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Acculturation theory, cultural competency and learning from differences: reflections from a European short student mobility program

Acculturazione, competenze culturali e apprendimento dalle differenze. Riflessioni su un programma di mobilità breve

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing recognition that in an increasingly differentiated social environment it is important for social workers to be prepared to intervene in multi-diversified and multicultural contexts, so as to promote inclusion, respect and empowerment. On this account, mobility and full immersion programmes appear to contribute the most promising professional learning opportunities. However, full immersion programmes are emotionally and cognitively very demanding, sometimes even exacerbating prejudice and racism; this has led to ongoing debates as to which strategies can safeguard the effectiveness of such programmes. This paper draws on the theory of acculturation to enable a deeper understanding of how full immersion programmes can educate to diversity in social work, and of the learning processes that can occur when confronting diversity. The reflection focuses on written feedback from, and focus groups with, students who participated in a short mobility project. Findings show how self-reflective practice, which acknowledges emotional journeys including what are usually considered negative reactions, is a necessary pre-condition for successfully transferring experiences of relating to cultural differences – as in the mobility programme – to professional skills.

SINTESI

Si registra un crescente riconoscimento del fatto che in un ambiente sociale sempre più differenziato è importante per gli/le assistenti sociali essere preparati ad intervenire in contesto caratterizzato da multiculturalità e diversificazione, in modo da promuovere l'inclusione sociale e l'empowerment. In relazione a questo la mobilità e i programmi full immersion, possono rappresentare tra le più promettenti occasioni formative. Tuttavia i programmi intensivi possono presentare complessità a livello sia emotivo che cognitivo, a volte paradossalmente, producendo un rinforzo di pregiudizi e stereotipi. Questa complessità ha dato origine continui dibattiti relativi a quali strategie adottare per garantire l'efficacia dei programmi full immersion. Questo saggio prende spunto dalla teoria dell'acculturazione (Berry, 2006) per proporre una comprensione su come i programmi full immersion possono

KEYWORDS

Cultural competence; globalisation; social work education; critical reflection; international social work

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Competenze culturali; globalizzazione; servizio sociale e formazione; riflessione critica; servizio sociale internazionale

rappresentare occasioni per educare alla diversità nel servizio sociale e sui processi di apprendimento che possono essere attivati in un confronto significativo con la diversità. La riflessione si basa sull'analisi di relazioni scritte di e focus group con studenti che hanno partecipato ad un programma di mobilità a tempo breve. I risultati mostrano come una pratica riflessiva che riconosca l'importanza di un percorso emotivo e che dia spazio anche a quelle che vengono per lo più considerate reazioni negative rappresenti una pre-condizione perché un'esperienza di confronto profondo con la differenza si trasformi in competenza professionale.

There is an established recognition of the importance of educating social workers to intervene in a diversified and multicultural world. As a result, social work programmes in Europe and the western world are increasingly offering courses that include multiculturalism and social sensitivity in their curricula (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Jani, Osteen, & Shipe, 2016; Sousa & Almeida, 2016). In many contexts it is mandatory for social work courses to devote time to helping students to develop so-called 'cultural competence' as well as critical professional identities in multicultural societies that are deeply affected by globalisation processes (Chambon, Johnstone, & Köngeter, 2014; Dean, 2001; Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2012; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017). Among the most recognised means to achieve these goals are international field placements and student mobility programmes, as part of international cooperation within joint projects (Köngeter, Altissimo, Jakoby-Herz, & Schröer, 2015; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012). Overseas and international programmes often represent an important opportunity for participants to learn to negotiate feelings of otherness from the point of view of a cultural minority (Barlow, 2007; Crabtree, Parker, Azman, & Carlo, 2014; Engstrom & Jones, 2007; Pawar, Hanna, & Sheridan, 2004). The main reflection presented in this paper is based on a short international mobility programme and stemmed from a discussion between staff members on how to proceed in making these experiences formative. In full immersion programmes students find themselves in a position that is not unlike being part of minority groups. Such experiences may therefore give rise to professional and personal tensions as they consist of full immersion contact with different worlds, thus deeply affecting the persons involved. Such experiences challenge the participants' values and principles as well as their ways of being and feeling, and are therefore very testing experiences that might jeopardise their aims, namely through resistance and rejection (Chambon, 2013; Mathiesen & Lager, 2007; Nagy & Falk, 2000; Ranz, Nuttman-Shwartz, & Thachil, 2015; Wiles, 2013; Xu, 2006). Therefore, the mere fact of participating in a full immersion experience and being in contact with diversity does not in itself guarantee that a training programme will successfully develop open mindedness and anti-oppressive attitudes or cultural competences themselves.

