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What students' Facebook posts teach us about the identity challenge in field placements abroad

מה ניתן ללמוד מתכתובות פיסבוק על האתגר הזהותי במהלך ההכשרה בארץ אחרת

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is a common tool that enables students to publicly express their emotions, thoughts, experiences, and knowledge. On the assumption that the personal narratives of students can provide deep insights into their learning processes during practical training programs, the article presents content analyses of Facebook posts written by Israeli students who participated in an international social work field placement program in India. Content analysis of the students' posts reveals that they grappled with their personal and professional identities as part of the learning process that occurred while they were formulating their professional identity as social workers. The analysis elicited three main themes: (1) awareness of the national identity; (2) exploration of other identities (personal, professional, and global); and (3) an attempt to contain multidimensional identity. The students discussed the main challenges they faced in the process of formulating an identity that will enable them to engage in international social work, and they described the fluctuations that occurred in those identities. The results show how public Facebook posts can be used as a tool to shed light on the contribution of social work education in international field placements, and provide insights into the learning processes that students experience in field placements abroad.

תקציר

פיסבוק הוא אמצעי תקשורת שכיח, שבאמצעותו מבטאים סטודנטים את רגשותיהם, מחשבותיהם והתנסויותיהם בפני קהל רחב. בהתאם, הנחת המחקר הייתה כי תכתובת של סטודנטים בפייסבוק תאפשרנה תובנה מעמיקה באשר לתהליך הלמידה אותו עוברים סטודנטים לעבודה סוציאלית במהלך הכשרה הנעשית בארץ אחרת. בהתאם לברוח זו, המאמר הנוכחי ניסה ללמד על תהליך הלמידה של סטודנטים המשתתפים בהכשרה בשדה בארץ אחרת, במקרה הנידון בהודו, באמצעות ניתוח תוכן של כתבות בפייסבוק שנכתבו במהלך שהותם בהודו. ממצאי ניתוח הכתבות מראים כי תהליך הלמידה מתאפיין בחיפוש אחר זהות אישית ומקצועית. תהליך זה כולל שלושה מצבים: 1 - מודעות לזהות לאומית 2 - גילוי ואיתור זהויות אישיות נוספות – זהות אישית, זהות מקצועית וזהות גלובאלית ו 3 - ניסיון לפיתוח עמדה רב זהותית. בתהליך ההכשרה בארץ אחרת קיים לא רק חיפוש אחר זהות אלא גם נעות בין הזהויות השונות וזאת על מנת להתחבר וליישם עבודה סוציאלית בינלאומית. התוצאות מראות כי תכתובות פומבית, כמו בפיסבוק, יכולות לשמש כלי נוסף וכאמצעי השופף אור על תרומת החינוך וההכשרה לעבודה סוציאלית ועל מהות תהליך הלמידה. כלי זה זמין במיוחד במהלך הכשרה בשדה בארץ אחרת, כאשר הסטודנטים ממשיכים את

קשריהם עם עמיתים ואחרים באמצעות תכתובות פומביות בהם הם משתמשים
על דרך השגרה

Growing interest in the impact 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 School of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) declaration (2014). This recognition represents a major step forward in expanding international perspectives of social work education (Council of Social Work Education, 2004), so that students are introduced to the development of social welfare and social issues in different societies that are at various stages of development. In addition, the international component exposes students to cultural diversity as well as to different human behaviors and social environments. This has been done mainly in the context of local field work training, although several social work schools have also included an opportunity for international field work placement abroad (Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012). The most recent international social work (ISW) programs have aimed to devote increased attention to international aspects of social work (Healy & Wairire, 2014), and to enhance social sensitivity, cultural competence, cultural relativism, as well as to promote moral and anti-oppressive interventions (Gray, 2005; Healy, 2007; Ranz, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Thachil, 2015; Reichert, 2006).

