

# The use of conversation-based programming in public libraries to support integration in increasingly multiethnic societies

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## Abstract

This paper theoretically explores how conversation-based programming in public libraries might support meaningful interactions between immigrants and individuals from the dominant ethnic group, and as a result, facilitate integration. The theoretical lens consists of Intergroup Contact Theory and a social-psychological model of integration. Four examples of library-based conversation-based programming are given in order to illustrate and expand upon the theoretical discussion: the Women's Story Circle at the Reykjavik Public Library in Iceland; Expat Dinners at public libraries in Denmark; the Memory Group at the Torshov branch of the Deichman Library in Norway; and the Språkhörnan programme at Malmö City Library in Sweden. Based on these examples, conversation-based programming shows potential for supporting integration through its ability to support, to varying degrees, equal status contact, common goals, intergroup cooperation and explicit social sanction, as well as the extensive and repeated contact needed for intergroup friendships to be established.

## Keywords

Conversation groups, conversation-based programming, immigrants, integration, intergroup contact theory, language cafes, public libraries

## Introduction

Ethnic<sup>1</sup> diversification of societies is happening at an unprecedented pace due to increased international migration (Castles and Miller, 2005). However, immigrant-receiving societies often grapple with segregation: the physical, structural, and/or social separation of people of different ethnicities (Finney, 2009). This lack of interaction between ethnic groups can have negative consequences for society, sometimes resulting in social tensions and/or exclusion (Baumann, 2008; Bråmås, 2006; Burgess et al., 2005; Pred, 2000; Wacquant, 2008). Moreover, research indicates that ethnic diversity can drive down trust (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002; Putnam, 2007), yet research also indicates that trust can be increased if people are able to maintain diverse social networks (Stolle et al., 2008; Uslaner, 2010). However, immigrants and members of the dominant ethnic group often lack opportunities for meeting and engaging in meaningful interaction, which happens when people think, feel and act together (Blokland and van Eijk, 2009; Phillips, 2006).

Accordingly, a developing body of research indicates that public libraries are able to facilitate informal meetings between individuals from diverse backgrounds (Aabø and Audunson, 2012; Aabø et al., 2010; Audunson et al., 2011; Berger, 2002; Putnam, 2003) and provide opportunities for social interaction between immigrant groups and the majority population through library programming (Elbeshausen and Skov, 2004; Fisher et al., 2004; Vårheim, 2011). In some cases, immigrants report having higher levels of trust and feeling more comfortable interacting with other non-immigrant patrons at the library (Vårheim, 2014). Furthermore, a study on the Språkhörnan

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language cafe at Malmö City Library (Johnston, 2016) and another study at the Torshov Branch of the Deichmann Library in Oslo, Norway (Ulvik, 2010) corroborate library reports (Atlestam and Myhre, 2014; Gundersen, 2011; Hjerpe, 2014) that this type of programming (aka, conversation-based programming) can expand participants' social networks across intercultural lines and facilitate integration.

Though the research is promising, the mere existence of a language cafe or conversation group does not guarantee that friendships across intercultural lines and integration will result.

Empirical research is needed for understanding how such programming might facilitate these reported benefits, as well as a definition of integration for evaluating programme outcomes – something that is often missing in the literature on the topic. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to theoretically explore how conversation-based programming (e.g. library-based language cafes and conversation groups) might support meaningful interactions between immigrants and individuals from the dominant ethnic group, which in turn may contribute to the reduction of divides in social networks along ethnic group lines and foster integration.

The issues raised have implications for library staff and management who plan and coordinate programming for immigrants, likewise for policy makers who are interested in finding practical solutions for bridging divides in social networks and achieving greater social cohesion in increasingly multi-ethnic societies.

The focus of this paper is upon public libraries; the terms *library* or *libraries* refer to this type of library. *Immigrant* refers to people living permanently or temporarily outside of their country of birth. This includes, but is not limited to, economic migrants and other temporary workers; asylum seekers/refugees; international students; foreign spouses and other family members (family reunification); and so on. The term *receiving society* will be used to refer to the people of a country, and sometimes even a city or region, to which an immigrant moves and/or where they settle. This term has been chosen instead of the term *host society*. The term *receiving society* implies that an immigrant has been received by the society and, therefore, is part of the society, whereas the term *host society* implies that an immigrant is a guest of that society, which is problematic because there is no clear sense of when immigrants cease to be guests and, as a result, may imply that immigrants are not fully part of the society (outsiders). The following section discusses the term *conversation-based programming*.

