



The Moral Ecology of Unstructured Speaking on Study Abroad: Finding Speaking Opportunities

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Abstract

This report describes the moral phenomena that students in an intensive Arabic study abroad program encountered as they tried to find speaking opportunities for themselves outside of institutional arrangements. The ways that participants went about speaking activities were accompanied by tensions that they had to deal with throughout the program. They found themselves obliged to consider values such as decisiveness, independence, and fairness as they tried to become better conversationalists, cultural insiders, and friends with the people they met. Additional research using the same analytic framework could reveal deeply practical insights for the benefit of language learners and practitioners.

Abstract in Arabic

يصف هذا التقرير تجارب طلاب في برنامج مكثف لدراسة اللغة العربية بالخارج وخصوصاً الظواهر الأخلاقية التي واجهوها في محاولة إيجاد فرص طبيعية للتحدث. تغلبوا على توترات طول البرنامج نتيجةً لطرقهم في أنشطتهم التحدثية. كانوا ملزمين باعتبار قيم مثل الحسم والاستقلال والإنصاف لكي يصبحوا متحدثين أفضل ومطلعين على الثقافة وأصدقاء الأشخاص الذين التقوهم. يمكن البحث الإضافي في نفس المنهج أن يكشف رؤى عملية عميقة لتعلمي اللغات والمهنيين.

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1. Introduction

In Leo van Lier's (2004) discussion of an ecological perspective for language learning, he said that "there is no value-free or value-less language use" (p. 185). Steffensen and Kramersch (2017) repeated van Lier's statement and further referenced Bert Hodges (2015), who described "language as a values-realizing activity" (p. 712). These claims have deep implications for language learning research, but examples of empirical research that show what these implications are in practice have not yet materialized, even when similarly difficult and pivotal concepts have received increased attention from researchers in the past decade, such as agency (Brown, 2014; Jackson, 2011; Mercer, 2012; Xiao, 2014) or identity (Barkhuizen, 2017; Diao, 2017; Kinginger, 2015; see also Norton, 2013).

Although language learning research has sometimes addressed the issue of differing cultural values, often in a study abroad context (Kinger, 2016; Plews, 2015; Seo & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005; Tan & Kinginger, 2013), the object of inquiry tends to be identity, agency, or concepts other than the values themselves. References to values in language learning research often assume that the reader already has a basic understanding of what a "value" is and provide no further explanation. As no explanation is usually given, values are often implicitly defined as something that people have, a cognitive or social construct that is one of many other subjectivities. While research focused on other concepts might not be expected to provide further explanation, a more deliberate consideration of values is necessary to reveal what van Lier's and Hodges' claims mean for language learning.

In preparation for a similar discussion in the broader field of psychology, Brinkmann (2004, p. 58) cautioned:

... granted that moral properties are an irreducible part of the human world ... we must be particularly careful in first understanding this moral dimension, since moral properties very easily drop out of consideration, or become reduced to something they are not, when investigated with the tools of current psychological methodology.

Bird et al. (2021) outlined one way to understand the value-based or “moral dimension” of language learning by synthesizing insights from value-based approaches to language (Hodges, 2015) and learning (Yanchar, 2016). The three primary claims synthesized from these approaches are that (1) language learning has intrinsic goods, (2) participation in language learning requires balancing contextual demands to effectively realize these goods, and (3) the way someone balances these demands and goods constitutes taking a position relative to other possible positions. This framework provides one way to define and conduct inquiry regarding values without oversimplifying them into something they are not.

Language research from a value-based perspective can contribute meaningfully to various theoretical discussions, such as providing conceptual details for the negotiation of difference (Kinging, 2010), providing an additional lens through which to see phenomena commonly revealed by critical theories, or encouraging a “practice turn” in related research fields. Furthermore, articulating the values involved in language learning, and describing how people navigate the moral phenomena of specific contexts, can generate uniquely practical insights for future learners and practitioners. Many approaches to qualitative inquiry can produce thick descriptions of participant experiences and insights that are transferable to other contexts, but detailing how a participant engaged in a practice and somehow navigated its moral complexities can provide a “practical bridge between abstract and everyday ethics” (Yanchar & Slife, 2017, p. 18). It may be that sharing insights along these lines with practitioners and learners may prove more useful, or useful in a different way, than sharing the “best practices” or “rules of thumb” that research tends to produce.

In this paper we share insights related to the value-based, or moral, phenomena revealed in the experiences of university students who participated in a semester-long, intensive Arabic study abroad program in Amman, Jordan. The participants considered here all struggled with an assignment to regularly converse with Arabic-speakers *outside* of their structured classes and appointments at the language institute, an activity that we will call “unstructured speaking.” Unstructured speaking was identified as an important practice related to the broader practices of studying abroad and language learning. A salient phenomenon relevant to this practice was how participants went about *finding* opportunities to speak. Consequently, the general research question that guided this inquiry was: what was the moral ecology of

unstructured speaking that participants inhabited during study abroad, and how did finding speaking opportunities fit into that moral ecology?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework we selected to answer this question draws on Taylor's (1985, 1989) philosophical position of hermeneutic moral realism and, more fundamentally, Heidegger's (1962, 1971) hermeneutic phenomenology, along with more recent interpretations of his work by others (Dreyfus, 1992, 2014; Guignon, 1983; Hatab, 2000). Hermeneutic moral realism is not concerned with "values" and "morality" as defined in classical ethical theories or common religious or political connotations. Nor does it define values as fundamentally cognitive or social constructions, as implied in language learning and social science research generally.

It is instead concerned with the "ordinary ethics of concrete practices" (Yanchar & Slife, 2017, p. 18), with the mostly tacit or implicit meanings involved in all human activities. From this perspective *practices* are the fundamental access point for understanding human life in general, and values are the boundaries and guides that give practices form. As "moral realism" suggests, values are as real as the practices that they constitute. From social psychology, Hodges (2015) concurs that values are "ontologically real demands, obligations, and opportunities" (p. 715), without which human activity would be shapeless and confused (for more on hermeneutic moral realism see Brinkmann, 2004; Slife & Yanchar, 2019).

One important matter that must be addressed in the context of study abroad research is the question of culture. Can different value systems found in various cultures be explained as anything other than social constructions? How does this interpretive frame account for cultural differences? The short answer is that hermeneutic moral realism does not claim that individual or social interpretation does not happen, but it is rather concerned with the stuff of practices that "seems to stand or have staying power even when it contradicts preference or prejudice" (Yanchar & Slife, 2017, p. 4). Hickman (2019), who addresses this matter in depth, adds that "these elements that 'push back' against us, *are not reducible* to interpretation" (p. 60, emphasis in original). As will be shown in the results of this study, analysis from a hermeneutic moral realist frame can reveal unique insights regarding issues commonly studied from a sociocultural or feminist perspective (e.g., gender).