To date, there have been several attempts to assess the outcomes of ISW programs on the basis of diverse measures (e.g. Gilin & Young, 2009; Kreitzer, Barlow, Schwartz, Lacroix, & Macdonald, 2011). These assessments are usually based on pre-program surveys, recorded reflections during or after field work abroad, and interviews conducted when the students return home (Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Kreitzer et al., 2011; Moorhesd, Boetto, & Bell, 2013). The findings indicate that these programs have mainly provided participants with a meaningful learning experience relating to cultural competence, cultural relativism, cultural differences, and personal and professional values. Students working overseas often report culture shock or 'cultural disequilibrium', as well as a sense of instability and lack of clarity about where they belong and what they should be doing (Barlow, 2007; Taylor, 1994). In their work abroad, they experience a process of transformation in which they re-evaluate and challenge their original attitudes, beliefs, and way of thinking (Ranz et al., 2015). In addition, Moorhesd et al. (2013) found that a short-term study program provided an opportunity for students to enhance their personal and professional self-awareness. Specifically, they became aware of aspects relating to the 'self', and gained a clearer understanding of the values they believe in and stand for. Most students gained an understanding of their 'self' as social workers developed a commitment for action, which helped them in the process of forming their professional and personal identity.

These outcomes have been based mainly on reflections from personal diaries, guided reflection, and various surveys. However, the students have also made extensive use of Facebook in documenting and reflecting on their experiences (Olding, 2013). Facebook is by far the most popular online social network (Kreutz, 2009; Young, 2013). In research conducted among students in international programs, Facebook has emerged as one of the most convenient and time efficient modes of maintaining social relationships, especially moderate-intensity social relationships that are formed while the students are abroad (Olding, 2013). Beyond the popularity of Facebook as a mode of communication for students, it has also been recognized by researchers in the social sciences as a novel tool for observing human behavior, testing hypotheses, and recruiting participants (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Through Facebook profiles and posts, individuals present relevant information about themselves. The research findings indicate that online social networks convey fairly accurate personality impressions of profile owners. Notably, offline relationships tend to lead to Facebook relationships rather than the other way around, which requires the self to be presented in an authentic way (Back et al., 2010; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Young, 2013).

The question arises: What can we learn through Facebook? Young (2009) noted that the Facebook profile represents a social identity at a given point in time. The changes in one's profile as reflected in updates, posts, and photographs over time, constitute a valuable source for analysis of identity transitions, and provide a vehicle for reflection on how a person's life has evolved and how that person has transformed over time. Furthermore, research on students in international programs has revealed that through Facebook one can learn about their social relationships, social adjustment, social identity, and social transitions in the international arena (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2012; Olding, 2013).

Facebook has become a popular mode of communication for students and a natural environment for them to maintain social relationships, which enables them to freely express what they feel, think, and imagine without being concerned about whether it is academically appropriate or what impression it will have on their lecturers. This environment is quite different from the academic environment, including the setting of field work abroad where students are expected to demonstrate and use their academic knowledge and practice.

This notwithstanding, to the best of our knowledge students' reflections in Facebook posts have never been analyzed systematically in an attempt to gain new insights about international field placements abroad and the learning process that they experience in those programs. As such, the aim of the current research is to reveal if and how the unique process that students experience in field placement abroad is reflected in Facebook, when they are free of academic expectations.

Context of the program

A School of Social Work in Israel offers an ISW track, which was established to promote the development of knowledge building and professional competence in ISW, as well as to prepare future social workers in Israel to apply ISW knowledge to local social work practice and policy. The program includes compulsory theoretical and experiential courses, and three weeks of international field work training in collaboration with the Institute of Social Work at a University in India. The students chosen for the ISW track are third-year students who have already learned identity theories and participated in practical courses on reflective social work in the first two years of the social work program. They were selected on the basis personal interviews, average grades, and letter of recommendation from their field work practicum supervisor. In India, the Israeli students participate in a psycho-educational training seminar which aims to help them integrate their experiences into a theoretical framework. The seminar consists of 18 meetings, which are held every evening at the same time and place and last between an hour and-a-half to three hours (for more details, see Ranz, 2015). As for field work training, the Israeli students in the program are required to work in Israel as well as in India, where they participate in field work training together with the Indian students.

