Critical Social Work

School of Social Work
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ont.
Canada N9B 3P4
Email: cswedit@uwindsor.ca

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at <http://uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork>

Link to article:

http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/broadening_environment_SW

Critical Social Work, 2014 Vol. 15, No. 1

Broadening the 'Environment' in Social Work: Impacts of a Study Abroad Program

Critical Social Work 15(1)

Heather Boetto, Bernie Moorhead, and Karen Bell ¹

¹ Charles Sturt University

Author Note

The authors would like to acknowledge the funding received from the Faculty of Arts at Charles Sturt University that aided us in completing the research study. We would also like to acknowledge the India Study Abroad Centre (ISAC) for their support with the program, and the contribution made by the centre to develop a rich learning experience.

Abstract

Adopting a critical social work frame of reference, this paper explores the impacts and challenges of a two-week study abroad program to India on Australian social work students' understanding of the environment in practice. Using a mixed methods approach, a small study was undertaken in 2011 involving pre and post-program surveys, as well as a facilitated reflective workshop to explore environmental social work. Results are discussed and indicate the program had a positive impact on expanding students' conventional socio-cultural understanding of the environment and global dimensions of environmental degradation. Whilst this is positive and suggests some justification for the international study abroad program, other questions and challenges are raised relating to complex cultural issues and neo-colonial aspects of study abroad programs.

Keywords: Environment, study abroad program, social work education, international social work

Many social workers are now discussing the implicit role of social work in dealing with the social impacts of global warming (Alston & Besthorn, 2012; Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Lysack, 2012; Peeters, 2012). Global warming refers to an average increase in the earth's temperature, which can contribute to changes in global climatic conditions. Global warming can occur from both natural and human induced causes, with the latter being attributed to a dramatic increase in greenhouse gas emissions concurrent with the industrial revolution (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007, 2013). There is mounting evidence to suggest that the acceleration of both incremental and sudden climatic events, including drought, bushfires, heat waves, floods and storms are at least partly caused by global warming (Australian Farm Institute, 2007; Climate Commission, 2013; Garnaut, 2008; IPCC, 2007, 2013).

Whilst climatic events have large-scale economic costs for families and communities, the social impacts can be devastating. Climatic events have produced widespread shortages of food and water (Alston & Kent, 2004), displacement and homelessness (Besthorn & Myer, 2010), and increases in death rates of vulnerable groups, such as those suffering from health conditions (Lam, 2007; McMichael, Woodruff, & Hales, 2006). Trauma caused by the experience of climatic events can also trigger significant emotional health issues, such as emotional distress and loss and grief (Dean & Stain, 2010; Morrissey & Reser, 2007), as well as behavioural issues associated with domestic violence and substance abuse (Anderson, 2001; Anderson, Anderson, Dore, DeNeve, & Flanagan, 2000). These social impacts have significant implications for social work practice and provide an impetus for the profession to work in an environmentally conscious way.

In efforts to incorporate environmental perspectives into social work, some national codes of ethics and guidelines in Western countries, such as Australia (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010) and the United Kingdom (British Association of Social Work [BASW], 2012) have included to varying degrees recognition of the natural environment in revised versions. For example, the terms 'physical', 'natural', and 'sustainable' appear in the latest Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics a total of five times and specifically relate to protection of the natural environment as inherent to social well-being (AASW, 2010, Sections 1.3, 3.1, 3.2, & 5.1.3). A further four references to the environment could be read to include, at least in part, considerations of the natural environment (Sections 1.1, 1.2, & 5.1.3). Similarly, the latest BASW Code of Ethics introduced the term 'natural' environment in relation to consideration of the whole person, including the context of the natural environment (BASW, 2012, Section 2.1). This further provides a professionally sanctioned responsibility for social workers to practice in an environmentally conscious way.

As a result, social work educators are grappling with ways and means of introducing environmental content into the curriculum. Whilst social work education has traditionally adopted a person-in-environment perspective, this has almost exclusively emphasised a socio-cultural focus (McKinnon, 2008). Jones (2013, pp. 217-220) refers to three distinct methods for introducing the natural environment into the social work curriculum, including the 'bolt-on' approach, the 'embedded' approach, and the 'transformative' approach to education. Other authors have explored ideas, such as the provision of an expanded view of systems and ecological theories (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Coates, 2005; Jones, 2010; McKinnon, 2008); integration of principles of 'deep' ecology into curriculum content (Besthorn & Canda, 2002);

applying principles of biophilia (Lysack, 2010); the addition of subject electives that focus specifically on sustainability and the environment (Jones, 2013; as well as the need for social workers to reconnect with nature at a personal and emotional level to foster commitment (Lysack, 2010).

