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Interaction of Cultural and Professional Values: Case Studies of Arab Social Work Students

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined the cultural and professional values of social work students from collectivist and patriarchal backgrounds who were educated in Western-oriented academic settings. Minority students in international learning environments often experience tension when liberal professional values, such as autonomy and gender equality, conflict with cultural norms that prioritize family honor, social cohesion, and deference to authority. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research analyzed two cases of female students who encountered value-related dilemmas during their field education. Thematic analysis of supervision transcripts, reflective journals, and field reports revealed three central themes: emotional strain resulting from internal value dissonance, the ongoing negotiation of cultural and professional identities, and the significant role of supervision in linking cultural belonging with ethical professional practice. Based on the findings, a four-stage culturally responsive supervision model was developed to guide educators and institutions in creating inclusive, equitable, and culturally informed learning environments for diverse student populations.*

Keywords: Arab social work students, cultural value conflict, culturally responsive supervision, experiential learning, multicultural social work education

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INTRODUCTION

In multicultural societies, institutions of higher education have become increasingly diverse, enrolling students from a wide range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. This growing diversity presents complex challenges, particularly in disciplines such as the helping professions, where personal identity and professional values often intersect in tension-filled, emotionally charged ways (Al-Krenawi, 2025; Vasilyeva et al., 2022). One pressing concern in such settings is how minority students navigate the often-conflicting demands of their cultural heritage and the dominant institutional norms that shape their academic and professional training (Hassan, 2025). This study was designed to contribute to global debates on culturally responsive education by developing a supervision-based framework that supports minority students' identity integration and emotional resilience during field training.

In a recent personal communication on September 10, 2025, Dr. Mahajana reported that Arab students make up approximately 48% of all students pursuing bachelor's degrees in social work in Israel. This figure highlights the substantial representation of Arab students in the field and highlights the importance of culturally responsive approaches in social work education. Despite their growing presence, these students continue to face significant barriers in predominantly Jewish academic institutions, in which cultural and institutional power remains unequally distributed (Stock & Ron, 2023). The dissonance between minority students' cultural identities and the values embedded in the majority's institutional framework often leads to experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and emotional distress (Jammal-Abboud, 2022).

Social work education in Israel is fundamentally rooted in Western liberal principles—such as individual autonomy, self-determination, and openness to discussing sensitive personal and societal issues (Azaiza et al., 2015). These

values frequently clash with the collectivist, family-oriented, and often conservative norms that shape many Arab students' worldviews (Abu-Gweder, 2025; Jammal-Abboud, 2024; Nouman & Azaiza, 2024). This clash creates tension: Assignments requiring self-disclosure, individual-focused interventions, and mixed-gender placements may conflict with students' cultural norms, generating moral distress and ethical dilemmas (Jammal-Abboud, 2022). As a result, the process of professional socialization may generate tension rather than fostering integration, particularly during field education—a central and transformative component of social work training. These tensions have been shown to evoke emotional distress, a sense of alienation, and challenges in fully engaging with the learning process (Hassan, 2025; Jönsson & Flem, 2018).

Although international research has highlighted the importance of culturally responsive supervision and training in supporting minority students in such contexts (Fairtlough et al., 2014), the Israeli academic literature on this topic remains relatively underdeveloped. Although earlier studies have acknowledged the cultural conflicts that Arab students face (Nouman & Azaiza, 2024), limited attention has been given to the specific role of supervision and institutional practices in either exacerbating or mitigating these challenges. To date, no empirically grounded model has been proposed that systematically explores how supervision can act as a bridge between dominant professional norms and the cultural frameworks of minority students.

This study aimed to address a significant gap by examining how Arab social work students in predominantly Jewish academic institutions perceive the supervisory process during their field education. It sought to adapt this process to better support their cultural identities and professional development. Specifically, this study intended to develop a principles-based supervision framework that critically examines structural inequalities within academic institutions while promoting students' sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and professional competence.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: How do Arab social work students in predominantly Jewish academic institutions experience the supervisory process during field education?
- RQ2: In what ways can supervision be culturally adapted to enhance their identity, integration, well-being, and professional development?

