Northumbria Research Link

Students' Involvement in International Humanitarian Aid: Learning from student responses to the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka

Abstract

Aid delivery has been critiqued for its failure to be locality specific and culturally relevant for recipients. Humanitarian responses to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami involved volunteers, professionals, and social work and other students. In this article we consider students' endeavours in two responses to this tsunami in Sri Lanka. These initiatives involving professionals, academics and students from financially wealthy Western countries working in a less wealthy and powerful country, sought to empower victim-survivors receiving aid in rebuilding their lives after the tsunami. We draw on a large scale three-year qualitative study of two models which began shortly after this disaster – one institutional, the other professional. The research covered many dimensions of humanitarian aid in Sri Lanka. In this paper, we focus on: students' perceptions of their preparation before going overseas; the support they received while abroad; their debriefing upon return; and implications of their experiences for empowering approaches to humanitarian aid. The research revealed many positives in students' experiences. However, structural inequalities perpetuated inegalitarian relationships, despite individual attempts to the contrary. This paper offers lessons to improve the quality of students' experiences and their contributions to local peoples' well-being.

Keywords: humanitarian aid, internationalising practices, student exchanges

Introduction

Social work academics and students have a long history in humanitarian endeavours (Desai, 2007). Linked to universities' internationalisation strategies, these can legitimate exploitative cross-border interventions, contradicting avowed aims of empowering local people to resume control of their lives. Hancock (1994), Hoogvelt (2007), and Duffield (2010) exposed oppressive theories and practices that underpin humanitarian initiatives. These connect to controversies within social work over universalism, indigenisation and culturally-relevant, locality-specific practices under globalisation (Midgley 2001; Healy 2007; Dominelli 2010). In Sri Lanka, Harris (2006) highlighted fragmentation and inefficient distribution of aid resources. Pilger (2004) argues that sending money directly to local communities is the best intervention because they then determine their own priorities and paths for reconstruction. Spivak (2012) contends that colonial relationships are integral to structures within which universities operate in a capitalist world. Teichler (2009) suggests that neo-colonial relations underpin universities' internationalisation strategies when perceiving overseas students as vital sources of income replacing dwindling state resources (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996; Baldwin, 2012), regardless of intentions. We explored these issues through two models that claimed to involve local people fully in controlling decisions concerning aid distribution and reconstruction. We were especially interested in social work's potential to contribute to empowering cross-border interventions following disasters.

We consider students' activities in humanitarian aid by examining two interventions that avowed empowering responses to Sri Lanka's 2004 tsunami , utilising a three-year qualitative study funded by the Economics and Social Sciences Research Council. One intervention, the Institutional Model (IM), began in a British university, had limited direct involvement from social workers, but many goals and activities that fell within the international definition of social work; the other, the Professional Practice Model (PPM) was initiated by a world-wide network of social work educators and emphasised professional practice (fictitious names). The trajectories of both models varied over time as detailed below. We consider students' experiences of their: pre-placement preparation; processes of engagement with local people and outcomes; debriefing upon return; and endeavours for empowering approaches to humanitarian aid. Students' reflections on humanitarian exchanges through these models and our analysis of their interviews inform this paper. We conclude that students' experiences of overseas humanitarian work are difficult and complex; and, energizing and positive. Some experiences

proved transformative because students re-evaluated their understandings of their place within the world, and social work educators and students gained important insights.

Contextual background

The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami affected 12 countries, devastated huge swathes of land, built infrastructures, buildings and livelihoods. In Sri Lanka nearly 40,000 people died. This disaster generated a huge groundswell of goodwill across the world and people, money, and resources poured in to assist those in need. The United Nations (UN) estimated that 600 organisations including governments, businesses and voluntary agencies provided assistance there.