This paper is based on a reflection over a short student mobility project and aims to better conceptualise the learning processes resulting from such projects. We maintain that learning processes could be better understood through the lens of acculturation theory. Our goal is to contribute to a better grasp of cultural competence, as well as to broaden and deepen our knowledge of best practices for its development.

Cultural competence, acculturation theory and students mobility: a literature review

Cultural competence can be understood as an ongoing process whereby one gains awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity and an ability to work sensitively, respectfully and proficiently with those from diverse backgrounds. Azzopardi and McNeill (2016) claimed that 'cultural competence includes the trajectory of knowledge development and integration of critical knowledge for

practice' (p. 283); thus the ongoing process, which constitutes cultural competence itself, consists of three characteristics of cross-cultural competence: (a) counsellor's awareness of his or her own assumptions, values and biases, (b) counsellor's awareness of the client's worldview, and (c) culturally appropriate interventions – all of which develop across three dimensions: knowledge, beliefs and attitudes, and skills (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996).

The idea that professionals should be culturally competent when operating in multicultural settings is widely consensual and has received vast scholarly attention, especially in discussions about international and global social work education and international field placement (Healy & Wairire, 2014). As such, cultural competence serves as a key argument when advocating the importance and necessity of implementing international content in social work education and developing congruent educational programmes.

Cultural competence, however, has been the subject of many discussions and debates, to the point of being defined as so vague and generic a concept that it should be discarded. Among the main criticisms, we particularly underline here that culture cannot be intended only as connected to ethnic groups, but has to be related to all differences in society (Jani et al., 2016; Willis, Pathak, Khambhaita, & Evandrou, 2017); that it is dynamic and ever-changing, and that there are relevant individual differences within ethnic and subculture groups. What emerges, therefore, is that only acquiring knowledge cannot be the answer (Jani et al., 2016). Cultural competence – if the term is still meaningful, as some have redefined it as culture humility (Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015) – refers to changes in attitude or mindset in relating to differences in society, which take into account the term's related power dimensions. In a sense, the theme of cultural competence shifts from the focus on cognitive knowledge of differences or special abilities towards considering the complex processes for dealing with differences and multiculturalism not only in interpersonal encounters but in the wider society as well (Sousa & Almeida, 2016).

It is within this perspective that the processes of acculturation can be relevant to understanding cultural competences and therefore to how subjects, within a social context, not merely relate to as yet unknown differences but also let themselves be changed by such encounters. Acculturation has been conceptualised by Berry (e.g. 2003) as a process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact in a multicultural society. Acculturation usually refers to the processes of coming to terms with a multicultural environment mainly for the purposes of building or adapting to a new life, as a result of processes of migration (although acculturation does not refer just to the incoming subjects but to all incoming and receiving populations). The acculturation process involves the change, or lack of change, that occurs as the result of contact between two distinct cultures (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Berry (e.g. 2003) sees this as a bilateral process in which two orthogonal acculturation orientations toward the host and home cultures combine to produce four possible acculturation strategies. These strategies comprise: assimilation (accept host and reject home culture); separation (reverse of assimilation); integration (accept and connect both host and home cultures); and marginalisation (reverse of integration). According to Berry's framework, integration may be the most adaptive strategy and marginalisation the least adaptive. Since this model was first introduced, it has been widely used to empirically examine acculturation and its relationship to mental health status, family values, ethnic identity and so forth (e.g. Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004). Connected to this framework was the identification of developmental phases undergone when in significant contact with diversity (Oberg, 1960). The first, the so-called honeymoon phase, corresponds to a process not unlike falling in love with the new culture, and would correspond to assimilation: the person thinks that the new culture is perfect and better than their original one.

