Social Work Students’ Field Work Experience in Bhutan: A Qualitative Study

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RAJENDRA BAIKADY, SHENGLI CHENG, AND R. M. CHANNAVEER

Abstract

The aim of the study is to understand the field work experience of Master of Social Work students in the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan. The study explores students’ (i) perceptions of international placement and international social work practice (ii) challenges faced in their fieldwork (iii) lessons learnt and (iv) students’ interest to take up international social work practice. The current exploratory study was conducted with students who were placed in different organizations in Bhutan for their internship during summer. The responses were collected through in-depth interviews.

Keywords: international social work placement, Social work education, and Internship.

Introduction

Internationalization of social work curriculum throughout the world began prior to 1996, with social work programs across the world beginning to internationalize their curricula and learning environments (Johnson 1996). Schools of Social Work and Social Work Departments at Universities followed the method of outreach to other countries through exchanging students, practitioners and faculty; offering special courses on international social work or integrating these topics into course content; placing students in international field practice; pursuing international research; and volunteering amongst international communities. These internationalizing efforts reflected

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the growing awareness that ‘many of our social problems are rooted in international dynamics which transcend state and cultural boundaries’ (Razack, 2002: insert page no.). During the globalization era, the introduction of an open market economy opened doors to many socio-economic as well as political problems along with boundary issues. Despite globalization, the challenges of practicing social work have been restricted to the nations and states in a very narrow sense. Still, many social work educators continue to find that the social work curriculum for the most part remains too narrowly focused on a domestic perspective (Cornelius and Greif, 2005; Healy, 2008; Johnson, 2004).

The present day socio-economic, political and cultural conditions demand that social work practice and education be internationalized. Through international field practicum exchanges social work students can be taught effectively about multiculturalism. International practice is a key way to foster cultural competency and acquaint students with the ways in which globalization affects social welfare (Engstrom and Jones, 2007; Johnson, 2004; Mathiesen and Lager, 2007). International field practicum exchanges enhance experiential learning by exposing students to different cultures (Engstrom and Jones, 2007). They also hone their professional acumen by exposure to different social work practices, social welfare policies, and institutions (Engstrom and Jones, 2007; Mathiesen and Lager, 2007).

**Review of literature**

Universities in the United States follow study abroad and exchange programs as integral parts of higher education (Elson-Green, 2002). While the general objectives of the study abroad programs of the US universities are to improve the multicultural and global competence of the students, in actuality, these US universities use the study abroad programs to meet the challenges of preparing social work students to work with domestic, immigrant and international clients (Lemieux, 2003).

Gibbs and Grambrill (1999) (as cited in Saito and Johns, 2009) supported these views and argued that the study abroad programs not only help the students to develop and enhance self-awareness (especially with respect to recognizing and facing their own values, basic beliefs and their ways of thinking about the country) but also
expose them to different cultures. Having gained international exposure, the students develop more sensitivity to, and learn to appreciate, diversity, which they could then directly relate to social work practice. The experience also helps them to identify social work more strongly as part of a profession that has the capacity to effect transformation across the globe.

In 2009, Saito and Johns conducted a study using a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore and retrieve a comprehensive overview of Japanese social work students’ opinions and attitudes towards international social work. Majority of the respondents felt that an increased understanding of the process and political issues, at both national and international levels, would help them to be more effective in their efforts to bring about change. One participant commented:

The increased understanding and sense of what is happening in the world in terms of social work would enable me to look at inequality and hidden discrimination. It also might lead students to taking more initiative both in professional development and in their direct practice (Saito and Johns, 2009 p 68)

Further, two of the participants in the said study stated that learning about international perspectives would contribute to national development but also mentioned the lack of motivation to study international social work: the other one said:

I don’t think the programmes really prepare students to be able to work internationally. It is more like we are stuck in our own development. We learned about other countries’ social work systems and history but I don’t know how they would be useful in a practical way (Saito and Johns, 2009 p 68).