Method

Research questions

1. What issues do students raise on Facebook?
2. What learning processes are reflected in the students' Facebook posts?
3. What can we learn about ISW students through their Facebook posts?

Participants

The participants in the study were 12 social work students enrolled in an ISW training program. All 12 participants were third-year BSW students from Israel: 7 were trained in 2013, and 5 were trained in 2014. All of them were women aged 22–29. To the best of our knowledge, all of the students used

Facebook before the trip to India. Because this was a naturalistic study, this number of participants is usually considered sufficient (Baker & Edwards, 2012). In addition, the analyses in the study were validated by two researchers: one was the guest lecturer who accompanied the Israeli students, and the other was an external objective researcher (Patton, 2002).

Instrument

Twenty-five Facebook statuses posted by 12 students were analyzed. Each status was between 300 and 500 words and was posted during January/February 2013 and during January/February 2014.

First, the researchers read each status from beginning to end, in order to identify the participants' voices. Second, they identified units of meaning in each of the group narratives (Patton, 2002; Unrau & Coleman, 1997). Third, they derived three main themes from the units 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

Every student gave the self-reflection narratives they posted on Facebook to the lecturer voluntarily after returning to Israel and after the lecturer had finished teaching them. All of the posts were given anonymously. The students also gave their consent for the lecturer to analyze all the material that was written during the three-week program in India. Statuses were posted every day or once every couple of days, depending on the student's decision. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work in Israel.

Findings

The narratives reveal three main benchmarks: (1) awareness of the national identity; (2) exploration of other identities—personal, professional, and global; and (3) an attempt to contain a multidimensional identity. In addition, between these benchmarks there were 'transitional spaces' that enabled the Israeli students to explore different identities by comparing themselves to the 'other' (the local students and social workers), or by 'going back' to their national identity. These spaces were found mainly during the weekends, when the students practised their national customs, sent posts, and talked with their families, relatives and friends in Israel.

Awareness of the national identity

The students presented this theme in two ways: through their Israeli national identity and through their identity as foreigners.

a. 'Israeli national' identity

The students chose to present their national identity in their first post, which reflected their public and professional role and emphasized their mission to strengthen international relationships through the learning process. This identity was detached and unidimensional. The students remained 'closed and reserved', and did not raise any dilemmas, questions, or other fears that one would expect to emerge at the beginning of this kind of training program.

> The Israeli consul [whom the students met after landing in India] … emphasized the international social work training program … as a means of strengthening relations between the two countries and improving the image of Israel in India … This is only the beginning of a unique learning experience, which will enable close observation and expose us to different social issues and different types of intervention.

Another example was written after an international conference held at Nagpur University in India:

> This morning there was an India-Israel social work conference. We (the Israeli students) all dressed in formal Israeli clothes (in contrast to our Indian daily clothes). We were so proud to see our college symbol next to our Israeli flag. This aroused a great sense of excitement and a real sense of our true mission.

a. The 'foreigner'

The 'foreign' identity that does not fit in with the local environment is a natural continuation of the initial detached identity that the students chose to adopt.

> Despite the attempt to adapt by dressing like the locals … we felt that we still hadn't succeeded in fitting in with the local environment … It was hard not to notice the way people looked at us …
> It wasn't always pleasant to walk in the street, and lots of people noticed that we are foreigners … lots of people were taking pictures, and people treated us differently … this aroused many thoughts, caused emotional flooding, and even led to arguments between us.

It is interesting to note that the 'foreign' identity was so strong that the Israeli students could not see any similarities between themselves and the residents of India. Hence, when they encountered children from traumatic backgrounds, they were 'surprised' by the children's ability to show love, or to be happy despite the harsh world they came from, as if this was something new that they had not seen in Israel.

