, Eckartsberg, Moustakas, and van Manen (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990).

These philosophers and researchers spoke to differing elements of phenomenology that may be emphasized, and thus different approaches to phenomenological research were developed. For instance, van Manen adopted Heidegger's emphasis on hermeneutics and interpretation, while Moustakas emphasized Husserl's *epoche* and the need to transcend one's own experiences. Other elements from these conversations seem to be taken up by all and are common to the various phenomenological methodology approaches (e.g., phenomenological reduction, intentionality; Burch, 1990; Eckartsberg, 1998) lending to their common origin in Husserl's thought (Creswell, 2007).

Empirical phenomenology. Empirical Phenomenology (EP) stems from and extends the transcendental approach advanced by Husserl (Creswell, 2007; Eckertsberg, 1998) and has been modified significantly by Giorgi in creating a more contemporary and applicable approach (Moustakas, 1994). In this approach, focus is on creating a structure of meaning. This is done by obtaining thick descriptions whereby analysis can portray the *essences* of the phenomenological experience. These portrayals come from analysis of themes that are common among co-researcher accounts of the phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

EP utilizes methodology that places a focus on the participants' descriptions of experiences, allowing the essence of the phenomena to come through the data (Moustakas, 1994). This methodology calls for rigorous methods that include an attempt to save original wording in analysis, and a verification step in which co-researchers are asked to check that the general structures reflect their perception of experiences. This methodology is congruent with the aim of this study, holding a theoretical perspective which seeks to understand the meaning of acculturation from the participants' perspectives (I provide explication of these methods in the research procedure below).

Philosophical foundations. In a discussion of phenomenological methodology, it is important to acknowledge the existentialist philosophy embedded within it. As Luijpen (1969) notes, "after Kierkegaard's existentialism and Husserl's phenomenology had, as it were, fused together in the work of Heidegger... the new style of thinking uses... the idea of existence or, what may be considered synonymous with it, the idea of intentionality"

(p. 36). *Intentionality* relates to the experience and presupposed meaning of phenomena as occurring subjectively, whereby these phenomena become objects of consciousness, and *consciousness is intentional* (Burch, 1990; Eckartsberg, 1998). Thus, existence of phenomena, including one's self as object, is subjectively perceived and experienced, as one's consciousness is always oriented toward meaning, creating an authentic presence in situations (Eckartsberg, 1998).

Existentialist philosophy is concerned about the meaning of existence, as ascribed subjectively. Kierkegaard expressed that *truth* is subjective; thus, the existence of the truth of something cannot be proven or disproven as it is understood within the meaning of one's subjective consciousness (Oaklander, 1992). With existential philosophy underpinning phenomenological research, it is not necessary to try to prove or disprove, but to understand how individuals experience the phenomena and what the meaning is of the phenomena (i.e., their truth).

Existentialist philosophy complements phenomenological philosophy. Existentialism explores the context and living nature of the individual, and phenomenology explores the essence of conscious experience (Eckartsberg, 1998). Full understanding of the conscious experience requires consideration of the context; or in other words, seeing from one's perspective requires some sense of knowing where one is standing.

Humanism is also included as a philosophical underpinning to phenomenological methodology. It has its conceptual origins stemming from existentialist thought. This

philosophy guides an approach that focuses on human values and concerns. Generating questions within the phenomenological approach, then, is guided by humanistic ideals. Questions are posed with the intention of pursuing human knowledge that is of practical and personal importance, that can affect experiential understanding, and that can influence social change (Rogers, 1985). The current study follows these criteria, as is indicated in previous chapters; the question of what individuals experience in acculturating and what their experience is of various factors that influence this process for individuals – including conformity – is one of such practical and personal importance.

Theoretical foundations. In phenomenology, an individual's experience is "lived through directly and uniquely as one's own" (Burch, 1990, para. 5). Here, a foundational component of phenomenology is a constructivist approach. The constructivist approach reasons that each individual has his or her own world view or frame of reference, which influences how he or she understands the world. This understanding is socially constructed, and since each individual has unique influencing experiences in his or her social environment, his or her frame of reference would also be unique (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Brown (1996) outlines four assumptions of constructivist perspectives:

1. All aspects of the universe are interconnected; it is impossible to separate figure from ground, subject from object, people from their environments;
2. There are no absolutes; thus human functioning cannot be reduced to laws or principles, and cause and effect cannot be inferred;
3. Human behavior can only be understood in the context in which it occurs;

4. The subjective frame of reference of human beings is the only legitimate source of knowledge. Events occur outside human beings. As individuals understand their environments and participate in these events, they define themselves and their environments. (p. 10)

By using this approach, this study will call for experiential understanding of the individual's view of acculturation and conformity in the context of his/her life in order for there to be authenticity in the data. This and the philosophical underpinnings all lend to an approach that challenges researchers to recognize preconceived notions of the phenomenon in order to transcend personal bias and understand the phenomena from the interviewee's perspective. This method, *epoche*, is discussed further below.

Empirical Phenomenological (EP) Methods

Data reduction. Data analysis with EP methods involves six major steps (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Moustakas, 1994): (a) *Epoche*, (b) *horizontalization*, (c) creation of *clusters of meaning*, (d) illustration of *textural* and *structural descriptions*, and (e) description of the *essential, invariant structure*, and (f) meaning verification.

Epoche. Husserl's *Epoche* requires that a researcher come to knowledge without any possible doubt, and that in this endeavour it is important that the researcher eliminate suppositions (Moustakas, 1994). Just as Keirkegaard wrote that truth is subjective (Oaklander, 1992), Husserl believed that proof to back up genuine knowledge is internal (Moustakas, 1994). The use of phenomenological methodology precludes that the investigation is directed at subjective phenomena (i.e., the essence of experience). As

this approach seeks to describe common experience among co-researchers, the researchers themselves must realize that they too will likely have preconceived understandings based on their own experience with the phenomena (Eckartsberg, 1998) – this experience may even have motivated the research question itself (Creswell, 2007).

The methods of data collection and analysis require not only that the co-researchers provide the data, but that the researcher gain a deep understanding from the co-researchers perspectives to be able to facilitate the data in describing the essence of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). As such, it is the role of the researcher to work collaboratively with the co-researchers, establishing a non-judgemental relationship guided by genuine empathy (Eckartsberg, 1998; Patton, 2002). In order to establish this non-judgmental attitude, the researcher must explore his/her experiences and gain an awareness of preconceptions in order to *bracket* them. This awareness allows for reflexivity throughout the investigation (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Moustakas, 1994), and allows others who read the study to gain a sense of the researcher's perspective and how he/she understood the phenomena through co-researchers' experiences.

Horizontalization. Once the researcher has bracketed preconceptions and collected the data, the first step in analyzing this data is for the researcher to first review all of the participant descriptions and researcher notes. This is often done initially through transcribing, and is usually reviewed several times. The next step is to highlight significant

statements that relate to the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Clusters of meaning. The researcher, for the next step, groups these significant statements into categories of like meaning called invariant constituents. To be included as an invariant constituent, each meaning category is to be considered fundamental to the experience of the phenomena. The invariant constituents are then labelled from a psychological perspective and combined into clusters (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). These clusters are verified against the original interviews.

Textural and structural descriptions. Using key statements, the researcher writes descriptions of these categories that are inclusive of all the experiences and meanings that each category and cluster represents; these descriptions include contextual information (*textural description*), using the participants' terms whenever possible, as well as explanation of the influencing factors (*structural description*). The researcher arrives at these descriptions from the data from each co-researcher, and then integrates these to produce descriptions for the group as a whole (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Essential invariant structure. The researcher then uses these descriptions to identify the common underlying experience. This final description depicts the meaning and essence of the experience of the phenomena for the whole group of co-researchers (Creswell, 2007; Eckartsberg, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Meaning verification. The final step is to verify with each co-researcher whether the final description accurately expressed his/her experience. Thus, the co-researchers are provided the opportunity to adjust or clarify the description, and the researcher must include these amendments (Creswell, 2007).

Summary

In discussing the research design, I clarified the rationale for how empirical phenomenological methodology best fits the purposes of the current study. Using this methodology, I was able to gain a deep understanding and thick description of the essence of the experience of acculturating in the first-year of undergraduate studies to student life at the University of Calgary, and social influences on this process. In the next section, I detail the procedure that I used to implement the methods outlined above.

Research Procedure

Epoche: Preconceptions

Exploring my preconceptions on this topic was an ongoing process throughout this investigation. Initially, before beginning this investigation, I did two things. One, I thought of my own story of acculturating to postsecondary education, and my experience with conformity during this process. Two, I brainstormed my experiences and understandings that related to key aspects of this topic (e.g., adjustment, culture, transitions, social pressure, university, values, priorities). Following this initial exploration, I found that it was important for me to write my preconceptions down as they came up during data collection and analysis. I also made an attempt to limit further exposure to this topic by

performing the bulk of the literature review after completing the data analysis. This helped me maintain focus on the co-researchers perspectives without comparing them to the literature until afterward. The epoche was included in the introduction chapter of this thesis.

Participants

Table 3

Description of Participants

Participant	Age	Previous year's Occupation	Current living situation	Previous living situation
Diane	18	High School	With Parents, Calgary	With Parents, Calgary
Sally	26	Working	Family, Calgary	Family, Calgary
Liz	18	High School	University Residence	With Parents in Calgary
Richelle	28	Working	Family, Calgary	Family, Calgary
Lisa	18	High School	With Parents, Calgary	With Parents, Calgary
William	18	High School	University Residence	With Parents, Calgary
Jessica	18	High School	Independently, Calgary	With Parents, Outside Calgary
Valerie	19	Working	Independently, Calgary	Independently, Outside Calgary
Betty	18	High School	University Residence	With Parents, Outside Calgary
Alison	19	Working	Independently, Calgary	With Parents, Outside Calgary
Cindy	18	High School	With Parents, Calgary	With Parents, Calgary
Denise	18	High School	University Residence	With Parents, Outside Calgary
Jordan	18	High School	With Parents, Calgary	With Parents, Calgary
Candace	19	Working	Independently, Calgary	Independently, Outside Calgary
Jenna	19	Working	With Parents, Calgary	With Parents, Calgary

Note. Pseudo names provided.

Fifteen students in their first year of study at the University of Calgary were recruited using the Psychology Department Bonus Credit Research Participation System. Participants were awarded one credit toward one of their courses in return for the 30-60 minutes needed to complete the interview. See Table 3 (on the previous page) for participant characteristics.

Data Collection

A pilot study was performed using 5 students in their first year of study in graduate school. The questions were well understood and appropriately-prompted responses that related to the students' experiences acculturating to their program with respect to aspects of conformity. Analysis of the data revealed content rich descriptions, demonstrating the effectiveness of the data collection and analysis methods. Results inspired revision and refinement of the questions. Original questions, data, and results from the pilot study are not included in the current paper.