In the same study, Saito and Johns (2009), while assessing the potential value of international perspectives, stated that some interviewees suggested that international social work training approaches would be useful when in a situation of working through conflicting agendas. Supporting this, one of the interviewees, who was firmly committed to international social work, stated:
Social work training that includes cultural issues should be more recognized as a way to reduce the prevalence of unintentional discrimination against ethnic minorities in the social welfare area. The concept of cultural issues could be helpful for professionals to identify, organize, interpret and integrate cultural data into their practice (Saito and Johns, 2009 p 68).

From the above narratives, the key issue that emerged was the belief that studying international social work offers potential solutions or alternative approaches from other countries; therefore, these experiences outweigh the benefit of studying social work in developing countries (Saito and Johns, 2009). However, it is to be noted that international social work is not only about exchanging ideas between developed countries; it is about promoting an understanding of the social, political, economic and ecological problems confronting humanity and fundamental inequalities that exist in the present world and about the system of international institutional arrangements that govern relationships between nations and, within nations, between groups of people.

Ahmadi (2003) seemingly argues that international social work should promote a deeper understanding of human problems in a wide variety of contexts. Comparing other countries’ experiences of social work practices and their ways of defining problems and finding solutions for them might offer greater insight into one’s own country’s problems, as well as inspire and enrich national and local social work practices. Hence, the Schools of Social Work should think about incorporating an international field practicum into their Bachelor of Social Work (Hon) (or equivalent degree course) curriculum. The experience of engaging in international social work might contribute to enhancing the profession’s scholastic knowledge as well as its practice. Earlier, in 1998, Dervisbegovic & Hessle stated that:

Experiences from recent years’ international social work activities indicate that participating in and studying the practices of social work in other countries has led to refining the practice of social work in the countries concerned (Dervisbegovic & Hessle, 1998).
Another major research, undertaken by Skolnik (1999), in 67 different countries, examined field education in 163 schools. It found that, while 95 percent of undergraduate programs reported practicum requirements, but only 39 percent at master’s level and 3 percent of doctoral programs reported having required fieldwork. The study also reported that the number of hours required in the field ranged from 200 to 1000 hours but that, during the field visits, students often rotated through an array of agencies to retrieve broad experience (Skolnik, 1999). In addition, the research concluded that the most commonly used settings, which is, over 90% of international field practicums, were conducted in medical hospitals, family service agencies and psychiatric hospitals (Skolnik, 1999). However, the common concerns and issues in international field instruction include: shortage of qualified field supervisors; shortage of appropriate field placements; questions about the role of the field liaison; and how to help students integrate theory and practice (Skolnik, 1999).

Several scholars have however investigated types of international social work exchanges and how they were implemented among countries (Cornelius and Greif, 2005; Pettys et al., 2005). For instance: Cornelius and Greif (2005) examined international collaborations in 85 US social work programs and found that 23 percent of the schools had at least one form of collaboration. The most common form of collaboration was the visit to other Social Work Schools by faculty and students. Similarly, Pettys et al. (2005) surveyed 53 Social Work Schools in the US, which offered international field instruction and found that 21 out of 53 placed their students for field work internationally. The study also found that the number of students placed for international field placement by any one School in any one year was very small and varied from year to year. The 21 universities reported a total of 123 students were placed from 1978 to 1999 (Pettys et al., 2005). This shows that the internationalization of social work field placement in particular and social work academia and practice in general is yet to develop in many Schools of Social Work across the world.

Pettys et al. (2005) classified four models of international field placement as: (i) an independent/one-time placement model, in which a student was placed only once, based on student interest and experience in a specific geographic region; (ii) a neighbouring-country
model, with universities in Mexico and Canada, where they placed students with citizens or residents; (iii) an on-site model, in which an adjunct faculty member in the host country could stay on-site as a field supervisor; (iv) and an exchange/reciprocal model, in which the home university sent faculty to the placement site at its own expense. As the world gets more inter-connected, social workers are increasingly bringing their unique skills, flexible approaches to problem solving, and values of social justice and empowerment to international settings. The social work perspective, moreover, provides unique strengths to discussions and actions around global challenges such as poverty, human trafficking, and children deprived of parental care, and HIV/AIDS.

