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'Aliens—but friends': practice placement at Balata refugee camp, Palestine

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‘Aliens—but friends’: practice placement at Balata refugee camp, Palestine

‘Främlingar, men ändå vänner’: Praktikstudier i Balata flyktingläger på Västbanken, Palestina

"الغرباء الاصدقاء": تدريب ميداني في مخيم بلاطة، فلسطين

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The Practice Placement in Palestine project is the result of collaborative efforts aimed at offering students from Lillehammer University College in Norway practical training in Palestinian refugee camps. The project brought the two cultures into close contact through which an exchange of ideas, cultural values, educational and social experiences took place. This contact aids in offering students educational opportunities that qualify them in their field of study and better their understanding of Arabic and Islamic culture. The paper offers explicit description of the project's vision, components, theoretical frames, procedures, successes, and obstacles. The project is unique in its proposals, results, and prospects.

Keywords: child welfare; social work; Palestine; placement; education

Projektet Praktik i Palestina (PPP) är ett samarbete mellan Barnevernutbildningen vid Høgskolen i Lillehammer (HiL), Norge, associated professor Erni Gustafsson vid Høgskolen i Lillehammer, Yafa Cultural Centre (YCC); flyktinglägret Balata i Nablus på Västbanken och Dr. Nabil Alawi, Nablus. Ändamålet är att erbjuda praktisk träning i socialt arbete med barn, ungdom och deras familjer för barnevern- och andra socialarbetarstudenter. Projektet innebär att människor från olika kulturer delar med sig av kulturella värderingar, personliga idéer och erfarenheter samt erfarenheter av yrkes- och utbildningsmässig art. Den nära och direkta kontakten mellan studenter, medarbetare och invånare i flyktinglägret ger studenterna mycket goda möjligheter att ingående lära och praktisera socialt barn- och ungdomsarbete samt ger otaliga tillfällen till att erhålla fördjupade insikter i islamsk och arabisk kultur. Praktiktiden ger även möjlighet att upprätta unika och djupa personliga vänskapsband. Artikeln ger en utförlig beskrivning av projektledningens visioner, projektets innehåll och struktur, dets teoretiska grundvalar samt en del av de erfarenheter artikelförfattare och övriga projektdeltagare gjort sig under projektets gång. Projektets inriktning, omfång, karaktär och resultat är att betrakta som unikt.

Nyckelord: socialt arbete med barn; Palestina (Västbanken); praktik; utbildning

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مشروع التدريب الميداني في فلسطين هو ثمرة جهود مشتركة هدفها اتاحة الفرصة امام طلبة كلية ليلهامر النرويجية للتدريب في مخيم بلاطة الفلسطيني. لقد جمع المشروع الثقافي من خلال التقارب الثنائي و من خلال التفاعل الفكري، الثقافي، التعليمي، التربوي والاجتماعي وقد عمل هذا التقارب التفاعلي على خلق فرص تعليمية للطلبة النرويجيين لكي يتم تاهيلهم في مجالاتهم التعليمية بالاضافة الي تعريفهم على فهم افضل للثقافة العربية والاسلامية. يقدم هذا البحث وصفا تفصيليا لرؤية المشروع، مكوناته، اطره النظرية والمنهجية، نجاحاته، والصعوبات التي واجهته. ان المشروع فريد من نوعه من خلال الطروحات التي يقدمها ومن خلال النتائج التي تم التوصل اليها و التوقعات.

كلمات مفتاحية: تربية الطفل، الخدمة المجتمعية، التدريب الميداني، التربية

The practical training component in the programs of study at Lillehammer University College (LUC) in Norway is of crucial importance for students since it helps them in the practical application of gained theoretical information and in gaining actual life experience. The authors of this article explored the possibility of giving students the opportunity to spend their practical training in a place where psychological and social traumas are conspicuously troublesome, especially for children. Palestine has an outstanding history of a pernicious political strife whose major victims are children, women, and disadvantaged people living in refugee camps.

The search for a field site ended at the Yafa Cultural Center (YCC) in the Balata Refugee Camp, one of the largest refugee camps in the West Bank. The Balata Refugee Camp is located in the suburbs of Nablus, in the northern part of the West Bank. It has a population of approximately 28,000 people. Totalling an area of one square kilometer, Balata Refugee Camp is in miserable condition, lacking in every facet the necessities for a decent standard of living. These refugees (today of course ancestors of the original population) are among the almost one million people currently living in different refugee camps inside and outside Palestine after being displaced from their lands following the war in 1948.