Building on the pre-understanding of values and language learning presented by Bird et al. (2021), the analysis for this study uses the analytic framework proposed by Yanchar and Slife (2017). Their framework defines a practice as a moral ecology, which can be described by examining its constituent parts and their relationships. Here we outline terms and definitions for some of these parts and relationships that will enable discussion of the findings later on.

Moral Goods: Setting aside other meanings of the word “good,” a moral good is *the* good(s) that a practice inherently performs. People may have ulterior motives or various purposes to engage in a practice, but moral goods are intrinsic to, and help define, what a practice is. For example, a person may engage in teaching at a school for any reason (e.g., to earn a paycheck), but teaching cannot accurately be called teaching if its inherent purposes (e.g., sharing knowledge with students) are not pursued. Similarly, this paper will show through the experience of the participants that there were inescapable moral goods that participants had to consider if participated in unstructured speaking.

Moral Reference Points: In addition to moral goods, participating in a practice would not be possible without guides to *how* people can or should carry out the practice. For example, teaching requires that a teacher consider better or worse ways to teach. A particular context may demand that a teacher be both patient and exacting, while any improper balance of these values potentially could hinder teaching. These values (and many others) are moral reference points to which participants in practices must look to comprehend in order to comprehend what a practice is and how one can do it well. The experiences of the students in this study revealed many such moral reference points, some of which demanded more of their consideration than others.

Moral Tensions: Moral ecologies can be complex and confusing, especially for those who are new to a practice. The uninitiated may not align themselves fully with the moral goods of the practice, or as contexts change even experienced practitioners may find that moral reference points that they were familiar with before are newly complicated. These and other types of moral tensions were observed in the experience of students engaged in unstructured speaking.

3. Methods

3.1. Data Collection

The data for this study came from the experiences of participants in a 15-week intensive Arabic study abroad program in Amman, Jordan. The program was run by a large, private university in the U.S.A. and hosted by an Arabic language institute in Amman. Students had completed two years of Arabic coursework and had reached Intermediate proficiency before the program. Most students, including those selected for this analysis, reached Advanced proficiency by the end of the program. The first author traveled with the students to Jordan as one of multiple administrators and remained with them for the program's duration, observing and helping with activities at the institute where they had formal classes.

The data were originally collected for a separate analysis (see Bird, 2021) using an interpretive grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 2006), but the topics and the depth of the information gathered in this extant data set revealed the need for a more in-depth analysis of the moral configurations of practice in this setting. During data collection the first author adhered to several standards of trustworthiness to improve the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), including triangulation, prolonged engagement, and persistent observation.

The first author held a round of semi-structured interviews with each student during the first weeks of the program and reviewed weekly self-evaluations that they wrote during the same timeframe. The content of these interviews ranged a great deal, but it became clear that students' speaking experiences outside of the institute were a topic of greater concern than others. Thus, the study narrowed in on those who struggled with these speaking activities in some way. Students were asked to submit regular reports as part of the program, where they reported some basic information about their speaking efforts (e.g., time spent speaking, level of engagement) and reflected on their progress and challenges. By triangulating this information with observations and the initial interviews, the first author selected nine of the 28 total participants for further data collection.

The first author held a second (and for some, a third) round of interviews with these students after the 10th week of the program, where participants provided updates on issues from the first interviews and shared new struggles and successes. While the very nature of unstructured speaking did not lend itself to systematic observation, on occasion the first author was able to informally

observe participants interacting with Arabic speakers outside of the institute. This helped corroborate and expand some of the information heard in interviews or read in self-evaluations. After the program ended the complete data set for each student consisted of at least two interview recordings and transcripts, weekly self-evaluations, daily speaking logs, and observation notes taken throughout the program.

The results of the aforementioned grounded theory analysis provoked questions about the values that participants dealt with during their sojourn, and the decision was made to analyze the data again using a hermeneutic moral realist framework to see what additional insights could be learned. During an initial review to re-establish basic familiarity with the data, seven of the nine participants for whom we had data were selected for this additional analysis. One participant was excluded because of a lack of relevant data, and another participant was excluded because his experience differed so greatly from the others that a separate analysis would be needed to adequately represent it. The final group of participants, identified here by pseudonyms, is described briefly in Table (1). The gender ratio of the participants reflected the overall ratio of students in the program.

Name	Gender	Undergraduate Major
Andrea	Female	Middle Eastern Studies / Arabic (TESOL minor)
Austin	Male	Economics
Benjamin	Male	Middle Eastern Studies / Arabic
Chris	Male	Middle Eastern Studies / Arabic
Judy	Female	Middle Eastern Studies / Arabic
Mitchell	Male	Linguistics
Thomas	Male	Middle Eastern Studies / Arabic

TABLE (1): PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

3.2. Data Analysis

The theoretical framework described previously informed a thematic analysis of the data, similar to a process used in other research from a hermeneutic moral realist perspective (Gong & Yanchar, 2019; McDonald & Michela, 2019; Yanchar & Gong, 2019, 2020), except that this study used extant data and did not conduct an analysis in tandem with data collection. To improve trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) we conducted progressive subjectivity checks and shared early findings with peers who were familiar with the analytic framework.

To begin, the first author read through the interview transcripts and self-evaluations for each student in order to become basically familiar with their accounts. During this review memos were recorded to document thoughts about the data. While other practices were discussed, it came as no surprise that “unstructured speaking” was the dominant practice of interest in this data, since participants were selected on criteria related to their speaking experiences. Shortly afterward the focus narrowed to “finding speaking opportunities” as an important phenomenon for the practice of unstructured speaking.

Having narrowed the analysis to a specific practice and a related phenomenon, the analysis proceeded using a set of a priori codes that reflected the phenomena described in Yanchar and Slife’s (2017) framework (see Table 2). The intent of these codes was to identify possible goods, reference points, and tensions that showed up as participants tried to find opportunities for unstructured speaking. After doing this for each participant’s self-evaluations, the same process was repeated for the interview transcripts. Throughout the coding process more memos were recorded alongside the data to record patterns and other insights for later reference.

Code	Description
Value judgments	Statements about the worth of something, about whether something was good, bad, ineffective, working well, etc.
Goods	Statements that reflect the inherent reasons participants were engaging in unstructured speaking.
Reference points	Statements that reflect how participants went about finding opportunities, engaging in unstructured speaking.
Practical participation	Statements about what participants did in practice.
Tensions	Statements about difficulties, paradoxes, confusions, or complications in practice.

TABLE (2): MORAL CONFIGURATION CODES

After completing coding, codes were combined according to their similarities or split if they seemed to hide too much detail. This process produced a number of initial themes that were then refined by comparing them with memos or by inferring how they might fit together in a moral ecology framework. For example, an early theme had to do with finding speaking opportunities that were logistically convenient. However, trying to place this as a good, reference point, or complication led to deleting it as a theme and integrating its components into other themes that fit better into a description of

a moral ecology. This process continued until certain reference points and tensions stood out from the rest in the experiences of these participants.