By focusing on the intersection of culture, power, and professional education, this study generated both theoretical insights and practical guidance. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of culturally responsive supervision in conflict-affected and majority-minority academic contexts. Practically, its findings can inform supervisory practices and institutional policies aimed at fostering greater inclusivity, equity, and social cohesion within diverse higher education systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Value Conflicts in Social Work Education

As an integral component of a multicultural approach in social work education, culturally sensitive supervision explicitly addresses cultural diversity and seeks to integrate universal professional values with students' and clients' unique cultural backgrounds (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004). This approach fosters students' professional identity development, enhances practical skills, and improves their ability to function effectively in diverse practice settings, such as Israel's multicultural society (Hardy & Bobes, 2016).

When culture is treated implicitly rather than explicitly in supervision, it can become a barrier to constructive feedback and meaningful learning (Devassy et al., 2023). Supervisors who consciously acknowledge and incorporate their students' cultural backgrounds help prevent feelings of rejection, discrimination, or cultural invalidation (Silberman et al., 1995; Williams & Halgin, 1995). Hardy and Bobes (2016) emphasized that a fundamental task of supervision in multicultural contexts is to give voice to previously silenced topics of cultural differences and diversity, thereby enhancing students' cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Hardy and Bobes (2016) distinguished between cultural awareness, defined as cognitive knowledge and insight about diversity issues, and cultural sensitivity, which involves emotional resonance and responsiveness to others' needs and feelings. Both are essential for competent social work practices in multicultural contexts, but cultural sensitivity requires attuned and affective engagement that goes beyond mere intellectual understanding (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). Together, these dimensions form the basis of cultural competence, a critical skill set for social work professionals navigating the complexities of diverse societies.

Current challenges for Arab students in Israeli social work programs

Social work education in Israel takes place in a complex and dynamic multicultural environment that mirrors the broader diversity of Israeli society. Students in these programs represent a wide range of cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, each contributing distinct worldviews and value systems to the learning environment. In recent years, the representation of Arab students in social work programs has increased substantially. This growth reflects a broader trend of increasing participation in higher education among Arab communities in Israel. Although this increase is a positive indicator of academic inclusion, it highlights persistent disparities in access, representation, and advancement in professional fields such as social work.

Despite these gains, significant challenges remain regarding the integration of Arab students and the preparation of all students for culturally competent and contextually responsive practices. These challenges stem not only from structural and institutional barriers but also from deeper cultural and ideological tensions embedded in the educational framework.

Research has identified the multifaceted obstacles faced by minority and international students in academic settings grounded in liberal, individualist values, values that may contrast sharply with the collectivist orientations prevalent in Arab culture. Studies on culturally responsive socioemotional learning stress the need for higher education institutions to provide professional development that enables instructors to address the emotional and cultural dimensions of student learning.

Language differences, communication styles, and cultural expectations further complicate academic engagement and adjustment. Comparable challenges have been observed in multicultural educational contexts across the Middle East, where initial encounters between students of diverse backgrounds can present both difficulties and opportunities for intercultural understanding and integration. Meta-analytic evidence also suggests that psychoeducational and sociocultural interventions can effectively reduce acculturative stress and enhance academic adaptation.

These insights point to the need for a culturally sensitive, principles-based supervision framework in social work education. Such a framework can support Arab and other non-Western students in reconciling the tensions between traditional cultural values and Western-oriented professional ethics while fostering inclusive, equitable, and supportive learning environments for all.

In conclusion, the experiences of Arab students in Israeli social work programs highlight the broader complexities of multicultural education in a society marked by cultural, linguistic, and political diversity. Although the growing presence of Arab students in these programs signals meaningful progress toward inclusivity, their continued struggles with institutional, cultural, and linguistic barriers reveal deep-seated inequities that must be addressed. To ensure genuine integration and professional preparedness, social work education must move beyond surface-level inclusion toward a pedagogy rooted in cultural sensitivity, equity, and mutual respect. The development and implementation of a culturally responsive supervision framework can bridge the gap between diverse cultural worldviews and Western professional norms, ultimately fostering a more just, empathetic, and contextually aware social work profession in Israel (Al-Krenawi et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence and documented challenges