Today, 9.8 million of the total Palestinian population (approximately 11.3 million) are located outside the 1967 borders of Israel and have been so since 1967. Of them, 4.3 million people are living in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza (2.7 million in the West Bank alone). Of the total 5.6 million Palestinian refugees, approximately 1.5 million live in one of the 59 officially registered UNRWA—The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—camps. This means that in one form or another, approximately between 1/2 and 2/3 of the entire Palestinian population are in diaspora (shatat in Arabic). This is the largest number of refugees in the world (Badil Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights, 2012; Brynen & El Rifai, 2007; Palestinian Central Bureau of statistics [PCBS], 2008).

A study from 2007 considered the behavior of many children in West Bank camps and found them to be ‘requiring a lot of attention, hyper-active, to have high attachment and/or dependency on adults, to be talkative, to be agitated or rigid, secretive, spending time with older people, getting into fights, and doing a lot of yelling’ (Hussein, 2007, p. 155). The same source found ‘attention difficulties and aggression indicators’ as a common denominator for the same children. As in other refugee camps in the West Bank, the Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus is an area where post-traumatic stress symptoms, such as nocturnal enuresis (bedwetting), aggressiveness, lack of concentration, depression, and flashback symptoms are common. Other things, one can observe, are signs of a lack of socially accepted behaviors that can be regarded as mildly asocial or diffident and

difficulties engaging in age-appropriate play activity. Among children and adolescents one can see an alarming rise in criminality and drug abuse (Hussein, 2007, and authors' informal interviews, 2009–2012).

YCC was established in 1996 by a group of educated individuals with similar social background to those in the refugee camp, with the aim of promoting self-awareness among Palestinian refugees, especially children, about their plight. It aims to foster an understanding of civil society that is based on freedom of thought and expression, and to build a generation of young enlightened Palestinians who are aware of their rights and are capable of shaping a better future. As such, YCC works toward building a local community that holds firm to principles of freedom and independence, through this they state that they 'try to offer some help in improving the situation of the refugees' (YCC, 2013).

This paper analyses the educational goals of the project, to what degree they are achieved, and the general objectives for the outplacement period of the students. It also accounts for the research methods used for analyzing data and the observational methods used by the students in reporting experiences during their practice. It aims to highlight the successful features of the project, as well as the learning opportunities that the project has given to the involved parties.

Method and sources

Under this heading the researchers distinguish between methods used for writing the article and methods used by the students during both work and observational reporting.

Research method

The approach used to understand the collected data is hermeneutics. It involves interviews with individuals involved in the project, learning from conversations with students, employees, and participants (mostly children and adolescents), and reading students' reports. All of these sources require an understanding for interpretation, an understanding that the meaning of phenomena is not the truth in itself. When the researchers, for example, discussed topics with students and the local staff at YCC, they at times experienced that the students differed in their presentations of themes. The researchers needed to interpret and mentalize the actual context of what the conversation partners were engaged in.

There were different kinds of data sources used when writing this research. In the mandatory written learning contracts, the students are responsible for documenting their assumptions and goals for learning. At the end of the practice placement, the students reflect on the same contracts—by what means and to what degree they have achieved their goals.

The same standards for writing the learning contracts are applied for all students, regardless of where they will have their placement. All are required, for example, to show some degree of critical reflection on both their own achievements and the practical and cultural context surrounding them. Furthermore, all have to make some assumptions about both individual and personal goals in order to estimate their development in personal and occupational competence.

Once the students are placed in the field site, the Norwegian project leader visits YCC for two to four weeks in order to meet, discuss, and collaborate. The different student groups also make collective activity reports.

At the end of the students' stay, interviews are conducted between the students and the Palestinian project leader, the Personal Special Contact/Field coordinator—SPC—(see down p. 14), the staff and leaders of YCC, and also with the families that the students have visited. The students also answer a standardized questionnaire upon the completion of their practice. The questionnaire asks the students about their understanding of information before, during, and after practice and addresses what the students learned on an academic, as well as personal level. It utilizes two seven-step scales to obtain overall estimates about the academic and personal experience of the students.

Information is also gathered from the mandatory project reports conducted by the students at LUC, after ending their stay at the Balata Refugee Camp. Some months after returning to Norway, the students are interviewed about their more lasting experiences and impressions of the placement in the West Bank.