The final task of analysis was to organize the themes in such a way that they adequately described a moral ecology. This revealed unique challenges, including some issues related to the question of culture discussed in the methodology. This led to a re-evaluation of some of interpretations up to that point and to additional thematic refinements.

4. Description of Unstructured Speaking

Before going on to findings, a plainer description of what participation in unstructured speaking looked like is needed to understand the themes that emerged from the analytic framework (see Bird, 2021, and Bird and Belnap, 2018, for an in-depth description of the program and its activities). In addition to participating in formal classes at an Arabic language institute, participants were asked to spend at least ten hours each week speaking Arabic with people outside of their classes. Two of these hours were provided each week through arranged speaking partners at the institute, but the participants were responsible for filling the other eight hours of speaking, or at least trying to find people with whom to speak. While other parts of the program were scheduled and dependable, unstructured speaking required constant flexibility and re-strategizing from participants.

This was clear in the ratio of time spent looking for speaking opportunities compared with actual time spent speaking. On some days participants spent nearly all of their planned speaking time looking for conversations and precious little time actually conversing. On other days, hardly any searching was needed. Based on self-reported data, the participants in this study spent on average about 10 minutes finding for every 60 minutes spent speaking. Furthermore, it was common in interviews and weekly self-evaluations for participants to reflect on their efforts to generate speaking opportunities for themselves. The question of “how am I going to put myself in conversations with Arabic speakers?” hung over participants day after day, week after week during the program. Those who found opportunities early in the week could afford to set this issue aside for a time but thought still had to be given for the next week’s plans. While participants did not often consciously break down the *how* of finding speaking opportunities, the ways that they completed this task might be usefully described by addressing the following questions: Who did participants speak with? Where did they go? When did they

go? Who accompanied them, if anyone? For the sake of clarity and brevity, from here on we will refer to people with whom participants spoke as speaking “partners,” and those fellow students who were with participants during speaking activities as their speaking “companions.”

Who Did Participants Speak With? At the beginning of their sojourn, participants were quick to speak with anyone who would (sometimes literally) give them the time of day. Over time, most participants became more selective of their speaking partners. Service encounters and other captive audiences (e.g., taxi drivers, salesmen) were a consistent source of quality conversations for some, while others looked for Arab peers in the same stage of life (e.g., university students). All but a few participants were limited to speaking with perfect strangers early on, but as soon as they managed to get someone’s contact information, meeting with someone familiar became an option. Participants spoke with their contacts over the phone or texted them to check their availability and set an appointment to meet in person. As they met more people, they could be more selective of who to spend their time with, assuming that their partners were equally interested. Very few participants managed to build a large enough network of acquaintances, or develop strong enough friendships, that finding new opportunities became unnecessary. Most participants had to keep making new acquaintances in case prior acquaintances became unavailable for some reason. Some participants also found that interacting with families in their neighborhood was socially acceptable and provided opportunities close to home.

Where Did They Go? The location of speaking activities varied greatly as well, though it was limited to certain geographical boundaries. Participants could, and sometimes did, travel to more distant parts of Amman, such as the downtown area or neighboring suburbs and towns, but the majority of unstructured speaking took place in regular locations close to the language institute. The University of Jordan was usually a short taxi-ride away, a mall and numerous shops surrounded the host language institute, and an English-Arabic language exchange took place weekly across town. Even if participants found one location more fruitful than another, circumstances often required that they visit a variety of places to get enough speaking time. For some participants, the most comfortable place to speak with Arabs was in the private space of their own apartment or that of other students.

When Did They Go? Unstructured speaking was nearly impossible in the mornings, as appointments at the language institute often began at 8:00 AM

and were followed closely by classes and other appointments. When their regular commitments ended about 1:00 PM, participants were free to structure the remainder of their day. Walking through the halls of the language institute right after classes ended might reveal some participants grabbing something to eat and resting, some getting a fast start on reading assignments, some heading into scheduled speaking appointments at the institute, some talking with other students about where to go for speaking that day, and others making plans over the phone with a friend. Certain times of day were better for speaking than others, since some acquaintances had classes during the afternoon, or they had work or other commitments in the evening. Weather played a role as well since summer weather in the early weeks, or winter weather in the later weeks, could make being outside uncomfortable at the wrong time of day. For their safety participants also abided by a curfew and apartment visitor restrictions that made nighttime speaking activities a rare opportunity as opposed to a regular possibility.

Who Accompanied Them? One complicated aspect of finding speaking opportunities for participants was going with other students to do speaking activities. During their first days abroad, anytime after dark, or anywhere outside the city of Amman, the program required that students travel in small groups for safety. For some participants, this was a temporary crutch that they discarded whenever possible; for them, going alone was the best way to get the most out of their speaking. While traveling together was at times required (to follow program rules) or expedient (to share taxi costs), many participants tried to split up from other students after arriving at a location where they might find one-on-one speaking opportunities. When conversations ended, they could regroup again to travel back. In the latter half of their sojourn, participants tended to find more intensive speaking opportunities (dinner with a family, wedding parties, activities with a group of Arab friends) that could easily provide good speaking opportunities for multiple students. Even though speaking alongside other students was common throughout their stay, very few participants depended on other students for conversational support toward the end of the program.

5. Findings

Having described what unstructured speaking looked like in general terms, we now turn to presenting five themes from a moral realist perspective that were related to finding opportunities for unstructured speaking. The interviews and weekly self-evaluations revealed that participants were

generally concerned with how effective they were at unstructured speaking, and that they regularly reflected on how they might be more effective by changing how they went about finding speaking opportunities. The findings describe the moral ecology of unstructured speaking that informed participants' evaluations of what were good or better ways to find speaking opportunities. Specifically, the findings describe the goods, reference points, and tensions that seemed most salient for the participants.

5.1. Balancing Moral Goods

Although the students' program clearly outlined and regularly emphasized a broad range of learning outcomes, some objectives seemed easier for students to grasp and focus on. Not surprisingly, the data clearly put linguistic proficiency forward as one good of unstructured speaking that received a lot of attention from participants. However, there were actually *multiple* goods that were intrinsic to this practice. Participants' engagement in finding opportunities for unstructured speaking involved striving for three goods: linguistic proficiency, cultural familiarity, and friendship. In other words, participating in unstructured speaking meant becoming more than just Arabic language users, but also Arab cultural insiders and friends with Arabs.