### Conversation-based programming as a concept

*Conversation-based programming*, as defined by the author of this paper, refers to library-based programming such as,

but not limited to, conversation groups or circles and language cafes. The central aspect of this programming is that participants converse and it is typically aimed at providing immigrants with an opportunity to practise speaking the language of the receiving country; expanding social networks; and, in some cases, facilitating integration.

Many of these programmes are very similar in nature and the distinctions between them are often small or non-existent. The difference between a conversation group and a language cafe is not well defined. Some programmes, such as those called memory groups or story circles, do not vary considerably and may even be the same as a language cafe or conversation group. Therefore, a more general term is needed for referring to the wide variety of library programmes that facilitate social interaction and are, at their core, conversationally based.

The structure of this type of programming is typically informal. Commonly the participants gather into small groups of four or five people. In some programmes, participants meet together before breaking off into small groups and, in some programmes, participants remain in the larger group. Other variations of this type of programming include women-only programmes and/or programmes that utilize written material or activities to facilitate discussion.

In light of the variations that occur, conversation-based programming is a type of library programming based on unstructured or semi-structured conversation that offers immigrants an opportunity to practise speaking the local language with native speakers. Semi-structured conversation has themes, topics, and/or questions chosen for discussion and/or other activities, such as creative endeavours or excursions; however, other topics can be discussed should they come up in the course of the conversation. Unstructured conversation does not have any preselected themes or topics for discussion. Participants simply discuss topics of interest (Johnston, 2015).

### Bridging divides in social networks: A need for integration

John W. Berry (1997) provides a social-psychological model based on the encounter between minority groups and the larger society. The focus of the model is on identity maintenance and links (relations) to in- and out-groups from which four outcomes can occur. According to the model, *integration* occurs when there are both in-group and out-group linkages. In-group linkages are the connections one has with other individuals from their own ethnic group, whereas the out-group linkages are the connections one has with individuals from other ethnic groups, which are the connections needed for bridging divides in social networks between groups.

While integration is a balance of in-and out-group linkages, *assimilation* occurs when out-group linkages with

the majority cultural group become predominant; individuals simply merge into the majority group. In contrast, *separation*, akin to the concept of segregation, occurs when a group maintains primarily in-group linkages (Berry, 1997). Berry uses the neutral term *separation* rather than the more commonly used term *segregation*, which typically has negative connotations. Some ethnic group separation can be beneficial for maintaining cultural and linguistic traditions, as well as for the economic and social support that individual group members can draw upon. However, segregation is generally considered to be involuntary social exclusion (Finney, 2009; Peach, 1996).

In addition to a balance of in-and out-group linkages, *integration* implies a harmonious relationship between ethnic groups, one that is balanced, fruitful and sustainable. It is a process that results in immigrants being able to fully participate in various aspects of societal life, including the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions, while being able to retain their own identity. Moreover, integration implies that minority cultures are also deemed important and valued within the society (Valtonen, 2008). Thus, *mutual accommodation* is required for integration to be attained, which involves all groups accepting the right of all other groups to live as culturally different peoples (Berry, 1997). Integration is rooted in the ability of ethnic groups to maintain their distinctive cultural identity while simultaneously participating as equals in greater society (Eriksen, 2013).

In contrast, *assimilation* is not only the predominance of out-group linkages, but is also accompanied by the gradual loss of culturally distinct traits. Immigrants gradually lose their unique cultural and linguistic characteristics and become indistinguishable from the majority ethnic group. It is the total and complete acculturation of one group to another (Park, 1928). As a model of newcomer incorporation, it has been deemed a failed approach due to immigrants, especially those from non-western backgrounds, tending to have disadvantaged positions in the labour market and persistent ethnic residential concentration, which has resulted in the formation of minority cultures and languages rather than absorption into the dominant ethnic group (Castles and Miller, 2005).

Within the Nordic context, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark have formal integration policies<sup>2</sup> and offer introduction programmes, which are primarily for refugees and other immigrants coming from non-EU or Nordic countries (though this varies somewhat between the countries). The programmes include language instruction, job training, and information about the culture and society of the receiving countries. The various programmes aim to provide immigrants with the tools (e.g. language and job training) and knowledge (information about the society) needed for facilitating their participation and inclusion in the greater society.

However, the integration policies and, subsequently, the introductory programming are essentially top-down

approaches to integration. Moreover, due to the focus on the receiving society's culture and language, it could be argued that the introductory programming can support only certain aspects of integration or even that it is assimilative rather than integrative. As previously stated, integration is about establishing a harmonious relationship between immigrants and the majority ethnic group while also nurturing within-group relations and valuing immigrants' cultures within society – mutual accommodation or influence. These aspects of integration cannot be taught in a classroom, but must be accomplished through face-to-face interaction between members of the respective groups, which requires a bottom-up approach.