> The children are really starved for love, and they really succeeded … It took one minute to fall in love with them. It's hard to believe that these are orphans, abandoned children, children of drug addicts or single mothers, children who had been left on railway tracks …

This was also manifested when one of the Israeli students met an orphan child in his field placement:

> The most significant event for me was a little boy who came to the orphanage … He sat down and showed the social worker his leg, which had a large and dirty edema that had been neglected for a long time and would take a long time to heal. At that moment, I couldn't believe that despite all of the wounds on his body, he succeeded in expressing his happiness and sweetness.

Essentially, this theme shows that the students maintained their Israeli identity, first by highlighting that identity, and later by highlighting their status as foreigners. As the findings indicate, they created a transitional space, which enabled them to explore other identities.

The attempt to come closer to the 'other' (the transitional space)

At this stage, the students' posts reveal the beginning of a transition, in which the students begin to open a window and observe the other as they reexamine their reserved identity. Despite this transition, the students remained much focused on themselves and on their identity.

> All day, I kept asking myself: Are they happier than us or not? Do they have more problems? How does this affect them? Are they sad? … Is that smile they greet us with for real, or is it just a nice show for us?
> The next day we went to the Indian college and had a fascinating discussion with the group of Indian students about social work and how they perceive the social work profession in India. Some of the themes raised in the discussion reminded us of the profession in our country (Israel) and we were able to identify with them, but others were new to us and raised questions about their (the Indian) perspective.

Exploration of other identities: personal, professional, and global

This theme focuses on the students' attempt to find other identities by moving between the familiar and foreign, between near and far. The process occurs in the encounter with others, and through personal and interpersonal dialogue.

a. Exploration of personal identity

This transition enabled the Israeli students to explore the new identities they encountered. In this case, a student working in a field placement with children who were left at railway stations described the new identity the children gave her—the identity of 'big sister', and she suggests that she shed her previous identities.

> I have fallen in love. I feel that just as they need the contact with me, I need the contact with them … When we asked the local psychologist if she could tell about the cases of the children, she said that when they come to her they tell her their stories. Then she tells them that she's going to forget the story together with them … they leave everything behind them because they have come to a family. That's the feeling they gave me, as a total stranger to them, when they changed my name to 'Didi', which means 'big sister'.

Another exploration of the students' personal identity was during the international conference, when the students were asked to present their work in English for the first time in their lives. The success of the conference as a whole and their experiences in particular filled them with pride, self-confidence, and faith in themselves.

> The conference starts. It is saturated with speakers, including us. We are all excited and tense at the same time! … In the end, we all overcame the challenge with great success! It was very exciting to speak a foreign language in front of big audience. We were full of pride and satisfaction, and flattered by the intensity of their interest in us and in our country Hurrah!! …

a. Expanding professional identity

Another transition took place when the Israeli students explored their identities, and expanded their professional identity by *assuming ethical professional responsibility*. This responsibility was manifested when the students decided to minimize their exposure of the local residents in photographs, in order to 'maintain their dignity'. Hence, from that stage on, the students focused on photographing landscapes and objects, and the image of the local residents was camouflaged. Thus, the students' *professional identity was strengthened* when they implemented the professional values of human dignity.

> We often need to document the rare moments of real people in photographs … However, we did not come to Nagpur as tourists … We reached the decision together that from now on we will try to minimize our exposure of these people—especially the people we encounter … in order to preserve human dignity.

In addition, the students' professional identity expanded when they had to deal with the different concepts relating to 'developmental stages' (the Israeli-Western individualistic approach) as opposed to the generic perception, which is common in India.