Data collection occurred in late November/early December, 2009, near the end of the first semester of the school year. This timeframe for data collection was intentionally chosen to ensure that the acculturation process was fresh and salient within the participants' awareness.

Polkinghorn (1989) recommended that between 5 and 25 participants be used in phenomenological studies (as cited in Creswell, 2007). Due to time constraints related to graduate program demands, a limit on the number of participants was set to 20 interviews. Saturation of themes, however, was reached after 15.

I performed in-depth, semi-structured interviews in collecting the data. Semi-structured interviews allow for collection of valid and reliable information as they provide room to clarify meanings (Vivar, 2007). Thus, through this interview process, I was able to ask clarification questions in order to ascertain that I obtain the most accurate understanding. The interviewees were asked all 13 questions:

1. What were you doing before you began your undergrad at the University of Calgary?
2. If I followed you through a typical day during this time, what would I see you doing?
3. What things were of highest priority in your life at this time?
4. What was it like for you adapting in your first year of study at the University of Calgary?
5. How did your priorities change once you became a student here?
6. What values were implicated and perhaps re-evaluated in this process?
7. What social pressures did you experience and were they in conflict?
8. How did you feel about these pressures when you first noticed them?
9. How did you resolve the conflict?
10. How do you feel about the situation now?
11. In considering your own values and experience, what would you recommend for students adapting to student life here?
12. In considering your experience adapting to life as a student at the University of Calgary, what can you tell me about the school's helpfulness with this process?
13. Is there anything you might expect they could do differently?

A question on conformity was also asked. Some different variations of this question were: "What is it about the way that you are that makes it easy to not conform?" "Tell me more about that experience of conformity." "When you feel these pressures, would you tend to agree or disagree with them?" I asked follow up questions related to interviewees' responses until it seemed that their experience had been thoroughly discussed. Following this, I asked participants if there was anything else that they wanted to add. The interview

ended when the participants' answered *no* to this question. These interviews were audio-taped and field notes were taken during interviews.

Procedure of Data Analysis

Audio-tapes were transcribed verbatim and field notes were added to the data for each participant. Data was analyzed using QSR's XSight 2 program, and then transferred to Microsoft Word computer software.

Horizontalization. In transcribing the interviews, I was able to immerse myself in the data. In addition, each time I took a significant break from the data analysis process, I once again reviewed all of the interviews before continuing, working to understand the meaning of statements from the interviewees' perspectives. Following transcription of the interviews, I imported the data into the XSight 2 program and proceeded to highlight key statements. I reviewed the data several times to ensure that all statements that were relevant to the phenomena under study were highlighted.

Clusters of meaning. Using the XSight 2 program, I copied the highlighted statements into emerging themes. These themes were then grouped under major headings that encompassed the meaning of groups of themes. The statements were reviewed and rearranged according to the theme in which they best fit. Within this process, I examined items under themes that were represented by few participants to determine if they could fit under existing themes that were more represented, and also re-examined themes to ensure that their meanings were unrelated enough that there was no redundancy between themes. All the while, reference was given to the original data

sources (i.e., the recorded and transcribed interviews) to ensure that I had appropriate understanding of the meaning that the interviewees intended. I then transferred the data to Word documents in preparation for the next step.

Textural and structural descriptions. In creating descriptions of the phenomena, I first isolated the meanings of statements from each interviewee and then integrated these isolated meanings with those of all the interviewees within each of the clusters of meaning. I removed repetition and ensured that all phenomena were represented in the descriptions. I further provided examples from the interviews to illustrate for the reader how the participants had described various phenomena.

Essential invariant structure. In order to ensure credibility within this process, I enlisted the help of my supervisor and an unbiased colleague. We sorted and resorted themes, continually referring to the essence of each theme to verify their meaning. Through collaborative exploration and discussion, we placed themes into like groups and identified a structure that best presented the themes. I then wrote up the description of this as it represents the underlying meaning and experiences of all of the co-researchers.

Meaning verification. I followed up with the participants through email to inquire about whether they agreed with the results. They were given the opportunity to make changes or adjust the descriptions to ensure that they accurately represented their experience. Participants were given six weeks to respond with these. Of the 15 participants, 0 responded with changes.

Enhancing the Quality of Data

Although qualitative investigations are not methodologically able to adhere to positivist standards of validity, such as experimental control and the ability to generalize as in quantitative methodologies, other methods for increasing the trustworthiness of the study exist (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Vivar, 2007). In the current investigation, various procedures were put in place throughout the investigation to ensure credibility of the data.

Researcher reflexivity. I worked to be reflexive throughout the study to ensure that any preconceived ideas that I hold do not influence the data to be less accurate. Within the interview, I checked for meaning and clarification, especially when I felt that the meaning I understood was close to my own reflection of the experience; this was to avoid biased interpretation. During the analysis, I checked the transcription against the audio recording to get a clear picture of the tone of voice, overt and general meanings, and underlying meanings, and checked this against my own understanding of what the participants experienced. In creating the essential invariant structure, I enlisted the help of my supervisor and an unbiased colleague to assist in creating an unbiased presentation of the experiences of all of the co-researchers.

Data collection. The interviewing approach is important in the data collection process. Collaboration within the interview allows participants to clarify meaning and correct misunderstanding. The interview process attempted to gain thick descriptions, as well, illustrating the context and elaborating on participants' experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Follow up verification. After analysis, findings were given to participants in order to check the accuracy of the descriptions (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000). This enabled triangulation to occur, where data was brought to each original source, verifying the accuracy with which the data was recorded, categorized, and made sense of; then, checked against information in the current literature on the subject; and brought to colleagues and professors external to the study to allow for pluralistic perspectives to be voiced. “A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollected by lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 27).

Employing consistent methodology. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through employing consistent methods of data collection and analysis, and providing transparent explanation of these methods – such as description of field notes taken during interviews and of how specific decisions related to analyses were made. All of these methods ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

I received approval from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board prior to performing interviews (See Appendix). In order to ensure that I followed ethical guidelines to *respect the dignity of participants and integrity in research*, I offered informed consent, discussed with the participants confidentiality, and performed the interview with respect and empathy for the participant and his/her experiences.

Informed consent. Informed consent was obtained from the students before each interview began (See Appendix), which explained confidentiality limitations, the risks and benefits of participation, and their ability to withdraw at anytime. In addition to providing the consent form to read and sign, I discussed with the participant an overview of what the study was about and answered any questions that the participant had.

Minimization of risk and offsetting harm. Although there is minimal risk that questions may be upsetting to participants, discussion of personal values, attitudes, and behaviours are requested. Thus, during the process of informed consent, the participants were provided a referral to the student counselling centre if they so needed. As discussed above, care was taken to respect the dignity of participants and integrity in research during the interview process as well.

Confidentiality and protection of privacy. The consent forms, which were the sole documents that contained identifying information for the participants, were kept separate from the data. They were informed that interviews would be identified by number in order to track notes, transcripts, and audio recordings. Only I had access to these forms throughout the investigation. During the informed consent process, I communicated to the participants that their identifying information would not be connected with the data but that I would retain this information in order to contact them following data analysis to provide them with the opportunity to review and verify the resulting description.

Storage and treatment of data. The signed consent forms and data collected (i.e., audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes) will be stored in separate locked drawers in

Dr. Kevin Alderson's office on campus for a period of 5 years, after which they will be destroyed.

Conclusion

In the chapters above I have provided a discussion of the problem, including relevant literature, and a discussion of the methodological position of this investigation, including the research design and procedure. The next chapter reveals the results obtained with these methods, including the emerging themes and descriptions of participant experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

While saturation of themes was achieved after 12 interviews, three additional interviews were completed as a cross check. These last interviewees did *not* introduce novel themes, adding support to the claim that saturation had been attained. Nonetheless, their explanations of their experience helped to deepen the pool of data from which the researcher could extract descriptions of themes. The researcher categorized and revised the data until the final results included 19 themes, one of which was deleted because less than 5 participants were represented in that category. Although 18 themes are represented in the final results, the contents of the themes fall on a continuum, allowing opposing statements to be represented in the same category, and allowing for a more concise presentation of results.

Figure 1 (found at the end of this chapter) presents the themes describing the experiences of first-year University of Calgary students conforming and acculturating to university life. This presentation of the themes demonstrates that in the process of conforming and acculturating to university life, students encountered various factors that affected their experience or were outcomes of their experience.

The researchers split these factors into internal and external influences, and found that each of the factors were described as being experienced as either having a positive/facilitative influence, or as having a negative/hindering influence. Interestingly, the label of whether these factors were facilitative or hindering depended on which goal

the student was looking to achieve at a given time. This was especially true for seemingly competing goals, such as maintaining a social life and passing classes.

Figure 1 illustrates that there were several themes that fell under the category of outcomes. The researchers found that these were also described as being sometimes more positive or other times more negative in nature, again depending on what goal the student was focusing on. Therefore, the researchers found that each internal and external factor fit on a continuum of positive or negative influence that affected outcomes, and each outcome factor fit on a continuum of positive versus negative outcomes.

Internal Factors

The internal factors the researchers identified were *school readiness, changing values, expectations, motivation, priorities, initiative, and feelings*. These are factors that the researchers identified as being internal to individuals, and related to their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

School Readiness

Many students talked about the benefits of taking time off versus continuing directly from high school to university. There were 6 students who did take time off ranging from one year to several, and there were 2 students who talked about taking the summer off as beneficial in providing them with a much needed break. Students described that taking time off allowed them to be more mentally prepared for university. The time to have experiences and grow up provides a changed perspective, or a greater focus on specific priorities that require the education, and on the priorities that focusing

on education requires. Not taking enough time off may take away from one's readiness to deal with the challenges that come with entering and continuing on with school.

However, some students identified that taking classes was also part of the process for them of knowing whether they would continue with their chosen field in university. Two students expressed concerns about high school not doing enough to prepare students for university and that, whether coming directly to university or taking time off, they were not ready for the amount of work or the requirements that university had of them.

One student who returned to school after several years discussed that taking time off can influence whether a student will be ready to make school a priority.