The Nordic countries face many challenges in achieving the ideals of integration. Following the influx of refugees in 2015, anti-immigrant sentiment is increasing. Right-wing populist parties are gaining support. For example, in Sweden the Swedish Democrats are the biggest or second biggest party and in Denmark the Danish People's Party has never been more powerful (The Economist, 2015). Norway is moving towards an asylum policy that will be among the toughest in Europe (The Local, 30 December 2015; NRK, 29 December 2015).

In addition to increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, inequalities exist, and in some cases are increasing, between immigrants and the majority ethnic groups. In Sweden, median household incomes of non-European immigrants are 36% lower than for native-born Swedes and residential segregation is prevalent (The Economist, 2015). In Norway, the unemployment rate remains consistently higher for immigrants than for ethnic Norwegians and there are growing concerns about increasing residential segregation (Eriksen, 2013). Recent research in Iceland found that immigrants work more, but have lower wages than Icelanders do and that they are not able to use their education to the fullest (Harðardóttir, 2015). Denmark's 'much vilified' immigration reforms, which restricted family reunification and increased student and work visas, may have contributed to reducing the employment gap between ethnic Danes and non-western immigrants from 42 to 24 % (The Economist, 2013); still a concerning difference. Practical solutions for facilitating integration – especially a bottom-up approach – in the Nordic countries are clearly needed.

### The quality of the interaction

Engaging in routine conversations with people of different backgrounds than ourselves has important implications for integration. Gordon Allport (1979), in his seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice*, maintains that brief encounters in which contact remains on a superficial level (e.g. brief interactions) may actually serve to strengthen prejudices if the contact is not significant enough to challenge beliefs and attitudes an individual might have of another and vice versa. He states that 'contact that brings knowledge and

acquaintance is likely to engender sounder beliefs concerning minority groups, and for this reason contribute to the reduction of prejudice' (Allport, 1979: 268). His intergroup contact theory is marked by four conditions: equal status contact, common goals, intergroup cooperation (to reach the common goal/absence of intergroup competition) and support of the authorities (explicit social sanction) (Allport, 1979; Pettigrew, 1998).

Thomas Pettigrew (1998: 76) advances this assertion by adding that contact must be between people who have 'friendship potential', which requires that people have extensive and repeated contact. He theorizes four processes that undergird Allport's original conditions for contact: learning about the out-group, changing behaviour, generating affective ties, and in-group reappraisal. First, learning about the out-group corrects negative views of the group and reduces prejudice. Second, behaviour change can lead to attitude change, and through repetition, intergroup encounters can become more comfortable and enjoyable. Third, generating affective ties relates to feelings of empathy and positive emotions associated with intergroup contact and the resulting friendships. Last, in-group reappraisal results from gaining insight into one's norms and customs that can lead to the adoption of new perspectives regarding one's own group. While these four processes can overlap and interact, Pettigrew maintains that intergroup friendship is especially potent because it can invoke all four processes; however, this requires constructive, long-term contact.

Rachel Davis-Dubois (1939) expands on the notion of 'equal status contact' by proposing that the reduction of prejudice and engendering solidarity can be achieved by establishing a 'cultural democracy'. This occurs when the thinking, feeling and acting together on the basis of equality leads to a sharing of values so that new values can emerge with the best of those that have gone into the merging. Dubois pioneered and reportedly obtained positive outcomes in New York City's so-called 'high-tension areas' with the 'group conversation' or 'neighborhood home festival' technique; a method of drawing people together to recall childhood memories related to universal themes (holidays, work, etc.) (Immigration History Research Center, 2001).

In fact, most studies employing contact theory report positive contact effects (Bratt, 2002; Frølund Thomsen, 2012; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). In Thomas F. Pettigrew's meta-analysis of 525 studies with more than 250,000 subjects, he reports that the theory has and continues to receive support in a variety of situations, groups and societies; in general, intergroup contact – even in cases that might not encompass all key conditions – usually has positive effects (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Even in light of the meta-analysis, a key question remains: are the positive effects from intergroup contact a result of less prejudiced individuals being open to such contact and more prejudiced, less tolerant people avoiding

it? Is there an inherent selection bias in the studies that report positive outcomes? Pettigrew examined this aspect by comparing studies in which individuals involved in intergroup contact had full choice in participating and studies in which individuals had no choice. He concluded that diminished prejudice cannot be explained by selection bias, by who has or does not engage in intergroup contact (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Of course, negative effects can occur from intergroup contact, even to the point of increasing prejudice. Two key aspects typically characterize these meetings: participants feel threatened and contact is involuntary (Hewstone, 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). Likewise, a study on black and white Americans found that contact was no longer effective when the black minority members perceived considerable discrimination against their group (Tropp, 2007).