> We were surprised to find that the two age groups, children and adolescents, were together despite their different ages. Six-year-old boys and 15- year-old boys were playing in the same activity room. These mutual spaces seemed odd, and are really unknown to us. I was surprised to see that it appeared to be working. This raises many questions: Are developmental stages universal? Are the activities suited to the different developmental stages? What is the rationale for this practice? Is the motive only a lack of resources? … Many questions arise, and it will take me time to understand how and why the activities are conducted in this way.

a. Global feminine identity

This identity emerged in three separate posts from the second week of the program. In the first post, the students expressed a 'shared destiny' based on the struggle of women to protect themselves and be strong. This was expressed in the pride that the Israeli students felt in a young Indian woman who was protesting in order to raise public consciousness of the dangers that

women face and strategies for coping with those dangers. In the post, where the students attached an Israeli song which describes a woman who is strong but lonely, it appears that they were expressing a global feminine voice.

> We happened to encounter a young woman … who had decided to take action. We found her riding a motorcycle, and she was holding up a huge sign which explains how women can protect themselves in various risk situations … It's hard to describe the sense of pride we felt …

The following is an excerpt of the song that the students posted:

> She was stronger than the winter, she was stronger than a storm … . She kept her heart in a safe, and kept her body to herself … [Gali Atari, a popular Israeli singer]

The second and third posts that week described a 'global feminine identity' that can create a candid, intimate discussion, an identity that brings women together. At this stage, the students put aside the 'foreign identity' and spoke in terms of 'we'.

> We felt that despite cultural differences and language barriers, we had succeeded in creating a genuine feminine discourse … We felt closer than ever to those real women.
> We heard various lectures about the issue of protecting women … Despite the vast distance and the problematic reputation of India with regard to women's safety, we understood how the issue of women is shared throughout the world, and how much Israel and India share in common in this respect.

Transitional space

The weekends became a transitional space that enabled the students to attempt to capture and become aware of other options, which include either formulating new identities or expanding their own identity. This process is reflected in posts which describe the students' homesickness for family, friends, food, and traditional Sabbath dinners on Friday night. On weekends, the students allowed themselves to revert to their national (Israeli) identity, which is closer to them. In that way, they could express their homesickness for the familiar things that are so far away. This space enabled the Israeli students to oscillate between several identities.

> We tried to assuage my homesickness for family and friends in Israel by having a traditional meal to bring in the Sabbath on Friday nights, and it warmed our hearts! On Fridays, as soon as we finish our field work we go to the local market and buy things to prepare an Israeli meal …
> Friday afternoon arrives, and we bring in the Sabbath. We stop studying for a moment. I'm sure we don't stop thinking during the weekend, but we gather new strength for the week to come.
> We brought in the Sabbath at the guest house with a pleasant Sabbath meal and moving letters from home.

The attempt to contain multidimensional identity

At this stage, the students attempted to develop an ability to simultaneously contain several identities. They can observe what takes place in the environment from a distance, like the 'foreign' identity; but they also look inward, and are aware of the impact that their experiences have on their identity, on who they are. That is, the students are aware of the 'global other' as well as their 'national identity'.

> I look at all of these sights from the jeep … I feel so sheltered inside, as if I'm in an aquarium looking out the window at the different sights … What I see in the street makes me restless … Sometimes I have such a burning desire to suppress it all in light of my feeling of helplessness.

The students discover that foreignness does not have to be distant and detached.

> We'll always be foreigners there … But does the sense of foreignness have negative connotations? Does it have to be accompanied by a sense of alienation? Today we discovered it doesn't have to be that way. Today the foreigner became more and more familiar.

The closeness enabled the students to look at their surroundings from a different perspective, as professional women who have suddenly found opportunities to initiate appropriate interventions.

For example, one of the students' last posts was about a 10-year-old English-speaking girl who helped the Israeli students by translating what they said to the staff members and children at the training center. This was reported in a local paper, and paved the way for professional intervention.

> As future professionals, we often use the word 'empowerment'. Today that word took on a deep meaning for me, because I believe that the newspaper article was meaningful for slum children, and particularly for this little girl … As part of an intervention program, we created a new corner together with the staff members of the center. The corner was called 'inspiration', and aimed to expose the children to a variety of figures who could be a source of inspiration and faith for them.

