Making A Difference Without Being Imperialistic:

The Complexity of Becoming A Social Worker in A Postcolonial World

Att göra skillnad utan att bli imperialistisk:

Komplexiteten i att bli en socialarbetare i en postkolonial värld

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Abstract
Social work can be perceived as a global profession, built upon a certain foundation of global values and ethical principles - like human rights, social justice, equity and empowerment - that are applicable everywhere regardless of context. In contrast, it can also be perceived as a locally based profession that needs to take local-specific conditions – such as culture and indigenous traditions – into account. Regardless, it is a profession that exists all over the world, due to globalization having spread both social issues and profession itself across national borders.

From a postcolonial perspective, contemporary international social work is equivalent to a new form of imperialism, i.e. that what started out as a western profession has now spread its values and methods to non-western contexts where they are not as well suited. This puts the profession in an almost paradoxical situation, as social work’s aim is to help socially vulnerable people improve their living situations and inspire them to self-actualization and empowerment, but by advocating this in the non-western world, western social work imposes ideas and methods onto contexts where they do not occur naturally.

This brings a dilemma for social work regarding how to deal with global issues. One option is to acknowledge social workers’ role as ‘helpers’ and strive to help people regardless of context, using existing methods and values. Another option is to acknowledge the West’s historic role as imperialists trying to take over the world, and thus let the third World solve their own issues without further involvement in order to avoid contemporary colonialism.

By interviewing Swedish social work students - whom all have completed educational field placements in non-western countries - this study strives to analyse how social work students that have experienced social work in non-western contexts relate to international social work and issues that come with it. This includes theoretical understanding, the role of social work education and their own roles as future professionals. The results show that the students found it frustrating to simultaneously want to help out and not be perceived as imperialistic. The conclusion was that the most important contributions western social workers can make in non-western contexts is to be aware of historical events and the contemporary part they play in global power structures, as well as try to humbly adapt to foreign cultures and accept differences rather than assume your own culture as automatically normative.

Keywords: social work, social work education, international field placements, postcolonialism, universalism, cultural relativism, cultural sensitivity
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1. Introduction

These experiences…it’s hard to find the same opportunity again. To actually get this chance, to see social work in another context and another country…I think that has been really valuable.

As the West took over the third World during colonialism, it brought a lot of local issues like poverty, national debts, corruption and social problems (Heron, 2005:783-786; Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012). Even after the end of colonialism these problems have persisted, and unjust global power structures are still a negative influence in many third World countries (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Desai & Solas, 2012; Drucker, 2003). Former western colonizing nations have left a legacy of underdevelopment, which means that even though third World countries are free nations, they still have difficulties adjusting to and ‘catching up’ with the rest of the world. These third World countries have been put in a state of dependency on foreign aid (Heron, 2005). Implicitly, the West is still in possession of global power, as the rest of the world remains inferior and underdeveloped.

Social work as a profession can bring effective solutions to problems like poverty, social injustice and lack of education by implementing values of social justice, empowerment, human rights and education to citizens in underdeveloped third World countries (Desai & Solas, 2012; Lough, 2014).

Despite usually good intentions, the social work profession has been criticized for contributing to sustain contemporary power structures rather than to challenge them (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Drucker, 2003; Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999; Trygged, 2013a). The dominant social work paradigm – which is presented as a unitary knowledge system and universally applicable – is actually based on a western ideology (Haug, 2005; Mutua, 2002). Because of this, it has often failed in effectively performing in non-western environments. Midgley (1981) coined the term professional imperialism, which implies that no matter how good intentions international social work has, the mere act of transferring western thinking into other cultures instead of adopting local, culture-specific wisdom is imperialistic (Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012). The need for help is usually determined by the West, as are methods for how the help should be executed (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Desai & Solas, 2012; Dominelli, 2012). International social work can thus be seen as a paradox. On one hand, the core aim of social workers is to help others. On the other hand, by travelling to undeveloped countries with an aim to contribute you take part in sustaining unjust power structures. Meanwhile, in the wake of colonialism, the third World is dependent on foreign aid that it is only entitled to it if it adjusts to western rules (Eriksson Baaz, 2001).

The need to raise awareness of unjust global power structures has been acknowledged within social work education, where an increased focus now lies on internationalizing the education (Hokenstad, 2012; Midgley, 2004; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012; Powell & Robision, 2007) and equip students for practises in globalizing situations and environments (Dominelli & Bernard, 2003). As a result, there has been an increase in international field placements for social work students (Cleak, Anand & Das, 2016; Dominelli & Bernard, 2003; Lough, Moore McBride & Sherraden, 2012), as this is an opportunity for students to become equipped with
essential skills for their future professional role (Lough, 2009; Lough, Moore McBride & Sherraden, 2012; Nagy & Falk, 2000; Wehbi, 2009). Professional imperialism exists within social work education as well, as sending students abroad entails a risk of contributing to upholding unjust power structures (Lough, 2009; Roberts, 2004; Wehbi, 2009).

There are some studies about social work students in international settings, although they are relatively few. There is no known previous study that focuses specifically on Swedish social work students. There is also a lack of studies that have completed their field placements in non-western countries (Dominelli & Bernard, 2003; Razack, 2002; Wehbi, 2009). Focus usually lie on domestic experiences (Trygged & Eriksson, 2012), exchanges between western countries (Dominelli & Bernard, 2003) or comparisons with international volunteers (Lough, Moore McBride & Sherraden, 2012). Results show mostly how social work students are comparable to international volunteers (Lough et. al., 2012), what practical skills students have learned (Lough et. al., 2012; Magnus, 2009, Pawar, Hanna & Sheridan 2004) or suggestions for how social work educations should internationalize their syllabus (Razack, 2002; Trygged & Eriksson, 2012). Due to the limited research, it is relevant to draw knowledge from adjacent areas like international volunteerism and international social work in general, as there are similarities between social work students and these groups. Social work students however differ from international volunteers in that they are training to become professionals. They also differ from professional social workers, as they are still in training – and therefore not yet fully responsible. Being a student means being within a certain educational context with obligations to live up to in terms of educational goals, and being expected to participate in certain ways. These students are in a dilemma of being social work students who are expected to participate in and learn about international social work, but simultaneously being westerners in a non-western context, which bring certain postcolonial complications, like being perceived as imperialists.

Having knowledge about how social work students relate to and problematize around their experiences of international contexts can give an indication to what aspects are important to focus on in social work education, as well as give suggestions to how social work education should adapt in order to meet requests and avoid negative patterns or influences. As globalization affects all aspects of social work and the primary aim of social workers is to help people – regardless of setting – social workers need to be aware of global power structures, the complexity of international social work and how they are themselves a contributing part of global injustices.

1.1 Aim of study
The aim with this study is therefore to do an analysis of how the experiences of Swedish social work students, that have completed international field placements in non-western countries, can be interpreted in relation to theories on postcolonialism and cultural sensitivity.

1.1.2 Research questions
How has the experience of international field placements affected these students’ theoretical understanding of social work?
How has the experience of international field placements affected these students’ view on the role of social work education?
How has the experience of international field placements affected these students’ view on their role as future professionals?
2. Setting the context

This section gives a brief background to international aid work in general and international social work in particular, including historical aspects, contemporary issues, international volunteer service and social work education.

2.1 International aid work

International aid started as a way to solve the legacy of dependency left by colonizers in the third World\(^1\) during the 20\(^{th}\) century (Davidson, 2001; Heron, 2005; Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012; Roberts, 2004). At first, the aid consisted mostly of financial aid schemes, which did not help third World countries in the long run but rather left them in a state of debt, poverty and underdevelopment (Davidson, 2001; Desai & Solas, 2012; Heron, 2005). Poverty is still a major issue – particularly in Africa (Heron, 2005; Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012) – even though there has been a global decline in the number of people living in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2015). Financial aid has thus not been successful in eradicating poverty, and has instead increased issues like corruption, conflict, discouragement of local initiatives and governments’ non-accountability towards their citizens (Moyo, 2009).

The colonial heritage has resulted in unequal global power structures, in which the West\(^2\) – as the giver – is in a position able to define the rules and determine the need of help, and the third World – as the recipient – has to adapt to western conditions (Eriksson Baaz, 2001; Jonssson, 2012). Policies regarding how the aid should be organized depend largely on aid policies formed by respective donating countries and their national or global interest, which makes it difficult to find common guidelines (Stokke, 1989b). The need for the third World to develop in ways similar to the West in order to be successful has increasingly been recognized as an impossible delusion, and there has instead been a realization that third World countries need to develop in ways that are more locally anchored and favorable for themselves (Davidson, 2001). There has also been an increase in postcolonial awareness in the West, i.e. that third World countries are not responsible for their inferior positions themselves, but that their debts are a result of western colonialism and that financial aid solutions might perhaps have been inefficient and created dependency more than actually solved problems (Desai & Solas, 2012; Moyo, 2009). There has thus been a paradigm shift in international aid work, from previously having been mostly viewed as charity or economic growth-based development, to now mainly consisting of models focusing on participation, empowerment, ownership and development cooperation (Cooper & Verloen van Theemat, 1989; Desai & Solas, 2012; Eriksson Baaz, 2001; Perold, Graham, Mazembo Mavungu, Cronin, Muchemwa & Lough, 2013).

2.1.1 International volunteer service

Much development aid is being performed within non-governmental organizations (NGOs). NGOs are part of the voluntary, not-for-profit sector, complementary to the public sector and private sector. NGOs are present in most countries, and many of them rely on international volunteers as a resource (Lough, 2014; Lough, Moore McBride, Sherraden & O’Hara, 2011; Payne, 2012; Trygged, 2013a). The main goal for international volunteer service is twofold:

\[\text{The term ‘the third World’ refers to countries with colonial pasts, i.e. a majority of countries in Africa, Asia and South America.}\]

\[\text{The term ‘the West’ – or ‘the western World’ – refers to Europe, North America and Oceania.}\]
to help underdeveloped communities and people and to give young westerners knowledge about issues like social justice, poverty and inequality (United Nations Volunteers, 2011). It is considered to be a legitimate form of humanitarian and development aid. For example, in 2014 international volunteerism helped provide service to about 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty (Lough, 2014). However, since they are not educated, volunteer workers are considered to be in the periphery of international aid work (Jonsson, 2012).

2.2 Social work
Social work as a profession has its origins in 19th century Europe and the US (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Blok, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Hare, 2004; Trygged, 2013c), where it developed as a solution to meet the social needs of individuals, families, groups and communities and to cure, contain or control behavior that was regarded as socially problematic or deviant (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2016b). Western social work has always had a clinical approach (Banks, 2006; Blok, 2012; Huegler, Lyons & Pawar, 2012) – with focus on specialized institutions – even though there has been a rise in things like community work, social development and promoting social change and political action (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Blok, 2012; Hare, 2004).

Social work became an international profession when western social workers, values and ideologies began crossing international borders (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray, 2005; Huegler et. al., 2012). This was the starting point for the belief that social work had a universally relevant methodology and an international professional identity, which has been criticized by for instance Midgley (see 4.1 Postcolonial concepts). Simultaneously to the social work development in the West, there was also significant development elsewhere. For instance, South Africa has a history of social work that extends almost as far back as the one in the UK and the US (Gray, 2005; Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2016a). These parallel developments have not gained as much international recognition, and many social workers in for instance Africa and Asia have received their social work education in European or American universities (Gray & Fook, 2004).

Social work in an international context takes place within a wide spectrum of organizational contexts, such as government agencies, NGOs and volunteer organizations (Desai & Solas, 2012; Lough, 2014). Even though social work is performed differently in different states, it is usually at least partially funded and controlled through governmental sources (Banks, 2006). In democratic states, social work usually cooperates with the state, while people in countries with weak states have to rely more on family relations and NGOs for support (Trygged, 2013b).

In line with international aid’s transfer from economic growth-based aid models to models based on social development and people-centered ideologies, the social work profession has in the latest 20-30 years increasingly realized that western models are perhaps not well suited for non-western contexts, and that social work in the third World needs to be based on local and contextual needs and resources (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Huegler et. al., 2012). This is however a process that takes time and is not something that can be changed overnight.

From having been a profession with a rather tenuous identity, questions have been raised within social work how specific the profession can and should be. This in turn has implications for both the practice and education of social workers, regardless of what local context they are situated within. There are thus many definitions of social work, depending on
the purpose for which they were written or the ideological viewpoint or context of the author (Banks, 2006). The most recent official definition is formulated by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2014) as follows:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The purpose of this definition is to unify social workers around the world and to provide a common starting point for presenting social work to governments and other international and national agencies and bodies (Banks, 2006). The definition is quite general, which is unavoidable when it is supposed to apply as a standard definition for many countries with varying conditions and contexts (Hugman & Bowles, 2012; Sewpaul & Jones, 2004). In addition, ethics and fundamental values can vary quite a lot between specific social work organizations and individual social workers’ own sense of moral integrity and responsibility (Banks, 2006).

It should be noted that there is an essential difference between the international definition of social work and the definition of international social work, however these two concepts are often confused (Mohan, 2008). It is perhaps even more difficult to identify international social work, as it is almost impossible to find a concrete, universal definition of what the area actually comprises (Huegler et. al., 2012; Midgley, 2001; Powell & Robison, 2007; Trygged, 2013c). The ambiguous meanings of international social work are most likely because ‘social work’ in itself is variously defined and understood in different countries and regions (Huegler et. al., 2012). Because of this, researchers usually formulate their own definitions. Having different understandings of the definition of international social work is enriching and can contribute to a greater appreciation of global problems and alternative ways of responding to social needs. International social work should therefore be seen as an emerging discourse open to eastern, western and indigenous influences (Gray, 2005; Powell & Robison, 2007).

2.2.1 Universalism and cultural relativism within social work

An ongoing debate within social work – particularly from an international perspective – is about universalism versus cultural relativism, i.e. whether social work can be claimed to be a universal profession with a common base of universal values and ethics, or if it should be based on contextual conditions instead and therefore be seen as perhaps several multiple professions rather than one universal. Universalism within social work refers to trends to find commonalities across divergent contexts that make it possible to define a social work profession with shared values and goals wherever it is practiced. From a universalism standpoint, social work should be based on common international standards – such as universal human rights or a unifying definition of social work - regardless of context (Gray, 2013; Gray et. al., 2008; Gray & Fook, 2004; Healy, 2007). As opposed to universalism, cultural relativism refers to the extent to which social work practice needs to fit local contexts (Gray, 2005, 2013; Haug, 2005; Healy, 2007). This includes the issue of finding a balance between imported social work knowledge and methods and developing domestic frameworks and structures for social work (Gray, 2013; Tsang & Yan, 2001). A risk with cultural
relativism is however that it has the potential of undermining modern human rights law (Desai, 2012).