Of critical importance to understanding the environment as the context for social work practice is an understanding of the global dimension of social work and recognition of the interconnectedness of environmental degradation between different countries. Dominelli (2010) refers to the 'internationalisation of social problems', and calls for a broadening of practice and understanding that local social work practice has international dimensions. This means that social work interventions in one country extend beyond its national borders and are likely to impact the well-being of communities in other countries (Dominelli, 2010). Global problems, such as environmental degradation, poverty, financial insecurity, and gender inequality are typical examples of international issues, which to a large degree are the consequence of Euro-Western industrialist and capitalist endeavours for economic growth (Dominelli, 2010, 2012).

Within the context of expanding international and environmental practice in social work, this paper discusses educational outcomes for some Australian social work students who participated in a short-term Study Abroad Program to India in 2011. Using a critical social work frame of reference, this paper explores the impacts of the Study Abroad Program on Australian social work students' understanding of the environment in practice. Critical theory is used to question the benefits of the program, cultural inequities, and the domination of powerful groups in the development and outcomes of study abroad programs (Fook, 2012; Mendes, 2009).

Social Work Study Abroad Program

The Social Work Study Abroad Program was first implemented in 2010 as a partnership between the India Study Abroad Centre (ISAC) based in Mumbai, Charles Sturt University (CSU) social work academics, and CSU Global, a division of the university committed to international exchange. The aims of the program were to enable students to engage in mutual learning opportunities that challenge self-awareness and to develop cross-cultural knowledge. More broadly, the program aimed to provide students with an international experience to strengthen awareness of the global dimensions of social work practice. The inaugural program in 2010 reported several positive impacts on student learning, including an appreciation of international social work, enhanced professional commitment and motivation, increased knowledge about community development, and the development of ongoing relationships with social justice projects (Bell & Anscombe, 2012). For example, one outcome of the 2010 program was that a student sub-group was successful in securing a small grant of \$1500 (AUD) from the CSU Social Justice Fund, for their fieldwork agency (an orphanage) to assist in the completion of ongoing upgrades to the orphanage facilities. Participants in the 2011 program were able to present the grant to the orphanage. Since the 2011 program, further initiatives have been undertaken by CSU academics and students, including securing a university grant to develop a carbon neutral study abroad program and to provide an online learning tool to develop students understanding of environmental perspectives in social work.

Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell

In 2011, the second Study Abroad Program was undertaken with similar aims, including the continued development of an ongoing relationship between CSU academics and welfare services in the community first visited in 2010. The 2011 program ran for two weeks in mid-November in the same rural village of Malavli, located in the state of Maharashtra, in the Pune district. Malavli is approximately 100 kilometres from Mumbai, the state's capital, and 60 kilometres from the nearest urban centre of Pune.

Preparation Phase

As part of the preparatory phase of the program, an online site was established within the university's online learning environment. This site was also utilised for academics to maintain communication with students, for students to converse with one another through an online forum and for resources to be added and announcements made about the program and broader topical issues relating to international social work. Before departure, three orientation meetings were undertaken via the synchronous on-line meeting function of this site.

On-site Phase

During the first week of the program, students undertook various visits to community and welfare organisations to become familiar with social work and welfare practices in India. In the second week, students attended a community welfare organisation for their fieldwork experience. Organisations included orphanages, village development programs, a sex-worker health organisation, a slum community project, and a children's disability organisation. As part of the field placement many students undertook small social work based projects as directed by the organisations, such as writing funding submissions, updating records, developing posters, interacting with service users, observation, conducting needs analyses and reporting. While this fieldwork does not currently count towards students' formal practicum requirements according to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), there is recognition on their academic transcript of having completed an international study experience once they have submitted a reflective essay on their study experience.

Day-to-day Support

During the on-site phase of the program, support to students involved ongoing conversations and dialogue to generate student self-exploration and critical reflection, especially in relation to individual or group responses to experiences. Many times the academic facilitators were also experiential learners in these conversations, yet were consciously applying critical reflection techniques to encourage movement from description to transformative learning (Fook & Gardner, 2007). At the end of each day, the three academic facilitators systematically checked with participants, often over dinner, to informally discuss the day's events and experiences.

There were two general feedback and evaluation sessions for the whole group conducted by ISAC and the academic facilitators. In addition, three reflective workshops for students were facilitated as part of the research project and these are discussed in more detail in the next section.