A growing body of research has highlighted the concrete challenges that Arab social work students face because of cultural tensions in academic and professional environments. Azaiza (2013) reported that many Arab students experience feelings of marginalization in predominantly Jewish academic institutions, which can undermine their motivation, engagement, and overall academic performance. Similarly, Haj-Yahia and Sadan (2008) reported that the clash between traditional cultural expectations and the norms of the social work profession contributes to increased stress and internal identity conflicts, in some cases leading students to question their career path or consider leaving their studies. Building on these findings, Nouman and Azaiza (2024) underscored the

detrimental impact of pedagogical practices that fail to align with the cultural backgrounds of Arab students. Their study pointed to decreased academic self-efficacy and a weakened sense of belonging as key consequences of this disconnection. Additionally, Arar and Oplatka (2022) shed light on the unique challenges faced by female Arab students, who often encounter a dual burden: navigating traditional gender roles while meeting the demanding expectations of higher education and professional social work.

Navigating cultural value conflicts

Arab social work students in Israel often face complex cultural value conflicts, as they negotiate the tension between the collectivist norms of their home communities and the individualist, secular principles embedded in social work education and practice (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Azaiza, 2013; Jammal-Abboud, 2022). This tension poses significant challenges in forming a coherent and integrated professional identity. In Arab society, collectivist values emphasize family loyalty, social cohesion, and deference to traditional authority figures, which are often reinforced through patriarchal structures (Dwairy, 2010). In contrast, social work education in Israel and Western countries promotes ideals such as autonomy, self-determination, gender equality, and individual rights (Yanay & Benjamin, 2005).

Navigating these divergent value systems can generate profound personal and professional dilemmas. Students may experience feelings of ambivalence or alienation, struggling to reconcile respect for their cultural heritage with the ethical imperatives of the profession. This dissonance can manifest in emotional distress, including anxiety, burnout, and uncertainty about their professional belonging or role in both the academic context and the community context (Nouman & Azaiza, 2024). Over time, such conflicts may also influence students' engagement in fieldwork, their relationships with supervisors, and their sense of legitimacy as practitioners operating between two cultural worlds.

Role of Supervision in Managing Conflict

Such cultural dissonance can affect students' academic engagement and ability to reconcile their personal, cultural, and professional identities. For many, this means navigating difficult ethical dilemmas in which professional standards contradict community expectations, particularly regarding issues of family confidentiality, gender roles, and client autonomy (Haj-Yahia & Sadan, 2008). The result is often a fragile balance that requires ongoing negotiation and support.

Culturally responsive supervision, as discussed previously, plays a pivotal role in helping students manage these tensions by providing a safe space for reflection, validation, and skill development (Hardy & Bobes, 2016). However, the current social work curriculum and supervisory practices in Israel generally lack adequate frameworks to address these complex dynamics (Al-Krenawi et al., 2024). This gap underscores the urgent need for tailored educational and supervisory models that recognize and honor the lived experiences and cultural

values of Arab students. Recent scholarship has emphasized the integration of emotionally inclusive supervision models that draw on transformative socioemotional learning principles. Davis and Chen (2025) argued that supervision based on socioemotional learning fosters emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience among culturally diverse students, helping them to navigate identity conflicts and develop a secure professional stance. This approach aligns with earlier calls for culturally responsive supervision that prioritizes students' emotional worlds alongside skill development (Gehart, 2016; Jagers et al., 2019).

The Current Study

Despite the increasing representation of Arab students in Israeli social work programs, current educational and supervisory frameworks remain inadequately designed to address their distinct cultural and emotional needs (Al-Krenawi et al., 2024; Jammal-Abboud, 2022). Curricula predominantly reflect Western, individualist paradigms, often marginalizing the collectivist values integral to Arab students' identities. This disconnection contributes to feelings of alienation, role confusion, and emotional distress (Azaiza, 2013). Although multicultural supervision is recognized as essential in theory, its implementation in Israeli social work education is inconsistent (Nadan, 2017), resulting in many Arab students lacking adequate support to navigate the complexities of balancing cultural expectations with professional demands.

A significant gap persists in practical, contextually grounded supervision models that address the lived experiences of Arab social work students in Israel. Few studies have examined how culturally responsive supervision frameworks concretely support identity integration, emotional resilience, and professional development. This study addressed that gap by investigating how supervision can be adapted to foster these outcomes among Arab students, emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive practices that validate lived experiences, encourage dialog about diversity, and equip students with skills for effective multicultural practice.