Mainly I took a bunch of time off to get myself mentally prepared for it... Lots of the younger students are like really into it and they're like really here for, cause they want to be here. But I find like some people are just not really a 100% wanting to be there... it's just like they don't have it as a high priority in their life. Cause it's just kind of like oh, just like a carry on from high school more than like actually like taking it seriously as like university. (Sally, age 26)

A student who had attended high school the previous year talked about having greater experience being beneficial, and about where one is in the transition to adulthood as being important:

I think people who took a year off, I mean, they worked, so they kind of had a chance to look at what it would be like in a dead end job for the rest of their lives... And I guess they probably had a chance to drink and party then. Whereas people who didn't take a year off, they're all starting to turn 18, or like other people around are turning 18 like, "hey! Let's go, go get smashed and stuff." (Liz, age 18)

Another student who had attended high school the previous year discussed that being more prepared would allow for managing the social pressure that tests one's values:

I walked in a little iffy, cause... it kind of broke apart for me a little bit, when I should of had a, like a stronger foundation coming in here so that you know maybe I could keep myself straight with, you know, where my priorities are and keep my values the way they were in high school rather than them pull apart in university, and then make things more difficult to have to bring it back and get myself straight again. (William, age 18)

One student described being unprepared for university:

High school kind of screws you over, like they don't prepare you that well, right. So I guess we just have to like take especially first semester as a learning curve and like sort of see what happens... [Coming from home school] coming into school and being in a classroom even... small things like um, you know people rustling beside me, I kind of noticed it at the start right, cause it's like I wasn't used to that... so that's been a significant adjustment. (Cindy, age 18)

Changing Values

The students described their experience of having changing values as they acculturated into university life. They talked about these changes as being related to their stage of development, the adjustment to university life, and as motivating their return to university. Numerous participants described having similar values as before, but that the degree of importance that they placed on particular values had changed. Others described a new perspective that came with the transition to university life that influenced an appreciation for new values. Most of the participants identified that the degree of importance that they placed on specific values guided what they held as priorities. Values that the students described as changing were related to self-actualization, success, focus, social support, relationships, family, and altruism.

For example, one student who planned to become a doctor talked about a shift in importance of her values, following having children, which encouraged her to act on them in a more direct way:

I guess the biggest change in my values, nothing's really changed, it's just my focus has shifted a little bit. But um, I've always sort of wanted to do more and reach out just within myself and my family unit... So I guess in terms of the values I'm reaching out more than I was before, but with the same core values of just wanting to help people. (Richelle, age 28)

Another student talked about her stage of development and being in university influencing a change in her values:

I think as you grow you kind of actually realize that friends are really more important... A few years back it wasn't really like I cared too much about my friends being around, cause every time you move into like a new year and you have new classes and your friends are like all gone from them you just make new ones and you kind of lose your old ones. Whereas when you move into university the friends that you made kind of like stick around. (Diane, age 18)

Similarly, another student described her sense of self changing along with the change in value of relationships in her life that came during this transition:

Coming from high school, taking that year off... that's a hard transition at first and like really hard, and it's an emotional experience, and it's not fun, and you don't know who you are. Well I didn't know who I was, and I didn't know what I was doing... Well, I was holding onto things that... in the past, in high school, things that made it easier for me, [such as] relationships that I had in high school; and holding onto those values... which have changed. Things change a lot in two years time, and when you hold onto them it's hard to move on and get past it, and become a new person, whether or not it's letting go of those relationships or allowing yourself to make new ones... I think that my outlook and my attitude have completely changed... At first it was, I was really focused on grades, and I still am; but, I think now I am more focused on the learning aspect and the doing the best I can, and actually developing more as a person rather than just as a student. (Alison, age 19)

Expectations

Students talked about university being either similar or different than they expected, or than they were used to in high school. They described comparing their expectations to their experiences and determining whether the transition into university was easier or harder than they thought it would be. They talked about expectations as related to flexibility, freedom, structure, their struggle with procrastinating and managing time, their level of determination, their idea of what a student is, their level of achievement, and social aspects of university.

One student described having expected university to be a “huge change,” but that things were only a little different than what he was used to in high school:

It's different for me, like I'm just so used to such a structured day, like you get up at a certain time, then you know you have to go to school, you can't just you know opt out of it, you have to go. Go through a long day, no breaks, I guess a lunch break whatever, and then you're back home, and then you gotta work. Here, I liked it, I like the change cause it's like, I had more flexibility, I had more freedom. But then I also kind of miss that discipline like you know it keeps you in check.
(William, age 18)

Another student who returned to school after starting a family and taking some time off described major differences between her expectations and her experience in university:

It was really scary for me to go back in school cause I've been out of it for so long. And I kind of envisioned coming on campus and seeing people with green hair and really short skirts and, you know, I'd think I don't know how to dress and how to act and think I'd be really old and things like that... And then when I got here I realized that nobody does that, and I was almost a little disappointed because I realized I couldn't dye my hair green... my whole outlook of what a student is initially and now, it's changed – I have maybe a little more respect for that.
(Richelle, age 28)

Motivation

Students described that in university it takes a lot more self-motivation than in high school, however, students differed in the degree of motivation they experienced to do work in university. Several students explained that the struggle for motivation is more difficult in university than high school because “things don’t seem as pushed on you,” there is “more room to actually slack,” and it seems too late to improve the grade if you “do bad on one test” as it is “half your mark.” Also, there is “less motivation to work harder” because of the freedom and flexibility in university, but “it takes a lot of motivation to actually work” and to be on top of “the timing.” Alternatively, some students described that because university is so much harder, “my drive is like so much stronger to do better” than in high school, and that it is more important in university to be “motivating yourself to do homework on your own [to be prepared] for the upcoming exams.”

One student described the importance of having a clear goal in mind in order to stay motivated in university:

I feel that if I wanted to do it, and had a goal in mind, like say becoming a nurse, I would be a lot, or I would do a lot better. I would be a lot better at actually bucking down and getting my work done. (Denise, age 18)

Students described that knowing what to expect in terms of work helped their level of motivation:

I actually am pretty sure I took, like, in high school for granted, just cause I never had to work this hard. Like I didn’t really have to study as hard as I do now just to get like grades that might not be to what I was expecting I would get. So for sure my drive is like so much stronger to do better. (Lisa, age 18)

Priorities

Students discussed their priorities, some new, some having changed in importance, and some having stayed the same. They identified numerous priorities, such as school achievement, finances, free time, family, religion, friends, time management, life goals, fitness, and balance. Students often described that finding a balance between priorities is now “harder,” and that the demands of differing priorities often work against other priorities. Some student described managing their priorities with more ease than other students described.

Many students described that school achievement had become their top priority.

One student described focusing on prioritizing this:

I was trying to take advantage of my, not free time, but when everyone else is busy, to like do my work. ‘Cause my schedule is really wonky, I’ve got like 5 hours every day in the middle of the day that’s just not courses, right. And everyone else has courses, so I try and like study and like get my work done during then. So, then at night when everyone else gets home I can go and chill out and study, but not have to study really hard. (Liz, age 18)

Students described that the priority for having free time became bigger, and that working toward the top priorities of grades, family, and friends is “harder.” On student discussed these changes:

I love maintaining my like relationship with family. So I guess I only have school and home. I am like a lot closer [with family] than I... was like end of last year, I guess, of high school. And my friends, I really, really do want to like hang out with them, but unfortunately they’ve like dropped a little bit on like my priorities and stuff as well. (Lisa, age 18)

And,

I don’t live at home anymore, so I live on campus. So that kind of pulls family and religion out of it. I mean I still, you know, try to go to [campus] mosque when I can... But it’s hard to when you know you go through such a long day of school,

badminton, school, and then you just want to relax, and then you go to sleep. And then you wake up the next morning, it's like ok, start the day again. But weekends is when I kind of make up for it, cause I go home every weekend. So I'd say it's kind of separated... There'd be a big distance between school and badminton [as priorities], and family and religion. (William, age 18)

Initiative

Students described that because in university, the teachers do not push you, and there are less assignments, there is more need for them to take initiative. However, "it feels like you kind of have too much freedom, so it's kind of hard." In university "everything is so much more individual" than in high school. You have to manage your own schedule, "find your own time" to ask the teachers questions, and then answers aren't as easily given to you. Studying has changed; "you have to like have your own motivation and incentive to do your own work." Learning from past tests provides "that push" to "make some adjustments." There is more need for self-direction, self-regulation, and to take initiative in adapting skills. For example, "you need to find ways of like shortening your notes." Some students described this process as frustrating, while others seemed to take on the responsibility of taking initiative more easily. Some students described that the degree that they took initiative differed throughout their transition into their first semester of university. For example, while some took on a large degree of initiative immediately, others did not do so until they became concerned about their performance a month or two into the semester.

One student explained her experience adjusting to university by changing her habits from cramming to studying:

I've definitely just really tried to buckle down with my studying, and I wouldn't really do that before. I would just kind of cram. And now I'm thinking I can't really cram anymore... I'm still going to do what I have to do to pass, but now it's more demanding and you have to, you can't just cram. (Denise, age 18)

And another,

You have to drive yourself to do your work. There's no one [saying], "you gotta, you gotta step it up here." It's like, "oh! I'm not doing so well in this class; maybe I should do something about that." So studying is definitely changed. I do more of what works for me I guess. (Liz, age 18)

And,

I think I had to just realize that I wasn't gonna be able to like get by on my barely put any effort in and still get the same grades in school. So I'm putting in more effort now than I ever have, and not getting the same grades I have before. (Jessica, age 18)

Feelings

Students described their feelings related to, and that affected, their adjustment in university and their choices related to social influence. Some students described negative feelings related to adjusting to being in university; for example, feeling pressure due to worry and anticipation about expectations and "not having second chances," feeling that the transition was "hard," and that "it was really scary for me to go back in school cause I've been out of it for so long." Other students described feeling positive about the transition, for example, feeling "really happy" and "interested in what I'm learning," and that the novelty is "refreshing." Some students described that in the process of adjusting to the new environment, they had to deal with letting go of their old situation and previous pursuits; for example, missing "high school, a lot of memories, teachers, friends."

One student described feelings related to being at the university and to the changes even when returning home:

Here I've found myself more isolated... in all these different settings... I'm not living at home, which is a big difference... it's still hard. I get lonely sometimes, even though there's all those people around me, I get lonely... When I go home, I feel like I'm a lot different than I was before. But maybe that's just because I don't live at home and it's always kind of like you be on your best behaviour. But I'm not too sure. (Denise, age 18)

Similarly, another student described feeling that returning home, family life was different:

I feel like um, like when I go home it's, the family life is it's changed. Like I feel like I'll have time to see my friends and my friends and my family, but you gotta, since I'm not living with my family anymore, it's kinda like you, I gotta put time into that, which I've never had to do. (Betty, age 18)

External Factors

The themes that the researchers identified as external factors were *school helpfulness, social networking, school difficulties, social pressure, social support, family values, and workload*. These were factors that the researchers agreed were influences from outside the individual.

School Helpfulness

Some students, more than others, identified that there were aspects of the university that were helpful in aiding them through their transition. Students indicated that the demographic of students and the size of the university helped them feel comfortable. Some indicated that sometimes other students were helpful, as well as particular programs and services that the university offered to students. For instance, some students found that the Service Stop was run "pretty efficiently, which is great," and

that tutorials were useful and “a little less intimidating” than asking questions during lectures or meeting with the professor outside class. Most agreed that the university offers “many resources available for a variety of concerns.” Students indicated that the university helped them find their classes, meet other students and friends, adjust to the new surroundings, and to the new expectations of being a student in university.

