Typologies of student experiences and constructed meanings of learning in international placements

*Sara Ashencaen Crabtree, Jonathan Parker, Azlinda Azman, Dolly Paul Carlo

*Correspondent address

Dr Sara Ashencaen Crabtree

Bournemouth University

School of Health & Social Care

2nd Floor Royal London House,

Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, Dorset UK BH1 3LT

scrabtree@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper discusses findings from a three-year British Council funded project into social work student placements in Malaysia. Processes of student learning in unfamiliar cultural contexts were examined in relation to three cohorts of students. Here typologies of experience influencing learning, elicited from student-recorded data, are discussed. Analysis suggests that students undergo a process of liminality, adjustment or resistance to the contexts of community, culture and placements encountered in international settings. Emergent themes were identified as naïve acceptance, critical revelation, critical observation, epiphany, critical reactionary, professional rejection and antagonistic response. Implications for international placements are examined based on the data.

Keywords: practice learning, cultural competency, international

Introduction

This paper discusses findings from the culmination of a three-year British Council Connect PM12 funded study (2009-2012) into student mobility, focusing on social work student placements in Malaysia. The study explored the processes of student learning in unfamiliar cultural contexts. The research component hinged implicitly on data gathering by the students in terms of their own pedagogic journey. Research aims were to understand how students adapt to the demands of international placements where cultural, religious and linguistic differences would be encountered. Student data narratives informed our understanding of the processes of acquiring greater cultural and intercultural competence.

Although the concept of cultural competence is well established and has been critiqued as essentialising heterogeneous groups (Laird, 2008), this remains a desirable attribute for social work professionals. Here we construct the aspiration towards enhancing cultural and intercultural competence as essentially aiding human understanding and providing the crucial link between immersion in the new cultural context, practice encounters and theory.

In an earlier paper in this journal commenting on preliminary findings we found that the concepts of liminality and epiphany (Author, 2012) were pivotal to deep learning among students negotiating the new cultural environment. Here we seek to examine the learning processes of three cohorts of students on international social work placements with a view to developing typologies of experience influencing learning, as elicited from data drawn from student recorded narratives. This exercise raises some intriguing issues that carry important

implications with respect to the success and sustainability of international social work placements.

Reviewing international social work placements

The popularity of international placements in social work, particularly in countries of the Global North, is demonstrated in the literature (Panos, 2004; Author 2012; Wehbi, 2009), reflecting the influences of globalisation and a concomitant impact on and increased interest in international social work (Hugman, 2010; Huegler, et al., 2012; Lyons et al., 2006). Despite contradictions posed by the newly developed Professional Capabilities Framework (The College of Social Work, 2012) in England, which effectively ignores international social work, interest has been revived through the ambitious work to develop a new overarching joint International Associations of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) international definition for social work (IFSW, 2000/2013). This is visualised as speaking across the diverse regions on the world, rather than being forged through the hegemonic constructions mandated by the Global North.

Furthermore deeper appreciation of the awareness of local, indigenous and authenticised bodies of knowledge are viewed as vital assets in multicultural societies (Ling, 2007). Laird (2008) additionally argues that broad recognition of difference and diversity is crucial to the aim of enhancing practitioner understanding.

Correlated with these universal trends social work in the UK has softened a largely secular identity through renewed emphasis on the importance of faith and spirituality, recognising

this to be a facet of diversity that may be inherently intertwined with cultural diversity (Author, 2008; Furness and Gilligan, 2010). The awareness of multicultural/multifaith heterogeneity is partially fuelled by the paradox of globalisation in the devolution of identities resistant to homogenisation of perceived 'westernised', Anglocentric identities and values (Author, 2012). Such arguments clearly resonate for social work in terms of anti-oppressive practice (Gilin and Young, 2009); and consciousness of social work's role towards global concerns like human migration (Hugman, 2010), climate change, global recession, civil and political ferment – including terrorism (Author 2013). The universality of social work, its value base and the unquestioned 'superior positioning' of Western paradigms are also called into question as an example of hegemony (Hugman, 2010; Orit Nuttmann, 2011, Razack, 2009).