Specifically, this research aimed to develop a principles-based supervision framework that critically addresses structural inequalities in academic institutions while fostering students' sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and professional competence. The study was guided by two central research questions:

1. How do Arab social work students in majority-Jewish academic institutions experience the supervisory process during field education?
2. In what ways can supervision be culturally adapted to better support their identity integration, well-being, and professional development?

By focusing on the intersection of culture, power, and professional education, the study generated both theoretical insights and practical guidance. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of culturally responsive supervision in conflict-affected and majority-minority academic contexts. Practically, it can inform supervisory practices and institutional policies aimed at fostering greater inclusivity, equity, and social cohesion in diverse higher education systems.

In summary, previous research has extensively documented the cultural value conflicts experienced by minority and non-Western social work students; however, limited attention has been given to how supervision can serve as a structured, culturally responsive mechanism for addressing these tensions. Although cultural competence is conceptually emphasized in social work education, systematic frameworks that operationalize this concept through supervision remain underdeveloped. This gap highlights the need for a principles-based supervision model that bridges cultural belonging and professional identity formation, an aim that guided the present study.

METHOD

This research involved a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural value conflicts experienced by Arab female social work students during their field education. A case study approach is particularly effective for examining complex, context-dependent phenomena that feature intersecting personal, cultural, and professional dynamics (Yin, 2018). Previous research on cultural competence in social work education similarly employed qualitative case studies to capture the nuanced experiences of students (Al-Krenawi, 2020; Devassy et al., 2023), thereby reinforcing the validity of this methodological choice.

Case Selection

The two cases were purposefully selected from the lead author's supervisory practice on the basis of three criteria. First, the students identified as facing significant cultural dilemmas during their field placements. Second, the conflicts represented common themes reported by minority students, such as taboos surrounding sexuality and tensions related to gender roles. Third, both cases provided sufficient depth of data for rich narrative reconstruction. These cases were selected not for their uniqueness but for their representativeness, illustrating the recurring challenges encountered by Arab students as they navigate the reconciliation of collectivist cultural values with the individualist and egalitarian ethos found in social work education.

Data Sources

Various qualitative data sources were used, including transcripts from supervision sessions, field notes that documented students' verbal accounts and emotional expressions, and dialogs between supervisors and students. The rich personal data on the students' backgrounds were collected during individual supervision sessions as part of their field education in an undergraduate social work program. In addition, transcripts from supervision sessions, field notes documenting students' verbal accounts and emotional expressions, reflective journals maintained by students during their placements, and field placement reports that detailed professional tasks and challenges were analyzed. These

diverse data sources facilitated triangulation and significantly enhanced the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with familiarization with the transcripts and journals through repeated readings, followed by initial coding to identify instances of cultural dissonance, identity negotiation, and professional conflict. Broader themes were then developed, such as the tension between family honor and openness and between patriarchal norms and gender equality. Emergent themes were subsequently integrated with models of cultural competence (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995) and theories of identity conflict among minority professionals (Singh & Jack, 2022). This methodology ensured that the findings were both empirically grounded and theoretically robust. To strengthen the analytical rigor and enhance credibility further, coding and thematic development were collaboratively conducted and reviewed by a research team.

Qualifications and Reliability

The analysis team consisted of three researchers with advanced professional and academic expertise in social work and qualitative inquiry. The primary coding was carried out by the lead author, a senior lecturer and an experienced fieldwork supervisor specializing in multicultural social work education. The second coder, a senior lecturer at a university-based school of social work in Israel and a recognized expert in qualitative research and field instruction, independently reviewed and refined the thematic framework. The third researcher, a full professor with extensive experience in qualitative methodology, repeatedly examined the coding and theme development to ensure analytic coherence, depth, and theoretical alignment. Through iterative discussions, comparisons, and consensus-building among the three researchers, intercoder reliability and interpretive credibility were achieved, thereby enhancing the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality, and culturally sensitive practices were implemented to honor the participants' identities and community norms. The study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of Zefat Academic College.