The Research Project

In addition to the experiential learning aspects of the program described above, the academic facilitators received a small university research grant to run a concurrent research project to evaluate the program overall, as well as to explore student perceptions of three key themes: professional identity, gender, and environmental social work. The overall aim of the research was to explore the impacts of the program on students' understanding of these themes. The research was conducted with the approval of the appropriate 'low risk' ethics committee of the university. Examination of the environmental component of the research formed one part of this larger study, and will be reported on in this paper.

Methods

The research question relevant to the environmental component of the study is - *'has student understanding of the environment been impacted as a result of the international study experience in India and if so, how?'* A mixed methods approach was considered the most appropriate way of achieving some information on students' pre-program and post-program perceptions of 'the environment'. Pre-program and post-program written surveys were distributed and three reflective workshops were conducted during the on-site phase of the program.

The surveys. Survey data was gathered via simple scale questions, with basic demographic data being gathered via closed, limited response questions. Open questions were also used to gather more detailed responses and to qualify responses to scale questions. There were thirteen items on each survey to capture basic details via closed questions (i.e., age, level of study). More detailed responses (i.e., usually a scale question followed by an open comments opportunity) were also gathered about the level of understanding of human rights, social justice, gender, social work identity, international social work, community development, cultural sensitivity, and the environment in social work.

Data thus gathered provided an indication of the general level of knowledge and any variation in knowledge of 'environment' across the group. As per the condition of the ethics approval document, individual student responses to survey questions could not be 'tracked' in order to minimise the chance of identifying specific students. Thus, the data analysis is limited to assessing overall trends in the student group, pre-program and post-program.

The reflective workshops. There were three workshops during the on-site phase of the program, with each one focusing on a specific research theme (gender, professional identity and the environment). Using Fook & Gardner's (2007) framework for critical reflection, each workshop group was facilitated following this pattern:

- Introduction of the key theme (gender, social work identity or environment);
- Identification and description of concrete experiences/events/learning incidents (during the study abroad program) relating to the key theme;
- Description of how the experiences impact on understanding of the key theme, including any changes;

- Discussion of how the key theme and experiences relate to social work in general and social work roles in practice in particular.

Each workshop group was divided into self-selected sub-groups of three or four students. Each student sub-group was asked to brainstorm their thoughts, write a detailed process record of their sub-group's discussion, and then share their group's discussion with the whole group. Notes were taken on the understanding that they would be collected as part of the research data collection process. Academic facilitators also took detailed process record notes, including verbatim quotations, during each workshop using the critical reflection framework to format their notes. These notes also formed part of the research data.

The reflective workshops, whilst used for research, also served to consolidate reflective learning processes, to deepen students' awareness of international social work and to encourage transformative learning (Fook & Gardner 2007).

Recruitment and Participation

Eighteen female students from CSU participated in the Study Abroad Program along with three female academics who developed and facilitated the program. Fourteen of the students were undergraduate social work students, two were postgraduate social work students; two were students in generic social science degrees. Students ranged in their current level of study from first to fourth year, and varied in age from early 20's to mid-60's.

All 18 students participating in the Study Abroad Program were contacted by letter and invited to voluntarily participate in any part of the research. This invitation was followed up at an on-line meeting prior to the commencement of the program. Sixteen students completed and returned consent forms to participate in the research. Of these students, variable numbers participated in different components of the research, as detailed below.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was undertaken via open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of the data (Ezzy, 2002). Open exploration of data occurred when workshop notes were analysed for recurrent topics. These topics were numbered and arranged into groups where central themes relating to the purposes of the study were identified. For example, comments relating to observations about the physical and natural environment were recurrent, so these comments were identified and positioned within a central theme that related to the aims of the study, in this case 'not just a socio-cultural environment'. Quotes that most represented common elements and differences were reported on as part of selective coding to magnify the voice of participants in the study. Data from pre-program evaluation and post-program evaluations were also collated according to research topics and organised into relevant themes.

Study Limitations

This is an exploratory study involving a small number of participants and as such, there is no claim made as to the representativeness or generalizability of the findings. The study aims

Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell

instead to provide potentially indicative, exploratory research on an under-researched topic and to make a valuable contribution to this emerging area of research in social work.

An ethical issue for this research was the potential conflict of interest given that the three researchers were also in academic/lecturer positions at the university. This lecturer relationship held with students could have influenced student responses or undermined the voluntary nature of the research. However, at the time of research, none of the researchers were in a direct teaching relationship with the students, and participation in the research had no bearing on any academic results. The researchers also emphasised the voluntary nature of the research, and consequently some of the students who attended the Study Abroad Program did not participate in the research.

