



Facilitating a Reciprocal International Exchange in Social Work

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Author(s):	<i>Julia Mirsky and Miriam Barasch</i>
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Facilitating a Reciprocal International Exchange in Social Work

Julia Mirsky, PhD, Miriam Barasch, MSW

Introduction

The importance of international exchanges in social work, particularly between professionals from Western and developing nations is being increasingly recognized, but their reciprocity is controversial (Gambriel & Pruger, 1992). It has been argued that such exchanges typically comprise a one-way transfer of ideas and practice methods from the United States to other countries (Midgley, 1992). This process is facilitated by the U.S. status and influence: the availability of funds for American social workers to travel internationally, the provision of scholarships for students from abroad to study in the U.S., and the export of American textbooks and other publications. The climate of opinion created by superpower influence increases the willingness on the part of non-western professionals to adopt American practices that are perceived as more "advanced" or superior to local practices. On the individual level, when western social workers export their knowledge to non-western countries they spontaneously export what is "theirs" and unwittingly tend to attempt and even compel their colleagues to adopt western approaches. They also tend to stay confident in their own theories and practice approaches instead of learning from their non-western counterparts (Midgley, 1992)

Yet, in the age of "global community," practitioners are increasingly confronted with cultural diversity among their clientele. In order to provide competent service, the practitioner needs to have knowledge of life and culture in other countries (Ramanathan and Kondrat, 1994). Moreover, they need multicultural competencies, the ability to provide professional services in a way that is congruent with the behavior and expectations that are normative to a given community. Much as the competence acquired in the native culture, this competence must be learnt through interaction with an

environment in which the target culture is pervasive (Goldberg, 2000).

Such interaction and learning are possible through international exchanges, which offer a chance for a temporary immersion in a foreign culture (Boyle, et al, 1999; Boyle & Cervantes, 2000). It is generally considered that the experience of coming to know people from another country on a personal level reduces ethnocentrism. In such encounters, both parties are often confronted with the relativism of their own culture. This produces stress and inner disequilibrium, and the attempts to relieve this stress result in cultural learning (Garland and Escobar, 1998). Numerous reports indicate that multicultural learning is most effective when it occurs in the context of structured cross-cultural programs (Holmes and Matthews, 1993), especially ones that combine temporary immersion a different culture (Boyle et al., 1999; Boyle & Cervantes, 2000).

However, programs that entail cultural immersion for practicing and senior social work professionals are extremely scarce. Such programs are more common in undergraduate and graduate training (Brennan & Schulze, 2004; Shepherd, 2003; Kamaka, 2001). Thanks to the special attention of the U.S. Council of Social Work Education (Nagy & Falk, 2000) more courses with international content are introduced into Social Work schools' curricula (Goldberg, 2000; Garland & Escobar, 1998) and some entail international exchange and immersion in a different culture (Ramanathan & Kondrat, 1994; Boyle et al, 1999). The training and teaching staff may take part in an international exchange program for students (Boyle & Cervantes, 2000), but programs tailored for practicing and senior social workers are rare (Rehr et alFacilitating a Reciprocal International Exchange in Social Work, 1993; Soskolne, 1993; Irizarry, 1993) and professionals are more likely to be involved in one-sided

Julia Mirsky, PhD, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

Miriam Barasch, MSW, The American Joint Distribution Committee, CIS Department

Address for correspondence: Julia Mirsky, PhD, Social Work Department, Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheva, Israel, julmir@bgu.ac.il, Fax: 972-8-6472933

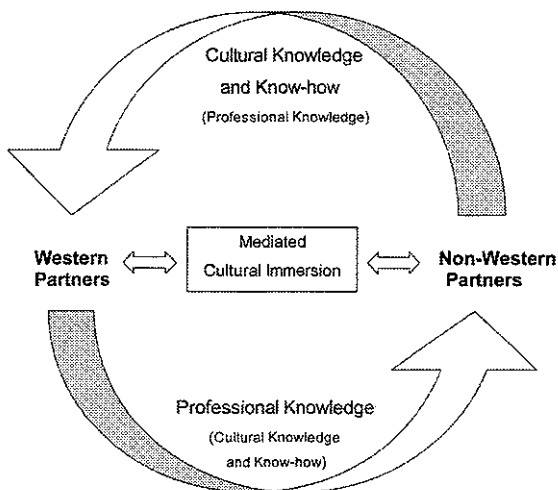


Figure 1

cultural interactions. They may be the recipients of local expertise while training in another country or transmitters of their own knowledge and skills, when they offer training or consultation to professionals from another country (Midgley, 1992).