Case Study Approach

Drawing on extensive supervisory experience in multicultural social work education, this study involved two illustrative cases involving Arab female students who encountered cultural value conflicts during their field placements. The first case highlights the discomfort experienced when discussing sexuality,

stemming from cultural taboos, whereas the second case reveals tensions between patriarchal norms and professional commitments to gender equality. These examples illustrate common challenges faced by Arab students, reflecting the clash between collectivist cultural values and Western individualist social work ethics. They emphasize the pressing need for a culturally sensitive principles-based supervision framework to assist students in reconciling these conflicts and developing cohesive professional identities. These cases were analyzed to provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

To guide the students' field learning, we implemented a culturally responsive supervision framework, combining experiential learning with reflective practice. The framework structured supervision sessions around four iterative stages, experience, reflection, exploration, and evaluation, allowing students to identify, discuss, and navigate conflicts between their cultural values and professional responsibilities. This approach ensured that the practical guidance provided was systematic, culturally sensitive, and directly applicable to the students' daily fieldwork experiences.

CASE STUDIES

Supervision and Training Context for Illustrative Cases

Prior to presenting the two illustrative cases, it is essential to contextualize the training and supervision context from which they were selected. Both cases exemplify experiences commonly encountered by Arab social work students in Israel and reflect broader patterns observed across multiple field placements. The cases were drawn from a parent-child center that serves as one of several field education sites affiliated with the academic institution, providing culturally responsive interventions aimed at enhancing parent-child relationships and promoting professional development in line with social work ethics.

The primary supervisor for both cases is the lead author of this article, a senior social work educator, researcher, and field instructor with more than 18 years of experience supervising students from the Arab community in Israel. She holds three academic degrees in social work from Israeli universities and specializes in culturally sensitive social work practices and parent-child interventions.

Case 1: Personal Collectivist Values of Family Honor Versus Professional Values of Open Discussion of Sexuality. Student Background and Cultural Context: "Especially for Women, it's Forbidden to Talk about These Things."

Rawan, a 21-year-old Arab Muslim social work student in her second year of undergraduate studies, grew up in a conservative family in Northern Israel, where maintaining family honor and modesty are deeply ingrained cultural values. From a young age, she was taught that public discussions of sexuality—especially by women—are taboo and potentially bring shame (*hishma*) and dishonor (*'ird*) not only to the individual but also to the entire family (Al-Krenawi, 2020). Reflecting

on her experience, Rawan shared, “It was very hard for me. Especially for women, it’s forbidden to talk about these things [sexuality]. I felt confused and uncomfortable.”

Fieldwork Dilemma and Cultural Tension: “I Felt Torn”

During her first field placement at a child welfare center, Rawan encountered a professional dilemma that triggered significant emotional distress. The center serves children and parents, providing therapeutic interventions aimed at improving parent–child relationships. Rawan’s role as a social work student was to provide emotional support to an 11-year-old boy as part of a comprehensive treatment program. The intervention took place over nearly 7 months during the academic year, with weekly sessions. Her discomfort intensified when she was required to participate in a seminar focusing on sexuality and intimate relationships, a subject that conflicted sharply with her cultural upbringing.

This discomfort was exacerbated when she was assigned to work with an 11-year-old Arab boy who displayed sexually expressive behavior. Rawan described her inner struggle as follows: “I felt torn. As a social work student, I knew I was supposed to address these issues professionally, but inside, I felt it was wrong. I was afraid of being judged.” Unable to engage openly with the boy’s family on this sensitive topic, she ultimately requested reassignment, citing her difficulty reconciling the expectations of professional openness with her deeply rooted cultural and moral values.

Internal Conflict and Identity Struggle: “It was Impossible to Know What was Right”

Rawan’s internal conflict stemmed from the tension between her collectivist background, which emphasizes discretion, modesty, and the preservation of family honor, and professional social work norms that demand openness, nonjudgmental attitudes, and candid discussions about sexuality (Hardy & Bobes, 2016). The professional setting required her to navigate mixed-gender interactions and address subjects considered taboo in her community, evoking fears of social condemnation, personal disgrace, and the risk of violating familial expectations. As Rawan reflected, “I wanted to do my job properly, but I was so afraid of bringing shame to my family. It was impossible to know what was right.”