Looking at the need for international placement for the social work profession, studying social work internationally through placements abroad may help the students to deepen their knowledge. This point was supported by the findings of a qualitative research conducted by Lindsey (2005). The students were exposed to different cultural norms and given them the experience of being an outsider: in this position they were compelled to re-evaluate their own and the host country’s values and norms. More generally, it enhanced students’ professional development by helping them see the importance of reflecting on their own practice and being open to the idea of applying some of the best of what the other system has to offer. Those the international placements made it clearer to the trainees.

According to Rai (2004), there are two main types of international placements (i) those who are foreign students, who arrange to do their internships in their home countries and (ii) students who go to a foreign country other than their own for an internship. Most of the literature addresses the second type of placement (Engstrom and Jones, 2007; Healy, 2004; Mathiesen and Lager, 2007; Pawar et al., 2004; Razack, 2002). The present study also falls under the second type where the students who are born and brought up in India were sent to Bhutan and Bangladesh for their International internship placement. This study is important as it explores the experiences of the students in their international placement and the challenges faced by them during their stay in Bhutan and the lessons learnt in the field.
practicum. These types of placements are certainly valuable and greatly enhance the social work profession.

Objectives of the study
To understand students’ perceptions about international placement and international social work practice.

1. To understand the challenges faced by the students in international field work placement.
2. To understand the lessons learnt by the students.
3. To understand students’ interest to take up international social work practice.

Methodology
As stated in the objectives, the central aim of the study was to understand the Master of Social Work students’ perceptions of international social work placement and challenges which they faced during their internship abroad programme. In the view of limited knowledge available on this topic and its exploratory nature, the qualitative research method was chosen because it enables researcher to understand the perception of student social workers along with the challenges faced (Creswell 2009). A grounded theory approach was used to enable researcher to generate concepts to understand the perception and challenges of social work students (Charmaz 2006).

Participants
The Department of Social Work, Central University of Karnataka placed eight Master of Social Work students, studying in their 2nd Semester at the Civil Society Organizations working for social welfare in the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan. Upon completion of the one-month internship placement at different organizations, the students were interviewed to explore the learning experiences they had gained in the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan. The interviews were conducted at the participants’ home university in India.

Data collection
In August 2015, the data were collected through personal interviews conducted with the student social workers by the first author. The research did not go through ethical review. Nonetheless, the oral consent of the Head of the Department was obtained to conduct research and participants were informed about the purpose of the study before the data collection. The responses were recorded after obtaining oral consent of the respondents.

A semi structured interview guide was developed (Table no. 0.01) around the themes (i) students’ perception on international social work placement and practice (ii) challenges faced by the students in their field placement (iii) the lessons learned by the students’ (iv) students’ interests in taking up international social work placements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table No: 0.01</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview Guide</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Discussion of international summer placement experience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Students’ perception on international social work practice</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Discussions of challenges faced during placement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Discussions on lessons learnt during the summer placement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Discussion on students’ interest to take up international social work practice</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

The transcripts of the interviews were read and analyzed first, then line-by-line review of the transcript was conducted and was coded by highlighting the key words. The themes were determined based on the highlighted key words and were established through phrases, sentences and segments of text. Based on the principles of saturation (Corbin & Strauss 2008), data were analyzed for each respondent until no new theme emerged. Quotes representing the themes were selected from the transcripts.

**Results**

The themes identified in the transcripts of the interviews are presented in the following four emerging themes: (1) a life-changing
experience; (2) an understanding of social problems; (3) exploring social work; (4) lessons learnt and challenges faced. The response of each student is presented under separate themes, because such a presentation provides a clear picture of the perception of the students towards the concept of international social work placement and challenges faced by them in field placement.