This paper reports on an international exchange program tailored for senior welfare professionals from the Commonwealth of Independent Republics (CIS, the former Soviet Union) and Israel. The program succeeded in overcoming the pitfalls of one-sided encounter in spite of the professional gaps between the two countries: in the fields of social welfare and social services. Israel belongs to the community of Western countries with a long history of social work practice, and the CIS to those countries where the profession is only newly developed. After a short description of the status and development of social work in both countries, we present the exchange program and its impact, and discuss factors that contributed to its success and conditions necessary for its replication.

Social Work in the Two Countries

Israel has well developed social work educational programs and services, the beginning of which can be dated to 1931. However, until early 1970s, due to the severe shortage of trained social workers,

many social work positions were filled by individuals with no relevant training. Over the years, the Israeli Association of Social Workers (ISASW) placed a growing emphasis on the upgrading of professional qualifications. Today only university-trained social workers can join the profession and growing numbers of social workers are seeking Masters and Ph.D. degrees. The ISASW achieved the establishment of a legally protected monopoly of social workers over their field of practice. A council of social workers acts as an advisory forum to the Minister of Welfare and social workers are active and influential in many agencies providing not only direct services, but also acting as social advocates and organizers. Notwithstanding a consistent process of professionalization both the income and the status of social workers in Israel is low (Spiro et al., 1998).

Welfare services in Israel were primarily modeled after European models with additional influence from the United States and. Until recently, they were based on the concept of a "welfare state" and offered mostly by the government through local departments for social services. Consequently, most social workers in Israel are employed by the government. However, with the decline of welfare state policies and the development of the third sector, a growing number of social workers are now employed in non-governmental organizations (Spiro et al, 1998).

Social work as a profession did not exist in the Soviet Union. The state took full responsibility for the provision of its citizens needs and claimed to have made welfare and social services obsolete. In reality, welfare services in the USSR were centralized, bureaucratized and ineffective. Social work as a professional and an academic discipline was introduced in the CIS only in 1991. Academic programs were developed, many under western guidance, in a number of institutions, and are offered now in about 120 institutions. Starting from early nineties, new legislation was also adopted that defined the functions and responsibilities of social services and the criteria for receiving assistance and a wide network of social services was established by the government. (Iarskaya-Smirnova,

1999). In light of the socio-economic crisis that prevailed, the social services had to be offered although there was a serious absence of trained professionals. To this day, most employees of social services in the CIS do not hold an academic degree in social work. They are often referred to as "social workers," but as a job description rather than as a profession. (Iarskaya-Smirnova & Romanov, 2002).

Government attempts notwithstanding, the scope, financial assets and professional level of state social services in the CIS are limited. Consequently, in the face of need, the role of non-government welfare organizations is especially important. One such organization that operates in the CIS is the AJJDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) a philanthropic organization. Over the past 10 years it has developed in the CIS a network of multi-service community welfare centers (Hesed centers) that offer a variety of services mainly to the elderly population (Avgar et al., 2002). To date over 170 such NGO centers operate all over the CIS, serving about 248,000 clients and engaging more than 9,000 employees and 14,000 volunteers. Initially created and developed by AJJDC professional staff based in Israel, this network of local NGO's is more and more heavily relying on local staff, skills and experience while the Israeli professional team has withdrawn to supervisory and consultative roles.

The Participants

The participants of the exchange program were 60 directors of large social services in CIS and in Israel. The above presented background accounts for the differences between the two groups: the former held academic degrees in various fields but had not received full academic training in social work and were employed in the non-government sector, while the latter were all academically trained social workers employed in government agencies.

The Israeli partners were 30 directors of regional and municipal departments for social services who were taking part in a prestigious program for senior managerial staff in social services that aimed to develop managerial and leadership skill in

incumbent directors. In the year 1999-2000 an elective seven-day field trip to Russia and Ukraine was introduced into this course, and they were the first groups to take part in this elective.