The second phase, often termed culture shock, is seen as the opposite. The term 'culture shock' is frequently used to describe how people react to novel or unaccustomed situations. As such, 'culture shock' designates a normal human response to an alien cultural environment, which includes affective, behavioural and cognitive components of cross-cultural interaction (Bochner, 2003; Mumford, 1998). As Oberg (1960) puts it, persons feel as fish out of water, negatively comparing

what they meet with familiar situations, and feel frustration about minor occurrences. Culture shock thus entails a criticism of aspects of the host country that is not based on understanding: the person here does not try to grasp the differences, but rather judges them unfavourably, comparing them with the home culture they miss and they totally identify with (D'Souza, Singaraju, Halimi, & Sillivan Mort, 2016).

The phases that follow, which Berry would define as integration, are characterised by a developing understanding of and interest in the differences. In positive settings and circumstances, people develop the ability to grasp the meaning of situations in different contexts. This produces a change in mentality and, in longer sojourns, an identity change, so that it is possible to identify a reverse culture shock when people return to their country of origin.

In the literature, processes connected to acculturation have been identified in social work as well. Several authors have identified in student mobility an initial position that can be defined as honeymoon (Anukrati, 2016; Ritchie, 2009): the students feel excitement, fascination, and optimism, and are thus less engaged in a critical reflection process which may examine in depth the complexity of what they are experiencing (Kim, 2001). Several studies have then revealed that in multicultural and international encounters experienced by social workers and social work students, there is an unconscious regression to conservative and even nationalistic perspectives (Chambon, 2013; Wiles 2013), leading to devaluing indigenous knowledge (Tsang & Yan, 2001). In addition, research findings show that the majority of international students express distress and experience cultural shock (Pyvis & Chapman, 2005; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), at least at the beginning of their international sojourns, as a result of being far from their home culture (Belford, 2017). Others have shown that students and social workers who are doing field practice with 'others', in local contexts or abroad, have reported a wide range of intense emotional responses, which include anger, guilt, frustration, anxiety, shame, a prevailing sense of being misunderstood and silenced, and potentially intensified apologetic attitudes (Barlow, 2007; Lough, 2009; Matthew & Lough, 2017; Ranz, 2015). These reactions are usually recognised as indicative of a transformation process during which students re-evaluate and challenge their original attitudes, beliefs and worldviews (Barlow, 2007; Lager, Mathiesen, Rodgers, & Cox, 2010; Matthew & Lough, 2017; Taylor, 1994); such reactions might moreover re-enact previous socially traumatic situations as being neglected, living in poor environments, being underprivileged and marginalised.

Many of these studies emphasise that students need help, such as counselling or peer support, in dealing with cultural shock and 'honeymoon' attitudes in order to be able to learn while participating in mobility programmes and to develop professional skills and competences as intended (Presbitero, 2016). Although this argument is well documented in the literature on social work education (Ranz, 2015), most studies concentrate on how to facilitate adaptive behaviours (Schartner & Young, 2015).

Fewer studies have addressed the acculturation dynamic among social work students as a formative process, when facing cultural diversity either in mobility or in practice placement. What we maintain here is that the process of experiencing and reflecting on the honeymoon phase, culture shock and integration has a formative value. Undertaking the emotional journey, which accompanies and strongly influences students' cognitive and experiential learning processes, is not merely part of the adaptation; it is a necessary component in developing an ability to understand, recognise and relate to, as well as form a critical attitude towards, cultural differences.

The method

The argument on the relevance of acculturation in building cultural competences is based on our experience as academic staff members belonging to different institutions in different countries, on a three-year Tempus programme, TachyWe. The project was coordinated by a German university and included eight universities and colleges within five European countries: Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy and Russia. The goal of the programme was to internationalise training and promote cultural competences for social work in the field of child and youth welfare. A relevant part of this

programme consisted in organising student exchanges. The latter consisted of intensive short study visits (15 days) including study periods, lectures, various meetings with practitioners, visits to social services and discussions with peers and experts. The visits were short so as to allow students, since most were already working in social services, to participate, as well as to be able to handle language issues with the support of hosting students, as only one English-speaking country participated in the project.