Despite the contentions associated with 'cultural competence', alongside problems of negotiating temporal and conceptual 'space' for international placements in packed social work curricula, such placements carry enormous potential (Abram et al., 2005; Faurchild et al., 2006; Gilin and Young, 2009; Tesoriero, 2006). However, international placements do not necessarily lead to enhanced levels of cultural competence (Pawar, et al., 2004). Educators may assume that the required transformation (Lough, 2009; Young, 2009) will almost inevitably take place through immersion (however brief) in another cultural environment, but this is not evidenced by research literature, which reports varied perspectives from those involved in the process. These reflections include reflections from students (Martone and Munoz, 2009), academic educators and practice coordinators (Pawar et al., 2004), faculty partners (Barlow et al., 2010), together with analysis of the processes of learning and reflexivity intrinsic to this necessary transformation (Author, 2012).

Logistical concerns and the need for careful preparation are also emphasised (Heron, 2005; Magnus, 2009); and e-technology is explored as a support system for long-distance contact/supervision (Panos, 2005; Plummer and Nyang'au, 2009). Complex issues are also considered in reference to power differentials relating to the predominance of international placements in the Global South undertaken by those from the Global North (Heron, 2006). Heron (2006) comments that educators should be vigilant in encouraging students to examine their knowledge and assumptions pre- and post-placement. Wehbi (2009) argues for interrogation and deconstruction of the motives of students wishing to undertake international placements; while Hyong & Hwa-ok (2010) argue that Western practices and indigenous needs require closer analysis. This also requires critical attention to avoid an inverse ethnocentric bias of uncritically assuming that indigenous/authenticised practice are superior paradigms to those of the Global North.

The context of the study

Following British Council funding a programme was established for social work student international placements in Malaysia. This permitted three separate cohorts of undergraduate students to be placed in 25-working-day placements in two different regional locations in Malaysia: Penang on the Peninsular and Sarawak in East Malaysia, hosted by two participating Malaysian universities: Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Funding subsidised student travel and subsistence costs on a decreasing scale over each successive year with the aim of pump-priming sustainable international partnerships.

Although both Malaysian HEIs had considerable experience of hosting international students, a rigorous process of student selection was regarded as vital. Strict attention to selection criteria was considered particularly important given the variation of cohorts, where due to the experimental nature of the international placements, it was not clear from the outset which cohort would benefit most from the experience, resulting in the opportunity being opened successively to each year group.

Although such variation had not initially been viewed as a possible variable for analysis in terms of student adaptability, some implications did emerge from these differences, as will be discussed further.   Interviews were conducted to test student motivation and genuine interest in and knowledge of international social work issues. A proven ability to adapt to new situations, including challenging ones, was required of candidates; and stable health status sufficient to cope with the climatic rigours and lifestyle changes. Finally a 'good' academic profile was requested evidenced by a record of non-failure and satisfactory attendance on the degree programme to-date. Over the three years 26 students (20 females and 6 males) undertook placements. Their ages ranged from 20 to 39 years and the majority were White British/European.

Problems of finding space for international placements in a bloated curriculum resulting from prescriptive reforms of UK social work education since 2003, meant the experience formed part of the placement requirement element for social work graduation. These placements followed on from the local placement where practice teachers, already allocated to individual

students, continued to work with them through long-distance media while in Malaysia. Such students were additionally supported by Bournemouth University practice learning staff, academic staff at USM and UNIMAS, additionally by field supervisors in local Malaysian agencies, and through formal peer support from Malaysian students in several instances.

Research component of the study

These placements were used as a vehicle for research on student learning in social work placements in unfamiliar cultural contexts. The research comprised a qualitative study of daily logs, critical reflections and critical incident analyses produced by students as an integral part of the placement. Candidates were expected to complete an anonymised daily log outlining daily activities, experiences, perceptions and feelings. The promotion of reflective skills as a development learning strategy for students is a familiar one in practice learning (Ruch, 2002). Reflective learning has been problematised in relation to lack of rigorous definition when used for assessment purposes (Eraut, 1995; Ixer, 1999). However, in the context of this research study it carried strong potential to gather rich data by delving into the subjective perceptions of the students.