Analysis of data is made by comparing the questionnaire answers and interview data from the different individuals and groups. Bruce Berg (2008) writes that 'data analysis can be defined as consisting of three concurrent flows of action: data reduction, data display, and conclusions and verification' (p. 35). The sampling and reduction of data to a manageable size was a continuous affair during all four years of the project. As Berg (2008) writes: 'Frequently, data reduction occurs throughout the research project's life. As the project continues, further elements of data reduction will occur. This data-reduction and transformation process occurs throughout the span of the research'.

The researchers' evaluations and decisions were made in response to the data as they were collected, and are based on observations in the field, statements made during interviews, and observations of patterns in various documents. Additionally, the researchers verified their impressions of the data through displaying them for the interviewees. The researchers in this way have done what Berg (2008) suggests when he writes, 'Conclusions drawn from the patterns apparent in the data must be confirmed (verified) to assure that they are real, and not merely wishful thinking on the part of the researcher' (p. 36), that is, securing a certain degree of both validity and reliability.

Students' work and observation report method

The students' role and method during the placement is to be engaged in 'participation observation'. The basic issue is to actively collaborate with the staff, children, and youth at YCC. Observation is a means to achieving the skills necessary in order to make qualified, informed interventions when working with children in an appropriate professional manner. Observation as a goal in itself, in a mere anthropologic sense, was not a desired option. The students had to learn through participation—*in situ*. Even though the students were not expected to perform anthropological research, it lies near at hand to make comparisons between fieldwork as a method and the students' practical studies. Among other things, one can identify the open and unpredictable way in which reality presents itself both in the field and in practical studies. In both cases, it is often afterward that one can decide whether something is real 'data', or redundant (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Ringdal, 2007).

The students were expected to be with, in a deep sense, the actual culture, not to be researchers in a disinterested, 'neutral' position. They were expected to be in the culture in order to develop cultural sensitivity, as well as at a critical distance based on actual participation in different contexts. As one Norwegian anthropologist expressed, the participants 'involve themselves by interacting with others, at the same time as they

observe what the others do' (our translation; Fangen, 2004, p. 29). She continues, they thereby 'come closer to the people's reality and get personal knowledge about them', and 'such a direct experience can result in a better understanding and interpretation' of the field (our translation, Fangen, 2004).

The students were asked to follow a matrix of six steps in reporting their observations. These reports were made once a week in the supervision meetings with the adviser, the SPC and the students.

To adhere to the schedule means that students have to make a neutral description of a specific situation (a case) and the situation described must be as precise, concrete and non-committed as possible. Following is a 'naive' and also a theoretically informed interpretation of the situation. Out of these three steps a conclusion is made, that is, what can be said from synthesizing the results of the three steps. After this synthesis, the students are expected to consider what actions were taken and which alternative actions were possible. The sixth and last step is to encourage the students to think more holistically; on a meta level, what is to be learned from the actual observation, what universal/general learning can be taken out of the essence of the experienced and interpreted situation? What predictions for future occasions can be made?

In short, through insistence that the students comply closely with the matrix structure, the goal was to train the students' ability not only to make 'free' assumptions and interpretations, but also to present these in as much of a 'nonbiased and neutral' way as possible, to actively use theory as a tool to attain deeper understanding, to conceptualize and synthesize the large amount of findings in the observations, to focus on the practical implications of the observations, and to encourage the students to generalize their learning, so it can be useful in different occupationally relevant situations in the future.

Structure, goals, and duties

Project goals

The project was launched in the fall of 2010. From the beginning, in 2010, until the end, in late 2012, 20 students visited Palestine (by the end of spring 2014, 44 students will have had their practice placement in Palestine). From then on the project has become a regular offer in the college portfolio of possible places for students to choose from when doing their long-term, bachelor level, study abroad programs.

The placement in the second or third year of the three-year education at LUC is meant to give students 'an experience of direct contact with children, adolescents, and their relatives', and an opportunity to develop skills in the 'planning and implementation of activities' (our translation; The Norwegian Education and Research Department, 1999, p. 44). Through interaction with participants in different types of welfare facilities, the students are challenged to work in a reflective and self-reliant way to develop a professional standard on different topics related to their education. The interaction with participants and colleagues in collaborative partnership promotes the capacity to identify relevant professional challenges and issues. Of the aims of having students in placement abroad, the first is thinking on a general level, to develop a certain degree of knowledge of other peoples' cultures and habits—to develop cultural sensitivity.

Cultural sensitivity is different from cultural relativism. The more extreme form of this attitude is seen as 'anything goes', that one culture is as good (or bad) as the other. 'A strict attitude of cultural relativism makes us unable of taking an ethical or value based

position' and 'makes us blind to what values, norms, and actions are acceptable in human relations'. In addition, 'to be morally indifferent can be profoundly inhumane (our translation)' (Askeland & Dölle, 2006, p. 48).