The Two Models: A Brief Description

Senior managers in a UK university with links to international and Sri Lankan NGOs and a university in Sri Lanka began the IM in 2005 to enable British staff and students to undertake voluntary humanitarian work in villages. Our research found that the IM brought positive benefits to university partners, students and village communities in Sri Lanka where pre-schools, schools and community centres were constructed using funds raised by British university staff and students who spent their summers teaching English and sports and engaging in cultural exchanges, on placements lasting eight to ten weeks. Over time, the IM diversified its activities to include community development, academic partnerships and capacity building. Within seven years, it encompassed 12 villages and four universities. By mid-2012, the original IM director had established a charitable NGO to ensure long-term sustainability. The British university, supported by a memorandum of understanding with each university, waived fees and raised funds for Sri Lankan academics and students to attend courses and undertake research in the UK. These exchanges covered staff and students from various disciplines including sports, bio-chemistry and social work.

The PPM was launched by an international NGO network that supports social work educators and builds capacity in university-based social work education. Immediately after the tsunami, this NGO established a network to partner schools of social work in disaster-affected areas with those in safe ones to support and provide resources identified as useful by victim-survivors (Dominelli, 2013). In Sri Lanka, this included needs assessments and research to help local people identify needs, support structures and aid distribution. This proved difficult because the

tsunami had ruptured transportation and communication infrastructures and qualified social work personnel were scarce. In the early days, PPM activities ranged from clearing debris to providing food, water, medicines and information about people's rights to assistance. Students learnt the relevance of clearing debris to becoming professional social workers. The need to build capacity in social work education and community development quickly became apparent. Over time, academics and students deepened their ties and enabled staff to spend time in other universities exchanging curricula and lecturing while students attended classes and undertook four-week practice placements. Despite lack of formal funding, one Slovenian and one British university strengthened their Sri Lankan links while other universities initially involved withdrew. The PPM utilised interpersonal relationships, commitment to developing social work theory and practice in mutually empowering learning environments and genuine desire to foster growth and development in the profession, to advocate for change and engage the Sri Lankan University Grants Committee in promoting social work education. In 2012, the Slovenian university signed a memorandum of agreement with a Sri Lankan university to extend the partnership to other disciplines.

The IM and PPM had different trajectories, but sought institutionalisation to achieve sustainability. The combination of players within and between countries varied over time in both initiatives, although a core group remained constant in each. Capacity building was prioritised by Sri Lankan educators, students and villagers in both models to sustain local initiatives and long-term benefits without international support. Villagers valued the mutuality, experiences, skills and resources that overseas colleagues contributed.

Contextualizing humanitarian aid

Humanitarian endeavours occurring in contexts of long-standing and unequal power relations can skew participative processes (Hickey and Mohan, 2004) and impact on aid-giving (Hancock, 1994), higher education's international activities (Spivak 2012), and social work (Midgley 1981). Achieving equality becomes dependent on relationships established by individuals rather than the structures that purport to support them (Dominelli, 1997). The UK and Sri Lanka have a history of colonial occupation. The latter remains structurally undermined by unequal trade relations and is economically and politically subordinate in the international capitalist system (Amin, 1977; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001). 'Participatory' approaches to development initially emerged to challenge top-down policies driven by international institutions that disregarded local priorities in favour of profit motives for powerful capitalist

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countries. Participatory approaches have been criticised for narrowly focusing on the local, ignoring 'wider structures of injustice and oppression', 'insufficiently sophisticated' considerations of power and empowerment, 'inadequate understanding of the role of structure and agency in social change', (Hickey and Mohan, 2004: 11) and treating participation as technical rather than political processes (Dominelli, 2012). University-community partnerships are complicated when occurring between countries with differing degrees of economic and political power in relationships that can amount to neo-colonialism (Collins and Rhoads, 2010: 193-8; Strier, 2011: 82-4). The dangers inherent in this contextual background question whether universities from wealthy countries can engage with communities in poorer countries and exchange students without doing harm.