Additionally, students were also asked to develop anonymous critical incident analysis where a wide range of issues could be explored, including oppression in practice (Suarez, 2008) and ethnic identity (Montalvo, 1999). Such exercises enabled academics and practice teachers to reflect in turn on diversity and oppression. This is a key point in considering the essential role staff play in supporting students undertaking international placements, where this may involve acquiring new socio-cultural competencies to support learning.

We did not undertake a 'pure' typological analysis of the students' experiences of learning in cultural different and sometimes challenging environments. Typological analysis is a descriptive analytic method that seeks to develop a set of related but distinct categories that are not hierarchically differentiated. The analysis demands identifying typologies for analysis through theoretical understandings, research objectives or intuitively from the data set. Whilst such a pure approach lends itself to a charge of prejudging the issues, we acknowledge our initial influences and typological thinking and then subject our preliminary typologies to rigorous challenge through a thematic analysis.

Ethical parameters

The ethical parameters of the study, following university research ethics approval, related to the need to gain informed consent from participating students, in relation to the gathering of their data at the point of selection. Students were assured that the data would be kept confidential and anonymised in future dissemination and were fully aware that it would be subject to analysis within the team. Judging from the data received the anticipation of scrutiny by the team did not appear to inhibit commentaries or lead to social desirability responses. From the outset students were assured that their involvement would not impact on any assessment of them as students. Furthermore, no prejudice would be extended to the non-selection of candidates applying for international placements.

Findings: typologies of experience

The following section discusses a range of student experiences as reported in their logs and critical incidents, where data was subject to coding at multiple levels in keeping with a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Insights developed from our analysis suggested a continuum of the experiences of liminality, adjustment or resistance to the clustered contexts of community, culture and placement in the international setting, some of which are reported elsewhere (Author, 2012).

Emerging from the data was a wide range of social categories in terms of how students reacted to new encounters and circumstances, as well as how they related to each other in an environment beyond the comparatively secure setting of the classroom or local placement in England. Such categories included age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, health status and religion and, arguably, politics as well.

As no cohort was composed of exactly the same year group and were diverse in several aspects, direct comparisons of cohorts proved difficult. However, owing to certain restrictions relating to English language, location and supervisory expertise the choice of participating agencies was narrow and were therefore likely to be used repeatedly. In this respect some comparisons could be drawn between students, particularly as the views they reported were liable to vary considerably from critical or naïve approval and active participation, to evidence of heavy critique or uncritical condemnation.

The following themes were identified:

- Naïve acceptance
- Critical comparison – revelation

- Critical observation

- Epiphany as self-discovery

- Critical reactionary

- Professional rejection

- Antagonistic response

Naïve acceptance

In some accounts narratives conformed to a naïve perspective by students. These perspectives were subject to a level of uncritical acceptance based on assumptions of the implicit virtue/ benefits of the agency, exemplified in this narrative:

> JP: 'They helped me to understand the culture and norms enormously. For example, the people here are much more forgiving when their child has a disability, whereas in England I feel there is a lot of resentment and hate.'

However, such naiveté operated also in terms of the assumptions held by local practitioners towards the knowledge and skills held by British social work students; reversing the expectation of students of their assumed novice-instructor relationship, causing some consternation or disappointment on both sides.

> MP: 'My placement 'supervisor' is very kind and friendly but doesn't feel too comfortable with the role and has said a few times that she is my "helper" not my supervisor.'

This extract may illustrate the intercultural hierarchical layering which resonates with the critique of the 'superior positioning' of so-called 'Westernised' social work models referred to by Razack (2009), albeit in a somewhat inverted way in which the direction of assumption of superior positioning stems from host supervisor rather than Western student (Parker,

2013). It also challenges notions of professionalised hierarchies and modes of practice more associated with the Western traditions from which students came..

Critical comparison - revelation

Further positive encounters were noted in terms of revelation on the part of students experiencing a process of liminality towards adjusting to the role of novice in practice settings perceived as offering a sharp contrast to the UK. These types of commentary produced a cross-cultural, comparative approach that challenged previously held conceptions about social work realities; and where the direction of comparison is ultimately positive towards the nature of the social work/welfare role in the new cultural context. Here KN, a mature student, refers to her elderly residential placement in Penang.