We analysed data resulting from written feedback and three online focus groups with participants to the programme. In the written feedback, students were asked to address several topics, such as their motivation to participate in the programme, what they had learnt, whether they had been able to identify universal issues in child protection, and strengths and weaknesses of the programme. All students were meant to provide their feedback in written form, but as many students felt unable to write competently in a foreign language in several cases staff accepted oral feedback. We received written feedback from 19 students: 14 females and 5 males who were attending different degrees programmes; 7 were PhD students, 9 were attending a Masters programme and 4 were Bachelor students. As regards their nationality, 10 participants were from Israel, 4 from Russia, 3 from Italy and 2 from Germany. As for the three focus groups, they were conducted through Skype from Italy by two university staff; 26 students participated (22 female and 4 male: 12 from Israel, 11 from Russia, 2 from Germany and 2 from Italy). The students were predominantly Master and PhD students but 3 Bachelor students also participated. The programme was not initially intended for undergraduates but the team decided to accept them in the mobility programme as long as they had previously had work experiences in the field of child and youth work. As previously mentioned, the majority of participants were practising social work while studying. As 8 students provided both feedback and participated in a focus group, in total we have data from 37 of the 41 students who participated in the mobility programme. The Irish students did not contribute any feedback, because they were unable to participate in the mobility due to organisational issues.

A first report on the students' feedback (Zinn, Fargion, Share, Swords, & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2015) provided us with the bases for a reflection on the nature of the learning that takes place during short mobility programmes. The first step entailed conducting an analysis of the emerging themes through using a programme for qualitative data analysis (QSR Nvivo 11). This inductive phase of data analysis produced numerous codes and subcodes (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005), which revealed how Berry's theory on acculturation might enable us to understand the learning processes under examination. We subsequently conducted deductive content analysis of the data, with the texts being selectively analysed in order to explore the participants' reactions to meeting a different world.

Our study includes both the limitations and strengths of qualitative research in terms of the validity and generalisability of the outcomes. In this regard, one of the main issues for this study consists of the authors' involvement in the exchange project, which makes this insider research (Humphrey, 2012). The main risk in such research lies in making assumptions, thus potentially losing important information. This can be seen as a limit, as indeed the process of reflexively dealing with personal experiences with students while analysing the data proved complex. However, our experiences of working alongside the students (not only in this project but also in others), with first-hand knowledge of the context – as underlined by many (Teusner, 2016) – can be seen to represent a strength and in our case enabled a deeper understanding of students' accounts.

As regards ethical issues, the guidelines of the university's Board of Ethics were followed at all times; participants were informed and accepted that their feedback would be used for research and publication; their contributions have been anonymised.

Phases of acculturation in the students' accounts

Considering the positions identified in acculturation (Berry, 2003), the first attitude we were able to identify in students' accounts appears to be similar to what has been defined as the honeymoon phase. As anticipated, it consisted of a general but superficial enthusiasm for the new reality. The

enthusiasm seems to be based on a shallow engagement with the world students were immersed in, leading to meetings and visits being experienced as a kind of tourism, with visiting students observing the mere surface or facade of social services and social interventions they were shown. In this case observations were usually generally very positive, based often on favourable comparisons with the home country:

I was impressed that relative to Israel ... it seems that South Tyrol has more resources to deal with children at risk. The conditions in the various institutions (modern buildings, wide open spaces and landscapes), the number of children in each facility (up to 8) and the number of staff in relation to the number of children in institutions are different compared to Israel. (Israeli student)

There are many extremely positive comments and often these students thought that what was happening in the visited country as far as social services were concerned was definitely better compared to their country:

My personal spontaneous reactions for the most part reflect my feelings and emotions: love and belief in your country, love for children and a host of other things. No doubt, Israel is an incredible and patriotic country which is strong in spirit. (Russian student)

I was very impressed to see the cultural sensitivity, as I wrote above. In Israel we have a lot of minorities (Arabic, Russian, Ethiopian ...) and I don't speak any of those languages, and also most of the Israeli population don't speak one of them. When I saw that in the host country all social workers spoke two languages it made me feel a bit ashamed that in my country this doesn't exist. (Israeli student)

In these particular cases, students seem to notice only positive aspects and do not perceive problems, somehow remaining on the surface; for instance, their observations do not seem to consider the underlying difficulties and conflicts within the area. The crucial point remains that the comments are based on a comparison with the home country and there are no signs of an understanding of the different context.