For example, one student commented that the help from the Service Stop at the university encouraged her to attend in the first place:

I came into campus and just like, they showed me how it worked, how the process online worked. I was like, “Oh my gosh, so easy!” and... Ya, it’s kind of like exhilarating, cause before I was getting really frustrated and was like, “oh university, no, not for me, it’s not worth all the trouble.” But then I like learned how to work the website like, “oh so fun!” And I kind of got giddy seeing what classes there were and what was available and stuff, and uh I’ll probably go to them to withdraw from my philosophy class too. So, they’re like helpful in multiple ways. (Liz, age 18)

Another student explained her experience with the university supporting her in adapting to university:

Everybody is just so open and friendly. And they, they had great programs like during orientation week they had very friendly like leaders that would show you around and they’d try to be your friend, which is something a new student needs to help adapt. ‘Cause then you’re going into a whole new world; it’s like, you know, moving to another country; you don’t know anybody. So when people open up to you like that it’s like, “oh I feel welcome.” So the school did make me feel really welcome at the university with the ah inauguration ceremony, with O week, with orientation, with everything it was fantastic. So I really liked how they, you know, really embraced the first years. It just made it that much easier to come here. (William, age 18)

Social Networking

Students talked about meeting new friends, maintaining friendships, and the ease or difficulty with which this was done in university. They described that this was either more difficult or easier than it was in high school, and that some factors related to this were the class sizes, the distances between classes, schedule differences, the social atmosphere, the friendliness of others, having roommates in residence, how proactive one is in seeking and maintaining friendships, and one's involvement in extra-curricular activities (e.g., sports, volunteering). Many students talked about social networking as being helpful for creating social supports to help them through university with creating "support," "balance," and "well-being"; these students described that this was necessary more so in university than it was in high school. Others described that friends were "distracting" and that in university it was an adjustment to come up with strategies for balancing the social side of university with the work side. Students described the experience as positive, for example, that it was "really nice and exciting," or overwhelming, for example, that "you just feel like you're nothing." Several students described that creating a social network was very important at the beginning of the school year, but that nearing midterms and finals, this became less of a priority. Alternately, students who did not focus on networking early on described that they still felt that this would be helpful for them to do.

One student described his experience:

There's a lot more variety. At my school a lot of the kids that went there are very, it's kind of rude to say, are very stuck up. And it's very geared to like a specific type of like personality. So they're very high class, or they're very I don't know, they're just very, they've got a classy feel to them; whereas like here you have a

variety. You've got different people from different backgrounds. It's just, I think it's exciting, cause then you get exposed to like a whole bunch of new viewpoints. Whereas, you know you're always stuck with like a certain few. In my school it's small; I think I had, the max I had in my class was like 30 and the smallest was like 6. So it's kind of nice getting to hear like during lecture discussion you hear different viewpoints from different people. So it's refreshing. (William, age 18)

Another student described the differences between socializing in university as compared to high school:

I love it. I live in res. My whole floor is like super friendly. Everyone's I think, I think friendlier here than in high school, because in high school you have those like cliques. Whereas here everyone's just like, "hey wanna go to the bar?" like "common everyone let's go to the bar!" [However], the people I hung out with in high school, I could I could rely on them to phone me up later and hang out. Whereas in university you gotta be more proactive and hound people down and be like, "hey let's do something, let's have a beer or watch a movie. (Liz, age 18)

School Difficulties

Some students, more than others, described that during the process of adjusting to school there were various aspects of the university that made it difficult for them. These students described barriers in the way the university system is organized, which often made it difficult for students who wanted information or to accomplish tasks such as changing programs or paying fees. The students described that following the due process of the organization was "confusing," and that there was so much "red tape." Other students talked about their experience with difficulties with classes: "inconsistencies" between how professors use the technology available (e.g., blackboard), lack of sufficient maps, large class sizes, lack of support from professors, not knowing where to find information or resources, or overlap of schedules to attend workshops. Some students did not like some aspects of university that seemed "a part of the process," such as taking

courses that were not related to their degree or area of interest, or only having a midterm and a final mark so that it is difficult to assess one's progress. Some students felt that they missed out on opportunities if they were unable to make it to orientation week, and that they still needed support in connecting with other students or resources; many students described that there was a lack of advertizing or clear indications of what resources were available and where to go for a specific need.

One student described that one of the biggest difficulties she had with a class at the university was the lack of appropriate materials provided in a timely manner:

One of my textbooks didn't come in until it was like six weeks into class or something, which is kind of ridiculous to me I think, because it was like, and the first exam ended up being like not out of the text book. But I think if you're gonna have a text book for the class it should be there within the first week, because... people like me to read 100 pages in a textbook, that's not a night for me, that's a week for me. Like trying really hard to finish it, so I mean like to get your textbook like weeks into class, and then you're like "oh my god, I have to catch up all this reading." Like, and then you just feel like overwhelmed by it. So I think like, you know they should be a little bit more strict about that. (Sally, age 26)

Another student described that it can be confusing for students to find and receive help and information:

It's all very confusing, because if you need a student loan you go to this department; if you want to know, you know, enrolment requirements you go to this department; if you want to know how to get an honour's degree you go to this person, you know. So it's all over the place. You know, having like that one source of information for everything would be useful... I guess a coordinator... just having one person who you know tells you where to go, that would be fine as long as everyone knows how to find him. (Richelle, age 28)

Another student described similar difficulties:

The process of my tuition and paying for tuition through scholarships... was really confusing, and you have to like there's the service stop and the administration

building that you have to go between and I found that like I keep going between them and I still haven't got some money back because they don't seem to work together... and the residence not being connected, it was really hard for me to figure out how my financing was going and hard for me to check on the computer because it takes so much time to jump between all of the places. So it's stressful. (Betty, age 18)

Social Pressure

Students described experiencing social pressure that was often in conflict with various values and/or priorities that they held; however, they described that these pressures seemed stronger if they aligned with other values and/or priorities that they held, and that were also high in importance. For example, many students described that both maintaining a social life and achieving good grades in university were high priorities, but that these were often in opposition to each other and difficult to balance. Students described that social pressures often made it more complicated or confusing to understand if and how they were achieving that balance.

Students described that the social pressures they felt were related to: needing to be successful in life, understanding "who you are and what you want to do," maintaining a social life, fitting in, achieving good grades, competition, partying, getting a return on one's financial investment, fulfilling family obligations, enjoying having freedom, and experiencing that time is so "constricted." One student summed up the experience that many described: Social pressures come in living "the whole experience of not only doing school but meeting new people and networking and opening up your possibilities to the world that university brings you." Students described that these pressures come from themselves, friends, family, and the university/professors. They described that these

pressures were less difficult at times when one type of priority clearly outweighed others. For example, in the beginning of their first year some students' described that taking in the university experience, creating social networks, and partying were priorities; but then when midterms and finals neared they struggled more with social pressures until it was clear to them that school was their top priority. For others this is not so clear cut, and students describe leaning more towards the activity that is more enjoyable.

A couple students described pressures related to having a time limit on when life accomplishments should be achieved:

I don't really pay attention to age because most people have some sort of schedule in life, to be like "oh, by the time I'm 25, by the time I'm 30, by the time I'm 35." I don't have that schedule in life. Like, I just kind of plan on getting things done, trying to manage it; so, just as long as I'm happy. I don't really care what's making me happy. I don't need it to be some sort of conformed version that everyone has right. (Sally, age 26)

Several students described experiencing conflicting pressures:

Being open to this new freedom to have your own choices and meeting new people, it's like I don't really want to go home on a Friday night. I kinda want to stay on residence or party with my friends. And then it's just like I kinda gotta think, "Ok well I did make a promise to my family that I would come home on weekends cause they wanna see me, and you know I kind of miss them too." So it's like what do I do, should I stay or should I go. (William, age 18)

Several students described having internalized and perhaps exaggerated pressures as experienced from others:

I put more pressure on myself than anybody else does. I like try to make it seem like it's other people, just cause I was, I was raised to be like, like you need to work your hardest. Like that kind of stuff, like you're not going to get things handed to you. So, I think that I put the most pressure on myself, and sometimes my friends give me that, just like "you'll be ok to do it tomorrow," that like, just that extra push. (Jessica, age 18)

Several students described pressures related to maintaining friendships:

I started to realize that, “hey these people are really pressuring me and you know I like it when I can wake up on the weekend, not have to sleep in till like 1:00 cause I’m hung over.” Right? And it almost feels like if I don’t hang out with people it’s like I’m – not that they forget about me, but there’s such long curves of time when we don’t hang out. And I’m one of those people who have really close friends, not like people who have like mediocre friends. So to keep the people I really like close to me, I have to be like really proactive in maintaining that relationship otherwise it’s like downhill. (Liz, age 18)

Social Support

Students described that having support from others – such as other students, professors, friends, and family – was important to them in going through the transition into university. Even so, while some students described that getting social support was easy for them, others indicated that it was difficult. Social support provided students with someone to talk to and who would listen and understand, who helped to motivate and encourage them, who helped them know what to expect from university, who was “like minded” with similar goals, and who helped them stay “on track” and resolve conflicting social pressure. They described that people were often supportive when they had similar experiences; for example, one student said, “My mom’s been pretty good so far, cause she almost flunked out her first year... so she’s like, ‘ya you’re doing pretty good compared to me’.” Students described that social support differs from social pressures in that these people help them achieve their top priority. Students described that this can be done directly, such as by encouraging them in their school work, or indirectly by providing them with balance so that they would not burn out.

One student described that receiving social support and giving it is often reciprocal within her relationships with friends at university:

They're more carefree I guess and maybe don't value school as much. But when it comes time to buckle down with finals and midterms they do [have a similar goal], so... I guess I try to say lets study, to try to help as well, to try and help them study. (Denise, age 18)

Family Values

Students described that many of the values they currently hold originate from their families and from how they were raised. Many of these values influenced them in their transition into university. Students described that these values related to working hard, having "a competitive drive," maintaining a "connection with family," religion, discipline, physical activity, being open to experience, relationships, integrity, "if you start something, finish it," and "you have to have some happiness in life too." Many students described that they clung to their family's values more during this transition, that often these values even expanded to "encompass more," and they found their values helpful to guide them in the friends that they chose, to maintain focus on their priorities, and "to keep me stable."

One student described her family's values influence on her work ethic:

They would have like, you know, pushed me to get good grades and they wanted me to do well and to succeed. So in that it was probably also, you know it was like a family value to do well at what you, at what you attempt to do, and so um that would probably also be part of what motivated me to do well at high school. (Cindy, age 18)

Another student described that the transition to university and into adulthood influenced her to take on her family's values to a greater degree than previously:

It kind of forces you to grow up a little, and um so I think your values stay the same... so that [being more responsible], I think that almost brings out your values more... I just think that I've grown more strongly towards like the values that I have. Like education mostly... Trying to um just actually do well, and really wanting for myself too. (Denise, age 18)

Workload

Interestingly, the majority of students described that the workload in university was greater than they expected, but a few students described that it was less than what they were used to. Even so, students that found the workload less still described that it was an adjustment because the workload differed; for example, the "workload is a lot less here," but the material "it's really condensed," and during the lecture "you're not really interacting" due to the class sizes. Most students described needing to "plan my time well, or wisely." Several students described that "there is a lot more reading," and "a lot more time on homework." A couple students expressed concern that in order to do well in a couple subjects, they compromise other subjects.

