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International Encounters: Experiences of Visitors and Hosts in a Cross-Cultural Program

Rebecca Ranz, Orit Nuttman-Shwartz, and Githa Thachil

The present study aimed to gain further insights into how visiting international social work students and their hosts from different cultures learn about each others' social services, culture, and personal values. Six Israeli students and 8 Indian students have written narratives and reflections on their experiences in the international encounter during the fieldwork exchange program. Content analysis of the students' papers revealed a learning process that students go through, through which paternalistic attitudes move in the direction of cultural sensitivity that leads to cultural relativism, and then moves back again. Through this process, the students acquire the knowledge and skills they need for implementing international social work in line with social work values and declaration.

Growing interest in the effect of globalization on welfare services and on professional practice has led to increasing recognition of the importance of an international component of social work practice and professional education (Payne & Askeland, 2008; Tice & Long, 2009), as reflected in the International Association of Schools of Social Work and International Federation of Social Workers declaration (2000).

This recognition represents a major step forward in expanding international perspectives of social work education (Council of Social Work Education, 2004), which introduce students to the development of social welfare and social issues in societies that are at different stages of development. In addition, students need to be exposed to cultural diversity as well as to different human behaviors and social environments. This has been done mainly by providing students with an opportunity for an international field work placement, which helps them develop long-term relationships with social work schools abroad (e.g., Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012).

Several theorists have criticized the Western way that the above-mentioned curricula have been developed and implemented to date. For example, Hokenstad (2012) claimed that "international social work education perpetuates cultural and intellectual imperialism and discourages development or valuing of indigenous models promoting dominant western ideas and practices" (pp. 172–173).

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To alleviate that problem, Lyngstad (2012) proposed a gradual perspective, which relates to diversity as well as to similarities between the West and the East in an attempt to contend with the above criticism. According to this perspective, international research and field practice should be learned through “comparative social work,” which “represents social work research, using comparative methodologies to analyze both differences and similarities between different contexts—mostly between different countries” (p. 14). Nonetheless, it remains to be determined whether this model has succeeded in creating social workers with global awareness, identity, and skills.

To date, there have been several attempts to assess the outcomes of international social work (ISW) on the basis of diverse measures (e.g., Gilin & Young, 2009; Kreitzer, Barlow, Schwartz, Lacroix, & MacDonald, 2011). The results revealed that the program provided participants with a meaningful learning experience relating to cultural competence, cultural differences, and personal and professional values. Moreover, the international program enhanced the visiting students’ knowledge beyond the content of the local program. It also increased the students’ awareness of the relationship between specific social policies and social service practices and enhanced their ability to develop new ideas about innovative social work practices that could be applied in their own country, in addition to deepening the students’ empathy and respect for members of other cultural groups. Finally, the students in the ISW programs reported that they had an opportunity to broaden and strengthen their own professional identities. Similarly, Panos, Pettys, Cox, and Jones-Hart (2004) concluded that the ISW program prepared students to work with culturally diverse clients by providing them with a global understanding of people, institutions, and cultural differences as well as with deeper insights into the effects of their own cultural values and perceptions on assessments and interventions back home.

However, a major limitation of the above studies is that they were based mainly on the experiences of the students from sending countries. They did not examine the experiences of the students from the sending and host countries together, nor did they examine the encounter between those two populations. Against that background, the present study aimed to gain further insights into what the students learn during the exchange and how they learn in the encounter that takes place between the students from the host country and the sending country.

The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To examine how visiting students and their hosts from different cultures learn about each others’ social services, culture, and personal values.
2. To explore what, in fact, students from different countries learn in a short-term 3-week visit.
3. To conceptualize the learning process of the two groups and maximize the benefits from the ISW field placement and cross-cultural encounter.

CONTEXT OF THE PROGRAM

The School of Social Work at Sapir College in Israel offers a 3-week international field work training project in collaboration with the Matru Sewa Sangh Institute of Social Work at Nagpur University in India as a part of the ISW program at Sapir.

The Israeli program includes compulsory theoretical and experimental courses such as a course on human rights in international social work and a course on social aspects of the globalization processes, as well as a mini-course that provides a historical overview on the language and traditions of the host countries. In addition, the program includes two experimental workshops on the encounter with foreign cultures and others, which focuses on examination, awareness, and conceptualization of social work in a foreign country before and after the field work training abroad. At the end of the program the students are required to conduct a supervised research project on issues relating to international social work.