2.2.1.1 The transferability of western theories and methods

The debate between universalism and cultural relativism raises the question of the actual universality of the social work profession (Gray, 2005, 2013; Gray et. al., 2008). Haug (2005) argues that one cannot speak of social work’s role in promoting global social justice without first acknowledging its role in historic and contemporary colonialism and imperialism, as well as compensate for this power imbalance. The dominant social work paradigm is in a way colonizing, because it represents an initially local western tradition whose theories and methods have been spread globally as a unitary knowledge system that is universally applicable (Hall, 2012; Haug, 2005; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012). In developing countries, there is argued limited relevance for the typically western individualized, clinical and therapeutic approach to clients. However, in many cases traditional values are being replaced by secular values that are less suited to deal with typical third World problems of poverty, hunger and ill-health (Hugman, 2008; Midgley, 2001; Pawar, 2000; Trygged, 2013c). This raises the question of whether the third World should import these western theories and methods or base its practice upon local traditions (Gray, 2012; Gray & Fook, 2004; Trygged, 2013b, 2013c).

As there are no clear answers to whether or not western social work is transferable to non-western contexts, researchers have varying opinions on the subject. Many favour a universal professional base (Ahmadi, 2003; Banks, 2006; Blok, 2012; Razack, 2002), which is also the foundation for much contemporary social work – for instance seen in the United Nations International Declaration of Human Rights (UNHR, 1948) or in the IFSW (2014) Global Definition of Social Work (Haug, 2005; Mutua, 2002). Other researchers tend to lean more towards a cultural relativism approach (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Bell, 2012; Gray et. al., 2008; Haug, 2005; Midgley, 1981; Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012; Payne, 2002; Tsang & Yan, 2001).

2.2.1.2 A common middle ground

The question of universality versus cultural relativism is one of the most debated issues within international social work. Even though the concepts are separated in theory, social work is in reality usually influenced by both. This is visible in the aim by several researchers to find a common ground for discussion and debate (Gray & Fook, 2004; Hugman & Bowles, 2012). For example, due to globalization issues like poverty, unemployment, migration and health issues are recognized as impacting both the western World and the third World (Huegler et. al., 2012). This favors a global perspective, united by shared human rights and social justice goals (Bell, 2012; Dominelli & Bernard, 2003; Lyons, 2012).

A common suggestion is a mid-range position between universalism and cultural relativism, where it is possible to adopt a pluralist approach with several local types of social work professions, instead of one global (Banks, 2006; Gray, 2005; Gray & Fook, 2004; Hare, 2004; Healy, 2007; Huegler et. al., 2012; Hugman & Bowles, 2012; Wood & Gough, 2006; Yip, 2004). These local ‘professions’ should be united by common goals, but be allowed to take various forms and expressions in different contexts. One argument is that if developing countries manage to contribute with local knowledge to the global stage, they can escape the role of victim. This can instead lead to a competing theoretical social science understanding
that challenges western views, both ideologically and economically, that involves the third World in a more prominent way (Ibawoh, 2007; Trygged, 2013b).

2.3 Social work education
Social work education began in Europe and North America during the 1800-1900s, as a part of the evolution of the social sciences, and then spread to the rest of the world (Hokenstad, 2012). Education is a forum where social work students have the possibility to prepare for their future roles as workers in globalized settings (Lyons, 2006). It is therefore essential for social work education curricula to meet certain criteria of internationalization and have unifying frameworks of human rights, social development and cultural competence (Asamoah, Healy & Mayadas, 1997). This focus can be detected for instance in an increase in courses with a specific international focus (Hokenstad, 2012), as well as an increased interest in learning about foreign cultures and contexts within social work (Gray, 2005; Hokenstad, 2012; Midgley, 2004; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012; Powell & Robison, 2007).

One part of the increased internationalization within social work education is the increase in international exchanges and the option to participate in international field placements (Hokenstad, 2012). This is a forum where students can relate theoretical learning to practice, develop personal and professional skills of self-awareness, empathy, critical inquiry and an increased understanding of power dynamics (Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery & Van Stratum, 2015; Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Smith, Cleak & Vreugdenhil, 2015). Students often cite field placements as prominent learning opportunities in their education (Barton, Bell & Bowles, 2005). This is however dependent on factors like knowledge and enthusiasm of the practice educator, regular supervision and opportunities for guided reflection (Domakin, 2014). Wehbi (2009) argues that cultural diversity is an area that western social workers need better preparation in, even when dealing with clients in western contexts.

Social work educations worldwide can be incredibly diverse (Dominelli, 2003), but the International Association for Schools of Social Work (IASSW, 2004) has developed global standards that need to be followed. These guidelines have however been criticized for being too based on the assumption that western social work is normative for the development of social work in other countries (Yip, 2004). Yip further argues that social work education discourages the development of indigenous models, as it promotes western ideas and practices. This viewpoint is in line with Midgley’s (1981) theory on professional imperialism (see 4.1 Postcolonial concepts), in that the standards are written in terms of Eurocentric social work practice and thus assumes a universality and applicability to non-western contexts. Yip (2004) argues that there are both advantages and risks with having a unified standard for social work education. On one hand, it can protect social work values, ethics, curriculum and knowledge, but on the other hand, it can also imply a rather rigid control on educations in various countries and not pay sufficient attention to the high diversity in cultural, social and political contexts (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Nagy & Falk, 2000).

2.3.1 Presentation of the social work education featured in this study
The university that all respondents attended consisted of seven semesters, during which time the students had two long field placements – semester three and five. Each placement was fifteen weeks. It was optional during both placements whether one wanted to participate in domestic or international field placements.
The university did not strive to explicitly internationalize its course content, but rather to erase the lines between local and global aspects. For instance, the course coordinator (personal communication, December 5, 2016) stressed the undivided aspect of field placements and emphasized that we live in a global world where local and global contexts affect each other mutually. This universal standpoint was notable in that students had the same syllabus and course goals regardless of where they were going on their field placement. There was however some differences between semesters three and five in terms of course goals. During semester three, the main goal for the students was to watch and learn, to get an understanding for different social issues and available resources and measure systems. During semester five, there was a bigger focus on analytical and critical abilities, related to experiences during the placement. They were also expected to be able to engage in theoretical discussion and understandings to a larger extent than students in semester three were. Overall, there was a large focus on critical thinking and reflection, both regarding methods in practice and the organization of social work, as well as on how social work is affected by globalization and global powers and how one should relate to that (course coordinator, personal communication, December 5, 2016). The curricula was thus in line with IASSW’s (2004) global standards, as unifying values, ethics and knowledge were considered a central feature, as is the case in the global standards.

When it comes to international field placements, a lot of focus was put on the preparatory phase (see 3.2 International field placements). Prior to the first placement, the students had a year of theoretical preparations. Focus during this phase was on power relations, principles and other theoretical aspects like colonialism and globalization. The students interested in international field studies had specific preparations regarding their motives, expectations, practical information, personal development, how to prepare for the unexpected, stepping into a certain context and what they as ‘white students’ represent – consciously and unconsciously (course coordinator, personal communication, December 5, 2016).

Students in international placements had the same assignments and requirements as students in domestic placements. They also had the opportunity of support from their course coordinator in Sweden during their time abroad. After returning to Sweden, the students participated in follow-up seminars, where issues like pros, cons, alternative approaches and global and local aspects were discussed. Throughout the whole process, there was a constant focus on unifying aspects, i.e. the awareness that we live in a global world regardless of local context (course coordinator, personal communication, December 5, 2016).

2.4 Summary

International aid that consists of western countries providing help to the third World has been an occurring phenomena since the end of colonialism, even though the form of the aid has shifted from primarily financial solutions to solutions that focus more on development, empowerment and cooperation. The same shift has occurred within international social work, and contemporary aspects include debates of whether the West should impose its fundamental values, methods and solutions for development onto the third World, or if the third World would benefit more from locally-based solutions and indigenization. This discussion occurs within social work education as well. On one hand, global guidelines encourage a bigger focus within social work education on globalization and internationalization – such as for instance international field placements, but on the other hand, sending students to the third World can become a part of upholding current unjust power structures in which the West has designated themselves as ‘helpers’ with a mission to ‘save’ the third World. It is therefore
important to educate students on these issues, so that they have a theoretical understanding for situations they might be confronted with during their international field placements, and thus know how to react accordingly and relate themselves to the complexity.
3. Previous research

In this section, an overview over previous research will be presented. Focus will be on social work students in international settings – including benefits and risks with international field placements - as well as on the adjacent area of international volunteer service.

3.1 International volunteer service

As there are a limited amount of studies that focus specifically on social work students in international settings, one needs to draw knowledge from adjacent fields. One field that has a lot of similarities with international social work field placements is international volunteer service (Lough, 2009). Social work students differ from international volunteers in some aspects, for instance theoretical and practical preparation (Lough, 2009; Lough et. al., 2012) and educational requirements, placements goals and the voluntary nature of service activity (Lough, 2009). There are however some similarities, such as motivations, both areas being designated to benefit host site and students, not being strictly compulsory, not well remunerated (Lough et. al., 2012) and acting within the same type of setting – such as NGOs that focus on helping socially vulnerable people (Lough, 2011; Lough, Sherraden, Moore McBride & Xiang, 2014).

Another similarity between international volunteers and social work students in international settings is how the time abroad has affected them personally. Returning volunteers often admit that their experiences were transformative (Jonsson, 2015; Lough et. al., 2014), and they show development of intercultural relations (Lough et. al., 2012), intercultural competence, communication skills and self-efficiency (Yashima, 2010; Balashov, Pasichnyk & Kalamazh, 2016) as well as global orientation, a sense of inclusion, development of social capital, gain of national pride and identity (Krishna & Khondker, 2004). Contributions and positive outcomes were also more likely to happen the longer a volunteer period lasted (Roberts, 2004). A comparison between international volunteer service and social work field placements can be viewed in Table 1.

Table 1
A Comparison Between International Volunteer Service and Social Work Field Placements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>International Volunteer Service</th>
<th>Social Work Field Placements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social action</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided reflection</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensity</td>
<td>Varies, 1-week to 2 or more years. Typically full time.</td>
<td>Typically one academic semester. Part to full time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmatic support</td>
<td>Varies, generally some orientation but little training.</td>
<td>Targeted curricular preparation, training and supervision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal</td>
<td>Varies widely</td>
<td>Typically high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory (curricular requirement)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential role-taking</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Mooney & Edwards, 2001
Criticisms against international volunteer work include that it is imperialistic, expensive, culturally insensitive, reinforces existing global inequalities, tackles symptoms rather than causes, benefits not going to local communities and volunteers undermining local staff, and has limited skills (Lough, 2014; Sherraden, Lough & Moore McBride, 2008). Notable is that these examples outweigh negative outcomes that international social work field placements have been accused of, in particular things like having limited skills. Lough (2014) argues that the social work profession should lead discussions of effective volunteerism, since much international volunteer work is being performed within the social work field and thus can be used as an arena for education on social justice and career preparation.

3.2 International field placements
International field placements are an increasing trend within several fields – particularly within social work education due to the growing recognition of the global context of social work practice (Dominelli, 2003; Hokenstad, 2012). In a global survey from 1990, 44 percent of participating schools of social work reported having had students complete field studies in other countries. However, most of these schools did not place students internationally continuously, but rather on an episodic basis. Most of these schools also had placed relatively few of their students in other countries (Healy, 2001). Another example is a study by Panos, Petrys, Cox and Jones-Hart (2004), in which 21 percent of all social work educations in the US had placed students in international field placements between 1997 and 2002. Due to the increased focus on globalization in curricula, international field placements are believed to have risen even more in recent years (Lough et al., 2012).

There is limited research about the actual benefits of international field placements (Cleak et al., 2016; Lough, 2009). Research that does exist has been able to detect some benefits like that the experience can build up students’ resumes even more than domestic field placements can, as well as lead to an international career (Cleak, Anand & Das, 2016; Dominelli & Bernard, 2003; Lough, 2009). It can prepare them for working with diversity, meeting social problems related to global events and expand their professional skills (Healy, 2001; Nagy & Falk, 2000). According to Behrnd and Porzelt (2012), students with experiences abroad have more intercultural competence than students without. By participating in international field placements, social work students usually also become more competent in their own national welfare system, due to having had to compare the host country to the home country (Trygged, 2013b).

When international field placements are successful, students can combine their awareness of local issues with a global awareness of diversity and inequalities (Cleak et al., 2016). International field placements can offer students valuable opportunities for critical reflection and inspire them to gain valuable insights for their personal and professional development, as well as broaden their cultural horizons, problem-solving skills, their ability to work effectively with diverse people and in diverse cultures, be exposed to alternative cultural contexts, definitions of social problems and diverse welfare structures and interventions (Cleak et al., 2012; Dominelli, 2003; Healy, 2001; Lough, 2009; Lough et al., 2012; Wehbi, 2009). This is however contingent on appropriate curriculum, support and supervision (Cleak et al., 2016; Dominelli, 2003; Lough, 2009; Lough et al., 2012). Wehbi (2009) argues that most existing social work international field placements do not aim to engage students in critical thinking regarding cultural competence, only to describe cultural norms and etiquette. Social work education therefore has an important role to play in equipping students as...
practitioners in globalizing situations to a larger extent than is currently happening (Dominelli & Bernard, 2003; Healy, 2001).

Placing social work students internationally is not only associated with positive outcomes and benefits, but also with some risks. One risk that might emerge is related to the wider on-going debate in which international social work has been criticized for reproducing paternalism and colonialism (Lough, 2009; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012; Roberts, 2004; Wehbi, 2009). This risk is particularly present if colonial history and contemporary power structures are not sufficiently included in the curricula (Caragata & Sanchez, 2002; Lough, 2009; Wehbi, 2009). For example, as western students participate in international field placements, they risk being perceived as ‘experts’ by locals, feeling superior or judging the experience to be irrelevant to their own learning needs (Hokenstad, 2012). Lack in student awareness might also affect host organizations and communities by reproducing imperialism or dependence, which can in turn lead to ineffectiveness, greater prejudice or poor cross-cultural understanding (Lough, 2009).