Some students described that the extra labs created a challenge:

It's hard when you are trying to do well in one, and you let all of the other four slide. And they're all super demanding. They all have, four of them have labs, all the ones without the... everything but the elective have labs; and so that's a lot of extra time. (Denise, age 18)

Another student described her experience of the workload in university:

I try to study as much as possible; it's a huge adjustment for me. I've never had to study, I don't know how. I haven't read in a few years, especially since I took a year off. I'm kind of just getting in the groove, it's pretty chaotic, and I don't have a social life at all. But that's ok... it's just been really stressful and tiring, cause I have something going on all the time, and I never have time to relax. So ya, so that's it; it's just a constant grind. (Jenna, age 19)

Outcome Factors

The outcome factors that the researcher identified were *balance, feelings resulting from experiences, social influence conflict resolution, and hindsight.*

Balance

Some students described achieving balance between priorities and recognizing that this was important for them. They described needing to plan for this, and that to maintain balance, they needed to modify the amount of time they spent on some things.

For example, “life has to be a lot more scheduled now than it was before.”

It’s a balancing of sorts to, you know, make sure you’re fully enjoying university, but also that you’re passing your courses... So I think I like to try to like fix it when my balance isn’t right, but it’s really hard. Cause ya like there are so many tug of wars going on. (Liz, age 18)

Several students described that there is “more,” and that because of this they have to focus on “time management” and “balance”:

The time aspect: Its different because we get so much more, um we get so much more to do, and there’s so much more pressure here, but we also have so much more free time; and so you have to find that balance. (Denise, age 18)

And,

It feels like I’m leaning more to like having more friends, and relationships go up. But at the same time, like the exams still look pretty hard, so now I need to, like, now I do more work than I used to do in high school. I need to keep on top of things. (Jordan, age 18)

Feelings Resulting from Experiences

Students described their feelings that resulted from the challenges that came out of transitioning into university, including those internal and external factors discussed

above, and especially their experience of social pressures. Students described that in efforts to focus on one priority, and to turn away from social pressures toward another, there are feelings of being “left out and isolated,” and of “not fitting in and you feel like you should,” and of “wonder whether everyone’s changing or are you just staying the same?”

Alternatively, students described feeling free from pressure when they focus on their priorities and values and place less importance on those pressures. Yet when students did conform to pressures, they found that the consequences were that “I feel bad that I like let myself down and let the prof down,” or that “I feel kind of guilty.” Students described that the greatest difficulty was having competing high priorities that were all very important – for example, one student expressed guilt about not spending as much time with her husband and children in order to be successful in school; while another student described that with group work for a class, “I feel guilty if I don’t do enough.” These challenges were described as overwhelming and frustrating. One student described, “Sometimes if I get overwhelmed with stuff I just stop, and I don’t do any of it, and I just let myself... I just sit at home basically. I just block everything out.” Several students described coping better, or “dealing with it more” after some time adjusting to university and the expectations.

One student described her feelings in her transition to university, resulting from pressures to succeed and have a successful career:

I feel like I want to pursue something more creative... but there’s... that pressure to be successful and everything... what I would want to do, because I would enjoy

it, um is maybe not considered a successful career by some maybe. So, like I think the pressure to do something and end up doing something successful is distracting me from my ultimate goal of being happy with what I'm doing... I feel like the pressure of all that is preventing me from doing what I want to do... it just makes me frustrated because a lot of them I put on myself, because I like care too much about what other people think. (Valarie, age 19)

One student described the difference between how she would feel when she chose to conform when it is against what she believed she should have done, versus when she chose to act in accordance with what she believed was best:

It still bothers me that I give into the social pressures. It bothers me that I do it because I know that I shouldn't be. So I think that's really conflicted because I know that I shouldn't be doing it. I know I should be studying, but I do it anyways because at the moment I don't feel like studying, which is stupid. And I know that that's a stupid reason not to, so I don't know... it just scares me I guess. I definitely feel better when I have studied. Like, I can sleep at night, I can relax a little bit more, I cannot stress as much when I do my studying. But when I don't study, I feel worse even when I'm, like at the time, while I'm hanging out I'm like "I should be studying." I think that that says a lot. (Denise, age 18)

Social Influence Conflict Resolution

Students described resolving conflicts between opposing social pressures. They indicated that resolving conflicting pressures related to personal values and social expectations involves "just taking like the time," taking life decisions "seriously," and recognizing the difference between wants, needs, and values; they also described compromising: "Sometimes you have to have conflict" with friends in order to "do well in school," but then other times "I'm putting it off to just hang out;" many students described that most often there is a need to prioritize and focus on school, although sometimes there is a need for balance when "I could really use a night to just breath and like let everything go." Several students described strategies for resolving pressures one

way or another; for example, spending “more time at the university doing work, just to feel like you’re less alone, to feel like you’re kind of involved in some type of social gathering, even if you’re not.”

Several students described having an awareness of pressures and trying to understand them better in order to resolve them:

If people try to pressure me to do something, then I’ll like, I’ll think about it from many different perspectives just to get a good view of it... Sometimes I do have to sit down and be like “ok, what do I want to do, what should I do, would be the right thing to do” and kind of have to juggle that around... When the pressures do come, sometimes I’ll be like, “ok. Ya that sounds like a good idea” and then I’ll be like, “ok, you know what this is not a good idea”... So sometimes I’ll be like... “ya I was going to do it anyway,” or “Ya I was thinking about it” and then sometimes I’ll be like, “I was thinking about it but you changed my mind and I’m not gonna doing it and I’m just gonna do my other thing... You know actually take more time into looking at it. And just, you know being you know exposed to new people with new views and stuff, I kinda can see things through what they see, be like, “ok, this is how they have fun. Now can I relate to that or can I not relate to that.” If I can’t related to that then, “ok you go do your thing ok I will just stay here, I’ll figure out something else to do with people that are more inclined to enjoy similar things, or not want to do something as stupid as the other guy.” (William, age 18)

Some students described working hard to resolve the conflict in the way that places their top priorities first:

It’s just the internal conflict, and sometimes it’s easier to go out to socialize. So it’s giving up the easier part and committing to the harder... That was the hard part for me because I never, I never liked turning people down for anything... so just saying no and I started spending a lot more time at my boyfriend’s place for a little bit, and just kind of taking myself away from it and trying to focus. (Betty, age 18)

Some students described coping strategies that allowed them to conform to one social pressure and relieve their conscience of the other temporarily. For example, one student described,

It's hard balancing all of them. I'm one of those people who think that studying a particular thing won't take that long. I like make this illusion around myself that, "oh no, it'll only take me an hour" whereas really it'll take me like two, three hours to study. So I kind of get there and go, "Uh Oh! But I just spent like two hours with my friends." (Liz, age 18)

Hindsight

Students described what they would do if they could start over, whether the same or different, now that they better understood what university life required of them. They described what they would recommend to others based on their understanding of what they feel is important to do when beginning university, and what they believed would help one through the transition: building a social network of friends, family, and professors for supports; having a good understanding of long term goals and "what path you want to do"; knowing one's self and staying true to values; being open to new experiences, "other people's thoughts or ideas of fun," and to changing; being informed about what the expectations are and "what their path is and be more organized upfront"; prioritizing and time management from the beginning;

Several students described that immersing in the environment, and being involved be would be beneficial:

Living on campus... I think that that'd be a really smart thing to do... even like, even in your first year or so, just so you get to know people and like you get to know the university better. So that you feel more like involved I guess. (Jessica, age 18)

And,

Get involved in stuff right away... Don't like shut yourself out... It's not supposed to be easy... develop those relationships, new relationships, so that you can develop

the new person you are going to be and stop holding on to everything that you had before necessarily. (Alison, age 19)

One student described that being grounded and having social support helped her to be flexible and dynamic throughout the transition to university, making this process easier:

You're probably going to change in your first year. Just the being somewhere different starts to change you anyway. So, I think it's important before you commit to just changing into that, it's nice to settle, like make sure you're comfortable and secure in there. Because I know if I didn't develop that social network and feel that I had that option it would have added a lot more stress and anxiety on me. So it's good to settle in, but also to recognize at a point when you gotta start moving onto you're, what's more important now. (Betty, age 18)

And,

Be prepared to make changes and adjustments, because like I was just talking to a friend of mine this morning and we were saying it is a lot different than what high school was... Be flexible... [But] stick to the values that you have, like don't let a big change like university like make it so that you turn to alcohol or something. (Cindy, age 18)

Summary

Students in this study described various factors, internal and external, that influenced their acculturation to university – including social pressures. They further described the outcomes of their experiences with acculturation and conformity to university. The following chapter will provide a discussion of these results in the context of the current theory and literature on acculturation and conformity in the transition to university.