Regarding the field work training, students in the program are required to work in Israel and in India, in addition to participating in a seminar on international social work in Israel and abroad. In India, the Israeli students participate in field work training together with the Indian students. During the visit to India, both groups learn together in an intensive psychoeducational course taught by a local faculty member and the Israeli lecturer who accompanies the group from Israel. The above-mentioned course served as the basis for the current study. Through these field work experiences, social encounters, and joint lectures, the Indian students are exposed to the domain of ISW.

The project aims to instill knowledge about the ramifications of globalization on invisible and at-risk communities around the world. As a whole, the program is an experimental learning experience that includes joint workshops and informal meetings, where the students from Israel and India learn together about ISW. The program presented here included four joint meetings, which were facilitated by two faculty members—one from the above social work school in India and the other from the Israel school.

The present study took place while the Israeli students visited India as a part of the ISW program, and it focused on the experiences of the Israeli and Indian participants in the four above-mentioned meetings that accompanied the field work training. In these meetings the students had an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the prevailing social problems and structure of social work in Israel and India, with emphasis on the local culture, politics, and traditions. The content of the program was designed jointly by the host school and the visiting school, and it was based on accepted processes of educational and group development in social work (Nuttman-Shwartz & Shay, 2011).

The first meeting was dedicated to an introduction among the students and to a presentation of the research topic “How and What Do They Learn? A Study of Eastern and Western Students.” It is important to note that during the period of the study, the accepted terminology *West* and *East* was changed to *North* (developed) and *South* (developing; Razack, 2009). This change also reflects the process that the authors experienced while they were writing the article, as well as the development of international discourse on topics such as paternalism, neocolonialism, cultural sensitivity, and cultural relativism.

The topic of the second meeting was “Social Work and Myself.” The guiding issues were “Why did the student choose to be a social worker?” and “Is there something in social work that represents the students from Israel and India?” Another topic discussed in this meeting was Gandhian social work and a representation of social work in Israel.

The third meeting was devoted to the topic of social problems. The guiding issues were “What happens to the student in the encounter with social problems?” and “What is the student’s attitude toward social problems?” Other topics addressed in this meeting were the relativity of social problems, culture and social problems, and international social problems. In the afternoon

session of the meeting, the Indian and Israeli students presented their concurrent field work in their respective countries.

The topic of the fourth and last meeting topic was “Departure: ‘We Come and Leave’—The Effect of the Short-Term Encounter on the Visitors and the Local Students, Clients, and Services.”

METHOD

Research Questions

1. What is the learning process that visiting and hosting students go through in a short 3-week encounter?
2. What do students from different countries learn in a short 3-week encounter?
3. What are the similarities and the differences in the learning process of visiting and hosting students in a short 3-week encounter?

Participants

The participants in the study were 14 social work students enrolled in an international social work training program. Six of them were third-year bachelor of social work (BSW) students from Sapir College in Israel (all women, aged 24–29); and eight of them were master’s of social work (MSW) students enrolled at the Matru Sewa Sangh Institute of Social Work at Nagpur University in India (five men and three women, aged 20–32). Notwithstanding the different levels of degrees awarded by the two universities, both programs had a similar structure and requirements, in accordance with regulations of each country. Because this was a naturalistic study, the number of participants was considered sufficient (Baker & Edwards, 2012). In addition, the analyses in this study were validated by three researchers: one researcher was from India, the second was the guest lecturer who accompanied the Israeli students, and the third was an external objective researcher (Patton, 2002).

All of the students in the program had field work training experience as well as basic theoretical knowledge about generic social work and various social work methods. For both groups of students, this was the first experience with an international learning encounter, particularly in the context of international social work.

Instrument

At the end of every session all of the students from both groups were asked to write personal papers and to record their reflections about their experiences in the encounter program. The reflections included the students’ critical analyses of what happened and, especially, why it happened (Fisher & Somerton, 2000).

Members of each group could add their thoughts to the notebook of each country during the course of the week. This procedure was implemented during the entire period of the encounter program.

Analysis

Content analysis was conducted on the basis of cultural and group theoretical assumptions, which included two approaches to group work: the group development approach (MacKenzie & Livesley, 1983) and the group as a whole approach (Bion, 1961). The analysis was conducted in three main steps. First, the researchers read each text from beginning to end to identify the participants' voices. Second, they identified units of meaning in each of the group narratives (Patton, 2002; Unrau & Coleman, 1997). Third, they combined the units into main themes after careful examination and reexamination of the texts. After completing the documentation, the researchers attempted to reach a consensus regarding the themes. If the researchers did not reach a consensus, they decided together whether to integrate the additional themes into new categories.