30 directors of Hesed centers from Russia, the Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus took part in the exchange program from the CIS side. They were taking part in a prestigious course for senior welfare managerial staff in an AJJDC supported training institute. Field trips to Israel were being organized for this course participants and alumni on a regular basis in order to expose them to western welfare services, models and ideas.

The Program

The exchange program was initiated by the AJJDC professional staff, Israeli social workers and other social science professionals, in order to upgrade the impact of previous field trips of CIS directors to Israel. It was perceived that although in previous visits the guests from the CIS were very warmly received by the staff of local social services, a genuine communication and exchange of ideas between them and their Israeli hosts did not occur. The cultural gap between the Israeli and their own social reality, of which their hosts were oblivious, apparently was obstructing such communication: Unaware of the conditions and challenges that these professionals were facing in the CIS, the Israeli hosts often presented to them projects and practices that were inapplicable to the CIS setting. It appeared reasonable therefore, to attempt and expose Israeli professionals to this reality, an exposure that would not only help their CIS colleagues on their field trips, but also enrich their own professional vision.

A preparatory seminar was held with each group separately prior to departure. The seminar was organized and led by AJJDC professionals who, proficient in both cultures started building a bridge between the reality in which both parties operated and the one they were about to encounter in the other country. The seminars acquainted the participants with basic facts about each country, with the structure and history of their societies and social services.

A weeklong field trip of the Israeli professionals to the CIS comprised site visits to Hesed centers, an overview of government services, home visits to clients, and meetings with centers' employees and volunteers. Joint seminars were held with local professionals in order to discuss differences between services in both countries as well as common professional themes. In addition, the tour included visits to sites of historical and cultural significance as well as participation in various cultural events.

The field trip to Israel followed and also consisted of site visits, but, as opposed to previous field trips, visitors were hosted only in those departments whose directors took part in the CIS field trip. Local directors could now choose sites and services for their CIS guests to visit according to their relevance to the reality in which the latter were operating. Also, based on their own experience, the hosts were now more sensitive to the experience of being in a foreign environment and to potential language barriers. Therefore, they assigned Russian-speaking staff members from their service to accompany the CIS visitors not only professionally, but also socially. The site visits were typically two-days long, and when possible their local companions hosted the CIS directors in their homes. Seminars were held to give the CIS participants orientation about the social services in Israel and joint seminars with local colleagues were held to discuss and integrate the guests' impressions, as well as common professional issues. Most of the CIS visitors had friends and relatives in Israel, and time was allocated for personal visits. These encounters were perceived as an invaluable source of first hand experience with local reality. Moreover, many of the Russian-speaking immigrants whom the CIS participants visited on a personal basis were clients of social services in Israel and therefore could offer them an unbiased perspective of service-consumers.

The Impact of the Program:

The impact of the program was examined based on a number of sources: Individual feedback was obtained via structured questionnaires from 23

Table 1: Responses to the question: "What approaches (views, values) to developing and operating services, to which you were exposed during the visit, have influenced your professional perception?" (N=19)

- The demand for professionalism and professional training before beginning work.
- The multidisciplinary nature and the differential approach throughout the system of welfare services, the integration of services.
- The immediate response to each client and each problem.
- The legal nature of the state.
- Cooperation and support for the work at the national and local level.
- Contacts with the family.
- Relating to and noticing the personality of the client, the attempt to ensure his/her satisfaction.

Israeli participants (76 percent) and 19 participants in the CIS (63 percent), small-group discussions were held with five additional CIS participants, personal interviews were held with three of them and information was also gathered from key figures in three Hesed centers in the CIS.

CIS - Table 1 summarizes the CIS participants' feedback on a questionnaire (Korazim, et al., 1999)

One year following the tour, some of the participants were interviewed in CIS and here are some of their reactions:

"For the first time we had an opportunity to evaluate our accumulated theoretical knowledge and experience from the point of view of what we need and can adopt from programs that exist in Israel, what is acceptable in our conditions. There were things that we admired greatly while knowing very well that it would be simply impossible to apply them back home."

"Already on the first day we held a very interesting discussion on professional ethical dilemmas, compared opinions and found much in common between us. Everyone realized that we could learn from each other, and Russian participants did not seem at all like "students" next to the Israelis."