Although few participants deliberately pursued all of these, moral goods are not dependent on personal preferences or desires; ignorance or resistance to them does not make them disappear. In fact, one participant's active resistance to making friends with his speaking partners provided evidence that friendship was actually an intrinsic good of unstructured speaking, because he could not fully participate in unstructured speaking without pursuing it to some degree. Benjamin was uncomfortable with the idea of making friends with his speaking partners, in part because he felt that real friendships were not possible in the short time of the study abroad program:

If I could become proficient in Arabic, you know, and not have to go make friends, then yeah... I definitely don't have any like, at least, perceived prejudices against the people here. I think they're great and some of the nicest people ever, but the relationships aspect of it is a little different for me. [...] I think if I was like, living living here it wouldn't be a problem, but the fact that I'm here for a couple of months, it kinda accentuates that for me.

Benjamin's negative orientation to friendship shaped the way he went about finding speaking opportunities. He was careful not to give speaking partners the impression that he wanted to be anything more than that, a

speaking partner. He avoided asking for and giving out contact information, and only met with people repeatedly if they happened to be around when he was looking for speaking opportunities. Perhaps not unexpectedly, Benjamin was burnt out after a couple months of this. At the end of the program, when other students were having some of the most fulfilling and successful unstructured speaking experiences with their Arabic-speaking friends, Benjamin was struggling more than ever to go out and speak with people he did not know.

Another participant, Andrea, took the opposite position. The program's focus on linguistic proficiency made her uncomfortable with unstructured speaking activities because she prioritized relationships more. "It's important that I learn Arabic, but.... I want to focus on making lasting friendships and bonds with people no matter who they are or what language they speak." As with Benjamin, Andrea's unbalanced orientation to the goods of unstructured speaking turned out to be problematic. While she did make some friendships, her lackluster pursuit of linguistic proficiency limited the number and depth of conversations that she could have with Arabic-speaking friends. Like Benjamin, she found it harder and harder to engage in unstructured speaking as time went on.

Other participants seemed to better balance their pursuit of linguistic proficiency, cultural familiarity, and friendship in practice. For example, Thomas was not satisfied with the speaking opportunities he found early on in the program because they did not yield culturally rich discussions and prospects for close friendship. In his interviews he mentions each of the three goods in relation to speaking activities, and in the pursuit of one good he often realized another. After getting to know a few Arabic speakers with whom he could have culturally interesting discussions, Thomas developed strong relationships and found that language learning opportunities came naturally. At about the same time that Benjamin was starting to tire of unstructured speaking, Thomas wrote this entry in his weekly self-evaluation:

This was a great week for speaking, and I had one of my most memorable experiences of the trip this last weekend. A group of us (5 Americans and 3 Jordanians) decided to take a trip down to Madaba on Thursday night. We went shopping, ate mandi, and made a campfire. There was nothing spectacular about what we did, but the company was great and there were many chances to use Arabic in new ways.

Thomas' balanced orientation yielded progress toward all three goods of unstructured speaking. If the speaking opportunities that he found did not afford progress toward all three goods, he evaluated them as inferior and tried other ways to find speaking opportunities.

As in the cases of Benjamin and Andrea, some participants seemed to strive so intently for *one* good that they struggled with *all* of the goods of unstructured speaking. As time went on, they found it more and more difficult to participate in unstructured speaking and eventually filled their time with other practices. Participation in unstructured speaking required the balancing of moral goods, and if participants failed to pursue even one of these, it made successful participation in practice more difficult in the long run.

5.2. Connection and Independence

Five moral reference points emerged from the analysis that seemed particularly impactful for finding good speaking opportunities. The first pair of reference points considered here deals with how participants' relationships figured into finding speaking opportunities and successful participation in unstructured speaking. The two reference points are connection and independence.

Connection refers to the network of contacts, acquaintances, and friendships that could potentially generate speaking opportunities. The simplest manifestation of this was participants inviting each other to "go speaking" with them at some planned location and time, even if they did not have a partner in mind. As participants got to know more and more people, being well-connected meant sharing specific speaking partners with each other with whom they had had success. Eventually they also shared invitations to special events such as dinners hosted by a speaking partner's family, engagement parties, or touring a nearby city. Another way that connection showed up was when participants made new acquaintances through previous speaking partners. It was not uncommon for speaking partners to introduce participants to their circle of friends and relatives, for example. As participants met more and more Arabic speakers and gathered their contact information, meeting with someone they already knew became easier and easier. Being well-connected meant that participants would only need to spend a few minutes messaging previous speaking partners, instead of searching a university campus or other space for new partners.

Independence meant that participants were responsible for their own unstructured speaking activities. In regard to holding conversations, it was important to most participants to find speaking opportunities that enabled one-on-one conversations with Arabic speakers. If other Arabic learners were involved in a conversation, responsibility for speaking was dispersed and provided less of a linguistic and social challenge, according to participants. Independence also showed up in the way participants went about finding speaking opportunities. While every participant in this study depended on existing relationships to some extent to find speaking opportunities, participants were also obliged to find some of their own speaking partners if they were intent on getting eight hours of unstructured speaking each week.

Independence was not a straightforward task for participants. In practice they encountered these values most often as they finished their classes at the institute and had to make plans for the rest of the day. If they did not quickly synchronize their plans with other students, then they would find themselves disconnected from some speaking opportunities. On the other hand, going out as a group was sometimes not conducive to one-on-one conversations, and decision-making (e.g., agreeing on where to go, when to leave a place) could be less efficient than going speaking by oneself. The few minutes after class when everyone was making plans often set the course for participants' speaking activities through how connected or independent they were.

Some participants leaned more heavily on their companions than others to find speaking opportunities, emphasizing connection more than independence. For example, Mitchell often traveled with friends to meet with a group of Arabic-speakers at the local university, an arrangement that was set up through the efforts of another participant. Once the two groups met, Mitchell would try to pair off with an Arabic speaker so that he could have an independent, one-on-one conversation, but his methods of finding speaking opportunities were still reliant on his connection to other participants. Similarly, Benjamin relied on his companions to help initiate conversations with people: "I think it just helps one with approaching strangers, a little bit, with the confidence and legitimacy of it."

Meanwhile, Andrea found early in the program that she could not depend on friends from previous Arabic classes to invite her to accompany them for unstructured speaking activities. "I can't rely on them. I feel like I have to take more responsibility for doing [speaking], and so I'm in that transition." Judy also sought more independence in her finding activities, in part because she felt

that she suffered from performance anxiety while speaking Arabic in front of her American peers. "Being around other classmates simply doesn't work for me. I'm anxious enough already, and I know if I'm around other people I'll inevitably end up letting them carry the conversation and I won't participate as much." At the time they said these things, Judy and Andrea found that the speaking opportunities afforded from their existing social connections were not as effective as what they could find by themselves. Before drawing on connections for speaking opportunities, they needed to make connections by themselves.

Most participants seemed to be somewhere in between the extremes highlighted above. Though Mitchell did most of his speaking in connection with other students, he sometimes tried to find his own partners when he could not find one-on-one conversations with the usual group. He also recognized that being too close to certain companions during speaking activities was less effective:

I noticed early on that I need to not go with [a particular companion]. I mean, he unintentionally dominates the conversation. People want to talk to him more cause he's a little more fluent, so it's easier [for them] to talk to him [than with me].