Procedure

The group met for four sessions (the first session was two academic hours, and each of the other three sessions was four academic hours). The first session was a presentation of the research, and it developed into a group discussion. The other sessions were based on a psychoeducational model. The first stage of work focused on interpersonal encounters, which were based on work in small groups and development of interpersonal relationships. The second stage of collaborative work was based on cognitive tasks, which followed the model of study groups (Ettin, 1999; Nuttman-Shwartz & Shay, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

The students from Israel and India consented to participate in the study and signed an informed consent form, which was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work at Sapir College. The records in the research notebook described above were anonymous and did not affect the students' grades in their field work practicum.

RESULTS

The main themes derived from content analysis of the narratives are presented, with emphasis on similarities and differences between the participants from Israel and India.

Analysis of the texts revealed three main themes that characterized the learning process. The first theme related to the manifestations and meaning of *paternalism*. The second theme related to *cultural sensitivity*, in an attempt to clarify the cultural context of the visiting participants and the participants in the host group. Consistent with this theme, the third theme was *cultural relativism*.

Paternalism—From an Automatic Response to New Insights

Paternalism comes from the Latin *pater*, meaning to act as a father, or to treat another person as a child. In modern philosophy and jurisprudence, it is to act for the good of another person without that person's consent, as parents do for children (Suber, 1999).

The premise of the Israeli students was that they are from a Western country (now referred to as a Northern country (Razack, 2009), and that they need to show caution and sensitivity in their behavior toward local students. The comparison between Northern and Southern students caused the Israeli students to adopt a type of paternalistic behavior, which can be referred to as *apologetic paternalism*. That is, they adopted a paternalistic perspective, which was accompanied by a sense of shame and guilt. An example of apologetic paternalism can be found in the following comments of students from Israel. After their first tour of a slum neighborhood in India, the Israeli students compared what Israel has with what the local neighborhood does not have.

The first thing that came to my mind was that none of us [Israelis] mentioned that we don't necessarily consider ourselves to be totally Western, but we *do* necessarily perceive the people from India as Easterners. That is, in our view, the culture and attire of developing countries seem backward. Even today, when we toured the slums, it seemed far away from social problems in Israel. I think it's hard to admit because this sounds very judgmental and critical, but when I think about it, it's inevitable to go that route [the comparison is inevitable].

Later, the students became aware that the paternalistic approach can be viewed as a kind of defense mechanism. This insight enabled the participants to talk about the "price of paternalism" and about the meaning of arrogance.

Arrogance protects us in the encounter with others. We came here, and we behaved arrogantly. We were afraid they wouldn't understand, we didn't want to be hurt. We were afraid that they wouldn't be able to accept everything that we are. But they protected us, because in the encounter with others I'm more afraid of being misunderstood than I am of not being able to understand others.

In contrast to the group of Israeli students, the students from India automatically responded to the stereotype of a society that belongs to Southern (developing) countries. They expressed apprehension and even shame about how Israelis would perceive India as poor and underprivileged:

When they visited the communities, I felt a bit uneasy because the slums are very dirty and unhygienic. I wondered what kind of impression they would have from our country.

Later, following a discussion about similarities and differences in social work, the students from India indicated that they wished the status of social work as a profession in India would be similar to the status of social work in Israel.

During the presentation I came to know that there is an association for social workers and license which is vital in Israel for doing social work. There is no such system in India. I feel we should take the initiative to make such a system in India, which would [be] for the betterment of social workers and [the] social work profession.

However, at the end of the sessions there was a reemergence of the Indian students' feelings of anger, as they attempted to rebuff the arrogant paternalism of the Israeli students as they emphasized the good qualities of Indian society.

As Indians we are capable enough to uplift ourselves. I think they missed out one important thing ... the people in the slums are also happy ... Instead of feeling ashamed of our problems we should be proud of ourselves that we are hopeful for a better future Sometimes I just didn't like their

sympathy for us. I didn't like when they said they have not seen as much poverty in their country as in ours. But I know they are speaking the truth.