The small number of participants involved in the research also raises issues of maintaining confidentiality within a relatively small group of students. However, the researchers received all research data in de-identified form. For example, all electronic responses were sent to the university's administration e-mail address and then forwarded to the researchers with all identifying details removed.

Results

Pre-program Surveys

Eight students participated in the voluntary pre-program evaluation, which consisted of a survey distributed electronically prior to the commencement of the on-site phase of the program. As part of this survey, students were specifically asked to comment on their understanding of the environment in social work with one question related specifically to the environment: *"In social work theory we often talk about 'people in their environment'. What is your understanding of the concept of the 'environment'?"*

All eight responses reflected conventional constructions in that participants referred to the socio-cultural context of people's lives. Some participants specifically referred to theoretical concepts such as the micro, meso and macro elements of social work practice, and to structural factors of culture and politics. There was one exception to these responses with one participant referring to the "physical" nature of the environment. However, this participant then continued to describe the family, work, and community socio-cultural elements of society. The following response reflects the ideas of most students:

Environment can be expressed in many forms. Micro-is the individual's personal environment, their home, family, and history. Meso is their friends, neighbourhood and community, and macro is government organisations, social policy and legislation. These are all environment [aspects] that surround us and affect our everyday living, and must be considered at all times.

Post-program Surveys

Nine students participated in the post-program evaluation, which was distributed in hard copy on the return journey to Australia and electronically distributed within a week of return. All post-program surveys were completed within two weeks of returning to Australia. As part of the post-program survey, students were asked to rate and comment on whether their understanding of the environment in social work had been expanded as a direct consequence of their study experience in India. A seven-point scale question was used to indicate the extent to which students assessed their development in understanding with one being strongly disagree and seven being strongly agree. This question was followed by the opportunity to comment using descriptive language.

As part of the post-program evaluation, one question related specifically to the environment: *"In social work theory we often talk about 'people in their environment'. As a result of my experiences in India, my understanding of the concept of 'environment' has been expanded."* Participants were then required to rate the degree of their expanded understanding of environment on a scale of one to seven with one being strongly disagree and seven being strongly agree, and then to provide an optional comment.

Out of nine responses five participants rated the degree of their expanded understanding of the environment at the highest score of seven; three participants rated the degree of their expanded understanding of the environment at the second highest score of number six; and one participant rated a score of number three. The latter participant commented that she already has a strong affiliation with environmental issues, which would explain the relatively low score in comparison to the other students.

Participants generally referred to an expanded view of the environment as involving consideration of the physical characteristics of their surroundings. Reference to water, amenities, pollution, food, and poverty were described as relating to the environment. One student wrote the following comment:

Definitely. In the village, the environment included the village and surrounds. The physical environment of the land was also an influence. In one village, the government had decreed the land arid and had designated it industrial. The village was at threat. Water development changed the landscape to lush agricultural land and it was re-designated and saved.

Reflective Workshop

Ten students participated in the reflective workshop on the environment, which took place on-site in the rural village of Malavli, India. The workshop went for one hour, during which students were organised into three small groups, and following the critical reflection format (Fook & Gardner 2007), they discussed: 1) Concrete experiences or incidents that relate to the environment; 2) The impact these experiences have had on understanding the 'environment' in social work; and 3) The impact this understanding has had on their view of social work's role within environmental practice. At the conclusion of the workshop notes from

co-researchers and workshop groups were submitted to the facilitator in de-identified form and safely stored for later analysis.

Workshop Themes

Not Just a Socio-Cultural Environment. In general, participants referred to varying natural and physical characteristics of their surroundings and related these characteristics to the environment. There were fourteen participant responses across the three workshop groups that described observable ‘physical’ characteristics of the environment in India. These characteristics included the visibility of pollution, rubbish in the streets, open sewerage, dilapidated housing, diesel fumes, water quality, dogs that appeared to be diseased living close to dwellings, and destruction of forests. Participants considered these physical characteristics as being “tangible”. Participants also expressed the nature of these characteristics as being constant. In the discussion concluding the workshop, Anna stated, “[With regard to the environment] there is no out of sight out of mind here [like in Australia]”.

Participants identified a link between these ‘physical’ characteristics and health outcomes for people in India. In particular, one workshop group expressed concern for the well-being of children living in these environmental conditions, for example children playing in polluted river systems. Another workshop group referred to health issues such as high mortality rates and a medical system that may not adequately support people living in extreme poverty. Several safety issues were also identified by these two workshop groups, such as slum dwellings located on main motorways with small children occupying those dwellings.