From the independent side of the spectrum, Andrea eventually became friends with other program participants who were more reliable as speaking companions. Much like the goods outlined in the first theme, unstructured speaking required participants to balance the reference points of connection and independence. Conditions sometimes required a shift in that balance, but both reference points were always in play.

Successful unstructured speaking required that participants find speaking opportunities through their own efforts *and* through the efforts of others. On one hand, forming a network of social connections enriched their options for speaking opportunities, allowing them to be more selective about which opportunities to fill their time with. On the other hand, finding their own speaking opportunities allowed participants to take more control of the conversations they had, without other students getting involved. Participants who managed to be both well-connected *and* independent could enjoy all these benefits.

5.3. Decisiveness and Naturalness

Another pair of reference points that emerged from the analysis had to do with the moments leading up to conversation. For many participants this seemed to be the apex of complications related to finding speaking opportunities. In Mitchell's words: "I think once I'm talking, I can talk, I don't feel anxious or nervous or anything, but I think it's just the initial... getting the conversation started." Approaching the start of a conversation was surprisingly complicated for some participants, especially when they were about to interact with someone new. A large array of different reference points was relevant for individual participants in these moments (e.g., humility, authenticity, creativity, courage), but here I discuss two in particular: decisiveness and naturalness.

Decisiveness while finding speaking opportunities meant quickly getting past the doubts and hesitations that participants encountered when they came into proximity with potential speaking partners. It meant opening one's mouth and engaging face-to-face with an Arabic speaker even if they were unsure about where the conversation would go and how well they would perform linguistically. Ultimately, all of a participant's efforts to find speaking opportunities hinged on whether they could bring themselves to actually start a conversation, and some participants were more decisive in this regard than others.

Naturalness meant blending in with the environment enough that participants could participate in unstructured speaking as an insider of sorts, even if it was often obvious that they were foreigners from their appearance and speech. Naturalness was a criterion that, once met, made it easier for participants to open their mouths and have meaningful conversations because they were already part of something that was of interest to potential speaking partners. The key here was to approach speaking partners in ways that did not feel overly contrived or pretentious.

For some, approaching speaking partners in a natural way was a cause for hesitation that prevented conversations from taking place, meaning that naturalness and decisiveness were in tension with each other in some situations. As Mitchell approached potential speaking partners, he would ask himself: "Is this going to be weird if I go up to this random person?" Even weeks into the program, Mitchell, Benjamin, Judy, and Austin were wary of approaching strangers in order to hold informal conversations, even though they openly talked about the need to be more decisive during their interviews.

After consulting a friend, Mitchell realized that the answer to his struggle was to find ways to blend in at the university where he most often looked for speaking opportunities. Others found that they could simply push past feelings of awkwardness, even if they were still uncomfortable with it. In Judy's words: "There's no other way other than just like, forcing yourself. Like, honestly, you have to just do it, get a meditation app to calm yourself in the morning, and then go out."

Other participants found it much easier to open their mouths. One of the more independent (though not extroverted) participants was Chris, who made it a point to initiate conversations with taxi drivers and shopkeepers that he met along his way. Whereas these tended to be low-priority interactions for many participants, Chris was determined to open his mouth with each taxi driver he met and see what kind of conversations could be had. He found that they were very receptive to engaging him in meaningful conversations if he took the initiative. "As far as they're concerned, they've never met another person in their life, and they'll tell their entire life story, and they want to know about everything in my life." Conversations with taxi drivers, none of whom he ever met more than once, turned out to be some of his favorite and most productive unstructured speaking activities.

For other participants, more time and preparation were needed to hold a natural and meaningful conversation. Students would share ideas for how to approach people naturally. For example, if students were looking for people to speak with on a university campus, they might first observe the area and try to fit in with what was going on there (e.g., studying on a bench along the sidewalk, asking somebody where a nearby building or event was). They would then wait for natural openings for conversation to show up. During a local election, participants received a class assignment to visit with people at nearby polling stations, where many participants found it easier to initiate conversations since they had a common interest with the people there. With a little bit of preparation, they found it natural to speak with complete strangers since they could start with questions relevant to what people were doing at the time.

Decisiveness and naturalness had a different kind of relationship than that discussed in previous themes. Whereas connection and independence were conceptually opposites of each other, naturalness seemed to be more of a potential roadblock for decisiveness than an opposite. If participants could figure out how to naturally approach speaking partners, then they found it

easier to open their mouths. Otherwise, they had to take Judy's approach and somehow force themselves to speak, even if it was initially awkward.

5.4. Treating Partners Fairly

Another important reference point by which participants evaluated potential speaking opportunities was whether they could treat their speaking partners with fairness. Some, though not all, participants expressed that they were uncomfortable speaking with someone if there was not a clear benefit for that someone. Satisfying this reference point required that participants invest something in speaking activities that made it worthwhile to their partners. We noticed three different ways that participants did this: financially, linguistically, and emotionally.

The most explicit form of investment was doing business. The possible exchange of goods (e.g., money for travel fare) often enabled conversation because there was a formal reason for interaction. Participants intuited that taxi drivers and shop owners were willing to speak with them to increase their likelihood of buying goods. Chris recognized that this presented a good way to find speaking opportunities: "In the store they don't get a lot of traffic, and you know they'll talk." In practice, the *possible* exchange of goods seemed to be a good enough investment for many participants to rationalize briefly speaking with a store owner. Upon reflection, though, Chris seemed to understand that there was something unfair about his strategy: "I don't buy stuff, which is not what they're hoping for, so maybe it's a one-sided benefit, but it's definitely helpful for me." Most interestingly, he seemed to know that doing right by speaking partners should guide the way he found speaking opportunities, but he took an apathetic stance toward this particular reference point. Or perhaps he found another way to make speaking practice worth the shopkeepers' time that I did not observe.

Another way that participants could provide value to their speaking partners was exchanging time spent speaking Arabic with time spent speaking English. Participants found many willing interlocutors at the local university and elsewhere who were trying to improve their English skills, and language exchanges were a quick way to be fair with everyone. Austin and Mitchell both experimented with exchanging English for Arabic, but after a while it became apparent that there were better ways to spend their time. Austin even decided to give his unstructured speaking time to other language practice rather than participate in exchanges:

There's not much benefit. I'll get a little bit of speaking, but it would be way better if I focused more on some [listening assignments] or something.... I really like the language exchange, but in these circumstances it's just not helpful to me.

Overall, language exchanges seemed to be a good way for participants to do right by their partners in the short term, but some participants seemed to value their limited time abroad too much to do them repeatedly.