However, the same study on black and white Americans found that contact in the form of interracial friendships may help to diminish the role of perceived discrimination (Tropp, 2007) and a study of black South African's post-apartheid perceptions indicated that harmonious contact is associated with lower levels of perceived collective discrimination (Dixon et al., 2010).

Pettigrew also reports that studies in multiple countries have shown that diminished prejudice is related to individuals with in-group friends who have out-group friends, though these individuals' changes in attitude toward the out-group are not as strong as those produced by direct contact. This, Pettigrew asserts, is the result of changing norms; it is perceived as acceptable or normal to socialize with an out-group person (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Moreover, contrary to the previously mentioned claim that diversity drives down trust, research shows that positive out-group contact in diverse neighbourhoods correlates with positive attitudes, the key difference being that individuals have the opportunity for positive face-to-face contact instead of simply living parallel lives in close proximity to one another (Hewstone, 2003, 2015; Stolle et al., 2013). Simply put, 'individuals who regularly talk with their neighbors are less influenced by the racial and ethnic character of their surroundings than people who lack such social interaction' (Stolle et al., 2008: 71).

However, Herbert J. Gans (1961: 177) cautions that a moderate degree of homogeneity is required in order to achieve an 'intensity of relations that is necessary for mutual enrichment'. He notes that people who encounter neighbours with some degree of similarity, such as age and income, may be more inclined to accept and even appreciate their neighbours' differing professional, religious, ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds, whereas the interactions may be limited or less positive if those similarities are not present.

Regardless of the optimal degree of heterogeneity needed for mutual enrichment to take place, the previously

stated research shows that most intergroup contact has positive effects, at least to some degree. Moreover, Miles Hewstone (2003: 355) notes that while contact may not be the only cure for prejudice and that many other interventions make important complementary contributions to its reduction, all interventions involve, to some degree or another, intergroup contact. Integration initiatives, such as conversation-based programming, are no different.

Furthermore, integration, as previously defined, and contact theory clearly align in regard to the formation of a harmonious relationship (reduction of prejudice/friendship potential), facilitation of immigrants' participation in various aspects of societal life (intergroup cooperation), toleration of immigrants retaining their own cultural identity (equal status contact) and appreciation of their cultures within the society (explicit social sanction). Therefore, contact theory is a potentially relevant theory for deepening our understanding of how conversation-based programming might support the social dimension of integration, which may have implications for the other aspects of integration such as the cultural, economic and political dimensions.

### Select examples of conversation-based programming

The following are four examples of conversation-based programming: the Women's Story Circle at the Reykjavik Public Library in Iceland; Expat Dinners at public libraries in Denmark (specifically Aarhus and Aalborg); and Memory Group at the Torshov branch of the Deichman Library in Oslo, Norway; and the Språkhörnan programme, a language cafe, at Malmö City Library in Sweden.

These examples are provided in order to illustrate and expand upon the previous theoretical discussion and to show some of the variety found in conversation-based programming. The aim is to explore the fruitfulness of the theoretical framework for understanding how the programmes might support integration, specifically in regards to the social dimension.

The author of this paper is familiar with the programmes by way of participation, informal interviews with programme organizers and participants, and in the case of the Språkhörnan programme in Malmö, a case study on conversation-based programming and integration conducted by said author. A three-year, multi-case study by the author on library-based language cafes and integration in three Norwegian communities is currently underway. The theoretical analysis of the following examples of programmes will be used to inform and develop the study on language cafes currently underway in Norway.

The four selected programmes are all advertised as library programmes; however, they are actually collaborative efforts by the libraries and other groups or government offices. Of particular relevance for this discussion, the

non-library collaborators all have integration-related aims or goals (some explicitly stated and other implied), which will be noted in each of the examples.