Participants in the workshop groups referred to the complexity of these ‘physical’ environmental conditions. For example, participants expressed concern for the immense number of plastic bottles on roadsides and in the rivers, and the amount of waste this creates, yet recognised that the use of bottled water creates employment, and provides safe drinking water. These participants stated that it is important to view issues within a larger context, rather than in isolation. For example, one student summed this up by saying, “There are no quick fixes.”

Participants also referred to the lack of utilities and services available for some people in India such as clean, functioning toilets and sewerage systems, electricity, and clean drinking water, which are often taken for granted by most people in Australia. One student stated the following:

The thing that stood out to me in India was the comfort factor, that is, people living with so little comfort. People living all their life in a tent with no access to toilets, or even some ground to grow vegetables.

During the program, participants experienced inconsistent electricity, warm and humid temperatures with no air conditioning, and slept on mattresses on the floor.

Global Dimensions of the Environment. Six responses indicated an understanding of how social and environmental problems are interconnected between different countries. These responses also suggest an understanding of the imbalance of power between Western and non-

Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell

Western countries. Two workshop groups wrote the following, “How can development not be about capitalism?” and “[It is] now a global world – this is the reality”. In the whole group discussion concluding the workshop, some participants discussed the contradictions of capitalism, and the dominance of the Western world in exacerbating environmental degradation in developing countries. One student stated the following, “Is it necessary to overcome poverty because we’ve created it?”

As part of the reflective workshop, participants were asked to consider the role of social work in addressing environmental issues. Nine responses were recorded across the three workshop groups. Seven of these responses related to a grass roots approach, and included reference to terms such as “ownership”, “self-determination”, and “people are expert of their own lives”. One response referred to the need for a collective approach, rather than individualistic and another response gave a general statement confirming the need for a social work role in global environmental issues.

Participants also referred to Australian history and the oppression of Indigenous Australians as a result of European settlement. One student stated the following:

What gives us the right to come here and Westernise these people....and at what cost?....just like we’ve done to Australian Indigenous people. I’m not saying we should do nothing....but at what cost?

Several other participants also shared this concern and highlighted the potential for Euro-Western social work to become oppressive in their efforts to undertake environmental practice in non-Western countries.

Collectivism versus Individualism. From the three workshop groups, seven responses referred to the collective nature of some aspects of Indian culture. Participants were impressed by their observations of the communal nature of relationships in some villages, and contrasted this with Australian culture that emphasises the individual.

Throughout the program, some participants visited villages and observed examples of groups of people working together for the common good of the community. For example, participants were exposed to community groups of women who contributed money to ‘community’ funds for use when children (not necessarily their own) became sick or for the provision of community needs. Participants identified the collective nature of Indian culture as a major deficit in Australian culture. One workshop group wrote the following response:

We have such a westernised view and what culture do we really have in Australia? Our human resources are better but we do not seem to have a really trusting community.

One workshop group applied the concept of collectivism directly to environmental issues. For example, participants in this group identified the significance of grass-roots approaches. Participants made specific mention of community development approaches that are led by people in the community to facilitate sustainability, ownership, and control of activities. This group of participants highlighted the inter-relationship between the environment and the collective nature

of a community with the following response, “Environment as a real community is related to the concept of person-in-environment. Community is more than the individual.”

Participants recorded three responses that related the concept of collectivism to Australian social work by identifying that social work practice is primarily individual-based. In general, these participants believed that Euro-Western culture had influenced social work knowledge and created an individual focus on practice. One workshop group expressed their belief that outcomes of Australian social work interventions are not planned or experienced by a ‘collective’ or community. Two workshop groups wrote the following responses, “Outcomes of Western social work interventions are not usually spread through the community,” and “[A] collective focus is what’s missing in our social work”.

Discussion

Research outcomes indicate that participation in the Study Abroad Program expanded students’ perspective of the environment in social work. Students who participated in the program were generally confronted with degraded physical and natural environmental conditions in the rural village of Malavli. As a consequence students were challenged to an extent by contrasting standards of poverty, environmental practices, and cultural differences on a scale, which they would not have normally been exposed to so readily in Australia. This served to explicitly expose the interconnectedness of people with their ‘natural’ environment and the global dimensions of environmental degradation. Whilst the program was located in a relatively impoverished rural area, India is a diverse country with varying contexts and much diversity. In addition, within a culturally sensitive framework, there is recognition that diverse cultures and locations have different systems and values about the environment and varying means to address environmental issues.