We understand cultural sensitivity more in line with the historian of ideas, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who argues that it is a methodological approach to understanding different cultures without arguing that all cultures are the same or equivalent (Eriksen, 2001). Cultural sensitivity is about recognizing one's own cultural values and their impact from the 'outside', and the same with a different culture from the 'inside'. It enables one to employ a stance appropriate for representatives of different cultures' backgrounds and worldviews. In a sense, one has to be in the same position as a good art arbiter or critic—to look for the interesting, to try to understand what at first looks foreign and incomprehensible, to see the art object (or culture) in a 'good way', with a 'friendly eye'.

To have students in the West Bank means to have students in a profound Islamic community. Regardless of the experiences the students face, they acquire different types of learning on a daily basis through meeting with children, whose behavior is in some degree different from the social norms that the LUC students are accustomed to in Norway.

Students are also confronted with tasks to cooperate with colleagues, and work with parents and adults, who in some respects have different standards on matters related to child rearing, gender normative behavior, ethical outlooks in general. The LUC students can expect to meet refugees from the Middle East in different areas of social and care context in Norwegian society. To have obtained 'in depth' understanding of cultural and social norms and standards that direct the way people think, react, and behave, is very important knowledge.

The students are introduced to some aspects of Arab and Islamic culture before they arrive at their placement site, but their daily, physical encounters at Balata Refugee Camp bring new epiphanies and unexpected reactions. For example, as three of the Norwegian students were walking in the camp they saw a group of children torturing a puppy; the scene touched the students and prompted them to act. The students pulled the puppy from the hands of the children and delivered it to an animal shelter. The students felt that intervention in this situation was appropriate and could lead to tangible results. These students then gave recommendations to the next group to work on the issue of sympathy with animals—something that the students observed to be lacking in the Palestinian culture. The next group began what they called an 'animal project' which aimed at showing children at the refugee camp the importance of being kind to animals. The project was successfully conducted with 20 children participating with the aim of disseminating their experience among other children.

Another aim for sending students to Balata Refugee Camp to work with children and adolescents is to enable them to use the different skills and theoretical knowledge obtained during their course of education at LUC. In Balata, they have the opportunity to practice nearly all the pedagogical and therapeutic knowledge they have acquired through the previous two years of study. One example is to practice some of the approaches they have learned in environmental and stress and aggression reducing therapy as paying attention to verbal clues in order to understand underlying meaning, to envisage a safe and confident structure in relations in order to encourage the children to be open-minded and non-aggressive, and to show that the students are trustworthy.

One of the student groups observed that bullying was a very conspicuous problem among the children in Balata. They observed that as a result of bullying, several children looked forlorn, detached, and inhibited. The children who had been bullied tended to keep silent and refrain from participating in activities because of fear and insecurity. Based on their academic foundation and the theories learned in child welfare education, the Norwegian students decided to intervene by working on this phenomenon of bullying. They showed the children affection, gave them leading roles in activities, communicated with their parents at home, and closely monitored their participation in activities. The students were able to make a difference in the lives of the bullied children by integrating them in the group.

The use of professional, pedagogical, and therapeutic understanding have shown in cases like these, albeit not every time, that one can expect that the students' approach affected the actual behavior (and intellectual and ethical understanding) among the children involved in the student-led animal care and the anti-bullying project.

General objectives for learning in the placement period

One of the objectives of the placement is to train LUC students to relate to children, adolescents, and families in a way that nurtures the possibility of predictable, professional treatment of real-life situations. During placement, the students apply their theoretical knowledge in practical settings and are able to assess different situations concerning basic childcare and social work. In cooperation with participants, the students plan and implement a wide range of activities, and are encouraged to work in a reflective and self-reliant modus. The students, in a critically reflective way, use different theoretical concepts, perspectives, and methods to achieve professional competence. The connection between theory and practical understanding is essential for achieving a true professional standard. The same can be said about achieving a profound, well-established self-understanding. (Skau, 2002).

The goal for the whole curricular period (where the practice placement is one of the most important curricular events) is that the students are encouraged to reflect on themes surrounding ethics and work. In doing this, they show that they can use these reflections in practical work among clients. They show that they can participate actively in collegial fellowship—including of course, their supervisors and contacts. They are also encouraged to reflect on and be conscious of their thoughts, personal development, feelings, and attitudes, and to communicate this with their supervisors as a part of the guidance process (Askeland, 2008).