The process of international field placements can be divided into three phases: *A preparatory phase* that involves helping students to reflect on their motives for overseas placements, educating them about power relations, principles, potential risks and contributions, both on a personal and a cultural level. *The actual stay abroad phase* includes learning in a different environment about different social problems, welfare policy, legal framework and the role of social work. *The post experience phase* consists of transferring newly gained experiences into new skills, perceptions, attitudes, knowledge and behavior (Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2012).

Existing studies on social work students in international field placements tend to focus on other aspects than featured in this study. For instance, there is no known previous study that focuses specifically on Swedish social work students. According to Wehbi (2009), there is also a lack in studies that feature the voices of students who have participated in international field placements outside the western world, where problems of postcolonialism, imperialism and severe poverty are a sight more common than in the western World. In addition, one is also in a position of racial differences, like for instance being the only white person among coloured people. This in turn can raise issues of alienation and cultural clashes. Dominelli and Bernard (2003) have done an extensive study on social work students in international settings, but focus lies primarily on exchanges within the western World, like between North America and Europe. Another example is a study by Razack (2002), where focus lies on how social work students and faculty represents from the West should relate to international field placements in the third World, but less on actual voices from the participating students themselves. A study by Lough et. al. (2012) - about international volunteer organizations based in the US that accepted social work students as volunteers - showed that outcomes for the students included international contacts, open-mindedness, international understanding, intercultural relations, life plans, civic activism, community engagement, media attentiveness and financial contributions. Another example is a study by Pawar et. al. (2004), who followed two Australian social work students doing field placements in India, and found that benefits included appreciation of the home country, effective learning and expanded horizons. Yet another example comes from Magnus (2009), who studied Norwegian social work students that had completed clinical field placements in Tanzania, and the results showed that the students came home with new tools, growing self-confidence and a critical view on Norwegian solutions. Overall, most existing studies focus on how the students were personally affected by their experiences in terms of having learned new skills.
3.3 Summary
There are many similarities between the fields of international volunteer service and social work education international field placements – such as lack of remuneration, an inherent ambition to help and the experience of culture clashes it might entail when coming as a young westerner to a non-western context. This makes research that focus on international volunteers relevant for social work field placements as well. When it comes to previous studies that focus specifically on international field placements within social work education, focus lie on a descriptive level – such as describing what specific skills students have learned or how they have been affected by their experiences – rather than on an interpretative level. This study thus aims to focus on how students’ experiences of international field placements can be interpreted in a larger context, in relation to theories on postcolonialism and cultural sensitivity (see 4. Theoretical framework). As most existing studies come from the US – plus a few from Australia and Europe – it is also relevant to study how Swedish students in particular relate to international social work. Each western context has its own specific conditions, which means that even though there might be similarities between various western contexts, there can also be essential cultural, academic or professional differences that might affect the result.
4. Theoretical framework

In this section, the theoretical framework will be presented. This study assumes a theoretical base of postcolonialism, from which other concepts like universalism, cultural relativism and professional imperialism have sprung. These concepts were all shown to be central themes in the empiric data, as well as intercultural sensitivity.

4.1 Postcolonial concepts

Postcolonialism can be difficult to define as one single theory, as it can refer to the specific time that followed after colonization, to a specific geographic space of former colonies and former colonizing countries, or to a specific experience of having been oppressed and subjugated. It should therefore rather be seen as a base for several theories (Lunga, 2008). A common denominator in postcolonial theories is that they question the recognition of the West as the only legitimate producers of knowledge – and how this knowledge is being perceived as objective knowledge - and aims to analyse and question how colonizing societies were, and still are, being constructed in order to legitimate current power structures (Lunga, 2008; Said, 1978, 1989). Theoretical concepts sprung from postcolonialism that will be used in this study are universalism, cultural relativism and professional imperialism.

An on-going debate within postcolonialism is about universalism versus cultural relativism. These two concepts are often put in discrepancy as two opposing ways in which social work can and should be conducted. Universalism implies that all people have unconditional rights and moral rules that apply regardless of cultural context. This makes the notion of for example universal human rights a valid argument (Healy, 2007; Mayer, 1995; Midgley, 2001). Culture is irrelevant to the validity of moral rights and rules (Donnelly, 1984). Criticism against this position is that it is imperialistic and favours western thinking, that ethical principles have been formulated by a dominating power and that it is culturally oppressive to reject local justices and norms. The opposite approach is cultural relativism, which implies that culture is in control of moral and that common norms do not exist. Truths are therefore relative and created by individuals and cultures, and one must always take context-specific conditions into account (Healy, 2007; Midgley, 2001). Members of one society may therefore not legitimately condemn the practices of societies with different traditions (Mayer, 1995). It can for example be argued that the UNHR (1948) is based on western values and therefore not automatically applicable on non-western contexts (Mutua, 2002). Criticism against this position is that it undermines global directives like human rights corpuses.

Professional imperialism is an expression coined by Midgley (1981). Midgley’s main argument was a critique of the social work profession’s striving to transfer theories and practices developed in the West to the third World. As a result, the occurrence of social work in the third World has emerged by social service systems being replicated to resemble those in the West (Razack, 2002). According to Midgley (1981), this transfer is an unconscious oppressive pattern in which the transferred theories and practices claim to be universal, but are actually invented in and custom-made for western social work contexts. Midgley (ibid.) therefore argues that social work theories and practices should pay more attention to local practices and develop in more contextual ways.
4.2 Intercultural sensitivity

A common point of departure in cultural studies is that meetings between cultures more often than not create problems, conflicts and misunderstandings. However, cultural differences in themselves are usually not a cause of problems (Stier, 2009). Our culture is what determines how we perceive others, and our degree of cultural insight can vary depending on context (Herlitz, 2007). We will always judge or value other cultures in comparison to our own. By observing other people’s appearances and behaviours, we unconsciously draw conclusions about their inner qualities or characters (Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

To be able to understand a culture other than one’s own, one needs to acquire other people’s cultural grammar; i.e. try to understand and experience the world from the other cultural point of view (Herlitz, 2007). Depending on how people act when they meet people from other cultures, it affects to what degree they can develop intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1998; Stier, 2009). Bennett (1998) defines intercultural sensitivity as the ability to communicate in an effective and adequate way in various cultural contexts. This can be viewed as a progress, in which one moves from an ethnocentric standpoint towards an ethnorelative one. Bennett’s (ibid.) definition of this development process is called the Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and can be viewed in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), adapted from Bennett (1998).](image)

Ethnocentrism consists of denial, defense and minimization, which all are states where one assumes that one’s own cultural worldview is central to all reality. Ethnorelativism is the progressive state from ethnocentrism, which consists of acceptance, adaption and integration. In these states, one assumes that cultures can only be seen as relative compared to one another, and that particular behaviour therefore needs to be understood within a cultural context (Bennett, 1998). Intercultural sensitivity is what happens when one manages to move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. This requires cultural knowledge, motivation and skills (Bennett, 1998), as well as openness, curiosity and understanding of other cultures and one’s own (Herlitz, 2007). Cultural clashes are what happen when one does not manage to complete this transfer. This can cause symptoms of self-criticism, weakened confidence and blame of others and oneself (Herlitz, 2007). Notable is that one does not necessarily have to start in the stage of denial, but one can also start in for instance the stage of minimization and still manage to progress from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

Ethnocentrism in itself is not a problem, but the problem arises when people start to reflect in terms of good/bad or right/wrong (Herlitz, 2007; Stier, 2009). Culture clashes are not only logical, but also emotional and existential. Meeting foreign cultures lessens a person’s ability to understand, explain and anticipate strangers’ actions and motives. This in turn can increase the feeling of worry and uncertainty (Stier, 2009). If one is not familiar with another person’s cultural grammar, it will be difficult to understand or accept why that person is acting the way they are (Herlitz, 2007).
4.4 Summary
Postcolonial theory is used as a point of departure in this study, as the fundamental standpoint on which the world is built. From postcolonialism several related theories have sprung, including concepts like universalism, cultural relativism and professional imperialism. These concepts have all been visible in the empiric data, along with the theoretical concept of intercultural sensitivity. These are the main theoretical standpoints that will be used when analysing the data.
5. Method

In this section, an overview of the research procedure will be presented. Focus lies on transparency, by explaining each step of the research process as thoroughly as possible, from collection of raw data to presentation of final results. Ethical aspects and methodological limitations will also be discussed.

5.1 Epistemological position
This study is built upon abductive logic, i.e. a sort of commute between induction and deduction (Blaikie, 2007). The study assumes a theoretical position of postcolonialism, but from that point of departure the research questions aim to be inductive, unprejudiced and allow the empiric data to generate theoretical conclusions. The study also uses a qualitative approach (Bryman, 2001), as the latent content of the empiric data is the main point of interest.

5.2 Materials
In order to create a base of existing knowledge and research, a first general search was conducted in the search engines SocINDEX and DiVa. Key words used were various combinations of social work, international social work, social work education, field placements, international field placements, volunteer work, international volunteerism, postcolonialism, universalism and cultural relativism. The articles were browsed through in order to get a first impression of existing research, and some articles were discarded while others were kept. By using the articles’ reference lists, further relevant articles, books and doctoral theses were found. In addition, the researcher benefited from having previously participated in adjacent university courses about international social work, social sciences and human rights, and could therefore use required readings from those courses as further inspiration. International legal documents like the UNHR (1948) were also used. As there was limited existing research that focused particularly on social work students in international settings, it was decided to include research from adjacent areas such as international volunteerism, in order to get a broader view.

5.3 Data selection
As the aim of the study was to investigate how students problematize regarding international social work, the most relevant approach was considered to be a qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews (Lewis & McNaughton Nicholls, 2014). The main criteria for respondents was that they needed to be social work students with experience of international field placements, which made purposive sampling a suited method (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant & Rahim, 2014). At first, the researcher compiled a complete list of all existing social work educations within Swedish universities. Nineteen Swedish social work educations were identified. Representatives (such as course coordinators or other faculty members listed as contact persons) for all nineteen social work faculties were contacted via email or telephone, with information about the study and an inquiry if they had students that fitted the requested description. Out of the nineteen universities, eight gave a positive response, i.e. that they had students that fitted the requested description. It was then decided that a cluster sample (Bryman, 2001) would be used to choose one university that all respondents would attend. The reason for this was that since the sample would be rather small, having all
respondents attend the same university would give them an internal homogeneity in terms of theoretical preparation and the opportunity to do field placements abroad.

As the aim was to analyze how social work students related to international social work, it was considered relevant that the respondents had a particular interest and knowledge in this area. This is what Ritchie et al. (2014) call deliberately choosing units that can reflect a particular feature. In this case, the particular feature was an interest in international social work. The university that finally ended up providing respondents was therefore chosen based on the criterion that it had the most explicit focus on international social work – and therefore most likely students with that particular interest - and that its students had the opportunity to participate in international field placements.

The course coordinator for international field placements at the faculty was contacted. Due to ethical considerations direct contact information to students could not be provided, so a convenience sample (Bryman, 2001) was used instead. The course coordinator forwarded an email from the researcher to all students with information about the study, including contact information, and the students that fitted the requested description could then decide themselves if they wanted to participate, and then contact the researcher. The criterion for respondents was that they had participated in at least one international field placements in a non-western country during their social work education. Eight students responded, saying that they were interested in participating. The researcher then confirmed their participation, and provided them with further practical information. During this stage, one respondent cancelled their participation, which means that there were seven respondents left.

5.3.1 Interviews
Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2001). This was considered to be the most suited interview design, considering that the research questions were formulated in a way that the respondents would need to be able to speak freely of their experiences and reflections, but would still need to be guided in order to stay within the research topic. Prior to the interviews, a topic guide (Ritchie et al., 2014) was created using the research questions and previous research as inspiration. Key issues for the interviews were outlined, and then broken down into more specific interview questions. The interview process needed to be flexible (Bryman, 2001) both in terms of in what order the questions should be asked and in terms of relevant follow-up questions.

Due to practical circumstances, all interviews took place by either telephone or Skype video call. The questions were not necessarily asked in a particular order or formulated in a specific way, as the researcher prioritized flexibility and letting the respondents lead the direction in terms of sharing their experiences and reflections. The interview guide was thus mainly kept as a checklist to make sure that no major areas were left out. The interview guide can be viewed in Appendix 1. All interviews took between 45-60 minutes each, and were all recorded and then transcribed. As all the respondents were Swedish, Swedish was used as the main language during interviews, transcription and analysis. The quotes that were finally chosen to be part of the final presentation were translated into English.

5.3.2 Presentation of respondents
Seven respondents participated in this study. They were all female Swedish social work students, studying at the same university. They had all participated in international field placements as part of their social work education – during either one or two semesters - and at
the time of the field placement they were between 22 and 34 years old. There was also some variation as to whether they had chosen to complete both field placements abroad or one field placement abroad and one in Sweden, as well as which semester they had spent abroad. All respondents had more or less former experiences of travelling. Mostly as tourists, but there was some experience of international volunteer work or having worked abroad. As for host countries, Uganda was the most represented country. This might be because the faculty in Sweden had made agreements with local Ugandan organizations to accept Swedish students, which in turn made it relatively easy for students to travel there. A contributing factor could also be that once students had been to a specific country or organization, it was perceived as easier for other students to go to the same place, as there might already be established contacts, good rumour, etc. A presentation of all respondents can be viewed in Table 2.