Emotional reactions, supervision experiences, and cultural dissonance

Rawan’s case highlights the emotional and professional turmoil that can arise when cultural values clash with academic and professional expectations. During supervision, she expressed deep feelings of shame, guilt, and helplessness. She feared that her actions might bring dishonor to her family and community. “I felt so guilty, like I was betraying my family just by being here and doing this work.” Professionally, she felt unsupported and inadequately prepared, perceiving the academic curriculum as lacking the cultural competence necessary to navigate

such ethical and emotional dilemmas. She added, “I didn’t know who to ask or how to handle these situations. I felt alone and confused about my role as a social worker.” Her distress manifested as anxiety, role conflict, and growing uncertainty about her professional identity (Nouman & Azaiza, 2024).

This experience illustrates the psychological impact of cultural dissonance as described in cultural competence models (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995), wherein students’ cognitive understanding of professional norms clashes with deeply ingrained emotional and cultural loyalties. This internal conflict can create significant identity tension and emotional distress. Rawan’s case also reflects broader systemic challenges faced by minority students who must navigate and reconcile conflicting value systems—those of their cultural backgrounds and those embedded in academic and fieldwork settings (Singh & Jack, 2022).

Supervision and Cultural Responsiveness: “I Felt I Could Talk about My Fears without being Judged”

The supervisor recognized Rawan’s distress, reflected on her feelings, and provided explicit validation, emphasizing that her experience was understandable and legitimate. She framed the situation as familiar to her from both her own experiences as a student and her deep understanding of Rawan’s cultural norms, particularly considering that Rawan was required to participate in a seminar addressing sexuality, a topic highly sensitive in her cultural context. This culturally sensitive approach enabled her to voice her internal conflicts without being afraid of being judged.

Rawan reflected, “I finally felt I could talk about my fears without being judged: first, because the supervisor understood me as a student, and second, because she knows the Arab culture in Israel.” The supervisor facilitated experiential reflection, encouraging Rawan to explore ways to uphold her cultural identity while gradually developing professional competencies aligned with social work ethics. This process underscores the importance of culturally responsive supervision models that validate students’ lived experiences and support the construction of hybrid professional identities (Devassy et al., 2023).

Conclusion and Educational Implications

Rawan’s experience demonstrates the urgent need for social work education programs in Israel to incorporate curricula and supervision practices that acknowledge and respect cultural diversity. Without such adjustments, students might feel alienated, inadequately prepared, and at risk of professional burnout. The development of structured, flexible supervisory frameworks that help students integrate personal and professional values is essential for fostering resilient, culturally competent social workers capable of serving multicultural societies.

Case 2: Conflict between Collectivist Gender Norms and Professional Commitment to Gender Equality: Student Background and Cultural Context

Rola, a 22-year-old Arab Muslim social work student, was in her third year of undergraduate studies at a college in Northern Israel. She came from a traditional, patriarchal family in a small town where gender roles are clearly defined and upheld as part of the community's cultural fabric. From childhood, Rola was socialized to value familial respect, male authority, and the centrality of women's roles in the home, which she regarded as a sense of loyalty and belonging. Reflecting on this background, she stated, "In my family, men make the decisions, and women are expected to follow. However, I wanted to help people and make a difference, so studying social work felt right for me." At the same time, Rola chose to study social work because of a desire to empower vulnerable people and promote social justice, values emphasized strongly in her academic training.

Fieldwork Dilemma and Gender-Based Conflict: "I Want to Help the Child, but I Don't Know Whether to Follow Tradition or Support Equality"

During her third-year field placement at a parent-child center serving predominantly Arab families, Rola was assigned to provide emotional support to a 6-year-old boy as part of a comprehensive intervention program aimed at strengthening parent-child relationships. Her role included weekly individual sessions with the child and monthly meetings with the parents to provide updates and facilitate shared understanding. During the 7-month academic year, Rola observed that the father did not participate in these meetings and often declined to share responsibility for household tasks, citing cultural norms that designate domestic work as a woman's duty. In contrast, the mother regularly attended the sessions and engaged in discussions with Rola.

During a routine family meeting, the mother shared ongoing conflicts with her husband regarding the division of domestic labor, which disrupted the household and negatively affected the child's emotional well-being. Rola recognized this situation as familiar from her own upbringing, reflecting norms that the father is responsible for earning income and that the mother handles housework and child-rearing. However, the professional values emphasized in her social work training promote gender equality, shared parental responsibilities, and active involvement of both parents in the child's life.