As an outcome of the placement, the students show that they are able to identify, from their own experiences, different competencies and values concerning the social work/social childcare field. In that they become able not only to describe individual psychological and sociological matters but also to describe social problems on different levels in society, how these problems can be understood, and what consequences this different understanding may have on their work as professionals.

The adviser and SPC

The adviser is, in a sense, the executive arm in the West Bank for the College representative and other project leaders in Norway. The researchers believe that this is a learning procedure that one can generalize to most parts of the world. A project of this type, which involves many people and is dependent on their cooperation, has to be

anchored in the local community, and has to rely on the culture in place. In most parts of the world this means that participants, if coming from the West, have to take help from persons in the community who have a certain degree of influence, who are regarded with esteem, and therefore have a network of personal contacts who are willing to give the necessary help in special situations. As Aina Lian Flem writes, despite the authority that many 'help' projects achieve due to inauguration by high-status or prestigious organizations, 'the practical outcome will depend on local anchoring and cooperation with many local operators (our translation)' (Flem in Askeland & Dölie, 2006, p. 132).

Through the duration of the project, the local adviser had the main on-site supervision responsibility. He also had the duty to evaluate the students' performance with the LUC adviser. The local adviser was assisted by a Personal Special Contact/Field coordinator (SPC). The SPC duties, as specified in a written job performance contract, are to devote real time assistance, to guide, and to translate for the students in their everyday work with the children. He also aids the students in planning and organizing activities, facilitates contacts with different institutions, and translates to and from Arabic and English. In summary, the SPC's job is to assist the students on various occasions and settings when necessary, and to give general assistance in study-related situations.

Students' performance and duties

After attending a short informational meeting and an interview of interested students, those selected attend a mandatory 12-hour introductory course in Arabic culture, some of the new history aspects of the region, and other topics that are useful to know about and discuss before leaving. The placement for the students at YCC is about three months, due to visa regulations. Before the end of the third week of placement, all students write a 'learning contract'. This is a statement of what each student would like to learn, how they plan on learning it, and what occupational goals the students have for their stay. It includes both occupational and personal goals, showing individual preferences. At the end of their placement at YCC, the students also evaluate to what degree (high/low) they have achieved their goals.

During the 3rd and 4th weeks of their stay, each student moves to live with a host family in the camp that YCC finds suitable, for at least five days. The stay with the family brings students to the actual family-life inside the homes of refugees. The host-family experiences during the project have been nearly totally positive. The criteria of assigning families to students state that it is an advantage if the family contains among its members teenagers or adolescents, and at least one member who is able to communicate in English. Interviews with the families and the students show that the students experienced the forming of very close relationships with their host-families, and that the bonds became strong very early in their stays.

For the families in Balata, it is the first time ever that students in an educational program have been so close, for such a long period of time. In an economic sense, our experience shows that the stay is often better with families that earn an average income, but families that are below the economic average can present a unique opportunity for the student.

One thing that has shown to be a challenge is that male students, due to Middle Eastern culture, cannot remain alone with a woman in the family while the men are at school or work. As a result, male students' stays with their host families are somewhat restricted, and the host families used has often members employed at YCC.

In the middle of the placement during the project period, the LUC representative makes a visit, which last one to four weeks. During the project time, this practice proved to be essential for the project to proceed and progress. There were various planning meetings, evaluations, discussions, and investigating new sites for the students to visit, making preparations for the next group, and guiding the staff and close co-workers. Without such visits the project would have perished. All of the involved parties agree that placement projects of this type absolutely require deep contact between all cooperating parties. It is only when this cooperation is functioning in a profound way that the team building can evolve and progress.

Around the middle of the placement period, all students were obliged to make an individual or group presentation for the rest of the YCC staff, the local adviser, the SPC and the LUC representative. The presentations were filmed and stored on either DVD or other electronic media. Students presented a situation that had invoked their interest, gave theoretical understanding of the situation, and reflected on themselves in the situation. The topics were relevant to peoples' lives in the camp, not in any sense 'detached' or functionally disconnected from the real living conditions of both the staff and the rest of the people in the Balata Refugee Camp.

On distance and proximity

The main question regarding distance and proximity is how to manage to be in a really close psychological and social encounter and at the same time be at a 'safe distance', enabling one to make independent, impartial interpretations and analyses? This balance is of crucial importance in social work.