**A life changing experience**

All the participants in the study are from rural backgrounds and the international placement was an unexpected opportunity for all of them. These students are from low-middle-class families and are first generation learners in their respective families. For all the eight students, this was their first international long-distance travel experience or even crossing international borders. Adjusting to a new culture, food habits and tradition was the first challenge that all the eight students reported during their placement. As the students explain:

While starting the journey I did not have the confidence that I would complete my internship for 30 days successfully. This was my first international travel and I am the first person in our family to travel abroad. No one in my family knows where the country, which I am traveling to, is geographically located and my parents do not even know that I am going to a different country. I am the first generation learner in my family. Hence, in the beginning it was little difficult for me to self-motivate and plan my journey. I faced many difficulties during these 30 days but I completed the internship successfully (student-A).

Before starting my internship abroad, I was really worried about the language and the communication difficulties I would be facing during my internship. I was greatly worried about the possible mistakes that I could commit and I did not have any prior idea about living in a country abroad. My friends told me that if I commit some mistakes during my internship then that may be informed to my country and it may lead to some problems. I was afraid of my acts in a foreign country and its effect on the agency where I was placed. But at the end of my 30 days internship, I had learnt many new things and I am happy that I did not face any such problems (student-E).
The students were placed in different civil society organizations working on different issues. They were responsible to report to their agency supervisor as well as faculty supervisor at home university. Both the agency supervisor and faculty supervisor planned the activities during their placements prior to students’ departure and a great amount of modifications was made in the later part during the placement according to the need of the trainees and the agencies.

I was placed in an organization working in the field of children with disabilities. My supervisor was a Postgraduate in Social Work from a reputed institution in India. As a trainee under her, I have learnt many lessons in social work intervention for children with disability. Studying and understanding the social work intervention in a different culture altogether was a wonderful experience and I always believed this is a life changing experience for me. After my 30 days internship at this organization, my perception towards disability and children with disability completely changed. This particular internship learning helped me to bring positive changes within me (Student -D).

In the agency where I was placed for my internship, nobody had had experience in social work, as Bhutan does not have social work education in any of its educational institutions. That is why; there were no social work professionals. The social workers in my agency were interested to know about social work in India and they asked us to give a presentation on social work in India. The particular presentation helped me to recall all the learning I had obtained during my undergraduate years and on the Masters of Social Work and the concurrent field work experience (student- A)

During the 30 days, the agencies offered different experiences to the students. Students were facilitated to visit different organizations working in different sectors in Bhutan. The government office, hospital, mental health and alcohol service settings were some examples. Other than these places, the historical and the heritage sites that the students visited during their visit to the Kingdom too helped them to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and the background of the Kingdom.

The visit to the addiction center helped me to understand different rehabilitation methods used in Bhutan from those
used in India. Prior to this, I did not have a very clear knowledge about the rehabilitation services that are provided to the alcohol and drug addicted individuals. This visit also helped me to understand and compare the rehabilitation process in India and Bhutan (student-C)

An understanding of social problems

Students were asked to give an account of social problems that they observed during their placement period and what were their reflections on these problems.

As per my understanding, the divorce rate is very high in Bhutan. The women with whom I interacted explained that the boys cheat often. When proposing marriage, they usually lie by pretending that they have business in India and earn good money. Believing this, the girls get married but later on, when the truth comes to surface, the girls apply for divorce and are separated. (Student B).

I have seen many youths get addicted to alcohol and drugs at a very young age. Consuming alcohol is in the culture of Bhutan but youngsters are more addicted to both alcohol and drugs. I was shocked when I was told that they give alcohol to the children when they are very young. This was a cultural shock for me as in India, although youths get addicted to alcohol and different kind of drugs, compared to Bhutan it is not very high (Student C)

The people, especially the Bhutanese youths, imitate the west. Because of this, they have become more addicted to alcohol and drugs. The education system is very poor and people are really not interested in education. We observed a very high level of reluctance for education as everyone discontinues his or her schooling after pre-university education. Only a handful of students continue their education till graduation (Student A).

The exposure to the social issues in Bhutanese society helped the students to get a clearer understanding of the Indian situation. As reported by majority of the participants, whenever they observe some social problems, they used to compare and discuss among themselves in the group. This helped them to understand their country more clearly.
We never felt that we are in the neighboring country and even though Bhutan was formerly part of India, we did not feel we like we were in our homeland. It was an entirely new experience and we truly experienced the feeling of being on an internship abroad (student C).