> KN: 'Residents encouraged to do as much as they can for themselves and for each other, laying up tables, clearing the dishes away, cleaning tables after every meal, sweeping scraps from floor, and assisting with washing up, preparing food and cooking. This really felt like it was their home and they are a family. In the UK the residents are fed and watered….no encouragement from staff to residents to help with clearing away dishes or laying tables. Everything is so impersonal and not the least bit homely for the residents who still want to feel like they are giving something back, not just waiting for death…'

The revelatory aspect found in other accounts describe the prosaic and literally 'hands-on' outreach role of social work in Malaysia, such as helping to clean up a site littered with empty syringes, as part of the daily routine of HIV/AIDS support workers. Contrasts with familiar social work remits and roles were regularly commented on in the students' accounts,

leading to intrinsic if not always explicit critique of the idea of the universality of social work; and where UK social work was quite often found wanting in the students' opinion.

> MP: 'In my opinion they still practice social work in this organization, offering counselling, support, education, services, and advice. Rather than what social work appears to have become in some departments in the UK, where social workers are grandiose paper pushers to refer people to other services after an assessment and do minimal therapeutic work.'

Critical observation

The developing analytic stance of the observer could also be detected in certain accounts by students in the continuum of the liminal process, following initial stages of disorientation and early adjustment, and prior to reaching some level of accommodation. In the following accounts, each student (both mature males) brought their respective knowledge of practice or the regional/cultural context into play in order to analyse the phenomenon of wage-earning substance users in Penang.

> GD: 'It is explained to me that all addicts have to go out to work to fund their habit. Most are fishermen or rickshaw drivers. In the UK a drug habit may be funded by crime – stealing. Here in Penang the penalties for stealing are extreme and there isn't much of value to steal, so money for drugs has to be funded by work.'

> HT: 'For them life is just about taking drugs. They hardly eat and use all their money to buy drugs. For many of them this is a lifestyle they have chosen because they could

be earning up to MYR 100 [approximately £25] per day, which is more than what people earn as a receptionist or clerk in the office'.

The accounts by GD and HT are particularly interesting in juxtaposition as referring to the same agency. The regular daily wage-earning by drug addicts in Malaysia is a theme in both accounts, but the burden of surprise in these accounts is contrasting, where one student (White British male) notes the poverty of the surroundings as the rationale for labour; and the other (male Asian) instead notes drug users' relatively privileged incomes set against such poor life choices.

Epiphany as self-discovery

A particular theme of epiphany could be detected in the data where the placement provided a vehicle for self-discovery, existential in nature. These epiphanic moments could be disturbing and painful to students, as this account from a mature female student conveys in recognising and relinquishing a 'rescue' fantasy.

> CC: 'A little girl wanted to hug me for a long time today. It appeared she drew great comfort from this and her tiny body that started off as very tense seemed to relax…I couldn't help but notice how very thin she was and felt a rasping in her chest. I felt powerless to do anything for this child, who as a baby was fed coffee, as baby milk was too expensive for her family. I knew right from the start that I would never be able to change things and push my values onto these people, which I can see would do more harm than good. For example, as a Westerner, part of me would love to take this child home with me for a few weeks to feed her, clothe her, bathe her and get the

medical care that she needs. But this would be so damaging on her return, as she would then have to cope with knowing how different things would be.'

Surprise and humility were emotions often reported in accounts where comparisons were noted between the excesses of one context and the witnessed deprivations in Malaysia.

> ZT: 'I will buy more fruit before I go, when I think about how much my son has of anything and how much the boys [children's residential home] have, I'm sure they would [like to] have more but they don't ask, whereas my son and other kids in the UK do ask for more!!! Makes me think.'

However, equally, a revelatory praxis moment could be arrived at through a sense of dislocation and disorientation, as noted by this younger, male student who chose to undertake a solo placement with an immediate and almost total immersion into the practice and cultural-linguistic context.

> KS: 'Going through the process; experiencing barriers at almost every turn, leading to a feeling of isolation…swinging from frustration to elation depending on the ability of the listener to understand me, being grateful and happy when only a part of what I was trying to communicate was understood; finally feeling the exhaustion and inability to absorb any further information. Through these experiences I feel I have a far greater undestanding of what people with different communication methods [experience] when engaging with services, i.e. how exhausting an assesment must be and I am aware of the need to maybe split a lengthy assessment over a number of meetings – this is something I could have been told but I would not have *felt* the importance for myself'.