**Table 2**
_A Presentation of All Respondents._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Sofie</th>
<th>Eva</th>
<th>Julia</th>
<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Moa</th>
<th>Elin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of placement</td>
<td>First placement in Uganda, second placement in Sweden</td>
<td>First placement in the Philippines, second placement in a western country (not Sweden)</td>
<td>First placement in Nepal, second placement in Colombia</td>
<td>First placement in Sweden, second placement in Kenya</td>
<td>First placement in a western country (not Sweden), second placement in India</td>
<td>First placement in Sweden, second placement in Kenya</td>
<td>First placement in the Philippines, second placement in Uganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous experience</td>
<td>Limited travelling</td>
<td>Much experience of international volunteer work and travelling</td>
<td>Much experience of travelling</td>
<td>Much experience of travelling and volunteer work within Europe</td>
<td>Experience of international volunteer work</td>
<td>Much experience of travelling, worked within Europe</td>
<td>Limited travelling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names are fictive

### 4.4 Analysis design
Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Spencer, Ritchie, O’Connor & Barnard, 2014) was chosen as an analysis design, as its characteristics – discovering, interpreting and reporting patterns and clusters of meaning within data - matched with this study’s aim to analyse how the respondents related their experiences of international field placements to theoretical understanding, their view on the role of social work education and their own role as future professionals.

Analysis of the data started on a manifest level and then moved on to a more latent level, by using steps of coding raw data, sorting codes into categories and then sorting categories into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2001; Spencer, Ritchie, O’Connor, Morrell & Ormston, 2014; Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O’Connor & Barnard, 2014). At first, all recorded interviews were listened through and transcribed. The transcripts were browsed through in order to get a general feeling for the material while looking for apparent meanings and patterns. The transcripts were then read through several times more carefully, while looking
for meaningful units of text and patterns on a more latent level. The units were coded inclusively, where all units had potential to be used in future themes. All units were written on ‘post it’-notes that were organized into categories, and then labelled with temporary themes and sub-themes. The method used for this process was by drawing mind-maps. The mind-maps were changed and modified several times, as some themes were discarded, some codes changed into main themes, etc. The ambition was internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, i.e. that the themes were mutually exclusive and did not overlap, and that codes did not fit into several themes. An example of how the development of themes took place through mind-maps can be viewed in Appendix 2. Finally, all remaining themes were reviewed in order to check that the codes formed a coherent pattern, and that the codes were relevant and reflected the wider meanings of the data set. After the final themes had been decided upon, the presentation of the analysis was written. As the writing process began, some themes had to be further changed and re-organized, in order to form a coherent analysis. During the whole analysis process, the research questions were always in focus. Quotes were included in the presentation in order to illustrate the story, a certain complexity or other relevant aspects of the analysis.

4.5 Reliability and validity
Results from qualitative studies can generally be generalized to other contexts (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston & Morrell, 2014). Considering that the aim of this study was to analyse how Swedish social work students problematize regarding issues related to international social work, the results can most likely be generalized to other similar populations like social work students with a specific interest in international social work. This is however dependant upon the specific criterion of having an interest in the international aspect of social work. The international aspect might not be considered equally important in another setting, if for instance the sample had consisted of social work students in general or of professional social workers in a Swedish context. The results would in that case likely have shown a lesser interest in international aspects and perhaps a bigger focus on how these aspects can affect social work in a local Swedish setting.

A study’s validity is about to what extent the researcher has measured the intended things to capture (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston & Morrell, 2014). In this study, validity has been strived for by keeping constant close contact to the research questions and to continuously reassert that they are in focus and that the aim of research has been the basis during both data collection and analytical process.

4.6 Ethical considerations
When contacting respondents, they were all informed of ethical considerations for research determined by Vetenskapsrådet (2002). These ethical considerations consist of four aspects: *information, consent, usage and confidentiality*. Information in this study consisted of first sending out a general email with information about the study, asking respondents to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. After having received interested respondents, they received a personal email with further information, planning of time for the interview, etc. After having decided upon a time for the interview, the respondents also received oral information adjacent to the interview. The respondents were informed – both in written form and orally - that their consent was essential; i.e. that their participation was voluntary and that they could cancel at any time. They were also informed of the usage of their participation, that the empiric data material would only be used in the study. Finally, the
respondents were also informed about the confidentiality aspect – that their participation would be treated with as much anonymity as possible and that no unauthorized people would be able to access their personal data.

One ethical consideration that arose during the research process was how anonymous a study really can be when all respondents are students within the same university and faculty. However, all respondents were aware of these premises and were still non-reluctant in sharing their stories in quite specific detail. This openness might be related to the fact that none of the data in the study can be argued to be of a particularly sensitive character, and that having participated in international field placements is mainly a positive experience.

4.7 Methodological limitations
As Ormston, Spencer, Barnard and Snape (2014) mention, it is impossible for a qualitative researcher to remain completely neutral. For instance, I as a researcher am part of a post-colonial setting, which might affect how I approach research questions and respond to data. I am a part of a certain cultural context as well as affected by dominating discourses.

The results of this study might have been different in the sample was different. Due to ethical aspects, the researcher was not able to choose respondents individually. Since all respondents actively expressed an interest in participating, they were probably more eager to share their stories than the average respondent might have been. The results might therefore have been different if the sample had been randomized, or if the researcher had actively chosen the respondents instead of the other way around. It might also have been a different result if the respondents had not been conveniently chosen for their interest in the international aspect of social work. Of course, then the respondents probably would not have been able to contribute as much as they did. It would also have been interesting to compare respondents from different semesters or host countries to each other instead of having them brought together in one sample, or to include male respondents. This might have brought a comparative aspect of whether there are differences in the way men and women problematize around international social work. It might also have been interesting to compare between universities, which was not possible with the resources available.

A methodological limitation was that interviews took place in another language than the language in which the study was written, which means that some original meanings might have been lost in the translation process. It also means that all included quotes are not the actual words spoken by the respondents, but include the researcher’s interpretation as well.

Since all interviews took place via telephone or Skype video call, it affected the interaction between researcher and respondents. It was difficult for the researcher to notice the respondents’ reactions and need for clarification, which might have been cause of misunderstandings or miscommunications. A visible limitation was the so-called Hawthorne-effect (Asplund, 1987), i.e. the fact that one takes part in a study affects how one responds to questions. For example, one of the respondents tried to adapt an answer to how she thought the researcher wanted her to answer. On a positive note, Bryman (2001) points out that respondents are less affected by the researcher’s presence during phone interviews, as they cannot see the other person and therefore have no opinion of the person’s ethnicity, sex, age or other factors.
5. Results and analysis

In the following section, results from the empiric data and analysis will be presented. Each theme and subtheme will be presented and analysed individually, followed by a summary.

5.1 Presentation of themes

The results were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O’Connor & Barnard, 2014). The point of departure was the research questions, and the analytical process culminated into five main themes. Each theme was further divided into several subthemes. An overview of all themes is presented in Figure 2, including how the themes are connected to research questions and subthemes.

![Diagram of research questions, themes, and subthemes](image)

*Figure 2. Research questions, associated themes and subthemes.*

5.2 Theme 1 – The more theoretical knowledge, the more complexity

The argument in previous research that contemporary international social work in general lacks a postcolonial and critical perspective (Haug, 2005) does not reflect the respondents in this study. They were both aware of and able to critically review the complexity of contemporary issues within international social work, including historic origin and their
multifaceted reality. A common conclusion was that knowledge does not necessarily make complex aspects easier to understand. It was rather that as their knowledge increased, so did their awareness of complex issues. This in turn appeared to bring almost hopelessness, as they realized how much it would take to actually escape the complexity and be able to change anything. An increase in knowledge was not automatically perceived as merely a solution, but likewise as a cause of even further questions.

*I feel like it’s better to remain stupid and happy (laughter)... that’s how I feel. At the same time I’m thinking... the more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know. There’s so much I need to learn in order to understand this somehow.* (Sofie)

Most respondents agreed that having participated in international field placements had made them understand the complexity more than they would have done by only hypothetically reading about it. They considered that experiencing a complexity was a more effective way to understand it, and that their theoretical understanding had improved more from their international field placement than it would have done otherwise. They however also mentioned that they did not realize how much they had learned during the field placements, but that these insights had primarily come once they had returned to Sweden. All respondents were however glad that they had taken the opportunity to travel abroad and gain new perspectives of the world, even if it had brought some complex thoughts and emotions as well.

*I think I can relate in another way now.../ I’ve gained some perspective that I’m only one person and not that important in a larger sense, that I can’t really change any global systems by myself, or change the way other people do things/.../ I don’t think I’ve actually changed anything, except that I gained new perspectives.* (Moa)

*Postcolonialism is everywhere. But I’d rather not be a part of it, which makes it... you need to consider before you go, like why should I go to the Philippines?* (Sofie)

### 5.2.1 Consequences of power

Power is an essential factor to consider when analyzing how the western World has affected the third World in terms of development. If one does not acknowledge the legacy of colonialism and the fact that the West is in a superior power position that affects all stakeholders, global issues can appear quite meaningless. As previously mentioned, there has been somewhat of a paradigm shift when it comes to international aid, from being mostly about financial donations to more cooperative solutions with focus on participation, empowerment and ownership (Desai & Solas, 2012; Eriksson Baaz, 2001). Among the respondents, there were traces of both ‘old’ and ‘new’ terminology. They were aware of their privileged positions and agreed that local staff needed to be empowered in their work. One respondent mentioned that as a westerner, you have never been forced to question your own culture or citizenship. You have thus never felt what it is like to be in an inferior power position, which can make it difficult to relate to how others relate to power and why it is such a big issue. There was a lot of criticism against the West’s prominent position, meaning that as long as the West is in charge, things will never change in terms of global power structures.

*Before my journey I was very aware of... you know, the history that for instance missionaries have had, that the aim with colonialism/.../ you know, slavery and*
such awful things. But I still believed that I could contribute somehow. But I gained a deeper understanding of the problems of coming from another culture...to arrive in another country expecting to help... even if I don’t want to admit to it... there’s a history to consider... and a global power structure to consider. I cannot claim not to care about it. It’s just there somehow. And in the same way I feel like I’ve learned a lot, and... yeah. Maybe that’s what you can do/.../ gain understanding in a respectful way. Because in some way, West still has all the resources, has all the money and power. So as long as the power balance in the world doesn’t change, help must probably come from the West. And I don’t know... maybe the current power structure is the thing that needs to be changed. (Eva)

Judging by how the local organizations were described by the respondents, it appeared as if the organizations were ‘stuck’ in a larger global system of financial aid and donors – a system that can be argued to have expired – instead of keeping up with social work and international aid’s transfer to more empowering values. Decision-makers and politicians were criticized for determining terms and laws from their own narrow perspective, without any real insight into reality. The respondents felt that they, as social workers, had superior insights into global issues and how to change them that people in charge had yet to realize. Yet it was impossible for them as students to ‘change the system’, which made them frustrated as they had to adjust to an organization whose motto they did not support.

It’s almost as if you realize that this type of aid work is so conditional. When you apply for financial aid from the UN... it’s almost like you’re contributing to uphold this system. It puts Nepal in further power disadvantage towards the West. In some way that undermines Nepal’s independence and ability to heal itself. Given that Nepal actually needs to heal. (Eva)

A concrete example - regarding the procedure of applying for financial aid from the UN to an aid organization in Nepal - illustrates the unjust power structures and how a system can be so complex that even though one can identify the problem, it is still almost impossible to change the situation.

These money that they’re supposed to apply for... you could apply in English, French, Italian, German... only European languages. When in reality it’s people in for instance India and Nepal that need these money more than anyone else. But it was not possible to apply in their languages/.../ it became so clear that the West has all the power. That these countries... in order to get money from the West, they have to become a part of the West themselves somehow. The help is not unconditional. (Eva)

The situation was being described as if the West was making unreasonable demands on third World countries to only be allowed to ask for help if they agree to certain conditions. The respondents were aware that this was an example of western superiority, in which the West sets the terms for aid and the ones in need has to adapt to western rules in order to qualify for it. The respondents also had a humble ambition to not participate in maintaining this power structure. At the same time, they realized that by participating in international field placements, they did in fact become a part in upholding it.

The more I learn, the more I realize how difficult the situation is and how everything is connected somehow and how incredibly complex it is. And the more I learn about social work... I mean it’s so difficult for me to know how to relate to
They managed to see their own part in the global system and acknowledge the complexity. They criticized the unilaterally aspect of the system, and questioned why exchanges are rarely mutual, for instance that social workers from Uganda never come to Sweden for field studies.

5.2.1.1 Criticism of the western world
Criticizing the western World is a clear expression of being part of a postcolonial discourse, as one acknowledges how colonizing societies have been constructed in order to legitimize current power structures with the West as the superior force. As long as the West remains superior, unjust power systems will never change. This standpoint was very obvious among the respondents, as their criticism of current power structures was mainly aimed at the West and their perceptions of the western World, and hardly at all aimed at the host countries they visited. Even though they could recognize themselves as part of a colonizing society, they also perceived themselves as separate from the rest of the West, in possession of a sort of ‘superior knowledge’. For example, they talked about historical ‘mistakes’ made by the western World, such as racial biology in Sweden. Another example was that they talked about ‘westerners’ in a way that implied that they did not consider themselves to be part of this group. When they caught themselves participating in typical western behaviour – like living in abundance - they began criticizing themselves, arguing that they did not appreciate their benefits but instead complained over seemingly insignificant details. There was also an inherent wish to help and a somewhat naïve idea that ‘maybe I can contribute’. Even though they were aware of their ancestors’ responsibility for much contemporary poverty, there was still a striving to be able to do things differently and change history, and thus help in a better way.

5.2.2 From universalism to cultural relativism
Most of the respondents had a universalism standpoint prior to their international field placement, only to move more towards a cultural relativism approach after having witnessed social work in another cultural context. This might have been affected by the education’s universal standpoint, and the fact that many international treaties and legal documents support a universalism approach. In other words, universalism is taught during social work education as the most suited approach to social work issues. The most common procedure for the respondents was that after having seen social work practice in a non-western context for themselves, they became aware that western methods might not be suited for non-western contexts – regardless of how well they work in the West – and they thus moved more towards a cultural relativism standpoint. There was however some individual variation regarding to what extent the respondents had moved towards cultural relativism and how much they supported universal solutions like global human rights.

Of course, human rights are really important. And it works in very many countries, and when we read about it in school, I was like: ‘God every country should have this’. But then when I came to India and realized what problems they entailed, why it wasn’t working...that made me understand why human rights don’t exist everywhere. (Moa)
Not all respondents were convinced that cultural relativism was automatically the best approach. It was the most common opinion, but a few respondents felt – even after having completed their field placements – that universalism was still the best approach and that there should be global guidelines that act as fundamentals for social work. They did however realize the complexity in this and were reluctant to force something that they viewed as ‘right’ upon someone else who might not share their viewpoint. They argued that insights about what constitutes as ‘right’ must come from within a country, rather than from someone else enlightening them about it. There was also an insight that what constitutes as fundamental values can differ between cultures, and if you try to understand something rather than judge it, it usually makes sense. Because of that, things like human rights need to be contextualized if they are to be successfully implemented in a local context, or else people will just ignore them and do things the way they always have.