In sum, in the context of this theme, which characterizes the feelings and discussions relating to paternalism, the participants addressed the differences between the two societies and the implications of those differences for the encounter. At this early stage the students experienced a process of reevaluating their original attitudes, which reflected structuralism and culturalism. The reevaluation process was based on emotional awareness or through cognitive examination, and it enabled the students in both groups to examine the joint encounter from a personal perspective (accepting the "other") or from a professional perspective (cultural sensitivity). In the following section we focus on the second theme—that is, cultural sensitivity.

Cultural Sensitivity—From Forced to Spontaneous Behavior

The definition of *cultural sensitivity* is being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and have an effect on values, learning and behavior (Stafford, Bowman, Eking, Hanna, & Lopes-DeFede, 1997).

The students learned about cultural sensitivity before the encounter. On the one hand, this enhanced their awareness of the other culture. On the other hand, it also caused them to exercise caution in the encounter with the other culture, particularly because they were either being hosted or they were hosting students from that culture.

The fear of misunderstanding the intentions of the hosts derived not only from language differences but also from difficulty interpreting and understanding the cultural meaning of the words, as reflected in the following statement:

I will never be able to understand the intricate dynamics of this place—at least not in a one-hour session or in a three-day encounter, or in three weeks. Even though they speak English, you don't know what insults them, what their gestures mean, what's appropriate and what's not ... what's behind the words.

Another difficulty derived from the concerted effort that the Israeli students invested in the process—the intensity of the work and the visit, in which they were obligated to respect the cultural codes of the local students.

I felt a need to cross my legs on the chair, and I had to keep reminding myself that this is forbidden because it's not considered respectable ... It's like I'm obligated to do something that's really unnatural, and they can't accept me the way I am?! On the other hand, I totally understand and appreciate that I'm their guest ... and it's important to me to respect their feelings.

The sense of discomfort also led to avoidant behavior. In addition, the Israeli students' curiosity and their desire to be exposed to new things conflicted with their persistent fear of hurting their hosts and with their efforts to be culturally sensitive.

I hope I'm allowed to write things here that I might regret or deny later ... But today I felt that I need to "walk on eggshells" because I said (as tactfully as I could) that I think the Indians are less attuned to the individual and to personal feelings. I felt like they were really insulted—like, it's OK for them to criticize themselves, but it's not OK for us to criticize them. That kind of inhibited the opportunity to engage in dialogue and learn together.

As time went on, the Israeli participants came to understand that avoidant responses inhibit communication. Concomitantly, a sense of trust developed among the participants, which enabled them to engage in a discussion focusing on the issue of cultural differences. At first, this discussion was introspective, and later it took place openly, in the group setting.

The discussion of cultural differences is deceptive ... caution inhibits us; it does not open up opportunities. It made me become inhibited, calculating, planning ... Same with them ... And it turned out that that's just what they were thinking about me, and they were cautious with me ... Even if things really happen and you only let go at the end, it's valuable. Maybe it can't happen in any other way.

In contrast, the students from India tended to deal with the issue of cultural sensitivity from a more cognitive, distanced perspective than the Israeli students. The students from India tried to understand who the Israeli students were and to determine whether the Israelis belonged to Northern countries or to Southern countries.

According to me or any other Indian laymen who know geography, Israel is a Middle Eastern country ... although it is a known fact that after the World War II, the unification of Israel was from different parts of the globe. ... [They came mainly] from the continents of America and heavily from European nations [with] the Western lifestyle and culture, and this can be considered as a reason to call themselves Westerners.

Attempts to analyze, explain, and conceptualize cultural differences have been made not only from an academic perspective but also in terms of the local cultural context. The behavioral codes for guests and foreigners in India call for respectful behavior:

All [of the participants] were wearing masks; everyone was being good and kind to each other. Indians say "guests are like Gods." But I believe there was an incomplete interaction. They said what they thought about India and we [expressed our] thoughts about Jews and Israel. I felt [this] was important because it enables lots of group members to open up and vent their prejudices.

The participants' statements indicate that both groups showed cultural sensitivity, but they expressed it in different ways. They continued to examine their own culture versus the other culture in an attempt to develop cultural sensitivity and communication. However, it appears that in their attempt to establish culturally sensitive communication, the students from India relied more on cultural context than did the Israeli students. At this stage, the students changed their approach. Rather than emphasizing sensitivity, caution, and avoidance, they began to behave more openly. This process enabled them to understand the other culture, on the one hand, while maintaining their personal and group identity on the other. In that way, it helped them view the encounter between the two groups from a perspective of cultural relativism.

