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**To cite this article:** MarianoSánchezDSoc, José M.GarcíaDSoc, PilarDíazDPSY & Mónica Duaigües (2011) Much More Than Accommodation in Exchange for Company: Dimensions of Solidarity in an Intergenerational Homeshare Program in Spain, *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 9:4, 374-388, DOI: [10.1080/15350770.2011.619410](https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2011.619410)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2011.619410>



Published online: 12 Dec 2011.



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## Research

# Much More Than Accommodation in Exchange for Company: Dimensions of Solidarity in an Intergenerational Homeshare Program in Spain

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*Intergenerational homeshare programs are being implemented, but they are not often submitted to evaluation. In 2009 and 2010, an evaluation of the largest intergenerational homeshare program in the country was conducted. Dimensions of intergenerational solidarity in the program were assessed through a quantitative analysis. The program was found to be one in which at least three dimensions of intergenerational solidarity—associative, affectual, and functional—are practiced. Results indicate that intergenerational homeshare programs should be considered much more than simple exchanges of accommodation for company. The use of the solidarity model to evaluate these kind of programs is recommended.*

*KEYWORDS* intergenerational program, intergenerational solidarity, Spain, homeshare, evaluation

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Kreickemeier and Martinez (2001), homeshare “is essentially an exchange of services. A householder offers accommodation to a homesharer in exchange for an agreed level of help” (p. 69). In Spain, one of the most common forms of shared accommodation is the intergenerational mode. In general, it consists of a program through which an elderly person who lives alone in a home that is in good condition can host a university student who is studying away from home, has limited economic resources, and is willing to provide company to the elderly person.

This article presents some results from the evaluation performed on one of the most consolidated intergenerational homeshare programs in Spain, the program *Viure i Conviure* (“Live and Live Together,” hereinafter ViC), run by Caixa Catalunya Foundation. Since its creation in the 1996–1997 academic year, the ViC program has been dedicated to the twofold objective of alleviating the solitude of elderly people and facilitating access of young university students to decent and affordable housing. In this particular case, the foundation does give some financial assistance to the elderly participants to cover the extra expenses (electricity, water, gas) incurred as a result of having students living in their homes.

In Spain, 7 out of 10 persons aged 65 and over admit that they prefer to live in their own home over any other type of living setting (CIS, 2009).<sup>1</sup> However, 6 out of 10 elderly people living alone in Spain state that they experience loneliness frequently (Del Barrio et al., 2010). And it is well known that among elderly people, living alone is a predicting factor for loneliness (Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandbert, & Pitkala, 2005; Theeke, 2009) and that loneliness is associated with adverse factors for both mental and physical health (Luanaigh & Lawlor, 2008). The Spanish population 18 and older believes that help for older people who live alone is the issue that most requires urgent attention among all the issues affecting these people (CIS, 2009). Programs such as ViC attempt to respond to this need.

Regarding the question of university student housing, the problem stems in large part from the confluence of two factors: the high percentage of students who do not have the economic capacity to live anywhere but at home with their parents plus the increase in the number of students who decide to study in a different city. In Spain, 7 out of 10 university students live at home with their parents (Fundación BBVA, 2010), while 7.6% of university students are in some other type of living situation during their years at university, with an average cost of 2,720 euros per academic year (INE, 2009). Lower cost alternatives must be found to help families deal with this expense.

The search by university students for ways to reduce accommodation costs and the wish of some elderly people who live alone for company

has led to growth in intergenerational homesharing programs in Spain. For instance, participation in the ViC program has increased from 20 resident pairs in 1993 to 329 in 2008–2009.

### Evaluation of Intergenerational Homesharing Programs

The literature on the evaluation of intergenerational programs indicates that systematic evaluation of such programs is not a common practice (Kuehne, 2005; Sánchez, 2007). In this regard, intergenerational homesharing programs are no exception, judging by the low number of evaluations that have been published on this topic (Altus & Mathews, 2000). It is frequently the case that assessments of intergenerational homesharing appear within the framework of broader studies on homesharing in general (Jaffe & Howe, 1988; Johnstone, 2001; Pritchard, 1983) or on accommodation for older people (Folts & Muir, 2002). Furthermore, intergenerational homesharing between family members is often analyzed at the same time as specific programs in which the participants are not related (Ahrentzen, 2003; Coffey, 2010), as is the case in ViC.