### *The Women's Story Circle (Söguhringur kvenna) Iceland*

The Women's Story Circle at the Reykjavik City Library in Iceland is a cooperation between Reykjavik City Library and WOMEN in Iceland, an intercultural organization for women. The aim of the programme is to serve as a forum in which women of all origins exchange stories, experiences and cultural backgrounds while taking part in creative activities and excursions. Women of foreign origin can practise their Icelandic language skills and learn about Icelandic culture and society; however, programme organizers encourage attendees to actively participate and engage in intercultural dialogue. Thus the focus is on the interaction between the women and not exclusively on language learning (Borgarbókasafn Reykjavíkur, 2014a; Samtök kvenna af erlendum uppruna á Íslandi, 2015). The emphasis on intercultural dialogue and sharing of cultures aligns the overall aim of the programme with integration, though this is not explicitly stated.

The focus on creative endeavours and sharing of experiences creates a conversation that is semi-structured, but with lots of room for unstructured conversation. One of the group's creative endeavours was a collaborative painting of Iceland (map) using images related to the women's experiences, culture, beliefs and identity. One example is a mermaid drawn by the west fjords of Iceland. The woman's name is Jurate, which means mermaid in Lithuanian. Her symbol is placed there because it is her favourite place. Another one is a lamb with a rainbow smile made by a Russian woman, which she chose to signify the freedom of expression in Iceland (Vilhjálmisdóttir, 2015, personal communication).

The map (image) was sold to a socially and environmentally conscious, as well as woman-owned and -operated, local coffee company, Kaffitár (Allen, 2014), and subsequently unveiled at the National Museum of Iceland by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the former President of Iceland. Kaffitár now uses the image on everything related to the company's brand and it can be found on their cars, product packaging, postcards, t-shirts and on the walls and stands of their outlets. The group uses the money received from the selling of the painting for dance classes, theatre and writing workshops (Borgarbókasafn Reykjavíkur, 2014b, Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2015, personal communication).

The emphasis of this programme on creating a forum for women to exchange their stories and collaborate in ways that draws upon their backgrounds and, at the same time, uses their unique contributions to create something new, which gives the programme a clear integration orientation. The artwork and other cultural activities provide an

opportunity for the women to think, feel and act together on the basis of equality. The painting represents the sharing of values so that new values can emerge with the best of those that have gone into the merging. As a result, the structure of the programme can be seen as supporting equal status contact, common goals and intergroup cooperation to achieve those goals.

Furthermore, the selling of the painting to a local business, unveiling of the painting at the National Museum by the former President of Iceland, and the promotion of the programme by the library gives the programme and the work of the participants explicit social sanction. The friendship potential is high given the regular interactions and opportunities for meaningful interaction and cooperation between the participants.

### *Expat Dinners Denmark*

The Danish Library Centre for Integration, which is part of the State and University Library, organized Expat Dinners at local branch libraries around the country as a part of the project Newcomers. The aim of the programme was to facilitate relationships between immigrants and Danes by bringing them together over a collective meal. The Danish Centre for Integration is no longer involved; however, the programme is still up and running in some libraries (Nielsen, 2012, personal communication). The programmes are open for all to attend and attendees are encouraged to bring food to share, possibly a traditional dish from their country (Statsbiblioteket, 2012).

At Roskilde Library, dinners take place three to four times a year and usually have a theme that often draws upon Danish and non-Danish traditions, such as Christmas, Chinese New Year or Halloween. At Aalborg Library, they hold the dinner once a year and do not have a specific theme as they have found that the attendees just want to meet and talk. The libraries provide the tables, chairs and crockery, coffee, table decorations (flowers, candles, etc.) and music. The food and socializing is left up to the participants. Overall, the dinners have been very well attended (by Danes and immigrants). Roskilde library reports having had over 85 attendees at some of the dinners (Jessen Spiele, 2015, personal communication). At Aalborg, the feedback has also been very positive, attendance high – participants just want the dinners to be held more often (Anderson, 2015, personal communication).

By encouraging each participant to contribute a dish from their country and taking on international themes, the subsequent feast symbolizes the fruits of integration; a merging of flavours and traditions that results in a delightful gastronomic experience. In this sense, it is a cultural democracy represented by a smorgasbord; each dish brings something unique and collectively the dishes reflect the community's unique mix of cultures with no one culture taking priority over the others. The collaborative effort to

create a feast and socialize, which can be considered the common goal, supports equal status contact. The libraries provide explicit social sanction by hosting and promoting the dinners. Furthermore, the dishes give participants a starting point for their conversation – which is otherwise completely unstructured – from which they can become acquainted with one another. This provides an opportunity for meaningful interaction between the attendees and, as a result, raises the friendship potential.

### *Torshov Memory Group Norway*

The Torshov branch of the Deichman Library in Oslo offers a conversation group for immigrant women based on semi-structured conversation. The conversation group utilizes memory work and the method of reminiscence, which was initially developed to help elderly people recall their memories, with the premise that memory sharing can serve to build bridges between ethnic groups. The approach is very similar to the previously mentioned work of Rachel Davis-Dubois and her 'group conversation' and 'neighbourhood home festival' techniques.