Cultural Relativism

The term *cultural relativism* relates to the transition from a feeling of foreignness to acknowledgment of differences represented in the environment (Healy, 2007). In the group session, this theme was reflected in attempts to integrate the emotional and cognitive dimensions of the cross-cultural encounter. Analysis of the themes reveals two main topics through which the students examined the issue of relativism: personal motives for choosing the social work profession and

the way the profession has been implemented in practice in each country. With regard to motives for choosing the profession, the students from India talked about faith, religion, and their national mission. In contrast, the Israeli students described their choice of the profession as an unplanned development that was based on an individualist worldview. The way that the students in each group presented their motives for choosing the profession caused the Israeli students to feel embarrassed about the relative ease of their professional choice in comparison with their counterparts from India. At this stage, the students began to learn about human growth through the interplay of sociocultural, spiritual, and psychological factors that influence the growth of individuals.

Some of them [the Indian students] expressed a deep desire to work in the profession, out of a strong belief that this is their mission. In contrast, I just happened into it. Some of them [the Indian students] gave up so much (a family, children, etc.) in order to be able to invest everything they had in helping people ... The Indian students' passion caused me to feel selfish—and above all, I felt superficial. I was really interested in discovering how the religious beliefs of some of the students were strongly connected with their choice of the profession—whether it was their Christian or Hindu faith.

Thus, the discussion about the status of social work focused on the institutionalization of the profession in Israel versus the emphasis on charity that characterizes social work in India. In the course of the discussion, the Israeli students experienced cultural relativism with regard to the profession. That is, their harsh feelings about the status of social work in Israel were placed in a different perspective after their encounter with the students from India. In relative terms, the Israeli students felt that the status of social work in their country was higher.

I thought about many of their problems. Social workers in India don't even have a license. This can only encourage corruption and cheapen the profession. And of course, it means that social workers are "people who give help" without having any knowledge or training. I also wondered whether I should at least be "consoled" about this issue, which is so basic, essential, and self-evident ... Where are their strengths and weaknesses? And where are our strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the reality? ... What would they do if they lived in our reality, and what we do if we lived in their reality? ... Lots of thoughts and questions.

The institutionalization of social work in Israel is perceived as a positive process and reflects the important status of the profession. The Indian students explained that the social conflicts and security situation in Israel make social work and social workers necessary.

Here in India the social workers are not identified ... we don't get any license. Therefore people who give charity and make donations call themselves social workers. So the professional social workers don't have any identity like the Israeli social workers. I think that because there are various conflicts and issues going on in Israel the role of the social worker is very important.

The discussion about the social work profession also addressed differences in the worldview of social workers in Israel and India—the individualist orientation of the Israeli social workers versus the collectivist orientation of the Indian social workers. In addition, attempts were made to understand the differences in the professional approaches of both groups of social workers in light of cultural, social, and economic differences between Israeli and Indian societies. The following statements reflect the perspective of the Israeli social workers:

Our world view is deeply rooted in the values of self-fulfillment, individualism, "what makes me feel good." We [the Israelis] want to help, but we are averse to the word "helping"; we're afraid of the

word ... They [the social workers from India] talked about dedication, helping others, and making others happy—things that make us [the Israelis] raise our eyebrows if people mention them. But why not? Why is this so unacceptable?

Today I can understand why they [the Indians] talk to their clients less about feelings. Because it feels like people here are fighting for their lives. On the other hand, I'm ambivalent about this topic, because I think that it's hard to avoid the individual, and it's hard not to let your clients express themselves. Apparently I have become accustomed to the Western approach.

Similarly, the students from India explained that their professional perspective derives from their worldview and from the social context of their country. Both of these aspects differ from Israeli society.

The social workers there [in Israel] are fighting for the rights of refugees and immigrants from other countries. It is a thing to be appreciated, but here in India people are not even interested to fight for their neighboring people. In India social work focuses on the community level more than the individual level. I think it is just because here in India poverty and illiteracy are found at a mass level. So we need to focus on that aspect first. And here we believe in holistic development. How can we ask a child his/her feelings when he is unable to have food at least once in a day? So we need to focus on the problems of basic need. After that we can work on their further development.