Last but not least, a feature of the 'honeymoon' approach we noticed was the attention given to aspects perceived by students as folklore – which were in fact indications of a tragedy occurring in the country. This is exemplified through a student asking to be photographed with a group of young armed soldiers in Israel, as a souvenir. Less dramatically, other students made comments on the landscape or the mountains and so forth, providing a picture close to a postcard.

We need to stress here that this 'honeymoon' attitude is not to be considered negatively as it seems a natural reaction within the process of engaging with diversity, and it needs to be processed in order for the experience to be formative.

Naturally, any superficial observations on the part of the participating students can be connected to superficial explanations by the host in a two-way process. On the one hand, we can see students who are keen to have a positive attitude towards the new and exotic country, and on the other hand a hosting group who tend to present the better aspects of their services, and who appear unwilling to discuss the more negative traits in their social realities: the visit is short and the hosting students and staff want to make a good impression.

Some students with a more critical mindset perceived this attitude in their hosting group:

I also experienced strategies for avoiding questions and critique, and transferring the process to another day of the week and then just focusing on some of the questions and ignoring others. (Italian student)

Other students noticed the seeming existence of taboo subjects:

In different situations, it was not easy for us to confront our feelings with the partners. We think this was connected to the high tensions present in the country at that time. We felt that the conflict ... the life conditions ... were like taboo issues. (Italian student)

Others noticed that it was not possible for them to grasp the reality of social services. As an Israeli student put it: 'we were in a show, not reality. Best social services, best kindergarten ...'

The second type of comments we identified are negative and contain criticisms. They refer to experiencing something not unlike cultural shock as the negative evaluation is based on a comparison of the familiar with the unfamiliar. Although the negative comments and feelings were not all-encompassing as in typical culture shock, occasionally students expressed negative feelings and impressions, sometimes in a judgmental way that is considered typical of the crisis in culture shock. An example of this was a student visiting Israel who generalised from a few observations when she mentions having seen (in a visit to a specified social service) children's mattresses on the floor:

Student I was in Israel. Children sleep on the floor without bed (frames). It's not good.
 Facilitator Were you able to say this?
 Student Yes.
 Facilitator What did they answer?
 Student That it's their tradition in Israel. (Russian student)

This may well have been the answer; however, the exchange appears difficult to understand as certainly it is far from customary for children to sleep on mattresses on the floor in Israel. Most likely, as in culture shock, the student seems to have been very negatively affected by some experiences; having witnessed children's mattresses on the floor (the student does not specify the context, nor she was asked, but it is clear that it is something she regarded as negative), she may have misunderstood the answer, thus generalising from the specific case, leading to a belief that in Israel children are made to sleep on the floor. This generalisation of traits deemed as negative, as we have seen, is another typical trait of culture shock.

In another case, generally critical conclusions were drawn through the limited experience of the country. The student concerned was convinced, on the basis of a field visit, that in Italy there was no community work:

As a community social worker I wondered why social workers (in Italy) do not promote and develop services? Doesn't the community need such assistance? I was engaged with these questions because I think that my most significant role as a social worker is to promote and assist in developing community capacity and creating an independent community, a community that won't need social work interventions and can manage with its own assets. (Israeli student)

Here, as in culture shock, the negative evaluation does not appear to stem from an understanding of social work in a different country, but from the fact that there is a perceived difference from what is customary, and therefore viewed as positive, in the home country.

Maybe the best example of culture shock comes from a student who was strongly negatively affected by the treatment of disabled children in a classroom in Italy. She was particularly interested in children with disabilities, thus a visit was specially organised for her to observe how a child with disabilities was included in a mainstream school. The student refers in her feedback that she was shocked by how badly the child was treated: the child was in the classroom with the other children but was not able to participate fully and was not given the necessary specialist attention and training. In her feedback the student stressed:

It's okay to have a disabled child in a general class, but he has problems and needs! You cannot stop helping them just to have society's principle of inclusion maintained. In Israel, there are special classes for disabled children.