Even so, some examples of homeshare evaluations are available. For example, Jaffe (1989) found that the basic parameter of the intergenerational relationship between elderly “homesharers” and young “homeseekers” was the “homeseeker’s concern for increasing independence and the homesharer’s interest in maintaining continuity for independence (and stalling the movement toward dependence)” (p. 239). Elsewhere, Danigelis & Fengler (1990, 1991) concluded, on the one hand, that homesharing enables both participants to make maximum use of the resources available to them and, on the other hand, they found out that “homesharing actually appears to maximize the possibility of mutual satisfaction between elders and their younger sharers” (1990, p. 164). In fact, they found little evidence that sharers experienced conflict due to their difference in age. Altus & Mathews (2000) demonstrated that older homeowners reported significantly greater satisfaction than younger homeseekers in the dimensions of health, well-being, and social activities. However, the results of these programs are not always satisfactory, and conflicts sometimes arise that cannot be resolved and lead to the end of the agreement (Folts & Muir, 2002; Jaffe, 1989).

In Spain, Pérez and Subirats (2007) conducted an evaluation of the ViC program. Compared to other studies that focused mostly on the exchange aspect (Danigelis & Fengler, 1990), this analysis highlighted that “what the program offers at the end of the day has more to do with the mutual warmth formed during the cohabitations than the simple efficacy of the exchange from which it originated” (Pérez & Subirats, 2007, p. 22). This finding suggests that ViC and similar programs may initially propose an exchange of goods and services to its participants but end up giving rise to much deeper relationships between them.

## PURPOSE AND METHOD

The overall purpose of conducting this evaluation of the ViC program, as proposed by the sponsoring foundation that runs it, was to look into the value of the program apart from its capacity to address the two basic issues that justified it initially: the elderly people's solitude and the young students' lack of housing. Consequently, we studied whether the intergenerational cohabitation occurring in the framework of ViC allowed for the practice of intergenerational solidarity. To do so, we used the so-called "solidarity model" (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Giarrusso, Silverstein, Gans, & Bengtson, 2005). Although this model has been used to describe intergenerational solidarity in family relationships, we believe that some of the dimensions it uses are also applicable to community programs (Jarrott, 2010) such as the ViC program. Our attempt to link these two spheres and levels of intergenerationality (familial and nonfamilial) is a response to growing demands in this regard (Cruz-Saco & Zelenev, 2010).

The solidarity model defines intergenerational solidarity as the social cohesion between the generations, and in order to measure it it distinguishes six dimensions (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). However, our study focused on the analysis of just four of these dimensions considered more appropriate in the context at stake, and, for reasons of space, this article offers information regarding only three of them:

- Associational solidarity: the frequency of contact between people of different generations
- Affectual solidarity: sentiments and assessments that the members of one generation express regarding their relationship with members of other generations
- Functional solidarity: support given and received between the generations

In order to describe these three dimensions in practice, we created two indicators for each dimension. Indicators of associational intergenerational solidarity were frequency of contact of the elderly people with young people (measured in response to the question "How frequently do you carry out a series of activities with young people under the age of 35?") and frequency of contact of the students with elderly people (measured as the response to the question "How frequently do you carry out a series of activities with people over the age of 65?"). To describe the second dimension, affectual solidarity, two indicators were used: perception of improvement in personal relationships with young people (measured as the extent of agreement with the statement "As a result of having a student living in my house, my relationships with young people are better than before") and perception of improvement in personal relationships with elderly people (extent

of agreement with the statement “As a result of sharing the home of an elderly person, my relationships with elderly people are, in general, better than before”). Last, we measured the third dimension, functional intergenerational solidarity, with the indicators escorting to places (the percentage of elderly people who go to certain places in the company of the student living in their home) and doing activities and tasks (percentage of elderly people who receive help from the student living in their home in carrying out a series of activities).