Participatory partnerships have difficulty transcending the lack of 'power to transform radically the structural inequalities that reproduce poverty' (Williams, 2004: 98-100). Social work can challenge structural inequalities, e.g., by supporting education, mobilisation, and organisation at local, national and global levels to tackle the negative consequences of unregulated financial speculation (Midgley, 2001: 27). This requires long-term, sustainable relationships that engage with political power, but is unachievable within the confines of short placements undertaken by students within both models.

Thus, we analyse more modest changes: the extent to which a placement experience in Sri Lanka changed students, their perceptions of themselves and role and place in the world, when operating within a backdrop of structurally unequal power relations. These modest, time-limited changes may have far-reaching consequences by impacting upon students' subsequent practice. We apply two criteria for success, derived from the literature: the explicit aims of those engaged in the models; and themes emerging from our data. We examine whether students established reciprocal power-sharing relationships with local residents by examining their responses to international inequalities; capacity to play critical roles in decision-making; and acquisition of values, skills and confidence for more equitable longer-term international engagement by focusing on cultural understanding, international employment, and long-term international engagement. And, we constantly explored whether the two models perpetuated or undermined local and international inequalities.

Methodology

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The IM and PPM were selected for study because they claimed humanitarian engagement that fostered long-term, empowering, egalitarian partnerships with local communities and institutions in Sri Lanka, thereby reflecting the values of culturally-relevant, locality-specific social work (Dominelli 2010). Research occurred from 2009 to 2012, received ethical approval from Durham University and informed consent was obtained from each participant.

Following Daly (2007), we eschewed pre-determined objective measurements of students' success, applying instead, an interpretive ethnographic methodology to explore the contested nature of international interventions and socially constructed realities. Data was collected to get 'inside' the social worlds of the research subjects to access the richness, complexity and particularities of their experiences (Berger and Luckman, 1967), including students' perceptions about the extent to which they felt they had realized empowering partnerships with local people and achieved transformative changes in their own behaviour. Within this approach, knowledge becomes valid if it is authentic, reflects participants' many voices and the reader is made aware of the researchers' epistemological assumptions and values, and specific contexts in which the research occurs (Klein and Myers 1999).

The entire dataset includes transcripts of 368 interviews, 10 focus groups and 35 sets of field notes. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Where technical problems prevented digital recording, local researchers took notes as close as possible to the exact words spoken, and checked their accuracy with interviewees. This paper utilises a sub-set of the total data: transcripts of 173 interviews - 79 students and 38 staff from universities in the UK, Slovenia and Sri Lanka of which 30 students and 7 staff were from social work programmes; and the remainder from other programmes. Where possible, students were interviewed before and after the exchange to ascertain: pre-departure goals, aspirations and attitudes; whether these had changed; and goals achieved.

Data was coded through Nvivo software using a grounded analysis method, so that:

'the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis...emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis' (Mathbor 2008: 37).

Initially, an open coding scheme was used, in a grounded process that avoided imposing pre-conceived ideas on the data, enabling themes to emerge based on the interviewees' priorities and concepts. Rough summaries of the ensuing 105 themes (stage 1) were

produced, with illustrative quotations. These summaries were used to break down each stage 1 theme into more specific sub-themes, based on the issues that appeared most prominently within that theme. Repeated throughout the 105 initial themes, this produced 388 themes that were regrouped into 12 key areas of findings (stage 1b).The process of 'coding down' from the general themes (stage 1) to specific sub-themes (stage 1b) led to similar or identical sub-themes emerging from within more than one stage 1 theme, enabling internal verification. Where duplication occurred, themes were merged, leaving 301 themes. The stage 1b framework was reviewed again to identify themes that lacked specificity and/or clarity, and broken down into further sub-themes. This produced 357 themes which were then grouped into 12 areas of findings (stage 1c). Applying the same coding framework to all sources enabled triangulation between the accounts of staff, volunteers and villagers. Patterns emerging from a selection of key themes are presented below accompanied by illustrative quotations, chosen because they are representative of wider trends in the data.