The students posted a song by Meir Banai [a popular Israeli singer], which describes the exploration of their different identities.

> I walk among them and then come back … I have some of this and some of that … I have both of them …

As can be seen, the students experienced an awareness of their own 'national' identity, and through the 'transitional spaces' they were able to explore the possibility of holding a variety of identities (personal, professional, and global identities). Moreover, this theme reflects the students' attempt to develop an ability to simultaneously contain their identity as foreigners but also as professional women who have a mission that they can implement. This was an attempt to contain a multidimensional identity, or at least to be aware of the possibility of having a plural identity. This transition was made possible by the weekends, when the participants in the program were given a break from being students and were able to encounter their feelings of homesickness for their own culture.

Discussion

The findings of this study, which were based on analysis of students' Facebook posts, explore the transition that the students experienced while they were abroad, in which they became aware of the different identities that they might have develop in the learning process. These findings are consistent with the results of other studies that relate to the learning process experienced by ISW students during their field work abroad (e.g. Beecher, Reeves, Eggertsen, & Furuto, 2010; Ranz et al., 2015). However, whereas previous studies only examined professional and cognitive learning processes, the present study analyzed Facebook posts, which emphasize personal processes as well. The personal processes included the students' awareness of their different identities, which they expressed publicly on Facebook. The main identities were: national, personal, professional, and global identities. In addition, the students attempted to develop a multidimensional identity. These identities reflect processes that characterize the developmental stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), which has been defined as 'the age of feeling in between'. That is, emerging adulthood is between the stages of adolescence and adulthood, in which youngsters are not under the supervision of their parents and other adults, but are not yet fully independent adults. As indicated above, students working in field placements abroad are in a distinctive space which provides them with an opportunity to challenge, explore, and discover their personal and professional identities.

As such, the experiences of these students reflect transitions that develop over time, from a connection with their national identity to developing a relationship with the places and the people they were working with. These transitions resulted in a feeling of attachment, which Niedenthal and Brauer (2012) argue is the basis for an 'interpersonal contagion' process, which is triggered by being in the physical presence of others, and allows for sharing emotions—a process that is essential for developing individual, group, and social identities.

This approach can shed light on the criticism that is often directed against the students who participate in ISW training programs abroad. The students are usually from Northern countries, and the criticism focuses on their patronizing behavior, which reconstructs and replicates colonialism, as well as on their lack of sensitivity to the local needs (Midgley, 2001). This criticism can be qualified by the content of the students' posts, which is consistent with the developmental processes described

above. In addition, these developmental processes focus on multidimensional identities, and cast doubt on perceptions regarding the global identity of young adults in the present generation, who are connected with peers all over the world through media such as Facebook (Arnett, 2002).

The findings of our study reinforce trends that refer to processes of 'us and them', as reflected in the sense of foreignness and even alienation that characterize social work students in the learning process in general and in ISW programs in particular (Chambon, 2013). The processes of 'other' and 'otherness' become essential in social work education as a result of globalization, and as a result of the tendency toward racism and oppression (Julkunen & Rauhala, 2013). In contrast to these trends, the findings also indicate that Facebook made the learning process of the students visible; it gave them an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of their national identity, as well as the culture and traditions that they bring with them to the learning experience. The findings reveal that this recognition is not just regression to a familiar place but a 'transitional space' that might help the students adopt a positive view of the culture and traditions of the population they are working with, in addition to enhancing their knowledge of the local culture. This process supports current trends in the social work profession, which attribute importance to knowledge of local culture and traditions.