## Sample

Among 658 elderly people and students currently participating in the ViC program and because of budget limitations, we were only able to randomly select 306 people (46.5%) of whom 149 were elderly and 157 were students. For these figures, the sampling error is  $\pm 6.07\%$  in the case of elderly people and  $\pm 5.78\%$  regarding the group of students; both sampling errors are calculated for a confidence level of 95.5%.

Seven out of 10 of the interviews with elderly people and students took place in the community of Catalonia. The remaining 30% were distributed throughout the communities of Madrid, Valencia, Aragón, and the Balearic Islands. A total of 99.7% of the intergenerational pairs participating in ViC reside in one of these five autonomous communities. The sample’s geographical representativeness is, thus, assured. See Table 1 for other relevant sample characteristics.

## Data Collection and Analysis

For data collection, we used structured interviews based on two questionnaires, one for the elderly people (38 questions) and one for the students

**TABLE 1** Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n = 306)

Characteristic	Elderly		Students	
	n	%	n	%
Sex				
Male	17	11.6	44	28.0
Female	132	88.4	113	72.0
Age				
Age range	56–99		18–44	
Mean age	82.2		25.0	
Marital status				
Widow/er	118	78.9	—	—
Unmarried	19	12.9	151	96.2
Separated, divorced	7	4.8	2	1.3
Married or in a stable relationship	5	3.4	4	2.5

(42 questions). They were designed specifically for this study, and participants answered them in the presence of the interviewer. The fieldwork took place between July and December 2009. The two questionnaires included both open- and close-ended questions relevant for our indicators. While some of these questions were original, others had been previously tested in studies performed by other research groups. Specifically, the elder's questionnaire included three items concerned with associational solidarity, one with affectual solidarity, and four regarding functional solidarity. The ViC student questionnaire included three items focused on associational solidarity, one item on affectual solidarity, and two related to functional solidarity.

Preliminary versions of the two questionnaires were piloted in May of 2009 by an experienced interviewer who interviewed elderly people and students who live together thanks to an intergenerational homeshare program very similar to ViC. After the pilot, some changes were made to the structure and to the response options of some items of the elders' questionnaire to facilitate their understanding of the questions.

A team of six trained interviewers performed the fieldwork by visiting sample members, reading them the questionnaire and recording their responses. Each interviewer coded interviewee's level of sincerity on a 5-point scale. More than 9 out of 10 elderly people and students in the sample displayed high or very high sincerity while the interview took place.

Upon completion of the interviews, researchers verified the quality of the data gathered and coded responses to open-ended questions. For statistical processing, SPSS 15 package was used.

## RESULTS

### Associational Solidarity

Regarding the frequency of contact of the elderly ViC participants with young people and in terms of the type of intergenerational contact with young relatives, elders mostly tended to talk, by telephone or in person (34.1% and 31.0%, respectively), with their younger family members, and they usually did so one or two times per week or on an occasional basis (30.2% and 26.2%, respectively). Turning to intergenerational contact between non-family members, the figures are much lower; here, the practice of occasional intergenerational contact, especially in the form of personal conversation, is the most common (53.4%). Now, then, the possibility of intergenerational coresidence offered by ViC changes this situation significantly: 91.3% of the elderly participants state that they converse in person daily or almost every day with the student living in their house, which is almost 13 times greater than familial intergenerational contact and 11 times greater than nonfamilial intergenerational contact with people under the age of 35.

We now turn to the frequency of intergenerational contact of the students with elderly people. In terms of nonfamilial intergenerational contact with elderly people other than ViC homeowners, the data indicated that our ViC students had infrequently spoken in person or gone for walks with these people (13.0% and 2.8%, respectively); a large majority of them had never gone out with, helped, or shared household tasks with elderly people.

However, when we look at intergenerational contact ViC students had with the elderly people they lived with, the picture changes radically; the percentage who (96.8%) speak in person every or almost every day with an elderly person is multiplied by seven and the forms of nonfamilial contact with other elders take place much more frequently: "Help them with personal care or household tasks." (28.3%) and "Share household tasks or care of another person": 32.3%.