In this group, the Norwegian group facilitators are library staff and language teachers from the participants' state-funded language programming, which is part of the introductory programming intended to support integration. The participants and programme organizers share their memories related to selected topics such as food, childhood, games and customs, thus creating a semi-structured conversation. In addition to the sharing of memories, participants hold presentations (to practise public speaking in Norwegian) and participate in discussions. The topics for discussion vary; however programme organizers make a concerted effort to introduce a range of topics, including controversial ones such as religion and local politics.

This programme may appear to support integration less because group organizers choose topics that are often related to current events and issues happening in Norway. Therefore, it may seem to be more of a teacher-student relationship (top-down approach) and assimilative rather than fostering equal status contact and integration. However, during an interview with the library director, Ingvil Falch (20 February 2014), she discussed with the author the approach taken by programme organizers. The organizers' approach is that of co-participants; they also share their memories and offer their opinions during the discussions. Falch gave the example of when the group shared memories of weddings. On that occasion, she brought her wedding dress and talked about her wedding day. Other participants also discussed their weddings; thus it was an exchange of traditions. The distinction here is that programme organizers are *participants in* rather than just *facilitators of* the discussion.

Importantly, organizers both listen to the participants' opinions and give their opinions in a manner that does

not prioritize their opinions over the others. As a result of this approach, the relationship between participants and programme organizers is less characterized by a teacher-student relationship and more supportive of equal status contact.

The common goal of the programme may not be as obvious as it is in the previously mentioned programmes. This is possibly a result of where the women are in the migration process and their educational background. The women who attend the memory group are enrolled in Norway's introductory programme for refugees, many are not literate in their mother tongue, and most are housewives, which results in them having little contact with Norwegian society. Therefore, the aim of the programme is both to facilitate language learning and socially involve the women in the community so that they will subsequently have the knowledge and tools needed to be active members in Norwegian society. Intergroup cooperation is an essential component for achieving these aims. Participants and programme organizers must think, feel and act together in ways that reduce prejudices and engender feelings of solidarity. The sharing of memories related to universal themes facilitates a way for organizers and participants to engage in mutually enriching dialogue.

The discussions and sharing of memories provide a way for the organizers and participants to learn about the cultures and traditions of the other participants and may lead to in-group reappraisal and the formation of affective ties, thus fostering friendship potential. Lastly, that it is held at the library (a separate institution than the one responsible for the introductory programme) gives the programme explicit social sanction.

### **Language Corner (Språkhörnan) Sweden**

The Språkhörnan programme at Malmö City Library in Sweden is a typical case of a language cafe. The programme is for both men and women and conversations are unstructured. Attendance is on a drop-in basis. Volunteers and participants simply gather in small groups and start talking. Programme volunteers are from the Red Cross and are working under the auspices of the organization's integration initiative (Röda Korset/Malmö).

Participants report that the programme benefits them in many ways. Many indicate that they gain confidence and achieve conversational fluency in Swedish from attending the programme and consider it an important social opportunity. Participants also indicate that programme conversations are informative and that the information benefits them in their lives outside of the programme. Common topics of discussion are often about work (where and how to find jobs), education (Swedish language programmes and higher education), recreation (what to do and where to go), and cultural behaviours and practices (relevant for navigating Swedish society). For many of the participants,

the programme offers them an opportunity to sit down and have a conversation with a Swedish person once a week, something that many are not finding elsewhere (Johnston, 2016).

Without preselected themes or topics for discussion, this programme fosters equal status contact by allowing topics related to Sweden and topics that have nothing to do with Sweden to be discussed; thus the conversations have the potential to be mutually enriching. Of course, topics related to Sweden are often discussed, but they are often brought up by the participants themselves so they reflect their needs and interests. As a result, the programme can be seen as providing support for equal status contact and integration.

Programme conversations provide ways for participants and organizers to think, feel and act together, which depends upon a degree of intergroup cooperation as everyone involved must work together to make the programme what it is. The fact that it is held at the library gives the programme explicit social sanction. The regular interactions and opportunities for meaningful interaction result in a high friendship potential. Even though a participant may only speak with one or two Swedish people with each week, this is significant if they are not finding other opportunities to have conversations with Swedish people elsewhere.