The findings indicate that processes of globalization are manifested differently in each country. Whereas these processes have led to increased urbanization in India and generated waves of severe poverty and distress among the local population, the main focus in Israel has been on a relatively small population, and on the arrival of refugees and work immigrants from Africa and the Far East. During the meetings, the students from the two groups experienced a process of reevaluation, in which they reexamined existing attitudes and adopted new attitudes and behaviors. This process is accepted in group and intergroup encounters, but it is also the result of examination and enhancement of awareness about the main themes that concerned the students in the encounter with their counterparts from a foreign country and different culture, who have different perspectives of the role of social work and methods of intervention.

DISCUSSION

The mutual learning model has been accepted and effectively applied toward social work training (Nuttman-Shwartz & Shay, 2011), and it was also the basis of the current learning model. The findings of this study show that this model enabled the students to learn through encounters with their peers, as well as through examination of processes and issues that concern social work students from the two target countries (Israel and India). In addition, the mutual model provided a basis for comparing perceptions of the profession and methods of work in each country and indicates that the model is also appropriate for international social work education.

The findings reveal two main axes in the learning process, which developed concurrently: the group axis and the content axis. On the group axis, the students from Israel and India experienced a process of development separately and together. This process involved a transition in terms of boundaries, as well as in terms of creating one whole group and returning to subgroups at the end of the process (MacKenzie & Livesley, 1983). Thus, the processes within and between the two groups were accompanied by attempts to identify the other as different,

which were mainly a result of students' cultural differences and biases, although in some cases the responses were gender-based. It is important to bear in mind that although this multinational cultural encounter reinforced the group process, it was also an obstacle to creating an atmosphere that encouraged cohesion among the group as a whole.

The content axis focused on three issues that characterize the essence of the encounter between the international social worker and the other—that is, the local resident or the visitor—and the encounter between the social worker and social work in Southern (developing) countries and Northern (developed) countries.

Their perspectives on these issues reflected a new learning process of transition, in which they moved from a paternalistic approach to an approach characterized by cultural sensitivity and cultural relativism (PCSCR) and then moved back again. The PCSCR learning process and the knowledge acquired in that process enabled the students to develop professional skills required for international social work, such as cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication, as well as familiarity with various cultures that differ from their own.

Toward PCSCR—A New Learning Process

In this encounter, which occurred in a multicultural context, the participants in each group experienced a cognitive and emotional process that enabled them to examine global and local processes from a broad, cross-cultural perspective. Moreover, the findings indicate that the students needed to deconstruct social, professional, and national schemata that they had internalized as part of an age-normative developmental process and as part of the development of their professional identity (Cinamon & Hasson, 2009). In fact, it was found that the students in the program shifted from a paternalistic perspective to a perspective that enabled them to implement cultural relativism. The students' reports indicate that they experienced a process of accommodation, which included changes in familiar schemata and adaptation of those schemata to the new reality (Allen & Friedman, 2010). Because attitudes toward paternalism and cultural sensitivity are part of the emotional and cognitive baggage that each group of students brought with them to the encounter, there was a need to create a supportive and safe space that would enable them to reach the stage of cultural relativism.

As shown in the Results section, in the beginning of the encounter both groups of students initially expressed automatic responses to the session and to the experience of foreignness. The atmosphere was paternalistic until the participants were able to reach new insights about others and about the feelings that were aroused. This kind of process is natural in the encounter between groups from different cultures, and it is known in the literature on situations of social conflict (Volkan, 1997).

The experience of foreignness and paternalism cannot be detached from the process in which each group reinforced its individual identity, as expected in the development of group dynamics. One of the first stages in the development of the group is the stage of differentiation, in which the participants in each group work on acknowledging the differences between them. The first stage is characterized by polarization, in which the participants emphasize their differences, including differences in the perspectives of individual members (MacKenzie & Livesley, 1983). In the case of groups from different nationalities, these processes are intensified and can even lead to hostility and closure, which has been referred to as *us and them* processes (Hopper, 1997; Weinberg & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2006). In the groups presented here, the students mentioned

apologetic attitudes, shame, and even anger and aversion, as mentioned by one of the Indian students.

When they visited the communities, I felt a bit uneasy because the slums are very dirty and unhygienic. I wondered what kind of impression they would have from our country.