Just because something works in the West, doesn’t mean that it necessarily works in for instance the Philippines. It can even do more harm than good. And that’s really where I stand. But of course, it’s easier said than done. I mean, I don’t think you can have...that there is one model of social work that works everywhere. Because life conditions are not the same everywhere. And I believe one needs to start at that point, and sort of proceed from there!.../ I mean that’s what I find so complex about international social work/.../ it’s all about social justice and human rights. But by performing the social work that we do, we take part in reproducing oppression and...I think it’s so contradictory. And how should one handle that? How do we change that? (Sofie)

Imbedded in the statements above is a complexity; a simultaneous strive to gain more knowledge in order to understand a complex reality, but also a realization of and a resignation to the impossible mission to change existing power systems. The respondents questioned the actual benefits of their participation for local communities, and appeared to feel guilty about imperialistic tendencies. They were reluctant to contribute to unjust power structures. From having identified themselves primarily as social workers, i.e. helpers, prior to department, their experiences of international field studies seemed to make them identify more as westerners, i.e. imperialists. This paved the way for an unavoidable clash between ideals and actual purpose.

If I continue maintaining this tendency of western white people being superior to coloured people and African countries /.../ if I maintain this through my attempts to save the world: ‘Me, I have the knowledge, I’m the one who knows best, I’m the able one. I will go and fix this.’ That’s how it’s been. And it’s difficult. I don’t think I have any hidden agendas when I go somewhere to make a contribution. To me it’s about experiencing social work, but the bottom line is that it’s not that simple. And I think those thoughts have occurred to me after coming home /.../ that it might have been better if I never went in the first place, so I wouldn’t have participated in upholding existing patterns. (Anna)

One assumption within postcolonial theory is that the western World has imposed its methods and values onto non-western contexts. From this point of view, one might assume that most NGOs and aid organizations in the third World are very influenced – and maybe even run – by western forces. However, the organizations featured in this study were primarily ran by local staff, even if some of them had been started by westerners and then handed over to local staff. The respondents were very much aware that they were part of a non-western context, and therefore could not assume to have the best available knowledge. They travelled with open minds and an aim to learn local methods and approaches.
You need to be careful not to barge in thinking that you know best. More like: ‘ok, so you do things like this, well teach me!’ To really have a humble attitude. (Sofie)

5.2.2.1 Local and global phenomena affect each other mutually

The course coordinator emphasized the importance of teaching students how local and global aspects affect each other mutually prior to departure during the preparation phase. The education aimed to not separate events, but rather to see them in a historical and global context. This approach appeared to be successful, as the respondents mentioned the interaction between global and local events as a key factor in understanding the complexity of certain issues and how they relate to each other. They also believed this was an area that they could relate to more than their classmates who did their placements in Sweden could, as issues concerning globalization was considered to have a bigger impact in international social work than in local social work.

*Globalization is like the biggest subject in the world. And to actually realize that.../ the global within the local, the local within the global. To actually see that connection...I believe that’s the key somehow.* (Sofie)

The awareness that local occurrences cannot be separated from global ones once again connects to the debate of universalism versus cultural relativism, i.e. whether the third World should import western social work theories and models or if they should base their practice upon local traditions instead. A constantly present theme during interviews was the complexity and ambiguity as to whether a universalism approach or a cultural relativism approach would be the most beneficial for all parties involved. The more experience and knowledge the respondents had gained from their field placements, the more complex the issue became and the more they began questioning existing knowledge. As previously mentioned, the students tended to have been taught a universalism approach to social work prior to departure, but after having experienced a non-western context themselves - and thus seen how for instance human rights do not work in a particular context – they tended to move more towards cultural relativism.

*I think the organization wanted to focus on children’s rights, and...they write this report every year. Since they have signed the Convention of the Child. But...it doesn’t really work like that. I think they rather focus on whatever problem arises, because they can’t do any better than that. There are not enough resources to change their working methods any better than that. Even though they really would like to...all the employees at the organization were so kind and had such ambitions. But unfortunately there were financial obstacles that prevented them from achieving their ambitions.* (Lisa)

The indication that most respondents leaned towards a locally based and indigenous social work rather than a universal social work, goes against the ‘common’ social work standpoint, i.e. that the profession has a universal foundation. It appears that by having actually seen practical examples of social work in the third World, the respondents realized that western methods did not work in those context and that one therefore needs to develop other methods that are more locally based.

*This thing that you can’t work in the same way...I thought about that. That we work in different ways in Sweden and Uganda. But considering the conditions in*
Uganda/.../ who says that my methods are the best methods? Sometimes during my field placements I felt like ok, I might not have done things this way. But on the other hand that’s only from my point of view. To them...it’s their way. And I also think that social work should be based on certain fundamentals, regardless of context. But actual work methods - that depends on the context, what resources you have - and local-specific conditions. (Anna)

In conclusion, the issue of universalism versus cultural relativism was acknowledged as a complex problem that lacks an obvious solution. The respondents were all aware of how their cultural heritage might affect their opinions and therefore strived to keep an open mind to other approaches, which could also be a contributing factor to why they were so open to taking Rome as the Romans will and adapt to local social work rather than to impose their western knowledge as superior.

### 5.2.3 Poverty is the biggest issue

The most conspicuous social problem noticed by the students in the host countries was poverty, which was expressed in different ways. Even though their focus was not to unravel causes of poverty, they still reflected on this. They concluded that poverty can be seen as an outcome of structural problems, for instance that women are generally considered as ‘less’ than men, and that third World countries are therefore underusing potential workers. Another area of reflection in relation to poverty was whose responsibility eradicating it should be. They had mostly negative opinions about the involvement of the West and favoured indigenization, even though much of the social work they witnessed was perceived as inadequate.

This is supposed to be a temporary orphanage. These children are supposed to live at the orphanage for about three months, after that the aim is to find their parents and get them back to them. But there were many children who had been living at the orphanage for more than a year. Because they don’t have enough resources to drive the kids back home to their families. And they also don’t have resources to follow up how the kids are actually doing back home, once they have been reunited with their families. So there were quite many flaws in the system. I mean in theory it all sounds good, but it didn’t work in reality due to financial difficulties. (Lisa)

I believe it can be difficult to create social change if you don’t believe you can actually change things/.../ if you don’t think you can affect anything, then it will be difficult to change things. (Eva)

There was also a realization that the problems of poverty were bigger than they had first imagined. Even though most respondents had seen poverty in the medias prior to departure and generally considered themselves to be well prepared in that area, they were still chocked when they got to experience severe poverty with their own eyes.

The poverty was so extreme, that even though I was prepared for it, it was still surprising to watch it with my own eyes. It made me very sad and I found it uncomfortable/.../ when we were in the slum where many of the children lived...it was like stepping into a movie made by UNICEF that I’ve seen on TV so many times in Sweden. And when you're sitting at home, watching...it’s impossible to understand until you’re actually there. So even though I’ve seen this type of footage, it was still a shock. (Anna)
5.3 Theme 2 – Social work education as an asset

Social work education has a prominent role to play in preparing students for working in globalized contexts. By giving students opportunities to participate in international field placements, the education has the possibility to shape how the students relate to the rest of the world, what they consider to be predominant issues and how they as social workers should relate to that. The ambition is that social work education will be a positive force that contributes to student learning goals, which was one aspect visible among the respondents. They felt that the university was responsive to their opinions and criticism, and strived to improve areas that had not worked ideally, such as for instance supervision. As far as preparation, the respondents were most satisfied with emotional, cultural and practical preparation. They felt that the education had prepared them in those areas, which was helpful when meeting a new context, both cultural-wise and social work-wise.

5.3.1 Broader view of what social work as a profession comprises

As mentioned by several researchers, it is difficult to find one clear definition of what social work as a profession actually comprises, as contexts and conditions can vary so much. This in turn entails various forms of social work methods. By participating in international field placements, the respondents found that their view of what the social work profession can actually entail had widened.

*The thing I've really learned about international social work is how different it can look in another part of the world. And I've also learned about international social work in general, what it is and who sets up the template. And I think that makes it even more interesting, once I've seen that in the Philippines they do things completely different.* (Sofie)

There was also a realization of the variety of ways in which professional social workers can approach their role: if they regarded themselves mostly as employees – which appeared to be the case in the western World – or if they regarded their work as more of a calling – which appeared to be the case in many of the host countries. The respondents were impressed with local social workers’ ability to improvise and come up with unique solutions for each situation, instead of being more bureaucratic and follow a certain predetermined procedure, as is often the case in Sweden. Being more flexible usually meant a faster process than in Sweden, which was seen as positive for individual clients who did not have to wait several weeks or months for a decision to be made, but could instead get requested help faster. To a few of the respondents, seeing alternative approaches to social work brought a criticism towards Swedish methods, meaning that Swedish social work just assumes to have the best knowledge for a particular situation, when in reality there are other approaches that might work just as well.

*This is how the lives of social workers can look in the Philippines. I mean social workers lives, it’s to a large extent about devoting your entire life to your job. And it’s not like that at all in Sweden. But they’re like very...you know, dedicated.*
(Sofie)

In addition to the aspect of how one regards one’s role as a social worker, the respondents also detected differences in how you can approach social work as a profession. For example, they realized how structural factors could be crucial when determining what a social work
practice will look like. Things like financial means - whether funding came from the state or the voluntary sector, or if the social work was primarily executed by the state or by NGOs - were described as crucial factors for what the practice would actually look like. Less state interference usually meant bigger responsibility for individual NGOs and social workers. The respondents did not give a clear opinion on which type of social work they considered to be the ‘best’, but were instead curious and wanted to learn about different approaches.

In Sweden, we’re protected since we all have the same conditions regardless of municipality. There is financial aid in all municipalities based on a common national norm. But in India it’s more like: ‘this NGO exists in this village, but not in this’/.../ so that becomes some kind of injustice. But...maybe not all villages need the same kind of help. Some villages have big problems with diseases and HIV, so they need specific help with that. So...it might seem as an unjust system, but it could also be that they base their work on specific needs and give aid accordingly. (Moa)

5.3.2 Broader view of what constitutes as social problems
From a social constructivist point of view, the one in possession of power is the one who gets to define the dominant discourse. In the case of international social work, it is therefore likely that the West – as the dominant global power - has defined what constitutes as social problems. This entails a somewhat narrow definition of what social problems actually are. The respondents found that some social problems they had previously never even considered – like orphans and street children - were actually considered to be major problems in the host countries. Another example was one respondent who had never reflected upon prostitution as a social problem, but after having encountered it during the field placement realized that it was actually a big issue in some parts of the world.

Prostitution is not a big issue in Sweden in the same way. For example, NGOs worked mostly to facilitate the lives of the prostitutes, like take care of their children or inform them about sexual transmitted diseases/.../ but if this was Sweden I think the focus would instead have been to counteract and prevent the problem in itself. (Moa)

Another eye-opener was realizing the different levels of needs and social problems. The respondents meant that you cannot bother about issues related to abstract goals of status or self-fulfilling, when you do not even have resources enough to feed your family or put your children through school. One conclusion was that since people in Sweden do not really suffer from lack of basal things like food and shelter, they tend to ‘create’ problems instead. So even though social problems exist in the West, the respondents waived them as non-important, arguing that people are far worse off in the third World. For example, one respondent talked about children being abandoned by their parents for no apparent reason, arguing that that was a trauma no child should have to experience. Thus, seeing poverty and other social issues that are somewhat ‘typical’ for the third World assured the respondents that their contributions were of bigger value in the third World than they would have been in Sweden. This also made them re-evaluate their contributions to social work in Sweden, in terms of how much their help was actually needed.

Even though people in Sweden experience crisis/.../ I’ve met people who are in much worse crisis and terrible circumstances/.../ social problems in other parts of the world have another dimension. (Moa)
5.3.3 Positive outcomes for the local community

One thing that previous studies claim is missing in research is what consequences it brings for local communities and organizations when the West sends young people – such as social work students or international volunteers – abroad with an aim to contribute (Cleak et. al., 2016; Lough, 2009; Lough et. al., 2012). Although the primary focus for this study was not to examine how the students’ contributions did in fact affect local social work, it was still possible to detect some patterns and tendencies from the respondents’ perspectives. They all felt like they might have made a difference or had had an impact on the local social work organizations. One example was a respondent describing how she encountered young women in the local organization that were fighting for women’s rights, and that she was able to encourage these women and assure them that they were doing a good thing. Another respondent mentioned being around as an extra resource, and thus able to finish projects that local staff did not have time to prioritize. Yet another example was being able to contribute with alternative ways to treat socially vulnerable people, as the respondents felt that local staff many times ‘looked down’ on for example children with disabilities. The respondents could thus bring these neglected people into attention and make the local staff see their worth as human beings.

In the Philippines there was an incident where I felt that one of the organization staff was acting violently towards the kids. I reacted very strongly against that. And I brought this up with my supervisor /.../ they’re supposed to work with children’s rights...so this incident that I witnessed became quite a big issue. And they explained it as cultural differences. I know that there are cultural differences, but it’s like...it shouldn’t be like that in an organization. And they agreed with me. This woman, I think she thought twice before beating children in the future. (Elin)

My supervisor asked me for my opinion on the work of the organization. And then I mentioned that they could take care of disabled children in a different way. At least give them pens and papers, have them sit and draw...just give them something to do or give them building blocks to play with, or just something. Don’t let them just sit there. And she understood that. Or at least she said that she understood that. (Lisa)

The common trait was that the respondents initially felt that they had not really contributed, but as they returned to Sweden and time went by they gained new perspectives and realized that maybe they did make a difference after all.