This created a profound dilemma for Rola: Should she guide the mother toward accepting the traditional division of labor and reducing marital conflict for the sake of the child's emotional stability, as modeled in her own family, or remain faithful to the principles of gender equality that she is learning to uphold as a social worker? Reflecting on this tension, Rola stated the following:

It is difficult because this situation feels familiar to me from my own family, but I also know that both parents should share responsibilities

equally. I want to help the child, but I don't know whether to follow tradition or support equality.

Internal Conflict and Emotional Struggle: "I Feel Torn"

Rola found herself caught in a profound emotional and ethical dilemma. Professionally, she was trained to support gender equality, challenge oppressive family dynamics, and advocate for clients and their rights. Personally, however, she felt a deep allegiance to the patriarchal values she grew up with, which she associated with family stability, respect for elders, and communal harmony. These values fostered a view of male authority as legitimate and necessary, and she worried that opposing them could damage family cohesion and betray her cultural identity. Reflecting on this tension, Rola stated, "I feel torn between what I've learned about equality in social work and the values I grew up with. I want to support the family, but I also don't want to go against my culture."

Emotional Reactions and Supervision Experience: "I Don't Know How to Navigate It"

During supervision sessions, Rola expressed profound internal conflict and torn loyalty. She described feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear that her professional stance on gender equality might be perceived as disrespectful or rebellious in her community, particularly toward male figures such as her father. At times, she felt paralyzed and unable to voice her professional opinions during family meetings or advocate effectively for the mother. Rola recognized that any decision she made carried deep emotional and relational implications: Choosing to uphold the values of gender equality might be experienced as a critique or rejection of her parents, especially her father, whom she respects and loves, and her mother, who has long accepted a traditional household division. Conversely, siding with traditional norms to maintain harmony could feel like a betrayal of her professional training and personal commitment to equality.

Reflecting on this tension, Rola stated, "I feel torn—supporting equality feels right, but it also feels like I'm judging my parents and what they have always done. Every choice has consequences for my relationship with them, and I don't know how to navigate it." This profound dilemma contributed to growing self-doubt, frustration, and distress, highlighting the emotional and ethical complexity inherent in reconciling personal, cultural, and professional values.

Theoretical Framework and Cognitive Dissonance

Rola had to navigate conflicting cultural and professional expectations. Her experience exemplifies cognitive dissonance, as she simultaneously held two contradictory value systems: collectivist norms emphasizing family loyalty, gendered roles, and respect for elders and individualist professional norms promoting empowerment, gender equality, and active parental involvement. This dissonance manifests as anxiety, role confusion, guilt, and impaired self-efficacy,

reflecting the psychological strain that arises when deeply ingrained cultural beliefs conflict with professional ethical imperatives (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; Singh & Jack, 2022). The tension inherent in reconciling these values posed risks to her learning process and development of a coherent professional identity, potentially leading to burnout or withdrawal if not addressed through supportive, culturally responsive supervision.

Supervision and Cultural Responsiveness: “My Supervisor not only Knows Social Work but also Understands My Culture.”

Supervision played a critical role in providing a safe and supportive space for Rola to articulate her dilemmas and emotional struggles. The supervisor first recognized Rola’s distress, reflected on her feelings, and provided explicit validation, emphasizing that her experience was understandable and legitimate. She framed the situation as familiar from both Rola’s perspective as a student navigating professional expectations and her own deep understanding of the cultural norms of Arab families in Israel. Through culturally sensitive, reflective supervision, Rola was encouraged to explore the nuances of her cultural background alongside the professional demands of social work. The supervisor employed experiential learning techniques, prompting Rola to engage critically with inherited values, question assumptions, and consider hybrid professional identities that integrate respect for cultural belonging without rejecting principles of gender equality.

Reflecting on the supervision experience, Rola stated, “For the first time, I felt truly seen and understood! I could express my fears and doubts without shame, because my supervisor not only knows social work but also understands my culture and where I come from.” This dual recognition, of both personal cultural loyalty and professional responsibilities, allowed Rola to navigate the tension between tradition and equality, fostering reflective thinking, emotional regulation, and the gradual development of a coherent professional identity (Devassy et al., 2023).