### Affectual Intergenerational Solidarity

The data regarding participants' perceptions of improvement in personal relationships with young people suggest that impressions are divided. Over half of the ViC elders (62.2%) did not believe that hosting a student in their home led them to have better relationships with young people than before. Moreover, there is no statistically significant relationship between this opinion and the years they have been participating in ViC ( $X^2 = 0.473$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $N = 146$ ). However, among these people, a large proportion believed that, as a result of hosting a student, they saw young people in a more positive light (47.3%), felt more inclined to participate in activities with young people (44.6%), and that they need to spend more time with young people to feel good (45.3%).

When it comes to ViC students' perception of improvement in personal relationships with elderly people, the data led us to a quite different perspective; the majority of the ViC students recognized that, thanks to their living situations, they saw elderly people in a more positive light (75.8%), and their relationships with elderly people were better. However, this improvement did not depend on how long the student had been in the program ( $X^2 = 0.911$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $N = 157$ ).

### Functional Intergenerational Solidarity

Some of the elderly people in ViC were accompanied to certain places, especially the ambulatory clinic, hospital, or medical specialists (59.1%); to the health center or GP (35.6%); to parks or other green areas (34.5%); and to the supermarket or grocer's (24.2%). Were ViC elderly people going to some of these places thanks to the fact that the students living in their houses accompanied them? The data in Table 2 helps address this question.



**TABLE 2** ViC Elderly People: Escorting to Places

Goes with the student living in his or her home	n	%
Supermarket or grocer's	44	38.6
Health center or GP	70	25.7
Ambulatory clinic, hospital or medical specialist	98	15.3
Park or other green areas	56	12.5
Cultural or sports activity center	19	5.26
Senior citizens' center	20	0.7

Another way to assess functional intergenerational solidarity is to analyze the support given in relation to a series of day-to-day activities. Compared with a sample of Spanish older people of the same age (CIS, 2006),<sup>2</sup> elderly ViC participants reported greater capability accomplishing daily activities: go to the doctor (35.1%), do the shopping (28.9%), do other household tasks (25.7%), run errands (25.7%), go out of the house (24.2%), and prepare meals (10.8%), for example. This increased capability was somehow linked to help provided by the ViC student at home. The difference with average Spanish elders persists even when comparison is strictly reduced to ViC elders and Spanish elders with same marital status (widow or widower).

The findings indicate that compared to the rest of the Spanish population of comparable age and marital status, more ViC elderly people can carry out certain daily tasks if they count on appropriate help. How much intergenerational help do ViC elderly people receive from the students who live with them in doing some of these normal activities? We can see the answer in Table 3.

We see, for example, that 30% of ViC elders who are helped in daily activities say that they receive that help, in first position, from the student

**TABLE 3** Percentage of ViC Elderly People Requiring Help Performing Daily Activities Who Receive Help From Students

	In first position <sup>1</sup>		In second position <sup>2</sup>	
	n	%	n	%
Use public transport	20	30.0		
Prepare meals	20	25.0	6	16.7
Take medication	16	25.0		
Go outside the house, go places	31	22.6	14	35.7
Do the shopping	43	18.6	21	42.9
Go to the doctor	46	17.4	25	32.0
Run errands	31	16.1	12	41.7
Put shoes on	8	12.5	3	33.0
Do other household tasks	41	9.8	8	37.5

<sup>1</sup>In first position: The student is the person who most frequently provides help.

<sup>2</sup>In second position: The student is the second most frequent provider of this help.

when it comes to using public transport, and 25% of them in the preparation of meals and in taking their medication.

Considering next what elderly people and students thought the program had done for them and what they had given to each other, 93.2% of elders reported that their participation in the program had benefited them. How? They were quite sure of the answer: above all else, through help received with personal care activities (51.7%). In addition, 94% of the elderly people indicated that they had given something to the student, particularly in the form of emotional support (49.0%) and personal care activities/help (35.6%).

As for the students, 98.7% of them indicated that their participation in ViC during the current academic year benefited them with regard to learning new things (35%) and having valuable experiences in life (31.8%). Nearly all students (98.1%) were also aware of having given something to the elderly person with whom they live, above all else, company (67.5%), happiness and well-being (22.3%), and security (20.4%).