"I visited a welfare service headed by a colleague who had visited Saint Petersburg and Moscow last year and had some idea of what was going on there.... Indeed, our work has a lot in common. We are better at accomplishing some things, and Israelis at others. For example, it seems to me that we have a better organized operation of clubs and volunteers. I would say that the Soviet training is to be credited here: friendship, comradeship, and other such things that help us in our work. Our experience in these areas ...is being adopted in Israel. But most important of the things I liked in Israel is the system of social work training. We have coordinators, homecare workers, club workers, librarians, administrators, but basically we don't have professional social workers."

"In the course of the seminar it became clear to me that the success of social services in Israel is based on the following: a) state support; b) systematic approach to problems of the family; c) professionalism of the employees; d) attention to the individual client. What amazes me most in Israel is the attention given to each individual client, regardless of age or the degree of loss of the client's abilities."

Interviews conducted with key figures in Hesed centers revealed two major organizational changes that came about as a direct result of the exchange program.

The encounter with Israeli services helped the CIS participants realize the need for ongoing professional development for their employees and having learnt that supervision is an inseparable part of a social service in Israel, they initiated the development of supervisory processes in their own centers. As a result of a grass-root change with many centers hiring psychologists to act as supervisors for the staff, the AJJDC's training institute developed a training program for supervisors. Its alumni established local training programs for new supervisors and ongoing peer-supervision groups and to date supervisors work in most of the large Hesed centers.

The second change brought about by the program originated in the client-centered model that

Table 2: Responses to the question: "What was your most memorable experience during the tour?" (N=23)

- The huge size of the center and the scope of its activity.
- The huge scope of the voluntary action.
- The complicated logistics of the center.
- Finding out about the willingness of clients to volunteer.
- Home visits and encounters in the club and day center.
- The direct contact with clients, volunteers and service providers.

Table 3: Responses to the question: "How did the experiences during the tour influence your work back home?" (N=23)

- Better understanding of the background of immigrant clients
- Higher sensitivity to immigrant clients and their culturally determined behavior.
- Developing programs better attuned to the needs of this population
- Establishing closer contacts with the immigrant community.
- Better understanding of the potential for voluntarism among clients, even handicapped.
- Assigning higher importance to activating volunteers.
- New ideas for projects.

the CIS visitors encountered in Israel. True to the clerical and service department oriented approach typical to the Soviet tradition, many of the Hesed centers had been service-centered organizations. They had been divided into departments and sub-departments that provided services with little referral or coordination between departments. This led not only to an inefficient utilization of resources but also, in some cases to inappropriate services being provided. Following the Israel tour, organizational changes took place in numerous centers and a new model of regionally based individual case management was introduced.

Israel - Tables 2 and 3 summarize the feedback of the Israeli participants.

First and foremost, the exchange program sensitized the professionals, mostly members of the social majority in Israel to a minority population they encounter in their everyday work, that of immigrants from the CIS. Also, a number of Arab and Bedouin service directors, representatives of another minority group in Israel also participated in the exchange program and their reactions were twofold. On the one hand, the encounter with the Jewish historical roots, especially with the Holocaust, made some of them more understanding of the Jewish majority in Israel. Having visited Babi-Yar, a site near Kiev, where tens of thousands of Jews were murdered by the Nazis, one of the Arab directors said: *"Only now I understand the meaning of the Holocaust Remembrance Day. Only now I understand the scope of the Holocaust and that it was a crime against humanity, not only against the Jews."* On the other hand, the encounter with the Jewish minority in the CIS reflected on their own perception of themselves as a minority in Israel. A Bedouin participant recounted: *"I was amazed how the Jews, being a minority in CIS managed to take such good care of themselves. The help of the Jewish Diaspora made it possible, and at first I felt annoyed, that the Arab Diaspora has not been as supportive to the Palestinians. Then I realized that much has been done there based on local talent, willingness and voluntarism and this is something we, the Bedouins can learn from."* A few months later, this participant established an association of Bedouins with academic education to act for the good of their community

Discussion

A valuable professional meeting and a two-way exchange occurred between the participants from the two countries. The CIS participants absorbed a large part of professional spirit behind services for population at risk in Israel. The tour focused their attention on new approaches, gave them practical tools for working as well as food for thought about professionalization and training. Israeli directors also benefited from this meeting

and learned about new programs that can be implemented in Israel. But for them the major impact of the tour was the first hand cultural learning about the CIS that was not only personally enriching, but also helpful in their work. The exchange had a positive impact on both parties in spite of the one-way gap in the favor of Israel in the development and professionalization of social work and in economic and organizational assets. In what follows we analyze the conditions that made a two-way exchange possible and explore some implications of the project.