Students' Pre-Exchange Preparation

Sammon et al. (2003: 165-166) highlight student selection as important to securing positive outcomes. In their Canada-EU social work exchange, selection criteria included academic excellence, positive evaluations from preliminary placements, and additional qualities relevant to international placements including adaptability, willingness to challenge their beliefs and/or perceptions, and acceptance of cultural difference. Structured interviews of applicants assessed these criteria through set questions and scenarios. The IM and PPM undertook similar efforts in selecting appropriate students. Difficulties in reliably assessing necessary qualities were exposed when a few students failed to respect local cultures. This harmed student learning outcomes, university images, and project reputations within Sri Lankan communities. Student selection is an important and complex element in such initiatives.

Tensions between learning through structured lessons and collective problem-solving arose in various exchanges (Thomas and Meehan 2010: 100), including our study where some students deemed structured approaches as more beneficial. Both models sought to prepare students for challenges they might face rather than being prescriptive to avoid imposing models developed elsewhere and facilitate dialogue to produce forms of practice that modelled a 'moderate mid-range position' between the extremes of universalism and cultural relativism (Healy, 2007: 12).

Preparatory activities included a consciously structured learning environment that considered the location that they would go to whether or not students had travelled abroad before. Learning methods included individual and group settings, taught and self-directed sessions, local placement contexts and internet searches. This demonstrates that the global is not just 'out there' but also 'here', and that local processes facilitate engagement with the global (Dominelli 2000).Preparation regarding the impact of global structural factors on different partner countries was limited. Such issues should be covered to provide comprehensive preparation and avoid misunderstandings that might arise from 'face value' engagement with other national and cultural settings (Razack, 2002: 259-260).

Enabling all students to participate in international exchanges is essential to counteract further privileging of already advantaged young people who can widen their networks through exchanges. Sammon et al. (2003: 162) found that 'typically young students with limited financial and familial responsibilities' applied for international exchanges. Inequalities in access exist within and between countries, and international exchanges can reproduce material inequalities on educational and cultural planes, and entrench material inequalities by enhancing the CVs of students who can afford to participate. Participation in the PPM or IM was limited to university students, a relatively privileged group. However, UK students in the IM reported financial pressures, as indicated below:

> 'three people…dropped out...one had a change of circumstances and...two girls couldn't raise enough money…I really shouldn't have gone [to Sri Lanka] 'cause I…should have worked and made some money…then I wouldn't be struggling now…but that would have made me quite bitter…I'm glad I did go but…I shouldn't have really gone'.

Other students argued that time required for fund-raising to participate, favoured students with parental financial support. Reports of donations from parents' friends suggested that securing funds was more stressful for students with less wealthy parents and limited social networks. Limited funding opportunities for university student exchanges could increase the importance of: encouraging students to pass on learning from international exchanges to their peers more effectively; and obtaining institutional funding to lessen the burden of individual fundraising. The IM illustrates how to spread lessons learnt through an extensive website carrying photographs and 'diary' entries from students, articles in university publications, email updates, presentations, themed dinners, and 'report-backs' at the beginning of lectures.

Students' Engagement with Local Residents

Sending students across national borders to engage with local people in egalitarian relationships requires careful preparation, planning and thought to consider differences in contexts, power relations and resourcing (Razack, 2002: 225). Sewpaul (2003: 327) argues that thoughtfully planned international exchanges can: help students from powerful, economically advanced countries engage critically with such tensions; raise awareness; enhance ability to learn from the wisdom of people in other countries; understand better the complex position of their country of origin within the world; and reflect upon its foreign policy impact on less powerful countries (Rotabi, et al. 2006: 454).