Finally, exposure to unfamiliar contexts had the power to transform how students perceived themselves, often in terms of professional identities, but also in intimate/personal identities. Here the discovery that ethno-cultural difference is celebrated (although this is by no means unproblematic or without qualification, see Author, 2012) in multi-cultural Malaysia enabled this student to reclaim the rejected part of her mixed race ancestry.

> PJ: 'I have realised that within myself I have accepted my own culture a lot more. Since I can remember I have always rejected the Indian side of me, but it was here that I learnt to relish in the fact that I am half Indian and it is something I should be proud of.'

Critical reactionary

Student responses in this section differ from earlier types in offering a critique that is both conspicuously negative towards the practice and cultural context, and less analytical. The so-called 'culture-shock' factor came to the fore in several accounts, and surprisingly, often in accounts by older, female students of whom we, as social work educators, might have expected perhaps more latitude in terms of life experience and encounters with the unfamiliar.

> NW 'Community work was to drop food parcels off to the poor families of X. This is a huge culture shock and I keep thinking I don't want to see anything like that again but people need to know about it. The opportunity to see such absolute destitution should be available to everyone….I wonder if any of the Malaysian Government officials have taken a wander down into those villages, down into the dilapidated shed that some 80+ woman, somebody's mother, called home!!! Just horrific! About seven homes we visited in all of various degrees of poverty, all unnecessary'.

This reaction to some obviously depressing sights of hard-core poverty is interesting where the student apparently failed to pick up on the differing cultural context and social policy drivers in place. The charitable exercise of giving out food parcels suggests a rather different Minimal State welfare policy to that of the UK, where food distribution in Malaysia may be a very necessary service; regardless that Food Banks are increasingly being seen as a social necessity in neo-liberal, post-Welfare State Britain.

Professional rejection

A few narratives suggested that initial disorientation and even discomfiture, common to many students, failed to achieve some resolution or continued theorisation, as evidenced in other accounts; but instead seemed to become petrified into a reactive rejection of values/practices that were 'othered' as impossibly and incomprehensibly alien.

> CN: 'There is also a certain uncomfortable feeling about how the children address the staff. [Supervisor X] is considered to be the children's mother and the staff are referred to as aunties and uncles!! One of the children asked me was I their aunty and I immediately stated that I was not and they should call me by my first name. In the UK this terminology would be frowned upon and I think would possibly raise some questions. It sits very uncomfortably with me!!'

The culturally-nuanced, familial and polite term 'aunty' as applied to many older adults in Malaysia, is also common in traditional British culture. The term carries the implication that certain protective responsibilities will be extended from adult to child in an informal but socially sanctioned relationship. This extract raises a number of professional questions relating to the student's literal interpretation of this custom; and the implication of the unsavoury, unsanctioned consanguinity inherent in such familial titles. It is interesting to note her discomfort and uncritical demand for using what could be construed as an impolite form of address, suggesting an assumptive superiority of UK notions of appropriateness in relationships.

The next extract reflects on an issue often noted by students placed in children's residential services: the Malaysian emphasis on the importance of education.

LC: 'Many children are keen to show us their reading skills. However I am hoping that those that do genuinely want to read have the opportunity to build on their skills. Resources are so very limited…I wonder if what we are doing with these children is simply tokenism…The children already have tuition several times a week after school and my personal feelings are that they already have enough learning. I can see for many emotional issues are not being meet and I feel that quality time with them such as nail painting, games and just talking would be far more beneficial to them.'

Wishing to meet the emotional needs of children in care is of course completely compatible with social work values, a consideration that may seem hardly worth stating. The main significance here lies in the apparent sense of overwhelming hopelessness felt by the student in the face of conspicuous need, where the educational achievements and ability to achieve by the children is considered to be almost irrelevant. This ignores the accepted wisdom (Author 2012) that education is the obvious route out of poverty for those born less privileged than others in Malaysia.