Participants could also bring the possibility of friendship to their conversations. Showing sincere concern for people, taking interest in others' interests, and expressing a desire to continue meeting were a kind of emotional or social currency that made speaking mutually beneficial. Not all participants were interested in friendship, however, and this sometimes made them feel inauthentic or dishonest when they approached people. Benjamin was especially careful not to take advantage of speaking partners by sending false signals of friendship. "I didn't want to feel like I was using them because I didn't have those intentions to carry on a friendship. I was just trying to learn Arabic." As discussed in Theme 1, Benjamin struggled immensely to find good speaking opportunities in part because friendship was a good of unstructured speaking. How could he fully participate in a practice whose intrinsic purpose was to develop friendships, when he felt that such friendships were superficial? All other participants in this study were at least open to the possibility of friendship, even if they did not expect a deep, long-term relationship. Participants' pursuit of friendship, even if minimal, enabled them to offer the possibility of friendship as a way to do right by their speaking partners. Moreover, those who more actively pursued friendship did not seem to rely on financial or linguistic exchanges to find acceptable speaking opportunities.

5.5. Gender

Each of the themes up to this point has focused on part of the moral ecology of unstructured speaking, including its goods, reference points, and how these were in tension with each other or created other practical complexities for the participants. This final theme revisits some of the previous themes in light of gender differences that participants encountered as they were finding speaking opportunities. Becoming a good conversationalist, a cultural insider, and a friend of Arabs looked different for female participants than it did for male participants. Moreover, they had to deal with reference points in different ways than male participants if they wanted to successfully realize these goods of unstructured speaking. Below I present some of the differences that I

observed related to (1) balancing moral goods and (2) connection and independence.

5.5.1. Balancing Moral Goods

Pursuing the intrinsic goods of unstructured speaking as a male participant involved spending a lot of time with male Arabic-speakers in the public sphere of Jordanian society (i.e., anywhere outside of people's homes). It meant talking about things that male Arabic-speakers were interested in, seeing Arab culture through their view, and becoming their friend. At times this was less desirable for the male participants in this study. For example, Benjamin described himself as having more female friends back home than male friends, something that he could not replicate in Jordan since he rarely met Arab women and it would have been culturally taboo for him to approach them himself. Several male participants also reported growing tired of some conversation topics that young Arab males would bring up. Thomas was relieved when he found speaking opportunities with a few Arab males who were interested in the same things he was studying at the university. "I think their age and maturity level is the difference, because they talk about more sophisticated and mature things."

Female participants experienced similar constraints to those of the male participants, but with female Arabic-speakers and more often in the private sphere (i.e., in people's homes, family life, etc.). Even though she had regular speaking partners that she called friends, Judy wondered whether being limited to female Arabic-speakers had prevented her from having many meaningful conversations about cultural and political topics that were important to her:

Maybe it's a cultural thing. They (Arab women) are just a little bit less inclined to be interested in those things than Arab men, but I can't go around Arab men, so... Maybe it's because a lot of Arab women don't work? I don't know, because more Jordanian women have college educations than men... I don't know. Maybe I just didn't find the right crowd?

Being limited largely to one sphere of Jordanian society, whether the public or private, appeared to constrain the ways that male and female participants could find speaking opportunities, the kinds of people they met, and the topics of conversation they discussed. In a way, male and female participants found themselves in two different moral ecologies during the program, and consequently their participation in unstructured speaking offered different moral possibilities.

5.5.2. Connection and Independence

Being well-connected with other participants was even more critical for female participants if they wanted to find good speaking opportunities in the public sphere. They had to rely on male participants to escort them while traveling around Amman, especially after dark. Still, being with male participants did not guarantee safe or effective access to speaking. In her self-evaluations Andrea recounted difficult speaking experiences: “When we go out at night we go with the guys and that attracts Arab guys. We had a little incident with a couple of really enthusiastic guys hanging around us all night.” She then followed up on these experiences in a later interview: “It’s just hard to build relationships with [Arab] guys. They’re really great speaking practice... because they wanted to just sit there and talk for hours. But there’s always just a large wall there.”

The private sphere was a very different story. The private sphere was organized by families, including parents, children of different ages, and extended family members who often lived in the same building or neighborhood. Women, especially mothers, were often the gatekeepers of family life, which made it impossible for single male participants to find speaking opportunities in Arab homes. Even if they were invited to eat dinner at a friend’s home, male participants usually remained in a guest dining room for the duration of their visit and would not be introduced to the family as a whole. Female participants, however, were readily welcomed, introduced to everybody, and could participate in Arab family life in ways that were off limits to men. Andrea described one such experience that was a highlight of her time abroad:

I got to go to an engagement party of my neighbor's niece. It was so culturally different than anything I have seen here in Jordan.... It was nice to sit around for hours and eat with them, even if we did get back pretty late.... It definitely dispelled some stereotypes that I had.

Many male participants could barely fathom having such an intimate experience with an Arab family.

6. Discussion

The themes presented here hint at the richness of the moral ecology that participants inhabited during their study abroad. Specifically, the results address the phenomenon of finding speaking opportunities within the practice of unstructured speaking. Using a hermeneutic moral realist perspective

revealed that participation in these activities involved traversing a moral landscape of values that simultaneously enabled and complicated participation. In the context of this study abroad program, a balanced orientation toward the goods of unstructured speaking revealed ways of participating that more effectively realized all of those goods. Failing to balance the pursuit of those goods seemed to magnify tensions between reference points that otherwise would have led to more effective participation. This is not to say that those who achieved a greater balance avoided complexity and tension altogether. On the contrary, each day that participants engaged in unstructured speaking presented new circumstances for finding speaking opportunities and unique challenges to the moral stances that participants had previously taken. It seemed that every time they figured out a better way to find speaking opportunities, new hindrances would emerge. Over time, though, as participants became more familiar with the broader moral landscape of study abroad and consistently evaluated their efforts to pursue the goods of unstructured speaking, obstacles became less frequent and less severe.

The findings highlight three goods and five reference points, but there were also many other reference points that could not be addressed at length. Thinking of the tensions that participants encountered related to only five reference points, the complete collection that were revealed in the analysis is overwhelming (see Table 3). Again, participants did not explicitly *think* about all of these values together in practice—an ineffective, if not impossible, task—but their self-evaluations each week reveal that they tacitly understood that they were relevant to finding speaking opportunities. Sophisticated participation in unstructured speaking meant somehow satisfying these reference points that guided good practice.

Moral goods	Moral reference points	Moral reference points (cont'd)
Linguistic proficiency	Connection	Discernment
Cultural familiarity	Independence	Honesty
Friendship	Decisiveness	Humility
	Naturalness	Neutrality
	Fairness	Openness
	Authenticity	Persistence
	Calmness	Privacy/unobtrusiveness
	Commitment	Relatability
	Consistency	Restraint
	Courage	Safety
	Creativity	Spontaneity
	Diligence	Strategy

TABLE (3): THE MORAL PHENOMENA INVOLVED IN FINDING SPEAKING OPPORTUNITIES

In the remainder of the paper, we will discuss how the current findings can help future students identify and move past tensions they encounter in practice. We then offer a few suggestions for future language learning research from a hermeneutic moral realist perspective.