The PPM and IM embodied international social work principles advocated by Sewpaul (2003: 300-302): a shared vision and commitment; equity; transparency; relevance; mutual benefits; and reflective evaluation, practicing with passion, honesty and valuing different contributions (Dominelli, 2003: 238-42). However, tensions and contradictions within such partnerships persist. Emancipatory practices can acknowledge and help individuals address structural inequalities, without absolving students from exploring their power and positioning within these structures or implications for relationships with others. Rotabi et al., (2006: 461-2) suggest that students confronted by extensive poverty in developing countries find these experiences painful and distressing while providing catalysts for professional consciousness-raising. Students in both models felt acutely the contradictions of international inequalities in wealth and power, leaving a powerful impact on their interpersonal relationships with villagers. After a social visit to a young Sri Lankan man's house, a student reflects:

> 'To invite someone into your home like that is a...deeply personal thing, especially if you're insecure like he was because we're all these rich white people and he's just got a very basic house with just a bed and a guitar'.

The perceived 'insecurity' of this Sri Lankan man has extra significance because he willingly invites the student into his home. Another student is reflexive about certain presumptions:

> '…it is also about breaking the boundaries between people and being ordinary rather than not. They were very appreciative because they said all the strangers are drinking bottled water, so are we animals drinking this water?'

Wider global inequalities positioned students as privileged, white and wealthy, leaving an indelible mark on their interactions with local individuals without preventing honest and respectful human relationships from being formed. In some cases students' engagement with such tensions yielded a more reflexive international outlook which contextualised their location within international power relations, usually expressed in comparisons of living standards, and reflections upon privileged, racialised positions.

PPM students had shared reference points in values and practices for engaging with local people through social work training. Yet, Slovenian educators reported occasional problems in how students engaged local people:

> 'The worst experience we had [some students] acted as if they owned the place, much like tourists.…The problem was that they didn't see their position as help but wanted to run things…Placements were…not always chosen on the basis of [local] good practice from which one should learn, but…[about a] local reality about which one should learn. This requires a lot of tact and patience…We were told [these students] were rather pushy, without concern for [local] circumstances…This particular incident emphasised that certain sensitivity is needed….It's not something new, but in a distant country such as Sri Lanka, it becomes very obvious'.

Despite being well-meaning, these students' behaviour had negative consequences for local people and their project. Senior staff in the IM and PPM reflected on these problems and enhanced student preparation to reduce such occurrences. Challenges included negotiating different definitions of social work, the (ir)relevance of European social work practices in Sri Lanka, and conflicts between different Sri Lankan practice models, as a Sri Lankan student participating in the PPM indicated:

> 'The social work approaches in the institute [Sri Lankan placement setting] and the approaches that we practice [in professional social work were] very different....Once… we worked in [a] mental health institution…and [later] the elders' home. The assessing of the needs of the inmates [by institution staff differed from what had been taught]. On the other hand, the approach of the [Slovenian] students in some projects was not appropriate in our social and cultural context. When applying what we learned [from Slovenian students and lecturers]...[we] exercise[d] what we had learn[ed] into a Sri Lankan context'.

Definitional challenges in international student exchanges and international social work are long-standing (Midgley, 2001). Shepherd et al. (2000: 290-91) discuss similar issues in other disciplines, with challenges arising from international differences in literatures, prior study and tuition. Student exchanges involve re-negotiation of disciplinary concepts and practices within contexts of unequal power, and require reflexive and actively anti-oppressive approaches.

Bennett (2003: 142), a Canadian student undertaking a social work exchange in India, discusses growing confidence in intervening sensitively in 'other' national or cultural contexts. Thomas and Meehan (2010: 101) suggest confidence may not produce competence in international environments, but its lack can cause students to avoid such engagements, and if forced into them, may underperform. Students from the IM and PPM found negotiating cross-cultural interactions difficult as this student teaching sports indicates:

> 'In the village we wore clothing down to our knees and t-shirts…but...some of the girls [her peers] wore strap tops and really short shorts and…it annoyed me because it wasn't respecting their culture'.

This student also described Sri Lankan university staff actively encouraging British students to challenge Sri Lankan cultural norms:

> [A]t the university, the Vice-Chancellor said it was fine for us to wear shorts and he wanted us to wear swimming costumes without t-shirts and shorts. He was almost encouraging us to…show…[Sri Lankan] girls that they could…wear that, but I think they were quite shocked at us wearing that. [The] swimming pool was the best facility that they have...The first night we were there, we got a couple of lads involved in a game of…water polo...obviously, there were no girls…but by the end of six weeks, the girls were getting involved as well'.