Antagonistic response

Although constituting minority reactions some extreme attitudes were revealed, demonstrating a high level of antagonism towards the perceived values and practices encountered in Malaysia by students. A strongly negative, emotive reaction clearly formed a feature of these atypical responses, which conveyed a marked dislike and even fear on the part of some students. While this did not necessarily preclude evidence of some deeper consideration on the part of students, as exemplified by CL's account below, such

judgemental attitudes generally appeared to inhibit or curtail the reflective process quite significantly.

> CL: 'The Christian side of [Agency X] is obsessed by evil spirits and the Devil and I still have not seen any information about the love of God…. [I am] questioning Christianity; my own faith. I would not dream of challenging this but it is worrying that Christianity is being used in this way and appears to be more of a cult – although I cannot prove this. And I must remember that I must not be judgemental as I am not here to be so. This is one occasion when I am finding if difficult as my own values and morals are being challenged.'

The student struggles with a startling discovery of the diversity of interpretations and ritualised practices undertaken by fellow Christians across the world. This extract is drawn from an increasingly troubled account of a stretched charitable agency struggling to meet the needs of impoverished and abused children. The student regards the perceived obsession of staff with the diabolical as threatening towards the children in their care, rather than the alternative possible explanation of staff attempting to comprehend and interpret the unacceptable threat posed towards vulnerable children beyond the walls of the agency, in a cultural context where metaphysical and religious constructions of good and evil are shared by Abrahamic religions (Author, 2008). The assumption, again, of UK political 'types' of normative knowledge, in this case of religious practice, influences the student's own approach to understanding the agency, its work and its underpinning beliefs.

An attitude of overt rejection of the cultural context, as typified by the next brief extract, was relatively rare. Yet evidence of unsuccessful placements was normally exemplified by accounts that were either overly preoccupied with the emotive self or disappointingly brief in content. In both cases, however, both description and analysis of the learning context and process were peripheral and superficial.

> AH: '[I] have tried to explain to her [fellow student] that we are out here to learn about the culture, try new things but not like their lifestyle as this would hypocritical of us to even try.'

However a more extreme rejection could also be found that combined attitudes of objectification and dehumanisation (even demonization) of individuals, along with a lack of insightful contextualising detail.

> SL '[In reference to home visit] I feel that I experienced my own personal glimpse of hell… but meeting these people and really understanding they were real people, not just like the people in my imagination, made it so real for me.'

Concluding discussion

In the 'types' identified feelings of disorientation, discomfort and disapproval were present in nearly all accounts at particular points. These instances propelled the majority of students forward in their thinking processes, demonstrating that they were engaging in critical, deep learning, where the emotive, reflective and analytical components were intensely grappled with. Whilst often leading to deeper insights of what had been experienced and processed later, they were ambiguous reflecting both a 'superior positioning' (Razack, 2009) and also developing cultural awareness/competence (Parker et al., 2014). Many students described the

experience as having been very positive to their overall development (Panos, 2004). Some described it as deeply meaningful and life changing; and where continued links with former placements continued on a personal basis between student and Malaysian staff.

Diversity of student characteristics raised a number of questions regarding which students might benefit most from international placements, challenging a number of our initial assumptions. The findings and 'types' identified, indicated that relevant prior travel experience did not necessarily indicate a tolerant, non-judgemental attitude by students in international placements. Nor did age and life experience guarantee the mature flexibility to cope with immersion into unfamiliar situations. The peer support of other students, normally assumed to be a good thing, often generated unhelpful dynamics that inhibited learning and acculturation. Insufficient data on ethnic diversity among the students did not permit us to explore this aspect in depth; and this was also true of sexual orientation – although commentary on the sexual orientation of Malaysians encountered was regularly offered and often approvingly.

Taken within the wider context of greater appreciation of international social work and an appetite for international placements, the attractions of such opportunities are self-evident (Panos, 2004). However, such opportunities are constrained by curricula in England and by professional fragmentation from external influences. Thus the rationale for time-consuming, resource-heavy international placements needs to compelling; and where reciprocation balances out the uni-directional nature of such opportunities. Furthermore the selection of candidates for international placements should be shared between UK and international HEIs according to a mix of selection criteria appropriate to both cultures, in order to maximise the

chances of achieving placements that are rewarding for all involved. This is important if cultural competence is to be learned and assumptions of superiority, whichever way that is directed, is to be challenged.

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