The students, while working in a foreign cultural context had to strive for achieving informed, multicultural understanding, cultural sensitivity, and to evaluate in a fair and positive critical way their own assumptions and culturally embedded opinions. What sort of cultural expressions can, with some sort of investigative 'neutrality', be regarded as beneficial or harmful for doing a good job as a social worker? That is, what sort of comparisons can be made, on both an academic and personal level, from different cultural expressions (in this context the Islamic Middle East and secular northern European cultures) that are relevant to the task of doing a good professional job?

One of the challenges every student has to consider is to go from an individualistic, egocentric, emancipatory, and mainly secular culture and society to a collectivistic, sociocentric, family-centered, deeply religious, and patriarchal/paternalistic society (Eriksen, 2003).

The students were asked to deal with relevant experiences as representatives of a major liberal culture who came to be in contact with a conservative culture. How does one adjust to foreign standards of thinking and living and integrating in the community, and at the same time remain able to represent his/her values and beliefs? What 'universal' social and ethical standards (according to the United Nation declarations on woman and children rights, the freedom of speech, religious freedom, gay people's rights) seem to be contradicted by locally, and culturally specific, and religious norms and standards? Questions like these arose, when the students compared themselves and their own inherited and internalized opinions and standards with people conforming to a quite different set of standards. This occurred, especially, when discussing and performing concrete matters, such as how to deal with children who are shy or acting out, how to deal

with information about more physical, punitive child rearing methods, how girls received different treatment from boys, or how to deal with people representing sexual minorities.

Women's subordination under men, children's subjugation under adults, staff subsuming under superiors, and individuals conforming to traditional, prevalent culture and religion, can more or less be found in all societies. Hofstede (2001) discusses these, and similar, hierarchies under the term 'power distance index (PDI)'. The Middle Eastern countries are scoring high on the PDI, revealing a pattern in the cultural expectations on the distribution of power. 'Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede, 2001, p. 157). We believe that the hierarchical structure of the family and 'unequally distributed' power within the family, and in the Palestinian society at large, combined with the severe stress that Palestinians suffer due to the Israeli occupation, can explain a portion of the relatively high degree of domestic violence, especially in the case of the physical punishment of children used as a rearing method. The same power structure and male-dominated cultural norms may also explain why some of female students at times felt uneasy with some Palestinian men in the Balata Refugee Camp. They experienced that the aforementioned men really did not care about what the students said or meant, and disregarded the female student's intentions and wishes.

The danger the students had to avoid was both over-identifying with their colleagues and friends (e.g. are really all problems in the society ultimately caused by the Israeli occupation? Could not some of them be of a more inherent origin?), or under-identifying (e.g. are there really fundamental differences between perceived Islamic and western secular norms? Cannot some of the observed differences also depend on personal and social differences?).

The dichotomy of social differences is related to the behavior of individuals in a collectivist society as compared to individuals in an individualistic society. Individuals in individualistic societies tend to be more independent in their thinking, more self-reliant, more prone to critical thinking and creativity, and perhaps more secure, since they are protected by a democratic system that guarantees their freedom of opinion. Individuals in collectivist societies, however, tend to be less independent, less self-reliant, and more prone to imitation of established norms, that they do not dare to question, and therefore, become more inhibited and less creative (Hofstede, 2001). 'In The Holy Koran, which everybody has to follow, it is stated how to behave and what is allowed and not allowed (halal and haram). If you are a good Muslim you inevitably will act well, as you don't question God's words and the hadith of The Prophet. That makes it very easy to know how to act. You do as you have been taught, and what by the majority is regarded as good behavior—and thinking!' (personal interview).

Hofstede (2001) has created an 'Individualism Index Value (IDV) indicator', in which he examines individualism (and the aforementioned Power Distance Index) in 50 countries by studying the behavior of 117,000 IBM employees who come from different cultures and countries.

The IDV in European countries is above 69, while in the Arab countries it is around 39. This, according to Hofstede, means that individuals in European countries are more individualistic than individuals in Arab countries. While the IDV is not an indicator of cultural superiority or inferiority, it certainly serves as an indicator for analyzing and understanding the behavior of individuals in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. For example, due to their placement at YCC, the students experience different

cultural encounters with the staff and children in the camp. The students asked questions in relation to some of the cultural encounters and in some circumstances did not feel they received adequate or satisfying answers.

One disturbing example was when the students got worried after a nearby shooting and sought answers from the witnesses. The answers given to them by many people was 'do not worry; it was nothing'. The LUC students felt nervous and uncomfortable because they felt that they were mature enough to shoulder responsibility and to fend for themselves if there was any imminent danger—an individualistic stand that their Palestinian counterparts could not relate to. For them, as Palestinians, they feel they belong to a community and other people in the refugee camp may take care of problems as they arise—a collective stand that ties them to the community reducing their sense of individualism.