In both models, students felt responsible for avoiding imposing activities from different cultural contexts in harmful ways and acting positively in interactions with local students. Student exchanges provide opportunities to develop cultural competence through practice and reflection. This is increasingly important as social work students, educators and practitioners struggle with dilemmas presented by social work centred on universal human rights in societies that are culturally diverse and have differing perspectives about the role and status of women and

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children (Healy, 2007: 13-14). 'Ethnic communities' are not homogenous blocs, but contain internal disagreements and struggles over values, and contradictions between stated values and actual experiences among different groups. Despite being undermined by high levels of domestic violence in 'white British' society where two women are killed daily by partners (Kundnani 2007: 138-9), assertions about the superiority of women's rights in 'white British', compared to 'Muslim' cultures exemplify this.

Students' Debriefing and Reflection

Sewpaul (2003) highlights the significance of careful mentoring and debriefing to support exchange students develop a more informed and questioning approach to further international involvement. Some students in our study would have appreciated closer mentoring, although reflective learning occurred, notwithstanding the loose approach to mentoring and absence of systematic debriefing, evidenced below:

> '[When] you are in Slovenia and you heard about Sri Lanka. They described it as a tropical country [highlighting] tourism and [making it sound] exotic. When you came there you have these exotic parts, but…you have people who don't have enough money even to survive…[In future] I would be more open and flexible and I will ask myself questions'.

Others reported moving through the successive stages Sewpaul (2003: 315-18) identifies for American social work students in South Africa. They went from naive intentions to 'really make a difference', following trauma experienced when confronting the scale of problems facing people in an industrialising country to reach more realistic expectations about their contributions. Reflecting on their experiences after returning can significantly re-orient understanding and perceptions, as this student claims:

> 'I've got more of a plan of exactly what I'm going to do…I was a bit naive about my… way of life after Uni. I [thought] 'I want to go into human rights right away and save the world'. Well I wasn't that dramatic….now, I think well I need to take steps to get there to 'save the world', in quotation marks'.

Debriefing and reflecting upon one's experiences are important learning processes. For social work students, developing a reflexive approach to cross-cultural practice has value far beyond the international placement.

Students' reflections exposed difficulties in undertaking assessments of complex local needs. Some felt poorly equipped to assess situations accurately and intervene effectively because they lacked: knowledge of local networks and power relations; proficiency in local languages; and professional training in relevant disciplines. This highlighted the centrality of more than good intentions to make international placements successful, and the significance of anti-oppressive professional social work training. Concerns were most pronounced among students working in Sri Lanka for several summers, as shown below:

> 'I got an all-together different experience [from the first summer], being in the community and actually getting to know people and learning...more of the language and being able to communicate with the people a bit better. Understanding the village politics…a little bit more, even though we were still very much in the dark and I'm sure people took advantage of that. [The first summer] we felt that we'd been able to be very involved in the community...Looking back, the first year... barely scratched the surface'.

This demonstrates the benefits of longer-term engagement for depth in understanding and self-awareness. Longer-term involvements occurred mainly outside the IM's and PPM's formal programmes. Students' on-going international contributions and long-term connections to the country built on affective relationships formed through a process of reflective learning and growing cultural insights. Some students formed emotionally intense relationships with people in the villages where they worked. For social work students, the principal purpose of the placement was professional development, but their experiences went beyond their professional roles, as one student reported:

> '[A student] went to [a country nearby] and then after fourteen days she almost started crying and she said I just went to the airport [to] buy the ticket and went back to Sri Lanka. Now that she's back she says she would go back to Sri Lanka because it's her home now'.