Exploring international social work

Bhutan has no social work programmes to date offered in any institution at any level. The Royal University of Bhutan offers some courses related to management and education. This is the only university in the entire country, which has some affiliated colleges. Social work is an entirely unexplored area in Bhutan. The workers in the agencies and the civil societies call themselves as social workers but they are not trained in social work. To undertake social work education one has to travel to either to the West or India.

The students social workers were asked to explain about the possible areas of social work intervention in Bhutanese society. In a general, students had the opinion that social work is a much needed profession in Bhutan.

Social workers in the agency where I was placed provide very good rehabilitative services. They were experts in the rehabilitation of the disabled and especially of the physically-challenged children. But I felt that social work with a Human Rights focus is very much required in Bhutanese society (Student A).

The professional social workers in any society work within the boundaries of professional ethics and values. Hence, the absence of professional social work training in Bhutan is one of the impeding factors in the rehabilitative and social service care in the country.

In Bhutan, there are no psychiatric hospitals. To get psychiatric services, one has to travel to India or other countries. There are also no counselling services available for the youths. As per my observation, the addiction rate is very high among the youths as well as the adults. Counselling and guidance services are necessary fields that are required to be launched as soon as possible (student C)

The Global Peace Index 2015 places Bhutan in the 13th position among the most peaceful countries in the world. The Global Peace
Social Work Students’ Field Work Experience in Bhutan

index ranks 162 countries covering 99.6% of the world’s population. The index interprets the level of peace using three themes (1) the level of safety and security in the society (2) the extent of domestic or international conflicts (3) the degree of militarization.

I was told that Bhutan is one of the most peaceful countries of the world, where one can find people very happy and satisfied. But when I was exposed to the societal aspects of the country, I realized that it is as peaceful as it stands. The women, with whom I interacted, shared that there is a very high level of domestic violence prevalent in the Bhutanese society. Wife beating is very common. (Student E).

It is an irony to note that the Kingdom of Bhutan continues to suffer from very high levels of disability amongst the children. A report produced by the World Health Organization, entitled Disability in South East Asia Region 2013 informs that the disability rate in Bhutan is 3.4% during 2001-2010, indicating that the country occupies the second rank after Bangladesh among the South East Asian countries.

As per my experience, the disability rate is very high and Bhutan lacks a disability rehabilitation strategy. There is a need for social work professionals in the field of disability and rehabilitation. Social work with disability action and intervention may support the country’s effort to reduce the high incidence of disability and this may also contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal that aims at achieving good health and wellbeing for all (Student H).

The social work trainees felt that the social work practices by the untrained social work professionals in civil society organizations in Bhutan are contributing much to the development of the society. If they receive the proper training in ethics, principles, professional values, skills and the techniques required for the social workers, as prescribed by the global definition of social work and global standards for social work education and training for social workers, they could make good progress. The social work trainees note that there is a need for the formalisation of social work education in line with the relevant community factors.
Lessons learnt and skills gained

All the eight students are from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Traveling to a different country was the first challenge they faced and adjusting to the cultural, food and the language diversity was bit challenging for initial days.

In the organization where I was placed, the social workers used to discuss everything among themselves in their own Bhutanese language and I could not understand anything. During the case presentation seminars also, they were discussing a particular case in Bhutanese. After some days, I started questioning them about the doubts I had, when they realized the language barriers: and then after they started explaining the case seminar summaries in English (Student H).

As India-Bhutan relations are very close and there is Indian influence in many areas like business and education, the majority of the people in Bhutan are able to use both English and Hindi in their daily lives. Hence, the students reported that the language difference did not really hinder their learning.

The internship abroad experience was a unique learning one for these eight students as they were traveling to a long distance for the first time without their family members.

Before crossing the border, I was quite afraid. I was worried that they might deport me back to India without giving me permission to enter the country. If the other seven were to receive permission, without me, then, I would have to travel back all alone. However, after completing my 30 days of internship placement in Bhutan, I gained a lot of self-confidence. Now I am confident that I can travel to any part of the world for study or employment. This internship abroad helped me to find the confidence within me! (Student F).