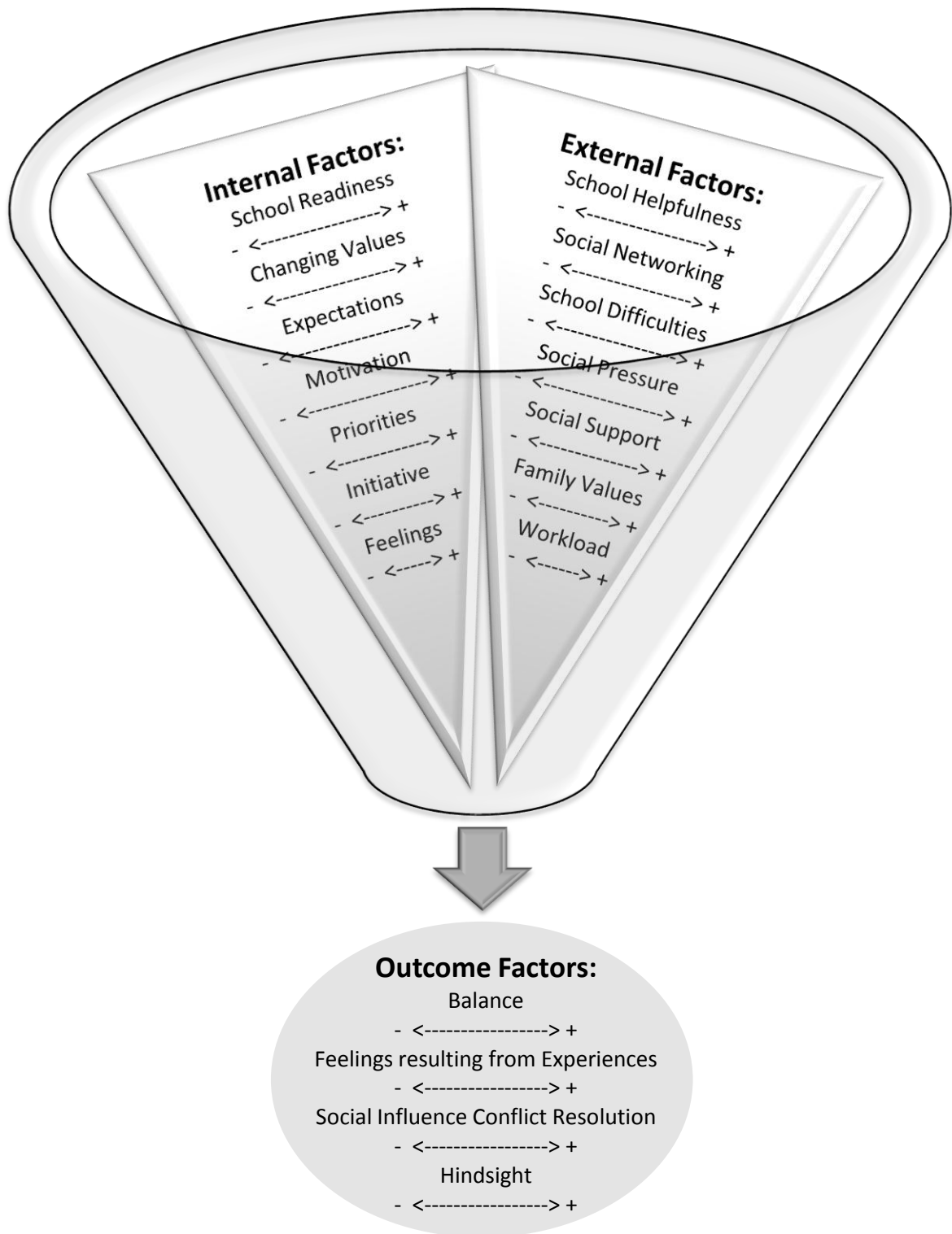


Figure 1. Presentation of themes describing the experiences of first-year University of Calgary students conforming and acculturating to university life.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The results of the current study indicate that students experience internal and external factors that affect outcomes during acculturation to university. Conformity and acculturation to university were talked about relative to external factors of *school helpfulness, school difficulties, social pressure, workload, initiative, social support, social networking, and family values*. Internal factors that emerged included *priorities, motivation, expectations, school readiness, changing values, and feelings*; and outcomes of *balance, feelings resulting from experiences, social influence conflict resolution, and hindsight*.

Students described their experience in terms of values, priorities, and social pressures, including evaluations of change in themselves and their motivations for conforming or not. In this discussion, aspects of themes that describe students' conformity experiences during their acculturation to university are highlighted and then placed within the context of the literature. The results are then discussed from a developmental perspective.

Descriptions of Conformity in Acculturation

Social Support

In line with literature that describes conformity in acculturation as adaptive (e.g., Bogdan, 2005; Cartwright, 2009; Gungor, 2007; Klick & Parisi, 2008; Renkema et al., 2008; Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008), students described that conforming to social influence helped them to fit in socially and academically, and to achieve goals (e.g., social

networking, friendship maintenance, balance, good academic performance). This coincides with research indicating that social pressure felt from parents and teachers regarding academic performance influences performance goals in students (Régner, Loose, & Dumas, 2009). However, in addition to these pressures being felt from teachers and parents, these students described that pressures from friends also encouraged them in their academic goals. They also described that pressures from friends helped them toward other goals, such as social networking, friendship maintenance, and having balance.

Students described that *social networking* and the *school helpfulness* were often important for obtaining support during the transition to university. Some students were impressed with the university student culture and how diverse, open, helpful, and even trustworthy students were. Those who integrated and made friends at the university described that these friends were often very supportive, whether they were providing a social break from studying or encouraging focus on academics. These results are reflected in the study on acculturation by Edwards and Lopez (2006) with the theme they titled, *friends provide help and fun*. Students described receiving social support from a variety of people, including family. This is significant as family support has been found to be associated with greater life satisfaction during students' acculturation (Edwards & Lopez, 2006).

Students described that they were more likely to conform when the social pressure related to their own values and priorities. In this sense, there was often a social

response of congruence (MacDonald et al., 2004). Similar to these results, studies have shown that students' attitudes and personal beliefs provide motivation to conform (Pool & Schwegler, 2007). Students tended to describe that these social influences did not feel like pressure. However, the challenge of social pressure for these students was described in maintaining a balance between their priorities when these conflicted and the social pressure threatened one or more goals in opposition (e.g., pressures to party instead of study for an upcoming exam).

Conflicting Goals

Conflicting goals, as discussed by students, are primarily represented by the themes *social pressure, balance, social influence conflict resolution, and feelings resulting from experiences* as outcomes. Some conflicting goals and priorities that students described were related to maintaining activities and relationships with family and friends outside their university life, while simultaneously working toward building social relationships at the university and striving for academic success. Many of these students described that they had to place priority on their university life. These results are consistent with acculturation findings that indicate that practicing behaviours related to the new culture is negatively associated with practicing behaviours related to the culture of origin (Chia & Costigan, 2006). This suggests that the more students become integrated into the university culture, the less they are likely to behave in ways that are consistent with their previous cultures (e.g., work, home, extra-curricular).

Just as social support was experienced from friends, family, professors, the university, and themselves, so was social pressure. For example, students described needing to *balance* developing social supports/friendships at the university and not socializing too much in order to allow for other priorities toward academics. This dynamic seems to mirror that of the eustress and distress dynamic (e.g., see Le Fevre, Matheny, & Kolt, 2003). This concept refers to the theory of stress on a bell curve, with eustress representing a healthy level of stress on one end, and distress occurring when the individual is overwhelmed by the pressure. Performance is implicated in this continuum: Eustress is useful for providing motivation and positive emotions that occur with increased adrenaline, and distress is the result of perceived incompetence regarding internal or external resources to manage the demands of the situation. Influential others may provide a healthy amount of pressure and stress that motivates these students toward various goals. However, when the amount of stress tips the balance, the influence no longer feels supportive, but instead may pressure the student to the point of feeling overwhelmed.

Students described their *feelings resulting from experiences* with conflicting social pressures as sometimes debilitating. This makes sense in relation to theory on stress, suggesting that these students become so distressed that they're bodies react with the fight, flight, or freeze response (Bracha, Ralston, Matsukawa, Williams, & Bracha, 2004). Amiot, Blanchard, and Gaudreau (2008) found that disengagement-oriented coping, such

as this, can be maladaptive for students. It is associated with lower academic motivation throughout the semester, and as expected, a decrease in well-being.

Many students described that over time, they became better at anticipating that various social pressures would conflict, and that this helped them be more prepared to better manage their responses to pressure. This came with a better understanding of academic expectations, and feeling more secure that newly formed friendships would remain intact should they decline an invitation. Student strategies to manage conflicting pressures resemble the task-oriented coping studied in Amiot and colleagues (2008). They found that students using this type of coping were more likely to feel increased well-being. However, as they also found this type of coping to be associated with self-determination, it makes sense that the students in the current study were more able to cope in this way following some adjustment that allowed them to feel as if they had more influence on their environment. This coincides with the finding that students in their first two years of study had less of an internal locus of control and lower well-being than other students (Karayurt & Dicle, 2008).

Adult students' experiences. Adult students in this study described more priorities related to roles in their life outside the university. They described experiencing pressures related to priorities that younger students are less likely to have (e.g., feelings of guilt related to internalized pressures to spend more time with the family rather than study). These students described managing this by spending less time socializing, networking, or integrating into the university life as a traditional student might. These

students described being less likely to conform, or even experience pressures, to party as the younger students. These results are reflected in the literature (Christie et al., 2005).

This coincides with Riediger and Freund's (2008) finding that older adults tend to organize themselves better than younger adults in order to lessen the conflict between goals, while younger adults may have a higher tolerance for experiencing conflict between priorities. This fits with descriptions from adult students indicating that one strategy they use for *social influence conflict resolution* is "just taking the time" and taking life decisions "seriously"; while alternatively, one younger student described, "Sometimes you have to have conflict." In this sense, adult students may experience less pressure to conform or assimilate by actively reducing opportunities for social pressure, which they do as a coping strategy.

Younger students' experiences. In *social influence conflict resolution*, younger students described needing to develop an understanding of their values or maintain a connection to their *family values* in order to better manage their responses to the influences of others. Some students described losing touch with their values at first, and that it took some adjustment to the culture of the university before they were able to reconnect. This suggests that perhaps for students undergoing the transition to adulthood, the transition of acculturating to university may be a trigger for identity development. Bridges (2001) would call this a *reactive transition*. Importantly, identity instability represents a significant vulnerability for these students in their experiences of

social pressure conflicts, as recognizing and holding onto values is a significant strategy for resolving social pressure conflicts by these students.

Academic Role Demands

Differences in the educational culture are important to explore (Lee, Bei, & DeVaney, 2007), and within this study, students' descriptions of these differences were pronounced. Several students described that their previous academic setting, high school (even for some adult students), left them ill prepared for university. Exceptions to this were students coming from private schools or who were home schooled; however, while they experienced less academic challenges, they described noticing bigger differences related to the cultural and social atmosphere.

Most students indicated that they were surprised by the increased freedom and differences in workload. These students described feeling pressure to have initiative and take on responsibility in this new setting. Clearly, the educational culture had different expectations of its members than what these students were used to. To refuse to conform to these requirements simply was not considered by these students; however, they did describe concerns should they fail. Many students described holding values related to working hard, which may have offset the pressure. Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that internalized values can decrease feelings of external control. Thus, students who perhaps generalized their values of working hard and integrated this into their student role, likely managed this pressure better.

Meeting these new academic role demands represents an interesting dynamic with respect to SDT, as young students may have a need for such autonomy, yet their level of competence in being autonomous has not yet been met. This is likely one reason that adult students are represented in the literature as having a higher need for autonomy in learning at university (e.g., Hardin, 2008).

Students described that it was necessary for them to adjust to these differences in the educational culture in order to be able to perform well in this new setting. Students described that in the midst of balancing priorities regarding course work, social networking, experiencing university life, etcetera, they needed to learn to manage their time differently, to negotiate how to get the academic help they needed, and also to learn how to learn in this new setting. These results coincide with the literature in that successful students are more likely to report that, as part of the acculturation process, they learned social skills and strategies to apply academically (Cheng & Fox, 2008).

Developmental Perspective

While often lay people may not recognize or highlight the influence of culture in development, socialization requires a degree of cultural conformity of individuals throughout their lifespan. The following discussion regarding the developmental perspective on acculturation to university maintains the assumption that social influences, although often more subtle than in situations of social pressure conflict described above, are still important in the developmental processes described by students.

Changing Values and Family Values

Transition theory. Students described changing values in terms of letting go of previous ways of being, not knowing who one is, and then looking forward with a new outlook and attitude. According to Bell et al. (2007), self-narratives describing value changes suggest a developmental transition. In consideration of the typical developmental stage for this age group, this developmental stage is one of identity development (Erikson, 1986; Guiffrida, 2009; Marcia, 1980).