However, as with the previous programme, the common goal may not be clearly defined. The majority of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they had been in Sweden for less than one year and over half had been in Sweden for less than six months. They are just beginning to learn the language and are still in the process of getting situated in their new society – learning their way around, finding a job, figuring out Swedish bureaucracy, etc. Given that participants are still in the initial phases of getting settled in the society, the facilitation of integration through mutually enriching dialogue might be seen as the implicit overarching goal.

### **Discussion**

The Women's Story Circle, Expat Dinners, Memory Group and language cafe (Språkhörnan) all support contact between programme participants (immigrants) and programme organizers (nationals of the receiving society) in ways that bring knowledge of 'the other(s)' and acquaintanceship. The establishment of equal status contact, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and explicit social sanction shapes the quality and nature of this contact. However, these aspects need to be considered on a spectrum rather than as a dichotomous either/or scenario in order to understand how and to what degree they are supported within the respective programmes.

Equal status contact is clearly very high within the Women's Story Circle and Expat Dinners. There is really no distinction between the programme organizers and the

participants and both programmes aim to facilitate the sharing of local and immigrants' backgrounds through intercultural dialogue.

The equal status of participants and programme organizers is not as obvious for the Memory Group and Språkhörnan and may not be to the same degree as the other programmes. However, the approach taken by the two programmes' organizers clearly places the relationship between participants and organizers nearer to the equal status contact end of the spectrum, though this relationship may initially appear to be characteristic of a hierarchical, top-down, teacher-student relationship.

A hierarchical mode of facilitating programme conversations may be helpful during the early stages of language learning. A study on the interaction between participants and volunteers at a conversation circle in Canada suggests that it may be beneficial for volunteers to start with a hierarchical mode and gradually shift to a cooperative and then an autonomous mode of facilitation, thus giving participants a gradually increasing degree of autonomy and ability to self-direct their learning – a process of empowerment (Gilst, 2010).

Moreover, the Memory Group and Språkhörnan programmes can be seen to achieve a greater degree of equal status contact as a result being open to discussion topics not related to the receiving societies, for example, recreation-related topics (hobbies, sports, etc.), cultures and traditions of participants, history and politics of other regions and countries, and religious beliefs, thus fostering mutually enriching conversations.

The establishment of common goals varies widely from programme to programme. All the programmes have clearly stated goals; however, the degree of how shared the goals are for the organizers and participants varies. The Women's Story Circle and the Expat Dinners are based on a common goal for all in the sense that it is the *same* goal for all. The Women's Story Circle offers a forum for participants to exchange stories, experiences and cultural backgrounds while taking part in creative activities and excursions. The Expat Dinners offer immigrants and Danes an opportunity to socialize and expand their networks over a collective meal. These goals are specific and apply equally to all who are involved, programme organizers and participants alike.

The Memory Group's goal is to make connections through reminiscence on themes that transcend cultures in order to build bridges between cultures and establish a harmonious relationship between individuals of diverse backgrounds, which is more ideological in nature. Of course, the focus on language learning and public speaking is not a shared goal. However, the approach to language learning – developing language skills by discussing current events and practicing public speaking – places this participant-focused goal within the ideological framework as it provides a way for programme coordinators to expand their

understanding and take into account immigrants' perspectives on the issues discussed.

The Språkhörnan programme may not appear to have a common goal for participants and programme organizers. The aim of the programme is to support Swedish language learning and integration. Language learning fosters and facilitates intercultural dialogue, which is necessary for engendering sounder beliefs and greater understanding between ethnic groups. Similar to the Memory Group, the common goal may be more ideological in nature and less specific in comparison to the Story Circle and Expat Dinners.

Additionally, programme organizers and participants may have different goals, but need each other to achieve those goals. For example, a 20-something, newly-arrived immigrant attends a language cafe to learn the language of the receiving country and to socialize. A local retiree volunteers at the same language cafe with an interest in broadening his understanding of the world (to become worldlier in his outlook). At the language cafe, they meet and use his language to discuss similarities and differences between their cultures. The language cafe thus provides an opportunity for these two individuals to pursue their interests; she improves her language skills and they learn about the other's culture. If this is the case, interdependent goals might serve the same purpose as a common goal and strengthen the equal status contact aspect. This area is in need of further research and is being considered in the author's current research on language cafes in Norwegian libraries.

Intergroup cooperation is necessary in order for all the programmes to function. These programmes will cease to exist if the organizers or the participants do not attend or fail to participate in the programmes. Unlike an author talk or poetry reading, it is not possible for the majority of attendees to take a passive role. There may be individual programme organizers and/or participants who contribute more and have higher involvement than others, but the programmes would fail if either the participants or organizers did not attend and/or refused to participate.