Preconditions for a Successful International Exchange

In order for an international exchange to succeed the following conditions need to be met: participants need to be motivated for cultural learning, either by internal incentives or external benefits or through preparatory work. The setting of the program needs to encourage reciprocity and meet the differential cultural needs of the participants and this can be best achieved through the involvement of cultural mediators competent in both cultures.

Motivation for Cultural Learning

The first pre-condition for a two-way exchange between professionals from different cultural backgrounds is **a conviction of each of the partners that the exchange holds potential benefits for them.**

When a professional exchange takes place between Western and non-Western social workers, it is plausible to assume that the latter would hold such conviction because of the more advanced development of social work in the west. Indeed, in the present project the CIS professionals were eager to learn and professional knowledge traveled almost exclusively one way, from the Israeli (Western) to the CIS (non-Western) partners. However, non-western professionals tend to idealize western approaches and practices and devalue their own assets (Midgley, 1992). This starting position may be mistakenly perceived as open-

mindedness. But, in the long run it may impede professional development as it does not promote the integration of new knowledge and practices with previous experience and with the local cultural context. Having not been "digested," such knowledge may be implemented rigidly and inappropriately, or experienced as foreign and eventually abandoned altogether.

When the Western professionals approach the encounter with their non-Western peers, they tend to cling to their culturally determined attitudes, beliefs and practices, which they unconsciously often consider superior to those of other cultures (Midgley, 1992). Therefore, intrinsic open-mindedness on their part can not be assumed and their willingness to learn needs to be encouraged by extrinsic factors. In the present case, much of the motivation of the Israel partners to open up to their CIS peers had to do with the fact that the latter were able to provide them with cultural knowledge and know-how that was practically useful in their work. It was clear that knowledge about the CIS, the realities of life there were operational tools applicable to their work with clients who emigrated from the CIS.

Preparation

In order to maximize the benefits of an encounter between western and non-Western professionals preparatory work needs to be done with each of the groups separately. The latter can benefit from a preparation addressed to restoring their own values of professional knowledge and skills, and their professional self esteem. In the last decade there is a growing appreciation of the value of traditional practices (Kulkarni, 1993; Nimmadadda & Cowger, 1999) and it is recommended that they be preserved and integrated with modern or Western approaches (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2001; Al-Krenawi, 1998; Nagpaul, 1993). Exposure literature that highlights the value of indigenous practices is a good source of learning for non-western professionals and a means of restoring their professional self esteem. Western professionals could also benefit such information as well as training

programs aimed at revealing their cultural biases and limitations (McAllister & Irvine 2002). Discussion of the "Standards for cultural competence" drawn by the National American Social Work Council (National Association of Social Workers, 2000, 2001), which direct attention to major cultural components in social work practice, can also be a very useful intervention in preparing Western professionals for an international exchange.

Cultural Mediators:

The participation of cultural mediators in an international exchange project is one of the keys to its success. Cultural mediation or brokering involves a vision of practice that can respond to the diversity of the modern society. It is a reflexive approach of deliberate and thoughtful choices of action based on knowledge of cultural differences, expansion of personal experience to others' communities, education from a variety of perspectives, and advocacy for broadening opportunities. Social workers may perform the role of cultural mediators themselves when they possess the necessary cultural knowledge and translate their insights about ethnicity into intervention (Kaplan et al. 2002). When they lack such knowledge, they may engage the help of non-professionals whose social status and knowledge of the specific community traditions may help render interventions more culturally appropriate (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2001). Cultural mediation is applied not only in the context of social work, also in psychotherapeutic settings (Giordano & Carini-Goradano, 1995; Singh et al. 1999) and in educational frameworks (Stage & Manning, 1992).

Cultural mediators can bring to an international professional encounter their cultural competence in both cultures, help bridge the gaps between the two parties, help find a common ground for both and facilitate the learning process.