Further, students' descriptions fit well with Bridges (2001) theory of transitions. The first year of university was associated with shifts in values for these students – whether these are changes in their importance or taking on new values and letting go of others – that demonstrate the transitional aspect of this event. Students' descriptions reflect a sense of knowing that, developmentally, it is time for these value changes to happen, coinciding with findings that suggest culture sets up expectations related to value changes according to developmental growth (Bell & Lee, 2008).

Students' descriptions of *feelings* relate to missing and letting go of the old way of being and anticipating and worrying about what will come also reflect this theory. Importantly, students' feelings reflected the neutral zone phase of this theory, describing a sense of not yet belonging and feeling isolated in the university, but having changed so much to no longer belong in the situation they came from. These results are reflected by those of Palmer and colleagues (2009). It is important to recognize this state of being in between during the transition to university, as it is part of the process and has implications regarding acculturation and conformity. For instance, the lack of

belongingness, an aspect of being in the neutral zone phase, can lead to increased conformity, even when individuals do not agree (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008). Further, students with a higher need for inclusion, who are already more likely to conform (Duck & Fortey, 2003), may be especially vulnerable during this time of disorientation and disidentification. However, an understanding of this on the part of students and their supports may facilitate students in working through this phase.

Family values were described by students as values that are seen as outside of themselves, but also are internalized as reflected in that their family values continue to influence them. These values were described as important components of support and guidance during this period of transition. Alongside this, students described that during this transition, they felt a greater sense of responsibility that encouraged them to focus on being true to their family values. This greater sense of responsibility may be another facet of ascription to cultural norms that comes with the transition to adulthood (i.e., as described in McAdams & Olson, 2010, in terms of changes in personality traits). This suggestion is further supported by the students' descriptions of greater adherence to family values during this time.

Given that the students in this study described holding onto their family values, but also described changing aspects of their values as a result of the expectations of the university culture, it is apparent that their acculturative approach was one of integration (Berry, 1997). As developmental transitions can be compounded by acculturative

transitions (Berry, 1997), it follows that several younger students described the transition to university as difficult, where they felt confused for a time.

Identity. *Changing values* and *family values* were described by students in terms of identity and knowing one's self and how to respond in situations based on these values. For example, students described that their values related to what priorities were important for them to act on. Also, as discussed above, students described that their values helped guide them when experiencing conflicting social pressure. Along these lines, literature on acculturation indicates that understanding one's self during the acculturation process is important to students' educational satisfaction (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008).

In providing guidance toward goals, conflict resolution, and educational satisfaction, identity was implicated as a significant component for students experiencing conformity and acculturating to university in this study. Several students described being exploratory in terms of their values and who they were in this new setting. Culture was also implicated in these descriptions as several students described recognizing a difference in the culture of their family or previous school. These experiences suggest that they were in the moratorium/exploration stage of identity development (Marcia, 1980; Phinney, 1989).

School Readiness

The theme, *school readiness*, described challenges in the first year of university primarily due to aspects of emerging adulthood. Students described that university

required a mindset that was more mature, responsible, and prepared than that of a high school student. Students described that the university culture required a sense of responsibility in order to manage the greater freedom they experienced so that they might meet the requirements of having greater initiative in this academic setting.

Thus, aspects of being in this transition may challenge a student's ability to focus on academic goals in favour of experiencing the freedom the university setting provides, as well as the freedom many students experience as they come of legal age into adulthood (e.g., no longer having legal constraints against drinking). As suggested in Shanahan (2000), the various life tasks ascribed by society have become compressed. While students feel the need to be on a career path, they are also experiencing pressures to partake in activities that are developmental markers. Students described that maturity is related to being responsible to the former goal over the latter.

Students described that one or two years between high school and university would provide greater experience, perspective, and focus. Adult students, who had taken several years off school, tended to agree with this, but they also tended to describe more role/priorities conflict (as described above). This coincides with identity theory that identifies this age group as having already settled various aspects of their identity, and as such that they may have less desire to assimilate into university life (Christie et al., 2005; Hardin, 2008; Hostetler et al., 2007). This makes sense in acculturation terms also as Chia and Costigan (2006) found that the older the individual at the time of entering the new culture, the stronger the internal feelings and positive evaluations of the culture of origin.

Further, they suggested that this difference may be related to more versus less mature ego identities.

Adult students and younger students present as having culturally diverse needs in the sense that younger students tend to be more flexible in integrating into the university culture: They are already working toward discovering who they are, while adult students experience various social constraints that prevent this type of flexibility. While adult students may need an environment that supports them in their current situation and accepts them regardless of their situational constraints, younger students may need an environment that supports them in consolidating their identities so that they can cope better. Thus, the argument applies that culturally diverse students should not be lumped together and expected to fit as a “typical student” might, and that universities need to adapt to address the unique needs of diverse students (Christie et al., 2005; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008).

Social Support and Resources

Given the challenges of conforming and acculturating to university, it is important to highlight the feedback students in this study provided on aspects of the university that were thought of as helpful or that hindered students adjustment, as described in the themes on *school helpfulness* and *school difficulties*. Also, students’ descriptions of what they would do differently or recommend to other students, from the theme *hindsight*, are discussed here. This section provides the perspective of the *student side* of research in the transition to university, as recommended by Palmer and colleagues (2009).

Helpfulness and Difficulties

Some difficulties identified by the students were consistent with results in the literature on the transition to university. For example, a common theme among students was regarding issues with the procedures and “red tape” of the organization. Hardin (2008) commented on the irony about institutional barriers simply: “Often, without realizing it, an institution creates obstacles to students’ progress” (p. 51). Students and the university have the same goal... for students to be successful. However, it seems that sometimes the university can get in its own way, and leave students frustrated and unsupported. Further, as indicated by SDT, students experiencing these institutional barriers as hierarchical will result in undermining the students’ feelings of autonomy, and result in decreased motivation to form an integrated identity and to integrate into university life.

The goal in the end is for students to feel like they belong and are a part of the university. For some students in this study, glimpses of this came early on with participation in social events put on by the university (e.g., Orientation Week), or being in campus residence and having plenty of opportunities for socializing with other students. Similarly, friendship quality has been found to be associated with university belonging (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). This sense of belonging helps students identify as university students, which improves students’ well-being (Iyer et al., 2009) and decreased students’ internalizing problem behaviours (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

Hindsight

Although several students indicated that they should have been better prepared for university by their high schools, most often students took on responsibility for wanting to have been more prepared, more organized, and more focused. Several students described that they would suggest to other students that knowing who you are and what your values are can help. This advice makes sense, given that many students described that recognizing and holding to values were important for resolving conflict between felt social pressures. However, as discussed above, the process of acculturating to university may make this difficult for younger students being thrown into an identity crisis, regardless of whether they intend to know their values and who they are before entering university.

Several students offered good advice: Students need to understand that they will undergo some big changes in this transition, both external and internal, and they need to be flexible in this process. This means a lot when put into context in reflecting on all of the changes students in this study described, from different expectations that teachers had in this educational setting, the different populations of students, different perspectives, the geography, the larger classes, living in the city or in residence; to the different struggles students had with themselves, and knowing who they were within this new culture at the university. Advice such as this is mirrored in the literature (e.g., Harvey et al., 2006).

Contributions to the Literature

This study provides account of 15 students' experiences conforming and acculturating to university. Deep descriptions of these experiences give explanation of the meaning that students ascribe to these experiences. The explanations come together to describe a process of *internal* and *external factors* that contribute to *outcomes* for these students. This adds to the literature that seeks to understand the *student side* of the transition to university.

The model taken on for understanding the students' experiences through a developmental lens with consideration of social responses/conformity and acculturation processes is new in the literature. Few studies were found in the literature that had results related to students, conformity, and acculturation. However, even these studies did not intend to explore all of these components. For example, one sought to explain identity and used the term conformity; one sought to explore students' experiences in university as related to a cultural and identity shift and found conformity; and another placed conformity and acculturation in context in history but did not explore the role of development in students. Thus, the current model may be used in future research that seeks to understand the experiences of individuals entering a new context with a different culture of values, norms, and expectations.

Limitations

As this study was qualitative in nature, generalizations cannot be made to other contexts or populations. These results cannot be generalized to all students or all university settings. The results of the study are limited to this sample of students in their

first year of study at the University of Calgary. As this study is a new branch in the literature, the methodology was chosen for its ability to be exploratory, and not to provide positivistic, predictive, or confirmatory results.

One limitation of this study is that no students responded to the member check. It is possible that these students agreed with the results and so did not respond, however, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, it could be that the time lapse between when the interviews took place and when the member check was done was too long for the students to maintain interest or motivation to participate.

Also, the majority of students who participated in this study were 18 and 19 year olds. As such, developmentally these students may not have the depth of reflection that older students might. Had the study included a greater degree of older participants, the quality of descriptions may have been different.

Another limitation of this study is that the methodology did not provide for longitudinal exploration that is recommended for study of processes such as acculturation (Chirkov, 2009). As such, this study was only able to capture a retrospective view from participants at one point in time in the process.

Implications for Student Supports and Policy

These results from this study can inform policy and practice that support students in first year of university:

1. Younger students may benefit from support in identity formation during their transition to university (Tieu, 2008). There needs to be consideration of culture

and cultural differences in this process (Cheah, & Nelson, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2008), and that conformity pressures play a role (e.g., Armour, 2009; Asencio, 2011; Duck & Fortey, 2003; Mahalik et al., 2005).

2. Adult students may benefit from an educational culture that is more inclusive (Harvey et al., 2006) and accepting of students that cannot fully integrate themselves due to situational constraints and stage of development (Chia & Costigan, 2006; Hardin, 2008).
3. Universities need to be aware of the impact of hierarchical structures and expectations on students' need for autonomy, and resulting feelings of external control. Pressures to conform coming from hierarchical cultures may decrease students' motivation to integrate into the university culture (Chirkov et al, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Downie et al., 2004).
4. Sources of social influence may provide both significant support (Régner et al., 2009) and significant stress to students (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008). Students' tolerance and skill at managing eventual goal conflict may vary by age; while older students may need to be supported more in reducing their stressors, younger students may need to be supported more in balancing their stressors (Riediger & Freund, 2008) and in understanding themselves in relation to possible social responses (Wadsworth et al., 2008).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies exploring the interplay between acculturation, identity development, and conformity on students are needed to replicate and extend the results of this study. These studies should be exploratory in nature, and the nature of culture requires an understanding of the specific values, norms, and meanings that individuals ascribe to their experiences (Chirkov, 2009). Further, as acculturation and identity development are processes that take place over time, future studies should incorporate a longitudinal methodological approach.