6.1. Identifying and Articulating Moral Tensions

An important theoretical connection for this research is to the “negotiation of difference” (Block, 2007; Kinginger, 2010), a concept which is particularly salient for study abroad participants who are often in close proximity to people from vastly different backgrounds and cultures than their own. As explained by Bird et al. (2021), a critical part of negotiating differences is identifying and articulating those differences. Previous study abroad research has also highlighted how articulating goals and expectations is associated with greater satisfaction and linguistic development. Allen (2010) claimed that participants in a French study abroad program who had specific practical goals (e.g., speaking French with my friend for 30 minutes today) fared better than those with a vaguer sense of what they were working towards (e.g., improving my accent). McGregor (2016) tells the story of Brad, a German learner who made some progress toward his goals but “remained unable to articulate” (p. 26) the expectations that he took on himself by participating meaningfully in a foreign society.

Something similar could be said about the participants in this program in regard to moral phenomena. This study reconceptualizes “differences” as moral tensions that also need resolution, and future discussions of the differences that participants encounter while abroad should keep in mind that the problems they face may in some instances be better understood in terms of the moral forces with which participants are grappling. If they are like the participants in this study, they may never have identified or explicitly considered these forces before, and participants cannot hope to make much progress toward solving a problem that is poorly defined.

We found that participants were rarely cognizant of the values involved in unstructured speaking. During interviews they seemed to understand implicitly what they were striving for and what was required to succeed, but only occasionally did a participant explicitly consider the goods and reference points of unstructured speaking. Even when they clearly discussed how an individual reference point (e.g., independence) was important to their success, it was a different level of complexity to describe the tensions they encountered

between multiple reference points. They lacked the vocabulary to identify and describe the tensions with which they were struggling, and as such, most of the progress that participants made toward the goods of unstructured speaking seemed to come about more through trial and error and less by strategy.

6.2. Implications of Treating Partners Fairly

Broader conversations around neo-colonialist discourses surrounding Americans studying abroad are also relevant to this study (Zemach-Bersin, 2007; Trentman & Diao, 2017). As Zemach-Bersin (2007) argues, discourses surrounding study abroad and the promotion of the “global citizen” mask a larger nationalist project to maintain U.S. hegemony throughout the world. These ideologies position language and cultural learning as a commodity that U.S. citizens have the right to consume. In this light, members of the target culture exist primarily to serve the needs of the students, particularly by providing the input and interaction necessary for language learning. Similarly, Trentman and Diao (2017) found that discourses surrounding study abroad, particularly in the Middle East or China, generally treat the experience of study abroad as a mechanism for gaining membership into a global cultural elite, without necessarily developing empathy for their Egyptian or Chinese interlocutors.

Though this study did not consider the larger discourses surrounding study abroad in general, nor the discourses surrounding study in the Middle East, it appears that some participants had a utilitarian attitude toward their speaking partners. However, this attitude may have been engendered by *local* discourses, rather than by the larger discourses about study abroad. The intensive nature of this study abroad program, and its requirements regarding unstructured speaking, created a culture focused on learning the language. While many participants benefitted from this culture, some participants acted as if learning Arabic was the only objective, even if the program and its administrators communicated other objectives. This was particularly notable in the case of Benjamin, the non-friend maker, whose sole interest in his Jordanian interlocutors appeared to be their usefulness for his linguistic development. Ironically, his sole focus on achieving linguistic proficiency appeared to hinder his progress as he neglected friendship and cultural familiarity which were intrinsic to unstructured speaking (and perhaps other practices that were part of the study abroad experience). If a utilitarian approach to unstructured speaking was self-defeating, it may not be unreasonable to assume that the same dynamic might apply to other practices in a study abroad context.

On the other hand, some of the participants grappled with and resisted this utilitarian approach. Andrea, for example, repeatedly criticized a culture among some students to do whatever it took to find speaking opportunities. She was instead satisfied to build meaningful relationships with anyone she met, even if they did not speak Arabic. Other participants usually were between these two extremes, learning the language while also trying to treat their partners fairly. Based on the information in this study, which was not approached from a neocolonialist lens, it seems that those participants who found a balance between the goods of unstructured speaking did not view their partners as tools for their own purposes. Thomas intended to maintain the friendships he made with partners beyond the end of study abroad, whether Arabic was a significant part of his future or not.

Interestingly, Benjamin's explanation *why* he was not interested in making friends with Arabic speakers may indicate a subtle resistance to neocolonialist discourse: he chose not to make friends because he did not want to be disingenuous (see Theme 1). Alternatively, Chris purposefully sought out speaking opportunities that gave him ample language practice without the expectation of friendship (i.e., speaking with storekeepers who were motivated by financial prospects). Though Chris and Benjamin were both reticent to pursue friendship, Benjamin seemed to give more heed to the reference point of treating partners fairly (see Theme 4), while Chris was comfortable setting it aside and finding speaking opportunities no matter what.

The differences between participants that we have highlighted in this section may be instructive for future administrators and students as they struggle to address neocolonialist critiques of study abroad. For example, administrators could make long-term relationships between students and people in the host country a serious consideration in program design so that those who are not easily inclined to making friends could pursue language proficiency without objectifying the people helping them learn. This example or other interventions would deserve careful implementation to avoid token changes that may only help students *feel* like they are not taking advantage of people during their study abroad. As the themes discussed earlier indicate, friendship and treating people fairly are intrinsic to unstructured speaking, and excellent programs will find ways to help participants pursue these.

6.3. Developing Familiarity

What change might be seen in the way learners participate in the practices of study abroad if they were more familiar with the reference points involved? Could they be prepared beforehand to handle particular tensions between reference points? And when they do find themselves dealing with tensions, what can be done?

A significant contribution of a moral realist framework and this research is providing a vocabulary to practical complications in a way that those who did not experience them can learn from. These descriptions are not generalizable in the sense of statistical inferences, but study abroad practitioners and future study abroad participants may find them transferable to similar practices and contexts. The themes of this report can be thought of as a legend on a map that helps travelers identify what they see along their journey and make educated decisions about how best to proceed. Whereas many of the participants in the current study did not have a clear picture of their own journey and the tensions they were facing until the end of the program, if they did at all, future participants could get a clearer sense of the tensions they might have to deal with before going abroad. They can also have a better sense of how to handle those tensions if and when they do face them.

Yanchar et al. (2013) might characterize these tensions as the result of “encounters with unfamiliarity” (p. 224), or interruptions to normally fluid, competent ways of acting. They also describe a few specific ways that learners might handle these encounters and return to competent participation in practice (see p. 225). Here we consider four of their suggestions that could be supported by the findings of this study: purposive study, self-reflection, amelioration, and innovation.