Moreover, the findings indicate that the students experienced a process of awareness of their personal, professional, national, and global identities. In that process, they essentially needed to maintain multiple identities. As mentioned, the importance of this finding lies in the recognition that in order to develop global processes, there is a need to return to personal and social origins, and this was possible mostly on weekends. These processes should not be judged as arrogant and patronizing, or as oppressing others (Dominelli, 2002; Midgley, 2001). Rather, they can be viewed as necessary developments that derive from the process of adaptation to a different place, culture, and people. Even if the processes would appear to contradict the values of the profession, they allow social workers to move toward multidimensional perspectives. As the findings indicate, the students, in putting aside their own national identity from time to time, were able to deepen their personal awareness and even to contain a multidimensional identity. This is easier when it occurs among Facebook peers.

As mentioned in the literature review, Facebook has become a popular communication tool for students, and is a natural environment for them to maintain social relationships (Kreutz, 2009; Young, 2013). This forum enables students to examine their own identity in an authentic way, without being concerned about what is academically appropriate or what impression they will make on their lecturers. Thus, the students in the ISW program could write posts in which they indicated that the weekends were a time to connect with their own home, culture, and tradition. Through the Facebook posts, the students not only had an opportunity to ventilate and receive support from natural sources, but might also have been able to simultaneously maintain their familiar national identity while developing a professional identity in accordance with the new global definition of social work. The importance of connecting to one's roots and understanding one's culture is reflected in the new global definition of social work as stated 'Social work is … underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and *indigenous knowledge*' (IFSW, 2014).

Moreover, the narratives presented in the findings section indicate that through the Facebook posts it is possible to identify the transitional process in which the students gained an awareness of their different identities while they were in another country. This includes awareness of their national identity, their foreign identity, and their global and personal identity, which culminated in an attempt to contain a multidimensional identity. As mentioned, this was a normative process, which took place in a familiar environment (i.e. posts to Facebook peers) outside of the academic context. Therefore, the students' Facebook posts can shed light on learning processes in the public-social space.

Besides the personal, family, and social sources, the findings indicate that the large number of women in the group as well as the social work profession encouraged a feminine discourse that transcended boundaries. Feminine identity was expressed as a professional identity, and vice versa. As

mentioned, the students' identity was uncertain; it was not yet internalized, and it relied on a gender-based connection with 'women of the world'. This was a place of protection, containment, support, and identification with the identity of marginal populations—the social status that prevails among women throughout the world (Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2012). These positions were expressed in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted by the UN in 1979. Despite the adoption of the CEDAW, unequal treatment of women has persisted in every nation in all areas of life (Mapp, 2012). Thus we can assume that when female students work abroad their gender identity is part of their 'baggage', with all that this implies. It can be argued that those circumstances, gender identity seems to be the main identity that provided a connection between the local and global identities in a foreign context. This argument is consistent with the perspective of Payne (2006), who claimed that the process of building a professional identity involves intersections between personal and collective constructions of self that can be negotiated in everyday relationships.

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 fully reflect the processes they experienced as reflected in their Facebook posts. Another limitation is that the study was based only on the posts that the students wrote, without addressing the comments and responses of friends which could have portrayed a broader picture. Finally, it is possible that because the students knew that all of the program content was being analyzed in this study, they were not as open as they would have been otherwise. In addition, the findings might have been different if men and students from different age groups had been included in the study.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings highlight the importance of the results, which show how public Facebook posts can be used as a tool to shed light on the contribution of social work education in international field placements and on the learning processes that students experience in the field placements abroad. Educators should bear in mind that in regular academic settings, students have difficulty expressing personal, cultural, and traditional dimensions that are necessary for them to open up to other worlds. Hence, it is necessary to provide students with a variety of spaces to express themselves in a way that fits the spirit of the times and reflects the processes of development that they are experiencing. In this context, it is important to use modern spaces such as Facebook as a means of broadening the learning experience. It would therefore be worthwhile to conduct comparative research on the different approaches to documentation among a larger sample of students from different countries in order to examine the relative contribution of each learning tool. In addition, because the present study focused only on the students' Facebook posts, it would be worthwhile to examine the comments accompanying those posts as well as blogs and other media techniques in future research.

Disclosure statement

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