The students reported that they had learned time management skills during their internship. The time management of the Bhutanese impressed them. In the initial days, going to their organization on time was a tough task for them. Gradually, they adjusted to the work
Social Work Students’ Field Work Experience in Bhutan

environment and at the end of 30 days; they were able to succeed in the time management.

I got two role models in my life because of this internship. They taught me the importance of time management and task completion on time. I also learned the importance of knowledge and the attitude, which compliments the knowledge. The experience of training under these two role models shaped me as a different human service professional. I will remember their contribution for my whole professional life (Student G).

In a way, the students gained both professional and personal skills during their internship placements. They were asked to give presentations about their social work learning, which provided them a chance to recall and recollect the social work learning, starting from their first degree course. The students were allowed to attend the case management meeting in one organization, which helped the students to understand case management in the disability sector.

Discussion

The growing number of cross-cultural social work exchanges raises concerns about how to address the multiple stakeholders involved in the process equally and effectively (Mathiesen and Lager, 2007). Also, internationalization of social work has gone hand-in-hand with an increasing Americanization or westernization of social work practices, to the extent that western paradigms are now dominant worldwide (Razack, 2002). This tends to reduce the scope for gaining cultural competency through international exchanges. In this context, student exchanges might even promote the hegemonic dominance of western practices (Razack, 2002).

Earlier in 1999, Rambally emphasized that field education in Barbados has spurred beneficial institutional change through the development of agencies for the practicum. Previously these agencies had little understanding of the scope and role of social work. She stated that ‘field education can become more than a medium for the integration of knowledge’ (Rambally, 1999:494).

Pawar et al. (2004), in a study, discussed the learning opportunities, as well as the challenges and strategies, experienced by both hosts and students in one practicum exchange between India and Australia. The
Asian Journal of Development and Governance (AJDG)

specific challenges were (i) using public transportation; (ii) dealing with poverty on a regular basis and on a physically close level; (iii) different communication skills, (iv) mannerisms and utilization of time; (v) communicating in English with a foreign accent; (vi) getting familiar with the infrastructure; and (viii) different social work practice, definitions and teaching (Pawar et al., 2004).

Engstrom and Jones (2007) conducted an analysis of international social work students’ internship sponsored jointly by two universities located in the USA and Thailand. The analysis found that the international internship expanded students’ knowledge base by exposing them to different social work practices and social welfare policies and institutions; deepened cultural learning and the development of ethno-relativism; and developed students’ skills and competency in dealing with diverse populations in an increasingly connected world (Engstrom and Jones, 2007). Based on the analysis and the findings, Engstrom and Jones (2007) stated that international internship helps the students to gain in the following five areas: (i) culture and behavior; (ii) experience of being different; (iii) comparative views of social welfare; (iv) global and local responses; and (v) different contexts and social work practice.

Berg-Weger et al. (2007) suggested that the following aspects are important for international field education:

(1) similarities of field education;
(2) a competitive process for students and agency supervisors;
(3) awareness of potential barriers to collaboration;
(4) geographic proximity to the placements; and
(5) ensuring collaboration between partners.

Mathiesen and Lager (2007) similarly suggested the following ways to improve international student exchanges or internships: establishing a communication feedback loop with potential participants; studying an overview of the other country; providing an orientation of practice at micro, mezzo and macro levels; identifying gains and costs; and clarifying expectations and roles for the students, field liaison and field supervisor in both host and guest countries.

Conclusion
Social Work Students’ Field Work Experience in Bhutan

There has been very little research about international field practice for Bachelor of Social Work students based on a South-South perspective. A majority of published research has focused on how North (or Western) ideas are imported into or incorporated by the Global South.

The authors of the paper presented a new perspective from the students from the Global South, representing a poorer segment of the society, from the rural areas (villages) of India, obtaining ideas from another poor country in the Global South, Bhutan. The participants developed personally and professionally in the light of their experience.

References