6.3.1. Purposive Study

Research has associated pre-program cultural training with improved linguistic gains and greater satisfaction on study abroad (Berg et al., 2009). Such trainings have become a common facet of many programs, and perhaps these deliberate attempts to familiarize participants with cultural norms and nuances could also provide a formal introduction to the goods, reference points, and tensions that they are likely to encounter. This could help participants even before going abroad to develop a greater “antecedent familiarity” with moral phenomena (Yanchar et al., 2013, p. 223) that could serve as a foundation for becoming familiar in practice later on.

Program leaders and instructors could help their participants to identify the multiple goods of unstructured speaking, emphasizing that linguistic proficiency is only one of those goods and is best realized by balancing it with the others. Some programs do emphasize cultural familiarity, but friendship is definitely not a common objective of language programs—not one that would be included in a serious program evaluation, anyway. Adjusting explicit program objectives to more closely match the goods of the practices involved in a program could be helpful. For example, I cannot help but wonder if Benjamin could have successfully participated in unstructured speaking if he had begun the program with a basic familiarity of all three goods of that practice. Many other students in the program were similarly hyper-focused on linguistic proficiency and might have approached unstructured speaking differently if all of its goods were discussed early on and reflected in the program's objectives.

6.3.2. Self-Reflection

Pre-program training could be complimented by deliberate and regular self-reflection, such as the weekly evaluations that the participants in this study completed. However, it should be expected that self-reflection will be limited to the vocabulary and concepts with which participants are already familiar. Study abroad practitioners might commonly understand that evaluating the language programs that they administer can only be effective if the goals and criteria for success of said program are well-defined. When values are well-defined, program evaluations can have a transformative effect (Norris, 2016), and the same might be true of participants evaluating their own participation in practices. Understanding practices from a hermeneutic moral realist perspective provides detailed description of the goals of practice (i.e., moral goods) and criteria for success (i.e., moral reference points), empowering participants to evaluate their efforts more effectively. The participants in this study regularly wrote and spoke about their struggles in the terms that program leaders gave them, and future programs may find that if leaders frame participants' struggles in a moral ecology that participants will find the vocabulary they need to evaluate themselves effectively.

Furthermore, if participants have already been exposed to specific examples of tensions that others have dealt with, self-reflection provides a vehicle for identifying those tensions in their own participation and thinking about how to resolve them. Future participants could use the reference points discussed in this study to scaffold self-evaluations related to unstructured speaking. They could consider individual reference points, such as how fair they

are with their speaking partners, and they could reflect on the degree to which they adhere to reference point pairs, such as connection and independence. Overall, the more participants know about the tensions that can arise as they try to find speaking opportunities, the better.

6.3.3. Amelioration

Beyond a conceptual understanding, participants also need to develop a practical familiarity with the moral ecologies that they inhabit. To resolve tensions and participate fluidly in a practice, participants can first look to existing solutions. Many of the concerns that participants brought up in their interviews and self-evaluations were dealt with by taking advantage of readily available options or resources. When Andrea saw that she could not rely on her social connections to find good speaking opportunities, an alternative—going out by herself to nearby shops—was immediately available. This was an effective strategy to resolve problems and make progress toward the goods of practice, but usually only in the short term. As time went on some participants sensed that there must be better ways to balance reference points that remained undiscovered.

6.3.4. Innovation

For the most persistent tensions, participants had to find *original* ways of finding good speaking opportunities. Dissatisfied with current offerings, Thomas discovered a novel way of finding speaking opportunities (i.e., hosting dinner discussions at his apartment) that other participants had not stumbled onto before. This innovation resolved multiple tensions at once and enabled Thomas and others to effectively participate in unstructured speaking, with only minimal interruptions, for the remainder of the program. Coming up with new ways to find speaking opportunities required being practically familiar with unstructured speaking already: Thomas found his new source of speaking opportunities by being well-connected in the first place. Maybe because of this, innovative ways of finding speaking opportunities were uncommon, and several participants simply gave up on unstructured speaking as a practice because they had outgrown existing solutions and could not come up with new ones.

6.4. Future Research

This study was limited in its scope, not only because it used an existing data set, but because it did not address unstructured speaking in its entirety. In fact, it only touched on participants actually *holding a conversation* as it was

directly relevant to themes about *finding speaking opportunities*. Holding a conversation is arguably a more central phenomenon to unstructured speaking, and additional research could build on the findings of this report and reveal additional reference points and tensions related to that particular aspect of unstructured speaking.

Research could also look beyond unstructured speaking to other practices that are part of a study abroad, language class, or a less formal context. MacIntyre (1985/1981) defined a practice as:

... any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity (p. 187).

Using this definition, a few practices related to study abroad that may merit investigation from a hermeneutic moral realist perspective may include:

- living with native speakers in a homestay or roommate arrangement,
- taking a content course as part of a direct enrollment program,
- interning with a foreign company, government, or other organization,
- maintaining long-distance relationships with friends made while living abroad.

Certainly, many other practices could also be analyzed from this perspective and yield valuable practical insights for language learners who engage in those practices. Also, many specific phenomena could be relevant to these practices, just as finding speaking opportunities was for unstructured speaking in this study.

Finally, it should go without saying that Arabic-speakers were an indispensable part of the moral ecology of unstructured speaking (see Themes 1 and 4), and their experiences interacting with students learning Arabic in their taxis, homes, neighborhoods, universities, and other spaces could provide additional insight. For example, future research could explore the various practices in which Arabic-speakers are engaged and the relationship that interacting with foreigners has with those practices.

7. Conclusion

This research takes seriously the statements from van Lier (2004) and Hodges (2015) regarding the value-laden nature of language use and demonstrates a framework for understanding the moral ecology of language

learning. The analysis revealed that participants evaluated their participation in unstructured speaking by appealing to certain moral reference points that guided their efforts to find good speaking opportunities. Some of these were salient for participants because they were in tension with one another (e.g., connection and independence, decisiveness, and naturalness) and others were simply ubiquitous (e.g., treating speaking partners fairly, gender). For the participants of this study, the tensions they encountered seemed to obscure how they might successfully participate in unstructured speaking. Some managed to resolve tensions and others seemed to give up on unstructured speaking as time went on. How participants went about finding speaking opportunities and how they dealt with moral tensions illustrated their individual orientations toward the moral goods of unstructured speaking. This study identified three such goods (i.e., linguistic proficiency, cultural familiarity, and friendship) that together constituted unstructured speaking in this particular study abroad context. Insights from this hermeneutic moral realist framework offer unique ways for learners and instructors to familiarize themselves with the tensions involved in learning a language during study abroad and prepare themselves and others to deal with them.

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