Moreover, there was also evidence of differences between the two groups. The students in the Israeli group experienced a process in which they examined the benefits of paternalistic attitudes and why those attitudes are necessary, whereas the students from India did not experience this process. The Israeli students constantly engaged in emotional and reflective examination, whereas the Indian students focused on cognitive assessments and on a collectivist perspective. It is possible that this difference derives from the pedagogic approach used in India versus the approach used in Israel. In India students focus on studying by rote for an examination, whereas Israeli students are expected to engage in reflection. In addition, at the beginning of the process the students from India responded automatically to the stereotypes of a Southern (developing) country. As time went on, however, they began to express anger about the arrogance of the Israeli students. The anger of the Indian students was accompanied by expressions of national pride, and this tone intensified as the process went on.

Although both groups of students expressed paternalism, as time moved on they demonstrated cultural sensitivity, which they had acquired in their country of origin. The manifestations of cultural sensitivity ranged from forced to spontaneous behavior. It is possible that prior acquisition of knowledge can impede the intercultural encounter, because the process of adaptation undermines the sense of being an individual and leads to avoidant behavior (Nuttman-Shwartz & Shay, 1998), as stated by another Indian student:

The discussion of cultural differences is deceptive ... caution inhibits us; it does not open up opportunities. It made me become inhibited, calculating, planning ... Same with them ...

The Israeli students refrained from expressing what was on their minds and chose to behave as they believed they were expected to. As time went on, the supervision process enabled them to realize that avoidant reactions are inhibitory. The sense of trust that developed among the participants was accompanied by the emergence of a dialogue that focused on the issue of culture in general and on cultural differences and similarities in particular. Initially, this dialogue was conducted at the individual, intrapersonal levels. The situation of being “without memory and desire” (Bion, 1967, p. 2) in the developmental process is a known difficulty that students experience. However, in an international encounter, it is not always possible to be totally open and act oneself. The attempt to be spontaneous was perceived as undesirable and unacceptable owing to the cultural frame, and in light of the cognitive awareness that spontaneous behavior can hurt someone else. It is also necessary to take into account that such behavior limits learning (Nuttman-Shwartz & Dekel, 2008). Concomitantly, the Indian students chose to observe the Israeli group from the outside, and they relied on a cognitive analysis of Israeli culture that enabled them to connect to the foreign culture despite their stereotypes about Israeli society in general and the group of Israeli students in particular. The cognitive perspective enabled the Indian students to engage in a dialogue with the Israeli group in their capacity as hosts. However, this perspective would be construed as detachment in the West. This explanation is consistent with the approach of Singh, Gumz, and Crawley (2010), who argued that there is an

essential difference in conceptual approaches and approaches to work in India and other developing countries with regard to developed countries, which include Israel in this case.

Besides the cultural explanation, it is also possible to relate to the above differences in terms of gender norms that shape the social structure and power relations in each society. That is, the behavior of the Indian students can be viewed as masculine, and the behavior of the Israeli students can be viewed as more feminine based on the gender composition of the two groups, because all of the Israeli students were women, and most of the Indian students were men (Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2012). We can base this assumption on a statement by an Indian student, who wrote:

I, on the other hand was not at all surprised that since [the] majority in [the] gathering were ... women, there would be [an] emotional breakdown talking on delicate issues of loneliness, misinterpreted by others, support from the family. I believe that women ... are mentally stronger than men and have capabilities of handling delicate issues such as woman, child and family issues.

It appears that the intrapersonal dialogue assisted the participants in the process of moving toward cultural relativism. The Israeli students explored their avoidant responses, which reflected the internal conflict between curiosity and the desire to get to know the other group on the one hand, versus fear of hurting them and a desire to be culturally sensitive on the other. The students from India engaged in a cognitive examination of the conflict between the accepted code of honoring guests versus existing stereotypes of Israelis and Jews. This made it difficult for them to engage in an emotional dialogue with the Israelis, which could arouse feelings of anger and even animosity toward their guests. That is, because it is prohibited to show these feelings in Indian culture, they chose to use the cognitive channel in their examination. It appears that both groups continued the process of comparison while developing cultural sensitivity and establishing intercultural communication.

The last stage of the process was reflected in the students' ability to understand and acknowledge cultural differences, taking into account the local reality and cultural codes rather than adopting a paternalistic perspective as they did at the beginning of the sessions. Essentially, the students began to understand the meaning of the term *cultural relativism*, where the sense of foreignness was replaced by acknowledged recognition of differences that represent the environment. The students' reports indicate that cultural relativism was examined at the micro and macro levels. The ability to understand the meaning of cultural relativism involved an emotional and cognitive process. At the emotional level, each group needed to remove the defense mechanisms that perpetuate existing stereotypes and allow themselves to adopt a different perspective without feeling that their self-identity was being threatened. At the cognitive level, the participants needed to acquire knowledge about global processes, as well as knowledge about local processes such as the migration of rural populations to the city and migration of refugees who seek asylum. In addition, there was a need to examine worldviews and religious beliefs, especially those that typified the group from India.