In the present project the organizers were in an optimal position to act as cultural mediators: they were senior professionals, social workers trained in the West who, for a number of years, have been

working in the development of welfare services in the CIS and competent in both cultures. Their experience as Western professionals who constantly encounter CIS colleagues, made them aware of the gaps and possible misunderstandings between representatives of these two cultures, but also of potential meeting points. They were, therefore, sensitive to the needs of both parties and able to mediate the encounter.

The Setting – Cultural Immersion

An appropriate setting is crucial in order for a truly reciprocal international exchange to take place. This setting needs to meet the basic requirements of any setting conducive to a group process – fairly comfortable and reliable conditions (lodgings, food, etc). In addition the setting needs to encourage reciprocity. In the present case, the cornerstone of the exchange program was a two-way field trip – that of Israeli professionals to CIS, and that of CIS professionals to Israel. Creating such a setting may require considerable funds and this should be taken into consideration at the planning stage.

A setting that is best suited for an intercultural professional encounter is one that allows for a controlled **cultural immersion** on a reciprocal basis. In the present project none of the participants spoke the language of the other therefore a full cultural immersion could not be achieved. It was however extended as far as possible with the help of interpreters and cultural mediators.

It has been repeatedly reported in the literature that cultural immersion is an effective strategy of cultural learning. It is successfully applied in professional training programs for social workers, health care practitioners, doctors and teachers (Doty & Pastorino, 2000; McAllister & Irvine 2002; Crampton et. al. 2003; Shepherd, 2003). Cultural immersion appears to have a potential as a method of raising the awareness of practitioners to the centrality of culture in the experience of individuals and in working with people. Training programs that offer trainees the opportunity to immerse themselves in another culture heighten the

appreciation of the value and uniqueness of diverse cultural traditions. The encounter with a different culture, when it occurs out of recognition and respects, may initiate a process of personal reflection. This may lead to the recognition of one's own gifts and limitations in practice in a way that fosters personal and professional growth. Based on this initial experience skills necessary for responsive multicultural practice may be more easily acquired.

Cultural immersion can be a threatening experience, when it is not properly structured and mediated. Keeping the stress at a level optimal for learning is another precondition to a successful intercultural encounter (Garland & Escobar, 1998). This can be done by structuring the setting of the program to include support providing elements. But in order to be effective, such elements need be devised based on cultural knowledge of both groups that take part in the encounter, here again the role of cultural mediators becomes invaluable.

The present project demonstrates how culturally informed mediators may succeed in monitoring stress of the participants through structuring the setting. Based on the knowledge and understanding of the Israeli culture, and the organizational culture of social services in Israel it was believed that the group is a potential source of support for Israeli professionals in a foreign environment. An integral part of their work are staff meetings where not only professional issues but also feelings and experiences are discussed and the Israeli culture in general encourages group belonging and sharing. Therefore, in order to alleviate stress, opportunities were created for the Israeli professionals on their field trip to the FSU to process the feelings and impressions in a group setting. In addition to meeting with local colleagues, separate sessions were held and group cohesion was encouraged.

For the Russian professionals, who came from another background the setting was structured differently. Most of the CIS participants had friends and relatives in Israel and the group was not their major source of support. Moreover, sharing and working in group setting is much less normative in

their culture. The understanding of this important difference between the two groups as well as of the high value of personal relationships (friendship and family ties) in the Russian culture (Markowitz, 1993) resulted in specifically allocated time for "private" meetings. These meetings were perceived as opportunities not only for alleviating stress but also for fuller cultural immersion. In a protected and intimate environment, with no language barriers the visitors experienced aspects of local reality that they could have not experienced in a more formal setting.

The present project demonstrates how learning opportunities of an international professional exchange can be maximized. It also illustrates the potential contribution of such a program to expand-

ing the cultural understanding and professional repertoire of social workers. However, the evaluation of the impact of the exchange was a secondary element of the project, and yields only preliminary results. Research on the value of cultural exchange programs is generally limited and there is no conclusive research evidence as to the specific merit of cultural immersion (Sleeter, 2001). Therefore, a wider implementation of international exchange programs is called for including systematic evaluation of the programs. Comparative research that will establish the relative value of cultural immersion programs as opposed to other strategies to train culturally sensitive professionals are also indicated.

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