## DISCUSSION

Regarding associational intergenerational solidarity, the intergenerational contact of ViC students is significantly greater than that acknowledged by the country's population of a similar age. While 67.6% of young Spaniards aged 20 to 29 and 67.3% of persons aged 18 to 44 say they have contact every or almost every day with elderly people, whether relatives or not (INJUVE, 2007; CIS, 2007), the number jumps to 96.8% in the case of ViC students who have such contact, and such contact is characterized by face-to-face conversation.

Through the ViC program, something that would otherwise be occasional, namely nonfamily, intergenerational contact becomes daily. Furthermore, it gives the elderly people another important form of intergenerational contact—personal, face-to-face conversation—to complement the most frequent form of intergenerational contact between family members, which is telephone conversations. Familial contact and nonfamilial contact thus complement each other; they broaden the possibilities for elderly people to practice (give and take) associational intergenerational solidarity by entering into contact with other people, which has been associated with healthy aging (Zunzunegui, Alvarado, Del Ser, & Otero, 2003). The ViC program seems to offer its elderly participants a much higher degree of intergenerational contact than they would likely have otherwise.

Moreover, ViC seems to be acting as a compensatory mechanism for the lack of intergenerational contact of the students with elderly relatives. The ViC program ensures that the distance from their elderly relatives does not become a loss in the density of their intergenerational contact; the daily contact with the ViC coresidents may palliate this potential loss.

Our research does not allow us to determine whether the high concentration of contact with elderly relatives on weekends and holidays (this intergenerational contact in the form of personal conversations jumps from 4.1% on weekdays to 17.7% on weekends) is due, in part, to the experience of intergenerational coresidence from Monday to Friday. Weekday contact may awaken students' awareness of how important it is to preserve intergenerational contact. This issue is one that could be examined more closely in subsequent studies.

As to our findings in the area of affectual solidarity, there may be a tendency for ViC elders to segregate their assessment of the interpersonal relationships they have with the students living in their homes from the one regarding the relationships they have with young people, in general. Specifically, 91.2% of ViC elderly people acknowledge that the coresiding students have made them feel better but do not believe that their relationships with young persons in general have improved. In the future, it would be worthwhile to look into the extent to which elderly people who homeshare with students see those young persons as representative of young people in general or as atypical young persons from which generalizations cannot be made. Even more worthwhile would be to find out whether the elderly people perceive their coresidents more as young people or more as companions to alleviate solitude; if it is the latter, it is normal for there to be no connection between the attitudes the ViC elderly people have around their respective students and their attitudes on young people as a group. Intergroup contact theory (Fox & Giles, 1993; Harwood, 2000; Pettigrew, 1998) has suggested that for a change of attitudes toward an outgroup to occur, outgroup members—in our case, ViC students—must be perceived as typical and their group membership must be a salient characteristic.

Despite perceptions among the elderly participants that the program did not improve their relationships with young persons, we should not underestimate the fact that around half of the elderly respondents acknowledged a positive change in their vision of young people and in their wish to be with and do things with them. That said, we do need to ask ourselves why the percentage is not higher. Is it just because of a ceiling effect with elders' existing positive attitudes toward youth? We cannot address this question properly because we have no previous data with which to contrast our findings. Could it perhaps be linked to a process of socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003) through which elderly people but not younger ones prefer to focus on the emotional meaning of already proven relationships rather than broaden their relational horizons? According to this process, ViC elders may not show greater changes in their affectual solidarity toward students partly because this relationships, based on temporary living situations, represents a new relational sphere arriving too late to warrant the additional efforts to cultivate it at the expense of attention devoted to existing relationships. Although it cannot be verified with the data available

to us, this hypothesis gains strength when we confirm that affectual solidarity of the students toward the elderly people does increase.

As for the younger participants, the students tend to link their perceptions of affectual solidarity quite closely to daily life in the home of a specific elderly person because, in general, they do not feel more inclined to participate in activities with elderly people. It would be very interesting to explore in the future potential ways to connect the students' positive visions of their ViC coresidents with their wishes to participate in activities with elderly people in general. How could we link the former—the vision—with the latter—the wish?