Another complementary interpretation of this is that the Palestinians and the Norwegians belong to two different societies. Hofstede discerns societies where one avoids insecurity, labeling this behavior 'uncertainty avoidance' (The Uncertainty Avoidance Index, UAI). The Scandinavian countries are among those that have a tendency to score low on uncertainty avoidance. Despite Hofstede not mentioning Palestine explicitly in relation to uncertainty avoidance, we can state that Palestinians are well educated in not avoiding insecurity—how could they? What the Norwegians thought was horrendous and terribly disturbing was for the Palestinians something belonging to everyday life, and therefore unremarkable.

The uniqueness of the project

What the researchers are aware of from their experience and knowledge about educational projects inaugurated by foreign institutions in the different refugee camps at the West Bank, are that, there are none that compare to the project that this paper describes.

It is the only one that is, on a basic level, developed in a deep cooperation between local people and their counterparts in a western academic government-funded institution. In no part of the project were any superior authorities involved; all activities were inaugurated, planned, and carried out by people who are directly involved in education, child, and youth work. One can, in that sense, call it a real solidarity project, which brings students from LUC in contact with the sociopolitical situation through engaging in educational activities.

The child welfare and social work students from LUC were the only ones that stayed for such a long period of time in such a close relationship with local colleagues. The researchers are not aware of any other programs where students live in a refugee camp and socialize in a profound way for three months. The students did not go as volunteers; their placement was part of their educational requirements. It means that their stay in YCC and Balata was an integral part of their education. They are getting their license as social workers in Norway partly on the basis of what they have achieved in the West Bank. The stay was evaluated, the students' performance examined, and finally submitted to an evaluation on the same level and with the same criteria as their co-students in Norway.

Findings gathered from the data sources

From the original learning contracts and the reflections on them, the researchers found that students wanted to learn more about communication with children—how to engage

themselves in activities with the children. They wanted to know how to communicate despite language difficulties, to learn more about the local culture—how to relate in a proper way to different people and to know more about Islam and the struggles of the Palestinian people.

The vast majority of the students reported substantial achievements in most of their personal goals. They learned to communicate despite the language differences, developed insights into the Arabic and Islamic cultures, and learned to plan and organize in a more efficient manner. Many experienced what, for lack of a better word, can be called personal growth and maturity.

In nearly all the answers from students, better knowledge about the local culture and how to accommodate it were mentioned. Many answered by saying that they learned much more about Islam as both a religion and a normative matrix. To experience how it is to live in an occupied society also increased their knowledge about the political conflict.

They came back after the stay with a better understanding of how to relate with people from different cultures. They came to know significantly more about the political situation in the area, as well as having a greater knowledge about ‘practical’ Islam. On an occupational level they learned ways to motivate and encourage children and adults into partnership. Reaching their professional goals was, in many cases, felt deeply.

On learning as connected to the occupational, professional context, students mentioned topics, such as gaining better understanding to implement activities with children, especially children with low-activity or with introverted behavior, to communicate despite language differences, to be patient and to see things from many perspectives. Improvising and taking the initiative to organize and plan different activities were also things that many of the students mentioned. Some students’ comments in the questionnaire were as follows: ‘I have learned to tackle difficult problems better’; ‘I have been much more patient and I consider more what to do before acting’; ‘I have learned to improvise, to take initiative and be a part in conflict (not so shy any longer)’; ‘cooperation and planning are things I never had any ideas about before, but now I have really gotten into that; it is something important in social work’.

Many also reported a better appreciation of how good the Norwegian health and social system in reality is. When comparing the two societies, students expressed a greater satisfaction with the Norwegian safety net and how it works. This finding is supported by studies elsewhere (Dølie & Askeland, 2006).

In the interviews and in the questionnaire the researchers asked about the sort of difficulties, discomfort, and annoyances the students experienced. The two highest-ranking difficulties were related to cultural/religious factors governing treatment of women and children. Paternalistic attitudes toward women as a gender and as individuals were sometimes mentioned.

The use of physical punishment in bringing up children upset many of the students. The same can be said about discriminatory gender differences. Implications for the students’ future professional practice when they experience these issues among refugees living in Norway is that they must be highly reflective and able to balance the account of other cultures (see paragraph above about cultural relativism), and to take account of Norwegian law and what is considered appropriate in Norwegian culture and society.