5.4 Theme 3 – Social work education as a liability

In the same way that social work education can be an asset in preparing student, it can also become a liability if certain aspects are not taken into consideration. For instance, if the education does not prepare the students sufficiently, the negative outcomes of their international placements can be plenty. They can become a part of upholding unjust power structures, or they can take the universality of western social work methods and ethical considerations for granted and assume that they are applicable anywhere regardless of context. On a personal level, they can also experience culture clashes that prevent them from appreciating the luxury of meeting foreign cultures, and instead only see what is deviant. This, in turn, can increase the dichotomy between the West and ‘the Rest’.
5.4.1 Lack of trust in the university’s preparatory ability
The education emphasized the connection between local and global aspects of social work, meaning that there were no significant differences in purpose between participating in field placements domestically or internationally. However, the respondents were critical against this universalism approach, meaning that the university’s theoretical preparation was unsatisfactory. For instance, one respondent thought that current theoretical preparation was more suited for students that would remain in domestic placements, as focus was mostly on Swedish laws and systems, which is knowledge that is not applicable on non-Swedish contexts.

*I have taken another course, in preparing volunteers for international placements. And only during those two weeks...I basically learned more about international social work than what I’ve learned during the whole social work education. So I would say that much of the knowledge and experience I have, I’ve gained in the field. Right now I’m taking a course where I feel that I’m learning more theoretical background. And that’s the last semester of the education. Not to mention, a course that isn’t mandatory, but something I’ve chosen for myself.*  
(Sofie)

*We had a few preparatory seminars with the teacher in charge. But that was mostly practical information /.../ Theoretical aspects of international social work is something that has been introduced in later courses, once we had returned to Sweden.* (Julia)

The respondents gave the impression of not quite trusting their education to provide them with necessary information, and that if they wanted relevant theoretical preparation and understanding, they had to obtain information from optional sources.

5.4.2 Too much focus on practical preparation
The respondents emphasized practical preparation – as opposed to theoretical preparation - as the most prominent preparatory factor contributed by the university. Even though they acknowledged the importance of practical preparation, they gave the impression that this was knowledge they could acquire elsewhere, and that the educational focus could have been on theoretical and emotional preparation to a larger extent.

*Even though the seminars were good...I don’t know, it’s just hard to prepare emotionally. It’s very good to cover all the practical issues, insurances and things like that, but emotionally it’s just hard to prepare, I think.*  
(Elin)

*I wouldn’t say we got any theoretical preparation regarding international social work. I mean the first two semesters in the social work education...they’re very general. And it wasn’t really focused on international aspects /.../ considering most students did their field placements in Sweden.* (Sofie)

The respondents also felt that there was far more focus on the preparatory phase than on the actual stay abroad phase and the post experience phase. They did have the option to get supervisory support from Sweden during the placement, but felt that once they had returned to Sweden, much of their reflection was up to themselves without supervisory guidance.
5.4.3 Uncertainties about the purpose of international field placements

The respondents were mostly positive about having the opportunity to participate in field placements abroad, but were negative in the sense that they felt that the university had not been clear about what the actual purpose of their placements was. Furthermore, preparation had not been country-specific enough, but was more a general common introduction for all students that were going abroad. As the local staff often had different expectations of what the Swedish students would do or contribute with, the respondents expressed a wish of having had a clearer purpose of their tasks, requirements and rights.

_I wish I had known more about the purpose of the field placement, so that I would have been able to make more demands /.../ I was very disappointed when I came there. Because my supervisor had given me an impression that the work they were doing was huge. And it wasn’t._ (Julia)

This uncertainty appeared to become more prominent during the placement than it had been prior to it, and there was an expressed wish to have discussed the matter more beforehand. The feeling of uncertainty increased depending on factors like how much the students felt that they could contribute, to what extent the work of the local organization matched the description given to the students beforehand, how much the agreed with local methods used by the organization and how much they felt that they were actively participating in the everyday work.

5.4.3.1 Lacking supervision

One prominent factor for a satisfactory field placement that was mentioned by all respondents – and hardly mentioned at all in previous research – was the matter of supervision. Most of the respondents complained of having had inadequate supervision in the host country, which according to them was one of the factors that mostly contributed to the experience being less than it could have been. They mentioned the supervisor being uninterested in introducing them to tasks, being absent and not understanding the implications of taking on Swedish students. The critique against the lack of supervision was not particularly aimed at the university – even though it is ultimately the university’s responsibility to provide satisfactory conditions – but something that the students related more to cultural clashes and misunderstandings in communication.

_I did have a supervisor. But she...I don’t think she quite understood the impact of being a supervisor for students. We had one evaluative conversation during fifteen weeks. I’m sure they had had other students from Uganda prior to me, but it seems like they don’t have the same expectations from a supervisor as we do in Sweden._ (Lisa)

_We tried talking to our supervisor sometimes and tell him how we felt about certain things, things that were difficult for us to watch. But that...I don’t know. I guess he didn’t understand our point of view. I didn’t really feel like he gave me any response or support._ (Anna)

5.4.3.2 Regarded as volunteer workers

Many of the host organizations were dependant on international volunteers as a resource, which relates to Lough’s (2009, 2014) argument that there are a lot of similarities between international volunteers and social work students. An unsatisfactory aspect that affected some of the students – those who did their placement in organizations that also had international
volunteers as part of their staff - was being compared to or perceived as a volunteer worker. There was a subtle sentiment among the respondents that they felt it was important to emphasize their professional identity - to put a clear distinction between themselves and miscellaneous ‘others’ – and therefore almost a plea not to be perceived as volunteer workers.

*I’ve been thinking a lot about international volunteer work. I mean, many organizations rely on volunteer workers/.../ they are an integral part of the organization’s work/.../ and that...I mean I really had to fight in order not to be perceived as a volunteer worker. To make them realize that I’m not here to play with the kids. I mean of course playing with the kids was a part of my job, integrating with them. But it was not my main purpose. /.../ it was like they expected me to take care of the kids. ‘We’re not gonna involve you in anything else related to social work’. (Sofie)*

### 5.4.4 Negative outcomes for the local community

One area that has been missing from previous studies is how the occurrence of young western people – such as social work students or international volunteers – in non-western social work contexts affects local communities. The research that does exist focuses mostly on how western people themselves are affected (Cleak et. al., 2016; Lough, 2009; Lough et. al., 2012). Even though it is impossible in this study to conclude factual local outcomes from the presence of western social work students, the respondents had some insight that their presence was a risk factor for potential problems. For instance, they were concerned about participating in socially vulnerable children’s lives for a short while only to leave them, and were worried what long-term impact their relationships with these children might have on them in terms of attachment. The respondents were almost more focused on how their contributions might affect local people and communities, than on how they might be affected themselves.

*To me it was difficult/.../ being there for a limited amount of time and to build relationships with both staff and kids and then just leave everything and go back to my life/.../ to me, that was tough. It felt as if I was there and just...you know, peeked into their lives a little and then I just left and that was that. (Anna)*

The respondents also expressed a regret of not having protested more against unfair treatment of children or people with disabilities, and meant that they should have seized the moment to contribute with for instance empowerment among socially vulnerable people and making local staff realize that all people need to be treated respectfully.

*I felt pretty quickly that I could have done so much more, you know. I mean, why didn’t I say anything about how they treated disabled children, or why didn’t I...I could have contributed so much more. (Lisa)*

### 5.5 Theme 4 – Me as an asset

Perhaps the most essential aspect of the outcomes of international field placements is how the students are affected on a personal level. Their experiences can be crucial to their future careers as professional social workers, as well as determine how they relate to international aspects of social work and social issues. The educational ambition is that students get rewarding experiences that can transform them and give them valuable insights into how to approach complex issues and situations. The respondents viewed themselves as an asset in many ways, meaning that they had gained valuable knowledge and insight that had made them more humble on a personal level and more equipped on a professional level.
5.5.1 Increased thankfulness

One thing that the respondents mentioned as one of the biggest changes for them personally was an increased thankfulness for their own privileges. Seeing poverty up close had made them appreciate the benefits of living in a rich country like Sweden. They all mentioned inspiring meetings with fellow social workers as particularly memorable and meaningful.

*It was really inspiring to see people who are actually giving up their own lives in order to work with these children, to make sure they have a future. That made me feel hopeful.* (Sofie)

Another type of inspiring meetings was with socially vulnerable people, and seeing how they managed to keep their lives together despite being far worse off than yourself. This made the respondents thankful for what they had and inspired them to try even harder in their own lives.

*The people I met that lived there, the children I met, they can’t compare their lives to mine. To them, this is their reality and their childhood. And they were so happy. There was so much happiness and love and people were so resourceful/…/ and that sort of made me feel… it weighed out all the bad/…/ people were happy and seemed to be doing fine after all.* (Anna)

5.5.2 Increased confidence

Some of the respondents experienced an increased professional confidence as a result of their field placement. They mentioned having learned about foreign cultures, how to respond to people, gaining a bigger understanding for immigrants in Sweden after having experienced being treated like an outsider themselves and toughening up by being able to handle stressful situations in a poor third World country. This was dependent upon factors like being aware of their benefits and how tackling obstacles would affect them. It seemed that a crucial factor for being satisfied with your field placement was having managed to adapt to cultural differences. Other factors mentioned were having a positive attitude, an open mind, flexibility, taking responsibility for your own learning, being prepared to change your mind regarding what constitutes as good practice, being unafraid, being aware of your privileges and being brave enough to say no when something clashed with your own belief or moral.

*You need to change your own opinion on what constitutes an educative and good field placement. Or what constitutes good social work. You need to be prepared to change your own point of view. And that can be really difficult to do.* (Eva)

*Being flexible is the most important thing. Really. To constantly be able to adapt to new situations. And I got to practice that every single day. And I thought I was already good at it before this travel, but…(laughter)* (Sofie)

*I think you shouldn’t be so scared/…/ I heard of many people who were truly afraid of the country they were going on field placement to. And… I think you should try to see people as human beings. It’s just another country/…/ try keeping an open mind.* (Julia)
As the IASSW (2004) goals for social work education consist of equipping students with cross-cultural learning, an understanding of how local and global phenomena affect each other, increased open-mindedness and an increased understanding for cultural variations in social work practice, the examples above show that this particular university had managed just that, as these were crucial factors mentioned by the respondents when talking about what they learned. They all recognized their unique experiences and were thankful for them, as well as acknowledged the possibilities to learn from those experiences and make the most of them. They were aware that their learning was their responsibility, and that they could not depend on anyone else to provide them with knowledge and skills. As far as personal outcomes goes, it was a matter of taking action into your own hands.

*You really need to take responsibility. I mean you do this journey as a social work student. Take responsibility over what you actually learn. Which is basically what every lecturer told us.* (Sofie)

Most of the respondents also admitted to being even more convinced of having chosen the right career path after their field placements, regardless of having had negative experiences on the field.

*I wanted to work abroad already before the field placement, and I still want that. So my plans to work abroad haven’t really changed much.* (Julia)

### 5.5.3 Well-intended motives are essential

Students’ motivations for wanting to participate in international field placements can vary a lot. One common dominator for the respondents was that they all had motives with positive connotations. The major motives mentioned were a wish to have a personal challenge, an altruistic wish to contribute and a curiosity of other cultures.

*I had already tried field placements at the Social Services in Sweden and I felt like I sort of needed something new, to open up my mind a little bit.* (Moa)

*I sort of want to go off into the world and help out somehow.* (Eva)

The respondents that had indicated challenge or curiosity as their main motif appeared to remain positive after the field placement, regardless of how difficult or frustrating the experiences themselves had been. They could see positive aspects of simply gaining knowledge, even if they did not contribute in a concrete way. However, the respondents that had mentioned an ambition to ‘help out’ as their main motif appeared to be rather disappointed that things had not turned out the way they had hoped.

One reason for wanting to complete one field placement in Sweden and one abroad was that it was believed to give a broader experience of what the social work profession comprises, as you can then compare experiences of two completely different cultural contexts rather than have two similar experiences. The respondents also felt like this was an opportunity they would never have again, and that getting the chance to see social work in a different cultural context than Sweden was a once in a lifetime chance that they would regret not having participated in when they had the chance. There was however also a more personal agenda, as the respondents considered their own personal careers and felt that having international experience could be meriting when working in intercultural environments in Sweden. One example was that it is humbling to have experienced how it feels to come as a stranger to a
new country and be treated as an outsider, which can be an advantage when meeting immigrants in a Swedish social work setting.

5.5.4 Cultural understanding is the key to acceptance

Out of all factors that contributed to the international field placement becoming a positive experience for the respondents, the most prominent and essential one was cultural understanding. Applied to Bennett’s (1998) model on cultural sensitivity, the respondents had managed to move from the stage of ethnocentrism to the stage of ethnorelativism (see 4.2 Intercultural sensitivity). Even though they were not in a stage of denial prior to departure, they were however in a stage of minimization – where one views human beings as foundationally similar regardless of superficial cultural differences. After their field placements, the respondents had managed to transfer to ethnorelativism, i.e. they tried to understand and be open to cultural variations instead of condemning something as deviant or strange. A sign of having been able to reach cultural sensitivity – expressed by some of the respondents – was being able to not only understand local customs, but to actually consider them to make more sense than Swedish familiar customs do.

Once you had been there a while, about half the semester, by that point you had adapted to the slow pace. And that was…I found that lifestyle…it’s kinda nice. You don’t feel the constant stress that you do in Sweden, to always be on time and that everything needs to be so structured. And then it was almost a shock to leave that context, because all of a sudden everything was happening in such a fast pace. (Lisa)

They could also notice similarities between themselves and people from other cultural contexts, from previously having seen mostly differences. Learning to work with other cultures - and learning to adapt to that culture and its particular differences – gave the respondents insight that we are all people and even though we have different skin colors and different cultural traditions, we are all still people and as such we have the same worth.