Other students offered similar accounts, reflecting intense emotional bonds formed around experiences that were heightened by unfamiliar environments. Continuing informal links gave

rise to further formal initiatives. After participating in the exchange, one student set up and ran a small NGO together with several other students and local partners. Although not social work students, they became engaged in long-term community development following their initial IM placement. After these experiences, one student changed career direction and trained in medicine to make more skilled contributions. Another made friends with and sponsored a Sri Lankan dance teacher's wages to facilitate employment at the children's home where she had volunteered. This experience led this student to enrol on a professional social work programme. A group of social work students supported local students working with a homeless community after their placements ended. This shows continued formal and informal relationships and interactions following voluntary placements abroad.

Discussion: Long-term impact on students

Students reflected upon the IM and PPM in terms of their longer-term international engagements and positioning in the world, including their impact on social and community work practice. Their examples covered international employment, confidence to engage in international settings, cross-cultural understanding, and reflections on 'race' and ethnicity including their own.

A prominent outcome of both models was increased openness to international employment among European and Sri Lankan students. Healey (2008) observes, international transferability in graduates' skills as a growing mainstream strand of recent educational policy and practice on internationalisation, although some institutions and networks had prioritised this for decades. Haigh (2002: 51) suggests that a major challenge facing universities is how 'to equip all students, especially our local students, the 'stay-at-homes', to compete in an increasingly international world of work' that they will encounter whether working at home or abroad. This holds for social work education, with a lack of awareness among many students and practitioners about professional developments in other countries (Midgley, 2001: 23-4). The IM and PPM addressed this problem by influencing students' future choices for employment, heightening awareness of international opportunities, and increasing motivation and confidence to pursue these, especially in teaching, social work, medicine, international development, the military, and diplomatic service.

Sri Lankan students likewise reported that overseas students and staff had helped develop their confidence and potential for future employment internationally. One, interested in sports, commented:

> 'I had a hope of combining sports and fashion together and [develop an] innovation… called 'sport fashion'. The experience we had with [overseas students] taught me [about] the new world trend and [I] will be able to approach my goal more easily. Actually, their visit showed me a new path and I could [be] expose[d] to [ideas and practices from other parts of] the world as…never before.'

'Exposure' to previously unfamiliar experiences and knowledge was a recurring theme in students' accounts , opening up mutuality, awareness of other possibilities, methods and places for doing things and increased confidence in realising their ambitions. This represents important contributions to students' self-awareness and understanding of international contexts within particular disciplines; and provided a flexible 'international outlook' involving an interrogation of motivations, confidence, skills, and knowledge that could reconfigure international engagements, and promote life-long transferability between roles and careers. A Sri Lankan university staff member suggested that:

> '[When] we teach social work we try to...establish [these] kind[s] of attitudes in [students]. When they [Sri Lankan students] visited Slovenia….that was their first visit out of [Sri Lanka]. I know some of them [are] still going on [with international engagement]. I know one girl who...really got into the area of social work and now she has applied…as a volunteer somewhere in Kenya. I asked her, 'Can you manage it?', and she said 'Yes, I think I can sleep on the floor, I can do anything'.

The IM and PPM included cross-cultural learning, with awareness of cultural differences an explicit objective and outcome for home and overseas students. A Sri Lankan university student who travelled to Slovenia stated:

> 'I was able to work with different communities, different cultures. The chance to go abroad itself was a new experience and a learning opportunity'.

For some students, humanitarian initiatives developed reflexive learning about themselves because encounters with difference prompted new reflections. One student said:

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> '[We] were in the villagers' houses, we wore their [clothes, ate] their food…I found that amazing...any of the issues [that] arise they'd all know each other and they feel comfortable talking, helping each other out, I think that's quite important…in the communities [if] they have financial issues they all group and help each other...you learn an awful lot about the culture and I think it really makes you re-evaluate your own culture and your own experiences'.