Based on the literature relevant to this topic, there are several factors that may be interesting to look into in future studies exploring students' experiences with conformity in acculturating to university. For instance, what are the values that adult and younger students hold with respect to conforming to norms and social pressures? Do those who value conformity highly differ in experiences from those who place less value on conformity?

Also, beyond the usual definitions of culture as related to country of origin, what do students define their culture by (e.g., coming from a working class family, belonging to a particular occupational field, ascription to a particular religion)? Do definitions of culture differ depending on degree of acculturation? Does it matter if researchers define degree of acculturation according to various environments or situations (e.g., degree of acculturation to university, a field of study, or any other new environment or situation)? Then, how do the answers to these questions relate to students' experiences of conformity in acculturation to university?

Counselling Implications

Implicated in the transition to university, developmental and motivational adaptations and self-narratives are aspects of personality that can be explored in counselling (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Of particular interest in this study are characteristic adaptations and choices individuals make regarding social pressures. Exploring social responses such as conformity can provide counsellors and students with opportunities to better understand their choices regarding characteristic adaptations and acculturation. Meaning behind these choices can be understood through individual's self-narratives, and counselling may help individuals reconstruct stories in helpful ways.

Relevant for those working with students is how culture impacts students' perceptions of the problem and their expression of concerns (Leong, Hardin, & Gupta, 2010). Various authors recognize the implications of cultural identity values on practice (e.g., Goldston et al., 2008; Leong et al., 2010). Students who highly value conformity to norms – such as those from collectivist cultures – place greater importance on what others expect of them than those who value conformity less. The current results and literature suggest that while this can mean greater social support it can also mean greater social pressure. Further, values toward conformity and protecting social group status may relate to the "use of indirect communication, suppression of conflict, and the withholding of free expression of feelings... that may contribute to the concealment of emotional disturbance" (Goldston et al., 2008, p. 22). As such counsellors need to be vigilant in

ascertaining risk, and should not underestimate the impact of perceived social pressures on clients' well-being.

Even so, counselling may not necessarily relate to helping students determine what they want, regardless of social pressures, as this relates more to individualistic values (Leong et al., 2010). It may instead relate to helping students internalize and integrate the values of what others want for them in order to increase their feelings of autonomy in choosing to conform. SDT advises that counsellors should also support clients' autonomy in the change process within counselling (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

Regardless of collectivist versus individualistic cultural values, conformity to norms is required by society in many situations. People are social beings, and as individuals develop and settle the challenge of identity differentiation, the trend is toward greater conformity (McAdams & Olson, 2010). In consideration of conformity as an adaptive behaviour, the above advice will likely apply across cultures, not only those from collectivist cultures. For instance, a student may need support with internalizing values that allow for greater autonomy in meeting academic expectations. The results of this study suggest that family values for working hard may be generalized to this setting, for example. Further, in supporting students undergoing identity formation, counsellors may explore with students their attitudes toward social norms, values, and expectations; and support them in internalizing these and possibly even the value of conforming to norms.

With respect to adult students versus younger students, counsellors may focus on empowering adult students in hierarchical university cultures in order to work toward

increased autonomy. Alternately, counsellors can expect that many younger students will need support in increasing their competence in university environments that require increased independence, self-direction, responsibility, and initiative. While SDT posits that the need for autonomy is universal, the current results suggest that development plays a role in readiness for autonomy in certain aspects of life.

Personal Experience with the Research Project

Looking back on my experience with this thesis, I think that I learned a lot about phenomenological and qualitative methodology. I was interested in experiencing what it might be like to complete a study from the ground up. Starting with a research question, and asking it. Analysing the data prior to full saturation in the literature on the topic allowed for a less biased and clearer understanding of the experiences of the participants. For example, I believe there was less that I needed to bracket in this analysis than there would have been.

The literature review definitely had me thinking about the numerous angles that my thesis could have taken, and even determining which aspects to narrow in on and include in the review was a process in itself. Still, a major drawback of this approach was that my questions were not organized based on the literature and what might have been helpful in filling the gap in knowledge. In a sense I lucked out in that this study was not done before, and that I was able to provide a useful contribution to the literature.

Knowing what I know now about psychological processes such as acculturation I would have preferred to have used longitudinal methodology. Further, an understanding

of the literature might have guided me toward a mixed methods design, where perhaps I would inquire into cultural values, acculturation, identity, and conformity through interviews as well as standardized scales. Yet, perhaps this study mostly opens up the inquiry on this subject and creates space for future studies to apply a more complex methodology that can provide stronger evidence for the usefulness of combining the various aspects of this topic. In that respect I think I am satisfied in saying that this is a simple exploratory study that takes a quick glance at a transition process using a perspective that has mostly been just alluded to in the literature: seeing the dynamics of social pressure and conformity in acculturation in the context of transitioning to university life.

Conclusion

This study found that students' experiences of conformity in acculturation to university related to themes that were represented as internal and external factors that related to outcomes. The results were discussed with respect to theories on development and motivation as were relevant for this population. Perceptions of social pressure and conformity were discussed in relation to goals and motivation for these students. Descriptions associated with conformity were discussed in relation to identity development for young students and to situational constraints for adult students.

While adult students experienced significant cultural adjustments during this transition due to the work to school transition, this study highlights that even between educational settings the educational culture was very different for many students. While

adult students and some younger students who had taken at least a year off experienced a work to school transition, those who transitioned directly from high school experienced significantly different expectations from the university than they were used to in an educational setting. Those who took time off after high school may have already experienced increased freedom and responsibility in their work environments or from leaving home prior to this transition. However, for those who did not, this aspect of emerging adulthood merged with the transition to university creating an interesting dynamic in their acculturation to university.

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APPENDIX A: Letter of Ethics Approval

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Poster

Study Information

Study Name Conformity Experiences in Acculturation to University

Abstract Credit

Description You will participate in a semi-structured interview, in which you will be asked about your experiences acculturating to your program in your first year at the University of Calgary.

Eligibility Requirements Adequate Understanding of English

Sign-Up Restrictions None

Duration 30 to 60 minutes

Credits 1.0 Credits

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APPENDIX C: Participants Consent Form



Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Jenine Hamonic, Education, Applied Psychology, [REDACTED], jhamonic@ucalgary.ca

Supervisors:

Dr. Kevin Alderson, Education, Applied Psychology, (403) 220-6758, alderson@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Mike Boyes, Social Sciences, Psychology, (403) 220-7724, boyes@ucalgary.ca

Title of Project:

Conformity Experiences in Acculturation to University

Sponsor:

(If the project is funded, identify the funding source here)

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research project is to improve our understanding of how students experience conformity while acculturating to their program in their first year of study. No research looking at students' perspectives and motives related to conformity and acculturation in university has yet been done, and it is believed that information gained may be applied to the counselling setting.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

You will participate in a semi-structured interview, in which the researcher will ask questions about your experience adapting in your first year of your program at the University of Calgary. The researcher will attempt to gain an accurate understanding of your experiences through collaborative discussion. The interview will be audio recorded. Expected length of the interview is between 30 and 60 minutes. At the end of the study, you will be asked to review the themes of the study to indicate if they fit for you and appear to be inclusive of your experience. You will be given a two week window in which you will be able to provide feedback, after which it will be assumed that you approve of the interpretation of results.

At the end of the study, a summary will be offered to interested participants (please note: you will need to provide your email address on this consent form for this to occur) which will consist of a brief summary of all significant results. We will outline which responses were particularly common, and the nature of the relationship between conformity and acculturation in this setting. We will also include any conclusions we have drawn from the research.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to participate altogether or you may chose to not answer particular questions for whatever reason. Additionally, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without loss of benefits or penalty.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

No personal identifying information will be collected in this study. Participants will remain anonymous in reports of the data, and this consent form will be stored separate from them. Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your age, gender, and program of study.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

As personal values, attitudes, and behaviours are requested, privacy and anonymity are of the utmost importance. Participants will be interviewed in a space where confidentiality can be assured. Should a situation present itself whereby a participant is upset to the point that simply withdrawing from the research is not sufficient to alleviate their distress, we advise that the university offers a confidential counselling service to all current students. Students may receive three sessions free per academic year. The Counselling Centre is located at MacEwan Student Centre – Room 375 and will accept either walk-in or telephone calls (220-5893) to make an intake appointment with a counsellor.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

This data will be used towards the completion of a Master's thesis project. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to information given. Audio tapes and transcriptions will not contain participant names, and will be stored separately from the informed consent forms so that even the investigators will not be able to ascertain the identity of the respondent. Only group information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. After the study is finished the audio tapes, transcriptions, coded data, and informed consent forms will be stored in separate locked drawers in Dr. Kevin Alderson's office on campus for a period of five years, after which they will be destroyed. If you decide to withdraw from the study, information gathered up to that point will be retained and used. Lastly, the aggregate data may be used again in a future study that re-assesses students' use of conformity and acculturation in this setting.

Signatures (written consent)

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Jenine Hamonic,
Division of Applied Psychology, Faculty of Education
[REDACTED], jhamonic@ucalgary.ca
And Dr. Kevin Alderson, Division of Applied Psychology, Faculty of Education
(403) 220-6758, alderson@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email rburrows@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this study at its completion, please provide your email address below (print legibly, indicating clearly whether a digit is a number or a letter – example: a “zero” or the letter “O”):

APPENDIX D: Debriefing Script

Debriefing Script

The purpose of this research project is to improve our understanding of the experience of acculturation to an educational setting with respect to aspects of conformity. No research to date has explored this concept. Research on conformity has found it to be an adaptive mechanism that aids with socialization, and it may also be implicated in the process of acculturation. In reviewing literature on acculturation, authors have pointed out the need for qualitative research that can provide descriptions relevant to understanding the context in which acculturation occurs, as well as to understanding the process of undergoing acculturation. The main objective for this study is to answer the question, “How do students in their first year of study experience acculturation and conformity in adapting to their program at the University of Calgary?” This study will provide some essential deep descriptions related to the process of acculturation that the current literature is lacking. Further, these descriptions may be useful in informing counselling practice in this setting.

The goal of this study is to explore students’ acculturation experiences and create descriptions that will inform our understanding of the contextual and particularistic nature of this acculturation process and the meaning individuals ascribe to it relative to the role of conformity. Participants recruited from the student population at the University of Calgary are asked about their experiences with acculturation in their first year of study with respect to aspects of conformity. Specifically, this study is interested in how values, expectations, roles and priorities might conflict and eventually be resolved by individuals transitioning into their student role. The phenomenological qualitative methods will allow for deep descriptions of the essence of this experience.

Knowledge gained in this study will add to the current literature on acculturation, conformity, and the transition to university. Findings will be presented at conferences, published in a relevant journal, and shared with participants, students, professors, and counsellors at the University of Calgary and other interested individuals and organizations. Understanding in this area will be useful for informing interventions for those who struggle with acculturation in educational settings. It may inform counselling within universities, or influence the development of programs for students. At the organizational level, descriptions of students’ struggles may influence how faculties and departments respond to their students’ voiced concerns.