All the programmes receive explicit social sanction from external and/or internal entities. Internal social sanction can be seen as coming from the library, the institution responsible for the programme. Libraries are public institutions, and by offering this type of programming, demonstrate explicit social sanction for its importance. External social sanction can be seen as persons and/or other groups from without the library who show approval of the respective programmes. For example, the Women's Story Circle has received external sanction from the local business that purchased the painting and from the unveiling of the painting by former President of Iceland Vigdís Finnbogadóttir at the National Museum of Iceland.

Most importantly, the programmes all foster friendship potential. Participants and programme organizers have opportunities to learn about each other's backgrounds,



experiences, and perspectives, which may lead to in-group reappraisal. The practice of intentionally sitting down and talking with people of different cultural backgrounds can be seen as a change in participants' and programme organizers' behaviour, which may lead to them feeling more comfortable socializing with people who are of a different ethnic group. Ultimately, these programmes have the potential to foster affective ties as participants think, feel and act together. This is consistent with the previously mentioned research and library reports that indicate participants of conversation-based programming expand their social networks and make friends across ethnic groups as a result of attending the programmes. These connections between cultural and ethnic groups can be seen as fostering the necessary in- and out-group ties needed to achieve integration and counter segregation.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, diminished prejudice is related to individuals who have an in-group friend who has an out-group friend, which is attributed to changing norms; it is perceived more acceptable or normal to socialize with an out-group person. This clearly has implications for the programme volunteers and their in-group friends/co-nationals; the volunteers socializing with recent immigrants may make those types of interactions appear more normal to their friends. Likewise, holding these programmes in public libraries may have positive social effects beyond the actual programmes. Library patrons who observe their co-nationals conversing with immigrants may perceive it to be more normal or acceptable to interact with immigrants; however, this is merely speculative as it is beyond the scope of the current research.

The programmes can be seen to support integration by fostering in- and out-group contacts; a participant will usually encounter individuals from other ethnic groups, but may also find individuals from their own ethnic group. Furthermore, immigrants' are able to bring their ethnic backgrounds into the discussion by sharing their experiences, perspectives and opinions. This suggests that their cultures are deemed important and that they are able to retain their own identity within the context of the programmes – a mutual accommodation or influence.

Language learning might be considered an aspect of these programmes that is assimilative due to the focus being only on the language of the receiving society. However, this assimilative aspect is somewhat countered or moderated by the programmes' overarching orientations to integration. This commitment to integration in regard to language learning can be seen in a of couple ways. First, programme attendance in three of the four programmes is voluntary, which means that any language learning done within these programmes is also done voluntarily. Second, no expectations are placed on participants' language learning outcomes nor are there any penalties for not attaining fluency.

The Memory Group is the only programme that requires participants attend due to its connection with the

state-funded introductory programme; thus the language-learning aspect is not voluntary. However, as mentioned previously, the approach taken by programme organizers to facilitate language learning is based on eliciting participants' experiences, perspectives and opinions, which aligns more with the overall integrative approach. The aim of the language learning is to support the women's voices entering into the public discourse rather than to ensure conformity.

## **Conclusion**

Contact theory and integration, as conceptualized in this paper, offer a useful framework for understanding the social processes and the quality of the interactions that take place during conversation-based programming. However, the framework leads to further questions. What are participants' and volunteers' own personal goals for participating in the programmes? Does it matter if participation is voluntary or required? How does length of time that the immigrant has been in the country influence the effectiveness of these programmes? How does the background of the participants (e.g. legal status, age, and education level) influence outcomes? Does it matter how often the programmes are held? How do levels of intergroup trust influence the interactions and, subsequent, outcome(s)?

Furthermore, becoming more informed about one another and establishing commonalities may help foster positive intergroup relations; however, individuals and/or groups of differing ethnic backgrounds may also have perspectives and beliefs that differ from or are even opposed by the others. Immigrants' full participation in society, especially within the political dimension, depends upon their perspectives, even conflicting ones, entering into the public discourse. Additional theoretical exploration relevant to conversation-based programming in libraries is needed regarding the processes by which conflicting perspectives can be handled in a manner that maintains positive intergroup relations while ensuring that all voices are heard.

These questions and various other aspects of integration will be further explored in the current research on language cafes in Norwegian public libraries.

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## Notes

1. Ethnic: of or relating to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background. In: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.
2. For details see: Danish Ministry of Refugee Immigration and Integration Affairs (2005); Swedish Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality (2009); Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet (2012); Ministry of Children Equality and Social Inclusion (2014); Ministry of Welfare (2009).

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