It is possible that the students reached the group stages of *intimacy* and *mutuality* (MacKenzie & Livesley, 1983), in which participants gained access to information that enabled them to understand themselves and others in more complex ways and to explore the meaning of close relations. At these stages, there is greater tolerance of closeness and openness, and the participants develop an independent understanding of equal relationships without feeling that they are being taken advantage of.

The findings indicate that the PCSCR learning processes experienced by the students enhanced their ability to work within a short time on the emotional and cognitive tasks that accompanied the encounter with students from the other group. In this aspect, it can be argued that the international social work track is similar to general training programs that are accepted for social work students. However, the content of the encounter is different from the encounter in general social work training programs. Specifically, the encounter is more intensive in terms of the supervision process and reflective work that the students need to engage in under the guidance of a familiar professional model. Based on this approach, the students worked along three axes: processes within the individual group members, processes within the group, and between groups. These processes helped the students work through and elaborate their multiple identities to feel more secure and open up to the members of the other group. The between-group process can also provide a basis for the interpretation of the encounter. According to that interpretation, the members of one group were visitors in a strange land, and the "others" (Indians) were hosts in their own environment. As Razack (2009) pointed out, "the North constructs those in the South as the 'other' and how spaces and bodies in the North also get constructed as the 'other'" (p. 17). The findings indicate that at this stage, it is possible to acquire extensive knowledge about international social work through comparative and contextual social work, taking into account social welfare policy and cultural diversity.

Contrary to expectations based on the literature (Das & Carter Anand, 2014; Dominelli, 2010), issues relating to human rights and oppression were not raised in the group sessions. It is possible that these issues were put aside, out of concern that there would not be enough time to process them and in the interest of sustaining the group. In addition, the sessions were conducted in English, which was not the native language of most of the participants (the students from India mainly spoke Hindi or Marathi, and the Israeli students were Hebrew speakers). In this connection, Payne and Askeland (2008) noted that "taking education in a foreign language will always make people feel inferior, less fluent and less competent" (p. 154). Thus, the language itself became part of the mechanism of oppression, in that it did not provide the students with a safe space in which they could express themselves articulately and fluently.

Before concluding, several limitations of the study need to be mentioned. First, the sample of students was small, and the study was conducted over a limited period. Therefore, the results might not accurately reflect the processes that take place in encounters between students from Northern (developed) countries and Southern (developing) countries. The second limitation relates to the theoretical assumptions. Notably, gender theory might provide an alternative framework for explaining the group processes. In addition, the fact that the participants in one of the groups were visitors may have affected the students' behaviors, feelings, and interpretations. However, all three researchers in this project considered the cultural and group aspects to be most salient. Nonetheless, it might be worthwhile to examine this encounter in homorganic groups (e.g., gender, traditional or modern societies) and from a wider variety of perspectives in future studies.

Another limitation relates to the way that the study was presented. The authors portrayed India as an Eastern country and Israel as a Western country. It is possible that this frame created an a priori cognitive structure that affected the discourse. In addition, the study was based on reflective reporting of the sessions rather than on written documentation or summaries of the meetings. Finally, although the Indian students represented various geographical areas of India, they were, as the Indian third author described it, from a deprived

region of the country, even if they probably had a more privileged background than students who do not speak English. Hence, it is likely that the findings would have been different if another population of students had participated in the study. Nonetheless, the contribution of the study is to offer a new way of looking at cross-cultural and international learning through the PCSCR learning process, which enables understanding of what global students undergo in an international encounter. Furthermore, owing to the lack of research on processes that take place in encounters between Northern and Southern countries, this study is noteworthy because it compares both the host and the visiting students. Therefore, it is important to continue examining how these processes take place, with emphasis on the transformation that social workers and social work students need to experience to develop mutual relationships based on cultural relativism without reverting to processes of colonialism and paternalism. Finally, it is important to invest efforts in updating the international social work curriculum so that it includes specific knowledge about methods of learning used in Northern countries versus Southern countries, as reflected in the findings of this study.

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