This pervasive cultural 'involvement', including residence, dress and food, provides a route to learning about other dimensions of culture including practices of mutual support, that produce new reflections on practices in their 'own' culture. Drawing upon practices from other cultural and national contexts provides valuable insights for social work students to formulate new approaches to problems they encounter in practice. Rotabi et al., (2006: 462-3) suggest the development of intercultural awareness through international exchanges is of increasing relevance when students return 'home', given the increasingly multicultural character of many countries. However, Spivak (2012: 141-142) warns of danger in ascribing benefits resulting from liberal multicultural education because white students:

> 'can have our otherness made palpable and comprehensive, without reducing it into an inferior version of the same, through the choice of studying literature, history, and anthropology 'at their best' [enabling]…Anglo[s] to relate benevolently to everything, 'knowing about other cultures' in a relativist glow'.

Students talked about becoming aware of previously held false assumptions and lack of knowledge about Sri Lanka. One stated:

> '[When] I first arrived...my only idea was…basically they [are] different from us...then…I thought, no, they're exactly the same as us, it's just that they speak a different language so we don't understand each other...I've discovered in what ways people are different and [in] what ways are similar to us...and how...they view the world differently...people [are] starting [to make more] sense to me...and at the same time less sense...as I found out [new] things I couldn't comprehend, I also began to comprehend things that before have been mysterious to me'.

Another student claimed:

> 'I think that the most important thing for me was to know that things are not so
> different. I expected really poor people or kids. They were like us'.

This depicts an iterative process of thinking that one understands, then grasping its inadequacy, subsequently replacing it with new, more nuanced insights. These experiences highlight the potential of international humanitarian exchanges to encourage intense reflexive encounters within cultural differences that produce new reflections and a rethinking of the normativity of earlier assumptions as indicated by Sewpaul (2003). Becoming aware of the limits to one's understanding is vital to reflexive social work practice, and a valuable benefit of international placements.

International exchanges caused students to re-evaluate fundamental aspects of their lives. Identity issues surface throughout international exchanges and need careful consideration before, during and after exchanges. White students' own ethnicities, normally invisible as the unspoken dominant norm in their societies were interrogated (Dominelli 1988). These exchanges provided sites for enlightenment, motivating some students to develop their theoretical understanding of 'race' and ethnicity because physical movement between countries problematised their social and economic position in the world. Other students described feeling the visibility of their 'whiteness' in Sri Lanka as deeply unsettling, echoing the isolation Bennett (2003: 140) describes as a white Canadian in India. One student interviewee articulated this as:

> '…in Sri Lanka you did feel that you were white. People felt you'd just put your hand
> in your pocket and just give them money and the expectation is that that's what white
> people do because that's what white people do. I didn't like that. I didn't like how
> people viewed me'.

Women students spoke about gendered experience of whiteness. Coupled with expectations of sexual availability, they viewed racialization as underpinning their sexual harassment (Dominelli, 2012). Some students, troubled by their own racialization, instanced international inequalities of power and wealth highlighted while participating in humanitarian initiatives. Others thought international exchanges produced processes of reflexive learning about the world and their places within it, which they considered positive overall.

Conclusion

Both the IM and PPM models shifted focus from immediate relief responses following feedback from partners and local people, to reflect changing local priorities, needs, opportunities, and funding, towards longer-term development and capacity building. This occurred because the two models had a value base that recognised local voices and empowerment of local people in securing the potential benefits of culturally-relevant, locality-specific interventions including social work, whereby overseas partners make valuable contributions to realising the priorities of local partners. They indicated that international exchanges lacking careful thought and preparation about who benefits and how - students, their institutions and/or people in the locality where they intend to work, can perpetuate exploitative relationships.

By focusing on students' experiences and changes in understanding their positioning in the world, this study revealed that organisations engaged in sustained international exchanges that work effectively with local partners can significantly deepen student experiences and understandings in both receiving and sending institutions. IM and PPM partnerships enabled students to reflect upon their cultural and material status in the world and prepare for more equitable international engagement. This is not an inevitable outcome of such engagements, but represents benefits worth striving for. This is a valuable insight for universities wishing to internationalise and social work educators and students contemplating international placements to consider.

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