On a personal level I think I’ve become a more humble person. I think I’ve increased my understanding of other people. I’ve also reflected on that we are all human beings, regardless of local contexts. It’s still the same world, and it’s not that big. We’re all humans, we’re all the same. (Moa)

One major contributing factor to being able to gain cultural sensitivity was having previous similar experiences. The respondents that had previous experiences of either having already visited the same country or had completed international field placements in another country prior to this placement had a larger sense of accepting cultural differences. This connects to what Herlitz (2007) mentions about the length of time spent in a foreign culture affecting how you feel about said culture. The longer time one spends in a foreign cultural setting, the more one will adapt to differences and find them less remarkable. If one already has past experiences of a culture prior to the field placement, these experiences will be added together in terms of the total amount of time spent in another culture. In particular, mastering the local language was considered a major contributing factor in the process of cultural adaption.
I had been to the Philippines before, which really made a difference. Coming there a second time, six years older...that was an advantage. I knew the culture and already had a network of people that I could use/.../ and I think that made my field placement more profound/.../ everything wasn’t new to me. There were already so many new things related to the placement, but there were also things that I could/.../ have a more profound experience of because I already had existing knowledge in that area. (Sofie)

Even though it is almost impossible to accept everything in a foreign culture – especially values that are in direct contrast to fundamental values in one’s own culture (Herlitz, 2007) - there was an ambition among the respondents to accept foreign phenomena, regardless of how strange they seemed. When something appeared strange and impossible to understand, they asked local staff and tried to understand reasons behind it rather than to simply dismiss it. One such example was time perception, as many third World countries have a more relaxed approach to time than western countries do. This can appear as a somewhat seemingly minor detail, but one that can be really frustrating if you do not learn to accept and adjust to it.

Eventually you adapt to this slower pace, you accept that things take time. (Elin)

Regardless of how strange or frustrating the students found certain customs and occurrences to be, the conclusion was always that just being aware of differences could make them easier to handle. There was an ambition to take Rome as the Romans will, to make the most of this opportunity and learn from differences rather than be frustrated by them.

I’m thinking about taking Rome as the Romans will...it’s difficult, especially as a white person working in an organization like this, trying to do things your way without stepping on somebody’s toes. Because my way is as different to them as their way might be to me. And you really have to/.../ familiarize yourself with how the organization handles things in that particular context. (Eva)

The major point made by the respondents concerning cultural adaption was that people should try to understand each other across cultural borders more than they currently are. They all showed awareness of this and were clearly ambitious in trying to understand and bridge cultural gaps, even when they were frustrated by culture clashes. They appeared to be theoretically aware of their reactions and could understand that the key to escape feelings of negativity and start appreciate difference was to become culturally sensitive.

Perhaps one shouldn’t impose change upon others/.../ we can’t come and say that: ‘you need to do this and this’ and ‘this is wrong’, but rather try to understand why they do things a certain way and...the things we see as lack of human rights might from another point of view be very respectful. You need to understand a culture from their point of view...for instance educating young girls is important. It’s easy to say that of course all countries should strive to do that. But then when I was in Nepal I felt that...ok I understand why things are the way they are and it’s a problem/.../ but for me to somehow go there and tell them that, without any real understanding /.../ it’s not as easy as them not liking girls and not wanting the best for them. It’s not about that. You really need to gain a deep understanding for a country’s culture and customs before you can go there and tell them what human right are all about. (Eva)
5.6 Theme 5 - Me as a liability
In the same way that one can perceive oneself as an asset, one can also perceive oneself as a liability, depending on how one relates to one’s contributions and weaknesses. As viewing themselves as an asset was mostly connected to the respondents having been able to culturally adapt, viewing themselves as a liability was more connected to having realized the complex global power distribution and their own inability to change things. Furthermore, they had also realized the complexity in simply claiming their ambition to help, as this implied some kind of unintentional participation in upholding imperialistic tendencies, regardless of how good their initial intentions had been.

5.6.1 Guilt
One of the most visible negative outcomes among the respondents was the feeling of guilt and feeling responsible for eventual negative outcomes that their field placements would bring for local communities. Having seen poverty and socially vulnerable people in a third World country made them re-evaluate their living conditions in Sweden and come to an insight that they needed to appreciate their Swedish lives to a larger extent and complain less about seemingly small stuff. They thought it was somewhat frightening how fast they re-adapted to their Swedish lives once they had returned, and mentioned that every westerner should have the opportunity to witness poverty up close because it was such a humbling experience.

*It was just hard to see how people lived. And here I am, living under such good conditions. Complaining about small stuff, you know, consuming and stuff. And there are people living in huts, with rats and lizards running around and...no. Small children are running around, crying and...snotty and dirty...it’s dog poop and shit everywhere. I was upset just watching all that.* (Anna)

*When I got back home, it was like...my god, we’re just consuming and living in luxury, and there are so many people that are in such a worse state. So I had quite a lot of conscience depression.* (Moa)

5.6.2 Weakened professional confidence
In previous research, there has been a lot of focus on benefits with international field placements. Less is written about what happens when students are affected in a negative way. Even though the respondents were mostly positive about their experiences, there were also traces of negativity in terms of having acquired a weakened professional confidence.

*I find it really difficult to know how...how to come to another country and...well, change anything. You have the ambition to go there and maybe...sort of listen to them, how they do things and what their aims are and things like that. But...you have to be very careful not to impose your own values and ideas of what’s right...I feel sometimes – almost too much – that maybe it’s not possible at all to change the world.* (Eva)

The respondents’ doubts included not knowing how to approach social work in another cultural context without imposing their own ideas too much, and how to find their place in a profession where there are already so many competent people and they therefore might feel redundant.

*My travel has made me think about where my place is. Where can I contribute, do a good job without taking someone else’s place/.../ let’s say I start working with...*
addiction. Will I be able to do a better job than someone who has personal experience from addiction? To me it seems difficult to find my place in social work. (Anna)

Another contributing factor to a weakened professional confidence was that the respondents thought they were missing out on valuable knowledge and experiences by not participating in field placements in Sweden. This was particularly visible among respondents that had completed both field placements abroad. As can be seen in Table 2, more than half of the respondents had chosen to complete both field placements abroad, even though they all had the opportunity to choose Sweden instead. In comparison to their classmates who had stayed in Sweden, they felt like their experiences had been ‘less’ relevant for their personal careers or not as impressive to future employers. For instance, they complained about not having learned specific professional skills, as focus had mostly been on cultural understanding and how to approach people from various cultural backgrounds. There was a tendency to not realize the importance of their experiences and what unique knowledge they could draw from it, but to rather compare themselves to their classmates in Sweden. The respondents were thus ambivalent due to simultaneously being thankful for having gained irreplaceable experiences, and being anxious about having missed out on Swedish learning experiences.

Sometimes I feel like I missed out because I didn’t do my field placements in Sweden and everyone is talking about what it’s like to work in the Social Services and things like that. And I don’t really know what they’re talking about. And that makes me feel like I missed out/.../ that might have weakened my professional confidence/.../ you know, relating to myself as a future social worker. (Eva)

When I left, I felt like I hadn’t learned anything/.../ especially when your classmates are doing placements in Sweden and learning new things everyday, that makes you panic and feel like you’re not learning anything. (Lisa)

Another example of how the students’ confidence was shaken was that they started doubting their motives for wanting to travel abroad. From having been rather certain of their career path prior to the placement and feeling that it would bring them assurance and valuable knowledge, once they had returned to Sweden they saw imperialistic traces of western contributions instead and were able to relate themselves to these unjust power systems.

Sometimes you felt like ‘oh no, what am I doing here?’ It feels like I’m just supposed to come here to observe how tragic their lives are, and then go back home to continue my life. So it was very mixed emotions. (Moa)

I’ve been thinking a lot about/.../ you know, me coming from the West and Sweden with the purpose to...I mean what’s the benefits of my going there? Is it because...does it provide anything for social work or is it for my own sake, that I get to experience something new and feel like I’m contributing? I’ve thought a lot about that and found it difficult, considering historical aspects of colonialism and imperialism. (Anna)

Regardless of how the students felt they had been affected personally, they all had a ‘big picture’ perspective where they agreed that doing something for other people was more important than doing something for yourself – not to mention that social work was considered to be more needed in other parts of the world – which sort of assured them that their decision to travel to a third World country and contribute was in some way legitimate.
5.6.3 ‘You are the strange ones, I am the normal one’

As noted by Bennett (1998), when meetings between cultures do not go successfully, cultural sensitivity does not occur. One can get stuck in a state of defence, feeling that everyone else is wrong while you are right and you are unable to understand or recognize unknown customs or traditions as legitimate. Even though the respondents were mostly positive about their experiences – and had previously clearly showed that they were aware of things like imperialistic patterns and the importance of cultural sensitivity – there were still some traces and hints of frustrated feelings due to not understanding certain cultural aspects and feeling superior to foreign cultures. For instance, one of the respondents described how local staff would beat the children, which was something she reacted very strongly against and refused to participate in, even if it meant becoming less culturally adapted. Another example was how difficult it was as a westerner to accept that women were treated as less than men, particularly the observation that women accepted this oppressive pattern without protesting. The respondents did make efforts to not minimize or look down upon people they met during their placements, but it was still possible to detect a sadness and pity over these people who were not perceived to be quite as informed as perhaps people in Sweden were.

There were a few disabled children at the orphanage. And that was really difficult to watch, how they were treated. It was almost as if they didn’t exist. They would only sit in a corner, stare apathetically and not be allowed to do anything. To me, that was very difficult. Because I didn’t wanna be the one telling the other staff how to do their job, and...still, I couldn’t just watch these kids be allowed to do nothing. And then, there was this small guy with a disability who broke his leg while I was there. And the staff thought it was really good that he broke his leg, because then he couldn’t walk. He would only sit there. And they thought that was really good. Because then they didn’t have to look after him. (Lisa)

It’s difficult to work in another culture than the one you’re used to. For instance, you’re used to putting up goals and make lists of tasks to do at the start of each day or week and then...you just do them. I don’t understand how they made it work, but of course somehow they did. But I found it difficult to work in that environment in the way I would have wished. (Eva)

Another central factor mentioned by many respondents as the key to cultural understanding was language. Language is a key issue in intercultural communication, and with insufficient language competence it becomes much more difficult for students to communicate with, understand or participate in local practices during an international field placement (Dominelli & Bernard, 2003). This in turn increases the occurrence of culture clashes even further. Since most of the respondents were not fluent in the local languages they encountered, this became a cause of frustration and an obstacle that prevented them from achieving as much as they would have hoped for.

Some of the staff barely spoke English, which made it difficult for me to communicate with them. (Lisa)

It was especially obvious when comparing the response from the majority of the respondents to one respondent who had previous experiences of the host country and therefore already knew the language. This became a crucial factor for that student, in terms of communicative abilities, cultural adaption and having an overall positive experience.
Language was such an important tool when working with the kids. Especially when we went out into the streets. Because I noticed, when we went together with the other volunteer workers...they hardly knew any Tagalog at all. They knew like two three words. I knew enough so that I could ask the kids like: 'hello, how are you, what's your name, how old are you'...and that made things so much easier for me. (Sofie)

5.6.4 Treated differently
The respondents criticized how locals perceived them specifically as westerners, and many of them felt that they were being treated differently because of it. They felt that locals tended to separate themselves from the students and sometimes almost treat them racially, as if their whiteness made them fundamentally different. The respondents were critical against this discrepancy of 'them and us', and described how they tried in several ways to bridge the gap – often unsuccessfully – rather than to acknowledge it. They did not want to be perceived as different because of their skin colour.

Most organizations we visited were...kinda afraid of our whiteness. Because I guess it often happens that white people come and try to change their work methods...it appears that they believe that we think we're better than them. But I tried to be very clear about my purpose for visiting, that I'm here because I want to learn from them. I didn't want them to think that I was there for any other reason. (Lisa)

It was as if the respondents’ skin tone automatically entailed essential skills and knowledge, and that there was a lot of pressure on them to perform and contribute because they were white. Some of the respondents felt like they were being treated as an expert or a saviour, and argued that this treatment would never have occurred in Sweden. In Sweden, they would have been treated primarily as students. But now they were not seen primarily as students, but rather as western people, which automatically translated into 'helpers'.

As a westerner - I don't really like that expression - unfortunately you get treated differently. Sometimes it felt as if they put us on a pedestal, but we didn't want to be put there. (Moa)

When I was in Colombia, many people asked me why I was there, what I could contribute with... and I don't think I would have been asked that during a field placement in Sweden... but just because I was doing my field placement in Colombia, it was like I had the ability to teach them something all of a sudden, although I'm only a student... just because I came from Sweden, I was supposed to contribute somehow, at least that was my perception of how they saw me. But I was only there to learn. (Eva)

There was some variation among the students to how they reacted when treated differently. Some of them merely shrugged and laughed it off, meaning that this is something you have to be prepared for and not something you should take personally, while others did in fact take it personally and found it hard to accept. To what extent the respondents were negatively affected by being treated differently ultimately depended on their attitude towards it, whether or not they were able to see it as it was and not be personally offended.

From the beginning I felt that they really excluded me. And it was like: 'oh, we forgot to inform you about this.' For example, we were supposed to make a field trip with the kids one day... I came there in the morning, noticed that: 'oh, there
are three kids standing there wearing white t-shirts. ’ I was wearing a black t-shirt. And then one of my colleagues came, also wearing a white t-shirt. And then another colleague came, also a white t-shirt. I was like: ‘did we have a dress-code for today?’ And they were like: ‘yeah, we’re going to do this today! Didn’t we tell you?’ /…/ that sort of illustrates how it was. (Sofie)

5.7 Summary
The respondents felt that the more they had experienced during their international field placements and managed to connect to previously learned theoretical knowledge, the more complicated and complex international social work became. They could see postcolonial reasons to why the third World had been left in a state of poverty and dependency, which made them critical towards western customs and its global influences. The education favoured a universalism approach to social work, which resulted in the respondents sharing this viewpoint prior to their filed placements. However, by actually witnessing social work in a non-western context for themselves, the respondents tended to move more towards a cultural relativism standpoint. There was some individual variation, but the general tendency was an increased realization that western social work methods are not always applicable and that local contexts need to be more influential. They realized how paradoxical it was to come as a westerner and expect to be able to change anything. On one hand they were students with a social work focus of wanting to help people, on the other hand they did not want to be perceived as imperialistic westerners. It ultimately came down to a question of identity; whether they identified primarily as social workers or as a westerners. The respondents concluded that the best thing they could do in their position was to be aware of their privileges and try to humbly adapt to and understand foreign cultural contexts rather than to dismiss them and impose western ways of thinking.
6. Discussion

In this section, the results will be discussed in relation to theoretical framework and previous research. The discussion has been structured according to the research questions, within which relevant aspects of the themes will be discussed. Finally, conclusions and propositions for further research will be presented.