The outcomes of the study suggest that a valuable educative experience occurred for students that challenged the conventional socio-cultural meaning of the environment to include consideration of the natural and physical environment. Findings indicate that international social work activities, such as the development of relationships with members of the host community, participation in some aspects of local culture, and active involvement in welfare programs, also expanded student understanding of the global nature of environmental degradation. Exposure to collective aspects of Indian culture appeared to be a valuable learning experience for participants in this study. The notion of groups of people working together for the common good, rather than competing against each other was noted by participants to be in direct contrast to conventional Australian culture, and to Australian social work.

However, the use of a study abroad program to develop student learning risks perpetuating Euro-Western colonial and imperial histories that serve to oppress marginalised groups in developing countries. The imposition of Euro-Western ideology, privilege, and power are key criticisms of study abroad programs (Heron, 2006; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2011; Polack, 2004; Wehbi, 2009). Social work students undertaking study abroad programs can be viewed as ‘tourists’ who undertake relatively shallow observations and conclusions about unfamiliar cultures through a Euro-Western lens. Similarly, social research is criticised for being dominated by Western modes of thinking, rather than providing a process of ‘decolonisation’

Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell

that enables indigenous people to communicate from meaningful and relevant cultural frames of reference (Chilisa, 2012, p. 13).

In addition to this, the dominant form of Western social work is a profession born out of industrialist and capitalist roots, for example by growing alongside nationalist welfare states that support capitalist endeavours. The idea of working with marginalised groups in developing countries whose relative poverty is significantly caused by industrialist and capitalist endeavours is contradictory and unjust (Gray, 2005; Mohan, 2008). These issues raise concern for the viability of study abroad programs within the social work curriculum. Further to this, one could argue that the industrialist and capitalist roots of social work has caused an estranged attitude in social work practice towards the natural environment. This has resulted in the inherent assumption that humans govern the natural world, rather than being interdependent with the natural world (Alston & Besthorn, 2012; Bell, 2013; Coates, 2005; Jones, 2010). This critical professional analysis challenges Euro-western social work to examine its role in contributing to global and environmental problems caused by a co-dependence that exists with industrial capitalism.

Nevertheless, literature on social work education identifies several advantages of study abroad programs, including: developed understanding of international social work (Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Cox & Pawar, 2006); the development of professional identity (Moorhead, Boetto, & Bell, 2013); increased cross cultural sensitivity and competence (Gilin & Young, 2009; Pawar, Hanna, & Sheridan, 2004); critical thinking, leadership and networking (Kreitzer, Barlow, Schwartz, Lacroix, & Macdonald, 2012); and a personal and political awareness of inequalities (Larson & Allen, 2006). Whilst the length and location of these and other study abroad programs vary considerably, they nonetheless indicate student learning in a number of areas when a critical and long-term approach is taken to learning.

To address some of the shortcomings of study abroad programs, conscious efforts were made by the academic facilitators to develop a program based on principles that are culturally sensitive and which develop student awareness about not only their own inherent assumptions about human behaviour, but also to appreciate the worldview of another culture. In this study, students were showing awareness of the presence of their Euro-Western lens by reproducing their experiences through guided reflection. Extensive pre-program preparation involving ongoing on-line meetings, forums, and reading of relevant literature also occurred. Whilst in India, academic facilitators conducted both formal and informal critical reflective sessions based on Fook and Gardner's (2007) critical incident technique with students individually and in groups about incidents, experiences, and thoughts and feelings. Challenging students' awareness of one's own assumptions, values, and biases was central to this process, as well as recognition by the academics of their own necessity to continually undertake this process.

In addition to this, academics and students have endeavoured to develop ongoing relationships with welfare services, professionals, and members of the host community, including the development of social justice and environmental projects to ameliorate some disadvantage in the village of Malavli. For example, the 2011 program was able to present social justice funding grants to two welfare services in India as a result of students' initiative from the previous 2010 program. Strategies by CSU academics were also implemented for the following

Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell

2012 Study Abroad Program to provide a carbon neutral program, and an on-line learning tool for further educational opportunities in 'green social work'. All these strategies and techniques fall alongside a social work curriculum at the university, which encompass a layered approach to developing culturally competent social work practitioners (Mlcek, 2013).