Knowing the field in Israel, I knew that the goals of individual child's rehabilitation may be often in conflict with the needs of the society. Does the Italian society's focus on inclusion come at the cost of reduced individual rehabilitation?! (sic) (Israeli student)

We will return to this example and its development, as it shows how open discussion and reflection can support the processing of those negative feelings, thus enabling learning for both the hosting and the visiting subjects. This provides the basis for activating a mental journey akin to a positive acculturation, in the sense that students and staff, both visiting and incoming, have the opportunity to critically integrate their experiences and develop new creative ideas.

Again, as with the honeymoon phase, it should be underlined that culture shock is not in itself negative, being in fact a step in relating to diversity. Considering those reactions through the lens of acculturation theory leads to a new understanding. Such reactions become problematic only if not processed and elaborated, constituting in fact stages in an emotional journey that led participants to more critically open stances, which enabled them to better understand and analyse critically what they had encountered. This mental and emotional process may then allow the development of new ideas in relation to their home contexts. In a student's words:

The basis should be trying to understand other approaches, seeing benefits and weaknesses and, after understanding another perspective, thinking of possible improvements (in your country) (German student).

The best example of this journey was probably the one presented above, regarding the student who was very critical of the treatment of children with disabilities in Italian schools. This student explicitly refers to this mental and emotional journey. As indicated, the student's experience in a primary school class provoked a strong negative reaction. The student discussed her feelings in-depth and she communicated, albeit with some difficulties, her strong criticism of the Italian system. However, her written feedback shows how her views underwent change whilst in Italy:

I was against the Italian policy of inclusion (for children with disabilities) at first, but in the end I got excited about it ... We were able to raise this issue openly ... I have doubts whether children with special needs in integrated educational settings get the best service but the difference made me think about the limits of 'specialised schools'. (Israeli student)

The student reports that she works with autistic children and this experience changed her intervention approach.

A further example from a German student highlights how integration can take place:

In Germany a large percentage of children in substitute care are placed in residential care facilities with an institutional background. Getting deeply in touch with the practice of foster care and its benefits made me rethink my perspective. The different point of view made me realise that institutional care in Germany must be sensitive to actually meet the needs of the children who are placed outside of their family of origin. (German student)

The above are quite good examples of change that emerged through processing what could be seen as an element of culture shock. Such change may lead to new approaches, to challenge routine ways of dealing with issues both in the home country and hosting country; it may lead to not importing ready-made solutions, but to being inspired by the differences and perceiving potentially fruitful innovations. This interchange bears many similarities to acculturation processes. Our analysis supports the hypothesis that even short full immersion experiences, when they enable students to be aware and reflect on their acculturation processes as they occur, can strengthen students' ability to connect in a non-oppressive way with the different worlds and cultures social workers meet in their practice, as well as critically learn from such encounters.

Suggestions for organising student mobility

Reports and focus groups provided several suggestions on the key features that support the journey we have described. The first feature relates to preparation: both students and staff observed that the better the training students had received, the better they were able to undergo the process successfully. Preparation thus entailed opportunities to discuss expectations and fears in coming into contact with a new country. What emerges in this regard is that student exchanges – particularly short exchanges – should be part of a wider programme with a time devoted to preparation and a time for critical analysis of the experience.

The second essential feature relates to opportunities for constant reflection on and discussion of student experiences. It was perceived as crucial that the hosting staff and students should benefit from formal as well as informal opportunities for discussion and, where appropriate, that they

should be willing to elicit and discuss criticisms: this would best enable both incoming students and staff and students from the hosting institution to develop from their initial stances.

Informal meetings between students and with programme staff were particularly appreciated, and should therefore be included in the organisation of the mobility:

One of the most positive aspects of the program was communication during breaks. I would like to point out that our conversations were rather efficient. That is why it would be beneficial for all participants of the practical training to spend more time together. Informal communication gives rise to very interesting discussions, ideas. (Russian student)

Above all, what everybody found crucial was the two-way exchange process that provided opportunities both for incoming students to present and discuss how services were organised in their home countries, and to present and discuss examples of practice with local students and practitioners. As expressed by a student:

It was the first experience in my life for me to participate in a program like this. I could speak with professionals of social welfare about children, about parents, about family. I could share with them my own experiences and I could see the experiences of people from different countries. (Israeli students)