Other conflicts affected difficulties in cooperation with some of the staff members. Some students felt that some colleagues did not take their efforts seriously. Sometimes they were dubious when making agreements, perhaps because of the surrounding realities. There is a perceived difficulty in working in a setting, where one must rely on

translators. The students were often unsure about the exactness in the translations to and from Arabic. Regarding the general culture and society in Palestine, many expressed ambivalence. All of the students agreed on the great friendliness and generosity that the Palestinians had shown toward them.

Some students also came back with a more critical attitude concerning the ethics and standards governing people and society as a whole. Despite this, all students expressed clear and great sympathy, and a larger engagement for 'The Palestinian cause'. Some expressed critical thoughts about the culture, mainly about the treatment of women, but for the most part the students generally seemed rather positive to the local culture.

The students were also asked to estimate the grade of satisfaction with the placement on a seven-step scale, where 1 denotes 'No' satisfaction and 7 denotes 'Very great' satisfaction. Two scales were used; one for academic and one for personal satisfaction. All students completed the questionnaire.

On the academic scale, 70% of the students put themselves on grade 5 or higher. On the personal scale 55% put themselves on 6, and 35% on 7. (Results for students who have had their practice until the spring of 2014 show that about 75% value their professional benefit to grade 6 or 7, and that over 75% value their personal benefit to the scale degree 6 or 7.) All in all, it's safe to conclude that an overwhelming majority of the students regarded the practice placement in Balata as a very satisfying experience, both on the professional/academic level and on the personal level.

What the project leaders have learned

The Norwegian project leader visits to Nablus were absolutely necessary. Every time, new issues surfaced that needed to be solved, planned for, or in one way or another dealt with. To be on site is certainly something very different from being in Norway and having to address problems or obstacles by email or Skype. On-site, there are various possibilities to influence colleagues and co-workers through guidance, supervision, advising, general discussions, and to achieve goals that are deemed beneficial for the project. As a project leader, one can engage directly in planning, obtain knowledge of the locations, institutions, and so forth. The project leader was also available for direct contact with the students.

The SPC was the direct link between the adviser and the students in their day-to-day work. It was he who followed up with the students and helped them with all necessary practical tasks and acted as a translator for the students. The decision to have a person who could function as a practical field coordinator has proved crucial. Before the appointment of the SPC, the local staff for various reasons could not manage as workers at YCC, advisers, and supervisors of the LUC students. The demand on one or a few persons was too big and the students were dissatisfied. After employing one dedicated person as a working guide to attend only to the students' interests, the researchers found the students more satisfied, the staff more relaxed regarding their obligations, and the adviser had more time to mediate with students on different topics.

When the organizational structure had settled and matured, the researchers saw it beneficial for the students' learning possibilities to extend their daily work to not only YCC and some of the UNWRA schools, but also to kindergartens and social development centers in another camp in Nablus. It was also decided that the students should visit more of the local helping committees and social organizations to broaden their views. At the same time the researchers reduced the visits to other refugee camps around the West

Bank, keeping Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jericho as places for mandatory visits. They saw that the study time could be too fragmented with travels around the entire West Bank once a week, living in a family for a while, working at different places in Nablus, and visiting interesting institutions in Nablus and elsewhere. The fundamental activity is to be at the Center (YCC) implementing activities with children and adolescents.

Conclusion

It is clear that the students' experiences from a foreign context contribute to strengthen their ability to work in a professional context—both academically and personally. They made an exploratory expedition of self in a different society and culture. They learned to tackle unforeseen and often strange situations, to look inside themselves for unknown or unacknowledged resources, and to meet academic and personal challenges.

LUC students matured substantially, both psychologically and professionally during the three months in Nablus. To live in such close contact with participants, clients, staff, and other students, in such a foreign context, set the students under mental pressure and test their personal individual abilities. This heightened their awareness of their own capabilities, and therefore, helped elevate it to a level that they could not have obtained without participating in the project at YCC.

In general, they developed awareness and sensibility to other forms of family structure, ways of raising children, relating to unfamiliar gender relations. Some students, both verbally and in written form expressed having developed a more critical stand after their stay. What they have learned is useful in their future careers as social caregivers and social workers. No students, not even the few who were 'critical', expressed regret over their stay in Palestine.

One of the staff members at YCC expresses what the researchers consider one of the core values of the project, seen both from the side of the population in Balata Refugee Camp and also from the side of the students; 'They are at the beginning aliens but become our dear friends'. (personal interview).

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