6.1 The students’ theoretical understanding of international social work

A central postcolonial aspect rising from the analytical process was the importance of power and power distribution. As social workers, one needs to acknowledge that the West is in a superior power position as well as responsible for contemporary injustices, in order to avoid becoming imperialistic. This entails a paradoxical position for international social workers, as the core aim of the profession to help people entails sometimes ‘imposing’ your help onto contexts that have not requested your help. This brought an ambivalence among the respondents, as they were aware of the complexity and found themselves caught in between supporting fundamental social work values and avoiding imperialism.

The distribution of power is a determining factor when it comes to much of social work’s core mission; to promote the wellbeing of people and empower people to strive for values like social justice and equity. If people are powerless, they will not be able to achieve these goals. Unequal power relations entails the giver a position to define the rules, which means that relationships that are strictly based on financial aid cannot be considered harmonic or based on common goals and interests, as the recipient has to adapt to western rules in order to benefit from the aid. The aid receiver has to appear to share the giver’s ambitions and accept his rules, in order to be accepted as an equal partner. This was clearly illustrated in the example given by one of the respondents, where an application process in Nepal to receive financial aid from the UN could only be conducted in English, when the reality was that very few people in the context actually knew English and therefore were forced to adapt to western rules in order to qualify for western help. The thing that perhaps really needs to change is the distribution of power. The question thus becomes whether current power holders – the West - would willingly give up some of their power in favour of others. Power is most likely not easily given up, which means that the only way for less powerful forces to gain power would be to fight for it. It is however unlikely that this can be achieved without turning to violent methods.

One of the most debated issues within international social work – mirrored by the respondents - is the universality of the profession, i.e. whether social work should be globalized or contextualized. There was a tendency among the respondents to move further and further towards cultural relativism as their experience of social work in a non-western context progressed. Regardless of what their position had been prior to the travel, it seemed that seeing social work in another context and experiencing how western methods entails issues for local practices made the students react negatively towards existing power systems and criticize the involvement of the West as self-appointed decision-makers. Even though western countries often have an ambition to help, the mere act of transferring western methods and conditions elsewhere implies that the West is still in charge and therefore can determine terms for how help should be conducted. For example, social work as a profession is based on so-called universal, fundamental values, like for instance the UNHR (1948) or the IFSW (2014) global definition and ethical principles. It is however doubtful how universal these documents truly are. For example, Mutua (2002) argues that the UNHR definition of human rights follows western standards. When liberals create values that are intended to be universal, they fail to recognize their own impact on other cultures. There are
other equivalents – for example the Banjul Charter in Africa (African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, 1981) – where focus lie not solely on individual rights, but equally on group rights and individual duties. The Banjul Charter would most likely not be accepted in the West as a satisfactory rights corpus, as it would be argued to not be paying sufficient attention to individual rights. Mutua (2002) argues that it can therefore be justified to compare the UNHR contemporary conquest of the world to the colonial conquest of Africa, as it does not take non-western contexts into consideration. The conclusion thus becomes that rights corpuses formulated by the West have a bigger global impact than its non-western equivalents, and that social work as a profession is perhaps not as universal as it claims to be. This would favour a cultural relativistic approach with local indigenous solutions, as contemporary social work appears to be most suited for western contexts. This is also the conclusion made by most of the respondents, as they had all seen examples of how western approaches did not work in non-western contexts, and therefore favoured more local solutions.

6.2 The students’ view on the role of social work education
As concluded by the analysis, the respondents viewed social work education both as an asset and a liability. This opinion shifted during the interviews, depending on what the focus of the conversation was at the time. From an asset perspective, the respondents were incredibly positive to having gained a broader view of their future profession. They were all thankful to the education for providing new insights into various ways to approach the role as a professional social worker, as well as a broader view of what actually constitutes as social problems. They also found it positive to having been able to contribute in terms of making local staff aware of alternative ways to relate to socially vulnerable people, such as giving love and attention to neglected children. On the other hand, from a liability perspective, they also viewed international exchanges as a form of colonizing activity. This was visible in the constant questioning of the purpose of international field placements, and how their experiences made them unsure if they were ‘doing the right thing’.

It is not an easy task for social work educations to find a balance between both being a global profession with a responsibility to follow global guidelines and principles, and also take into consideration the variety of cultural-specific contexts and try not to support a system of imposing help onto people that have not necessarily asked for it. The social work education featured in this study implied having a universal standpoint, which became complicated as the field placements made the students lean more towards a cultural relativistic standpoint. The respondents all agreed upon the importance of having certain global guidelines – for instance human rights – but could also give examples from their field placements of particular occasions when these guidelines did not work. In conclusion, the students appeared to favour universalism on a hypothetical level prior to departure, but once they had witnessed examples of social work – or lack thereof – in a non-western context, they realized the complexity and importance of taking local aspects into consideration and thus became more supportive of cultural relativism. There was however some individual variations, as some respondents completely supported cultural relativism while others were more ambivalent and could see advantages with both standpoints.

The fact that the students approached their host organizations with a humble desire to learn from them can also have to do with the fact that they were students and not fully trained professionals. It does not necessarily have to be a matter of being westerners in a non-western context, but also of being a student in a professional context.
The course coordinator argued that requirements of international and domestic placements were the same, but that the practice itself could differ between placements because the field of social work is so wide. The respondents all mentioned feeling uncertain about the purpose of their field studies. This uncertainty might not have been specifically because they were in an international setting, but because the field of social work is so wide and it therefore is difficult to formulate an exact purpose. As a western student in an unfamiliar cultural setting one might be more susceptible and sensitive to new impressions, which can entail that having a fix point – like a clear purpose – is a comfort. It could also be because there were different requirements between semester three and five, and seeing that the respondents represented both semesters, they might have perceived the purpose of their placements in various ways. A third possible reason for feeling uncertain about the actual purpose of the field placement could be because local organizations have different takes on what taking on a student actually entails in terms of responsibility.

6.3 The students’ own role as future professionals

Just as social work education was perceived as either an asset or a liability, the students related to themselves much in the same way. How they saw themselves in relation to international social work was dependant on factors like how much they managed to contribute, culturally adapt and acquire knowledge and skills that could be valuable in their future careers.

Even though all respondents were themselves members of the western world – and one might argue that it takes two to tango – they did not romanticize or defend their own heritage and culture, but rather managed to acknowledge it as the root of many problems. The tendency was that the respondents with mainly positive experiences of their field placements had a humble approach to global social issues and were able to see their own contributions in upholding unjust power structures. They emphasized the ambition to learn from others and having realized that there are different approaches to and methods of social work that might be just as good as the ones used in Sweden. On the other hand, the respondents that had had negative experiences – like not being able to culturally adapt - had the opposite reaction and were more critical towards other cultures and elevated their own culture as norm.

The aspect that the respondents felt was the most important one they had learned was the impact of cultural sensitivity. In previous similar studies, student reactions to foreign traditions have been a kind of ‘western superiority’ that dismisses cultural variations – such as feeling disorientation and anxiety (Razack, 2002) – without any real understanding that cultural clashes might be the reason for these negative feelings. These types of reactions are in line with the early stages of Bennett’s (1998) model of intercultural sensitivity. The respondents in this study were aware of the impact of culture, and even though they all experienced some degree of culture clashes, they could relate to those negative feelings on a theoretical level and thus have an objective understanding of their own feelings and reactions. Even though they did not start out in the primary stage of denial (Bennett, 1998) – but rather in the somewhat later stage of minimization - there was still a clear progression in the way they reacted to cultural differences that showed how they had moved from an ethnocentric stage to an ethnorelative stage. One thing that seemed to have affected how they reacted to their field placements was the accumulated time they had spent abroad. For instance, if they had previous similar experiences, they were more likely to adapt easily to
new surroundings. The more international experience they had, the further they had already moved from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

One aspect that the respondents all mentioned as a negative outcome for them personally was a weakened professional confidence. They compared themselves to their classmates doing field placements in Sweden and felt that the skills they had acquired abroad could not compete with the skills their classmates learned. This can be interpreted as a failure by the education in enabling their students to see the relation between the local and the global. One explanation for their weakened confidence could be that they put themselves in the context of professional imperialism (Midgley, 1981). Experiencing a non-western context for themselves might have made it clear what negative consequences their presence could have had for local communities, which in turn could make them doubt their own motives. It might almost have been perceived as a personal defeat. It thus became a matter of identity. Prior to departure, the respondents identified themselves primarily as social workers with an ambition to ‘save the world’. However, after the placement they realized the impact of their role as westerners and thus identified primarily as western imperialists.

6.4 Conclusion
There is a discrepancy between how the education featured in this study viewed social work and the respondents’ view on social work. The education favoured a universal standpoint while the students favoured a cultural relativistic standpoint. The tendency was that this shift in viewpoint came from having experienced non-western cultural contexts and thus witnessed how western approaches could be unsuitable. The respondents thus tented to move from a universalism standpoint towards a more cultural relativistic one.

As a profession, social work claims to be universal, based on a foundation of common values and principles. At the same time, social work promotes values of indigenization, empowerment and strengthening people to stand up for themselves rather than to simply accept outside help, i.e. that social work practice needs to be contextualized. This makes social work international field placements complex. It is a learning opportunity that is encouraged in global guidelines, but at the same time it is impossible to escape the fact that a western person travelling to a non-western context with some kind of social agenda risks becoming an equivalent to historic colonizers. In other words, the respondents – as social work students in international settings – had been put in a paradoxical place imbued with ambivalence. It became a question of identity, whether they identified primarily as social workers or as westerners. The tendency was that the respondents identified as social workers prior to departure, but more as westerners after their placement.

The respondents saw their experiences as positive for themselves personally, but from a theoretical perspective they saw it as an imperialistic action that contributed to upholding global unjust power structures and consolidates the West as primary power holders. How these students view their role as social workers has impact for their future professionalism regardless of which context they will be working in, as their approach to the profession will determine their social work practice. They concluded that the best way to relate to the complexity of international social work was to be aware of global issues - including historic origin and impact for all involved parties - and on a personal level to aim for cultural adaption, i.e. the ability to see past your own narrow point of view and realize that just because a certain practice or custom is different from yours, it does not mean that it is not as good.
6.5 Further research
Participating in field studies is mandatory within social work education, however it is not mandatory to complete them abroad. The respondents in this study had all specifically chosen international placements, and they could also choose country and type of organization themselves. In a domestic placement, it might be more of a random placement than an actual choice by the student. It might therefore have been interesting to compare the attitudes of students in international placements compared to students who participated in domestic field placements. Does the fact that a placement is mandatory affect how participants feel about it?

Another suggested area for future research is actual outcomes of international field placements, in terms of how they affect local communities or host organizations. One option would be to do a comparison between social work students and international volunteers, to see if there are differences in approaches, outcomes, etc. A related area is how socially vulnerable people – particularly orphans or street children – are affected in terms of attachment. These children have most likely experienced some kind of trauma by losing their parents, and are now in a situation where they are encountered with multiple possibilities of attachments and breakups, as various westerners come into their lives for a relatively short while to then leave again.
7. References


Appendix 1 – interview guide

These are the questions asked during interviews. As they were semi-structured interviews, the questions were not necessarily asked in written order, but the interview guide was kept as a 'checklist' to make sure that no relevant area was left out. All interviews took place in Swedish.

Bakgrund

Vilket besöksland?
Hur lång vistelse?
Reste du själv eller tillsammans med andra?
Hur länge sedan var resan (vilken termin)?
Ålder (vid resan)
Tidigare liknande erfarenheter

Innan resan

Vad var det som fick dig att göra din praktik i…? Varför valde du att göra praktik utomlands?
Hur förberedde utbildningen dig?
   Praktiskt?
   Teoretiskt?
   Hur presenterades internationellt socialt arbete?
Sammanfattningsvis, vad lärde du dig av utbildningen?
Hur förberedde du dig på egen hand?
Finns det något som du i efterhand önskat att du vetat innan resan?

Under resan

Kan du berätta om din praktik?
Vilka sociala svårigheter/orättvisor i samhället såg du?
   Varför tror du det var så? Vad kan problemen ha berott på?
   Kan du koppla detta till någon teori?
   Något som bekräftade det ni lärt er på utbildningen?
Vad var verksamhetens syfte?
Hur såg organiseringen ut? Var det västerländsk/lokal ledning/anställda? Vet du vilka som startade den?
Vad såg du av organisationens arbete?
   Upplevde du att verksamheten levde upp till sitt syfte?
Vad hade du för arbetsuppgifter/roll?
   Vad kunde du bidra med?
Hur fungerade kommunikation med verksamhet/inhemsk personal?
   Hur blev du bemöt?
   Upplevde du att de lyssnade på dig/stöttade?
Vad fick du för stöd under praktiken?
Hur kände du under praktiken?
Vad var svårt?
   Fanns det dilemma som du hade svårt att acceptera?
   Hur kände du då?
Vilka bra grejer?
   Vad reagerade du positivt på?
Förändrades din bild under praktikens gång (av organisationen, landet)?
Sammanfattningsvis, vad blev resultatet av din vistelse?
Efter resan
Har du reflekerat kring resan? Vad har du tänkt då?
   Fick du någon hjälp med reflektion?
Hur har resan påverkat dig?
   Personligt?
   Professionellt? Vad har du lärt dig?
Har din bild av resan förändrats över tid? Om du jämför hur du tänker nu med hur du tänkte precis efteråt.
Hur har din tankar om internationellt socialt arbete rent allmänt ändrats genom din praktik?
   Har resan gett nya perspektiv på världen?
   Vilka problem finns?
Hur ser du på universellt vs. kontextuellt socialt arbete?
Vad skulle du vilja förmedla till andra studenter som ska åka ut idag?
   Skulle resan ha kunnat läggas upp på något annat sätt?

Övrigt?
Appendix 2 – an example of mind-maps

This is an illustration of how themes associated with research question three – ‘How the experience of international field placements have affected the respondents’ view on their role as future professionals’ – were developed during the analysis process, starting with the first temporary version of themes and ending with the third and final version.

Version 1
Version 3

Me as an asset
- Motives are essential
- Cultural understanding is the key to acceptance
- Increased thankfulness
- Increased professional confidence

Me as a liability
- Guilt
- Weakened professional confidence
- You are the strange ones, I am the normal one
- Treated differently