Emotional and cognitive processes can thus be seen to take place in a climate of reciprocity and mutual learning, as emerged in a focus group:

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Student | It's important for the [people we] visit to hear about our work in Israel ... It was good to exchange knowledge and exchange experiences. |
| Facilitator | To talk, not only listen. |
| Student | To share, exactly. (Israeli student) |

This last excerpt from a focus group seems to show very effectively how the concept of mutual learning in student mobility is deemed important in developing cultural competences in the most positive sense.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Universities and social work courses aim for social work professionals and students to develop cultural competences in acting in a world in which globalisation dynamics seem particularly strong, and characterised by growing diversity, considerable mobility and forced population displacement. How we should best prepare practitioners has been the subject of many debates. Our analyses reveal, in line with other researches (Brown & Brown, 2013; Jani et al., 2016; Ranz, 2015; Robinson et al., 2016), that such competences are enabled by processes that involve the whole person, showing similarities to what was defined by Berry (1997, 2003) as acculturation process. As claimed by Rogler (1994), student acculturation is a process of changing cultural beliefs and values arising from exposure to the culture of the host country in which the students are studying.

In addition, our analysis shows that reaching a culturally competent position, one that allows in-depth and respectful interactions with the 'other', involves undergoing stages that would appear at first glance as negative. As such, we can hypothesise that students as well as staff who took part in our study experienced and dealt with a contradiction: on the one hand their emotional stance, as described above, and on the other hand their professional knowledge and professional requirements for them to be accepting and non-judgmental when they encounter others, especially in unfamiliar environments.

Focusing on the participants' professional knowledge could in fact lead to considering both the 'honeymoon' and the disorientation anger of culture shock phases as unconstructive, because they entail superficial attitudes, or because they are characterised by rejection and judgmental attitudes towards what is perceived as different. However, students' feedback as regards their mobility experiences highlight how these are natural reactions when feeling personally challenged by cultural differences. As such, studies and researches on acculturation processes can be of great relevance for

the education and supervision of practitioners: spontaneous natural reactions do not need to be repressed or negatively valued, but rather to be processed for the experience to become formative.

Our second main point, which supports other research results (Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Das & Anand, 2014), is that the main means that proved useful in supporting such a process are related to creating space for reflection and discussion – a protected and accepting environment that allows the free expression of negative feelings and thoughts.

As shown by the results, the mobility experience becomes formative when students are firstly prepared, then accompanied during their intercultural experiences, and finally are able to discuss their experiences afterwards. This provides initial evidence of the effectiveness of the three phases in international programmes as described for example by Nuttman-Shwartz and Ranz (2014) and Schwartz et al. (2011).

Another point, which is specific to mobility, is that processing the complex feelings and ideas that arise whilst experiencing cultural difference is definitely facilitated in a context where there is reciprocity and mutual learning as well as informal opportunities for social interaction (Nuttman-Shwartz & Ranz, 2014). Although in this paper we focus on students, in our view cultural competence journey needs to be travelled by all, not only by the students involved in mobility programmes, but also by teaching staff supervisors, both in the hosting and home countries.

Our analyses point to the view that cultural competence could entail a more complex meaning: it does not merely involve being open or knowledgeable but could additionally be equated to being familiar with and having experiences of the process of acculturation. This means knowing how to master reflectively the steps and phases that professionals and lay people undergo when relating meaningfully to difference. As such, possessing cultural competences would mean being prepared to recognise and process the natural responses that occur when relating to or being immersed in unfamiliar worlds, where familiar frames of reference have lost validity. As Jani et al. observe, 'culture is fluid and ever changing and, therefore, competence in a culture can never be permanently attained' (2016, p. 314).

As acculturation theory affirms, we need to underline that the stance of being open to change one's ideas in meeting with difference is one of the preconditions for avoiding oppressive relations, particularly when there is power imbalance. For this openness to become part of the professional mentality our reflection points to the relevance of full immersion programmes, which need not take place abroad (Quinn-Lee & Olson-McBride, 2013). Even programmes of short duration, if carefully organised, can provide the best environment for learning to deal with differences in a non-oppressive way.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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