Nevertheless, the question remains, *is this enough?* In the absence of opinions from indigenous voices and local Indian community members in connection with the program, it is impossible to know whether the positive impacts of the program are mutual and whether the benefits of student learning are reciprocated in some positive way to people in the host community. The inclusion of indigenous voices in evaluating the program's benefits pose additional challenges regarding the risk of traditional research approaches that perpetuate power differences. However, unless these avenues are explored for the CSU Study Abroad Program, the Euro-Western lens remains the dominant force for developing the knowledge gained.

Conclusion

This research suggests that participation in a two week Study Abroad Program to India provided a valuable educative experience for students' developmental learning about the environment. Experiential learning, involving the development of relationships with the host community, people and culture, direct observations of degraded physical and environmental conditions, and involvement in organisational programs, expanded student understanding about the inextricable link between people and the natural environment. Although it might not be possible or even favourable for every social work student to participate in a study abroad program, the results of this research suggest that an international experience might be one method of providing the impetus for change to social work students' understanding of the environment.

The social implications of global warming are increasingly drawing attention to the relevance of the natural environment to social work practice. Fundamental to adopting a more holistic environmental focus in practice is an expanded curriculum content in social work education that considers the relationship between people and their natural environment. This broadens the conventional Western view of the environment, which in the past has almost exclusively emphasised a socio-cultural perspective. Further to this, a global perspective of social work education is required to understand the interconnectedness of environmental problems between different countries, in particular the negative effect that industrialist capitalist behaviour has on the environment. Finally, it is critical that social work academics developing international programs for students learning make a conscious effort to address the shortcomings and potential injustices of such a program through specific strategies and techniques.

References

- Alston, M., & Besthorn, F. (2012). Environment and sustainability. In K. Lyons, T. Hokenstad, M. Pawar, N. Huegler, & N. Hall (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of international social work* (pp. 56-69). London, ENG: Sage.
- Alston, M., & Kent, J. (2004) *Social impacts of drought: A report to NSW Agriculture*. Wagga Wagga, NSW: Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University.
- Anderson, C. (2001). Heat and violence. *Current directions in psychological science*, 10(1), 33-38.
- Anderson, C., Anderson, K. B., Dore, N., DeNeve, K. M., & Flanagan, M. (2000). Temperature and aggression. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 34, 63-133.
- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2010). *Code of ethics* Canberra, AUS: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/740>.
- Australian Farm Institute. (2007). *The new challenge for Australian agriculture: how do you muster a paddock of carbon? A discussion paper on climate change and emmissions trading and their future impacts on Australian agriculture*. Sydney, NSW: Author, NSW Farmers Association.
- Bell, K. (2013). Post-conventional approaches to gender, climate change and social justice. In Alston, M., & Whittenbury, K. (Eds.) *Research, action and policy: Addressing the gendered impacts of climate change* (pp. 53-62). London, ENG: Springer.
- Bell, K., & Anscombe, A. W. (2012). International field experience in social work: Outcomes of a short-term study abroad program to India. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 32(8), 1032-1047. doi:10.1080/02615479.2012.730143.
- Besthorn, F., & Canda, E. (2002). Revisioning Environment: Deep ecology for education and teaching in social work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 22(1/2), 79-101.
- Besthorn, F., & McMillen, D. (2002). The oppression of women and nature: Ecofeminism as a framework for an expanded ecological social work. *Families in society*, 83(3), 221-232.
- Besthorn, F. H., & Myer, E. E. (2010). Environmentally displaced persons: Broadening social work's helping imperative. *Critical Social Work*, 11(3), 123-138. Retrieved from <http://www.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/environmentally-displaced-persons-broadening-social-work%E122%180%199s-helping-imperative>.
- British Association of Social Work (BASW). (2012). *The code of ethics for social work*. Birmingham, ENG: The Polic, Ethics & Huma Rights Committee. Retrieved from http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_112315-7.pdf
- Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.
- Climate Commission. (2013). *The critical decade: Climate science, risks and responses*. Canberra, ACT: Climate Commission Secretariat, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Coates, J. (2005). The environmental crisis: Implications for social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 16(1), 25-49.
- Coates, J., & Gray, M. (2012). The environment and social work: An overview and introduction. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21(3), 230-238. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00851.x
- Cox, D., & Pawar, M. (2006). *International social work: Issues, strategies and programs*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.

Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell

- Dean, J. G., & Stain, H. J. (2010). Mental health impact for adolescents living with prolonged drought. *Australian Journal of Rural Health, 18*(1), 32-37. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1584.2009.01107.x
- Dominelli, L. (2010). *Social work in a globalising world*. Cambridge, ENG: Polity.
- Dominelli, L. (2012). *Green social work: From environmental crises to environmental justice*. Cambridge, ENG: Polity.
- Ezzy, D. (2002). *Qualitative analysis: Practice and innovation*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Fook, J. (2012). *Social work: A critical approach to practice* (2nd ed.). London, ENG: Sage.
- Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2007). *Practising critical reflection: A resource handbook*. Maidenhead, ENG: Oxford University Press.
- Garnaut, R. (2008). *The Garnaut climate change review: Final report*. Melbourne, VIC: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from http://www.garnautreview.org.au/pdf/Garnaut_prelims.pdf.
- Gilin, B., & Young, T. (2009). Educational benefits of international experiential learning in an MSW program. *International social work, 52*(1), 36-47.
- Gray, M. (2005). Dilemmas of international social work: Paradoxical processes in indigenisation, universalism and imperialism. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 14*, 231-238.
- Heron, B. (2006). Critically considering international social work practica. *Critical Social Work, 7*(2). Retrieved from <http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/critically-considering-international-social-work-practica>
- International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2013). *Climate change 2013: Summary for policy makers*. Geneva, SW: World Meteorological Association.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2007). *Climate change 2007 synthesis report*. Geneva, SW: World Meteorological Association.
- Jones, P. (2010). Responding to the ecological crisis: Transformative pathways for social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 46*(1), 67-84.
- Jones, P. (2013). Transforming the curriculum: Social work education and ecological consciousness. In M. Gray, J. Coates & T. Hetherington (Eds.), *Environmental social work* (pp. 213-230). London, ENG: Routledge.
- Kreitzer, L., Barlow, C., Schwartz, K., Lacroix, M., & Macdonald, L. (2012). Canadian and EU social work students in a cross-cultural program: What they learned from the experience. *International Social Work, 55*(2), 245-267.
- Lam, L. T. (2007). The association between climatic factors and childhood illnesses presented to hospital emergency among young children. *International journal of environmental health research, 17*, 1-8.
- Larson, G., & Allen, H. (2006). Conscientization: The experience of Canadian social work students in Mexico. *International social Work, 49*(4), 507-518.
- Lysack, M. (2010). Environmental decline, loss and biophilia: Fostering commitment in environmental citizenship. *Critical Social Work, 11*(3), 48-66. Retrieved from http://www.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/sites/uwindsor.ca.criticalsocialwork/files/coates_44_pdf.pdf.
- Lysack, M. (2012). Building capacity for environmental engagement and leadership: An ecosocial work perspective. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 21*(3), 260-269. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00854.x

Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell

- McKinnon, J. (2008). Exploring the nexus between social work and the environment. *Australian Social Work*, 61(3), 256-268.
- McMichael, A., Woodruff, R., & Hales, S. (2006). Climate change and human health: Present and future risks. *The Lancet*, 367(9513), 859-869.
- Mendes, P. (2009). Tracing the origins of critical social work practice. In J. Allan, L. Briskman & B. Pease (Eds.), *Critical social work*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Mlcek, S. (2013). Are we doing enough to develop cross-cultural competencies in social work? *British Journal of Social Work*, 1-20. doi:0.1093/bjsw/bct044 Retrieved from <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/2003/2015/bjsw.bct2044.abstract.html?papetoc>.
- Mohan, B. (2008). Rethinking international social work. *International social work*, 51(1), 11-24.
- Moorhead, B., Boetto, H., & Bell, K. (2013). India and us: Student development of professional social work identity through a short-term study abroad program. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 33(2), 175-189. doi:10.1080/02615479.2013.768614.
- Morrissey, S. A., & Reser, J. P. (2007). Natural disasters, climate change and mental health considerations for rural Australia. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 15(2), 120-125. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1584.2007.00865.x
- Nuttman-Shwartz, O., & Berger, R. (2011). Field education in international social work: Where we are and where we should go. *International Social Work*, 55(2), 225-243.
- Pawar, M., Hanna, G., & Sheridan, R. (2004). International social work practicum in India. *Australian Social Work*, 57(3), 223-236.
- Peeters, J. (2012). The place of social work in sustainable development: Towards ecosocial practice. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21(3), 287-298. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00856.x
- Polack, R. J. (2004). Social justice and the global economy: New challenges for social work in the 21st century. *Social Work*, 49(2), 281-290.
- Wehbi, S. (2009). Deconstructing motivations: Challenging international social work placements. *International Social Work*, 52(1), 48-59. doi:10.1177/0020872808097750