In terms of functional solidarity, the presence of the students, in addition to company and security, is a help when it comes to going to significant places. Without them, some of the elderly people interviewed would have to find alternative means to access places associated with basic necessities, such as food provision and health care, which means that this kind of help is especially relevant. What the elderly person would do to meet these basic needs if it were not for the help of the student living in his or her home is unknown.

Moreover, ViC students perform a series of activities and tasks at home. Engaging in these activities opens a channel for collaboration and help, a channel for functional solidarity between the elderly person and the student especially because these activities benefit both generations. The data indicate that ViC students are important as primary sources of help, enabling the elders to carry out various daily activities. Functional intergenerational solidarity generally flows from the bottom (younger students) up (elderly homeowners). However, both elderly people and students carry out activities; thus, functional intergenerational solidarity can flow in both directions, as observed in our research findings, and suggests that ViC promotes intergenerational relations of mutual help (functional intergenerational solidarity). Moreover, the ViC program makes it possible for elderly participants to continue feeling useful through taking care of and helping the students, which is another important factor in healthy aging (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Thang, 2003; Zunzunegui, Béland, Sánchez, & Otero, 2009).

Our cross-sectional study has some limitations. On the one hand, our data only allow us to describe ViC participants' thoughts. A randomized, quasiexperimental study may have allowed us, for example, to better understand the value of intergenerational homesharing compared to other types of homesharing or to find out which aspects of the participants' lives change significantly once they have participated in this kind of program. Furthermore, our sample is not large enough to enable us to draw conclusions about the relationships between the variables of interest. Finally, our decision to exclude from the study normative and structural solidarity due to our belief that conditions set under the ViC contract somehow force the

practical development of these dimensions would need to be rethought, and it deserves further research in the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

The intergenerational homeshare program ViC consists of more than the exchange of accommodation for company. In terms of intergenerational solidarity, this program is a space in which at least three dimensions of this solidarity are practiced: associative, affectual, and functional. This conclusion may open avenues for future research on intergenerational homeshare programs as sources of and contexts for the practice of intergenerational solidarity. Likewise, this research supports further exploration of how dimensions of familial solidarity might be expanded to intergenerational community settings (Kohli, 2005).

From the perspective of associative intergenerational solidarity, ViC offers participating elderly people a much higher degree of intergenerational contact than they would have if they did not take part in the program. The experience of sharing a home through the ViC program may serve as a “school” for familial and nonfamilial intergenerational contact in that it allows students and elderly people to learn and practice various forms of such contact.

With regard to affectual intergenerational solidarity, around half of the elderly people acknowledge a positive change in their visions of young people and in their wishes to be with and do things with them. As for the students, the majority recognize that their relationships with elderly people are better and they see elderly people in a more positive light.

In the area of functional intergenerational solidarity we have observed that this kind of solidarity flows in both directions: from the student to the elderly person and vice versa, which means that ViC is also a program that promotes intergenerational relationships characterized by mutual help. Thus, ViC opens new possibilities for elderly and young people to practice intergenerational solidarity.

Programs like ViC are more than the simple exchange of two services, of company and accommodation. Intergenerational homeshare programs promote some valuable dimensions of intergenerational solidarity among their participants. Therefore, implementation of these programs might constitute a good example of societal response to current European policy challenges in fostering intergenerational solidarity, “creating an awareness of importance of intergenerational relationships, and recognising not only their diversity but also their complementarity” (Zaidi, Gasiior, & Sidorenko, 2010, p. 2).

However, solidarity is not the only dimension in intergenerational homeshare programs. Current literature increasingly acknowledges that solidarity may be just one way of dealing with ambivalences (Lüscher et al., 2010). The latter refer to contradictions linked to certain kinds of experiences

like intergenerational homeshare programs. Hence, the interest to explore in future research not only solidarity but intergenerational tensions and conflicts between elders and youth coresiding within the framework of these programs is in line with comments presented in this article (Folts & Muir, 2002; Jaffe, 1989).

## NOTES

1. Throughout the article, numerous references appear to CIS (Center for Sociological Research), a government body whose mission is to study Spanish society on an ongoing basis. It is a very important source of information on the opinions and behaviors of Spain's population.

2. In this case, appropriateness of this comparison was based on the fact that the sample profile and wording of this particular item in both studies coincided.

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