Conclusion and Educational Implications

Despite these efforts, Rola’s journey toward reconciliation was marked by profound emotional and ethical tension. She gradually developed strategies to negotiate her dual identities, such as framing professional advocacy in ways that respect cultural sensitivity, seeking support from mentors who had similar backgrounds, and reflecting critically on the implications of her choices. However, she also recognized that any decision—whether to uphold professional gender equality or respect traditional family norms—carried deep emotional consequences, affecting her relationship with her parents, particularly her father, and challenging her sense of cultural loyalty. She experienced the real threat of feeling torn between criticizing her family and remaining faithful to her professional and personal values.

Theoretical Analysis and Themes

Rola's experience exemplifies key themes in the literature on cultural competence and identity conflict in social work education. The case illustrates power dynamics in families and cultural communities in which patriarchal norms maintain gender hierarchies (Abu-Gweder, 2025). It reflects the cultural misalignment between Western individualist professional values promoting gender equality and collectivist, patriarchal cultural systems emphasizing hierarchy, tradition, and family cohesion (Hardy & Bobes, 2016; Triandis, 2006).

From the perspective of cultural competence models, Rola's case underscores the importance of both cognitive cultural awareness and emotional cultural sensitivity (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). Without recognition of the emotional resonance and relational implications of cultural values, professional training risks alienating students rather than empowering them. The psychological strain Rola experienced aligns with identity conflict theories that describe how minority professionals negotiate competing cultural and professional demands (Singh & Jack, 2022).

Implications for Supervision and Education

This case reinforces the critical need for culturally responsive supervision that acknowledges the complex, often contradictory realities faced by minority students, including the potential relational and emotional consequences of professional decisions. Supervisors must facilitate reflective, nonjudgmental dialogues that validate students' lived experiences and support the coconstruction of hybrid professional identities (Devassy et al., 2023). Educational curricula should incorporate explicit content addressing gender norms, cultural conflicts, and strategies for ethical practice in diverse cultural frameworks.

By integrating these approaches, social work education in Israel can better prepare students such as Rola to navigate the nuanced tensions among cultural belonging, emotional loyalty to family, and professional integrity, ultimately fostering more resilient, culturally competent practitioners.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of reflective journals, supervision transcripts, and fieldwork reports revealed three interconnected themes highlighting the experiences of Arab social work students navigating tensions between cultural values and professional expectations: (a) internal value dissonance and emotional distress, (b) negotiating dual identities, and (c) the role of supervision in bridging cultural and professional worlds. Each theme captures the emotional, cognitive, and relational challenges that emerged consistently in the students' accounts (see Table 1 for more details).

Table 1: Summary of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes	Observed Impact
Internal value dissonance	Emotional and cognitive conflict arising from clashing cultural and professional norms	Rawan: "I couldn't even say the word 'sexuality' without imagining my family's faces." Rola: "This is how men are in our families—you shouldn't challenge it."	Anxiety, avoidance behaviors, reduced confidence, and professional self-efficacy
Negotiating dual identities	Effort to reconcile cultural loyalty with professional social work values	Rola: "I felt like two people ... but I didn't know how to bring these two women together." Rawan: "Am I still a good daughter? I was afraid I'd lose myself."	Emotional strain, identity tension, and isolation from cultural and academic communities
Role of supervision	Supervision as a culturally attuned space for reflection and hybrid identity construction	Rawan: "My supervisor helped me think of ways to talk about sexuality without disrespecting my culture." Rola: "I can advocate for women without insulting men."	Development of hybrid professional identities, increased confidence, culturally sensitive practice

Internal Value Dissonance and Emotional Distress

Both students described intense emotional struggles resulting from conflicts between deeply rooted cultural norms and the expectations of social work practice. Rawan articulated the weight of these tensions: "I couldn't even say the word 'sexuality' without imagining my family's faces. If anyone from my community saw me talking about this, they would think I had lost my honor."

This quote highlights the profound fear of social judgment that shaped Rawan's professional experience. Her discomfort was not simply about the content of her work but also intimately tied to the perceived risk of familial and communal condemnation. She described feeling trapped between her obligation to her profession and her loyalty to cultural expectations: "Every time I had to talk about sensitive topics, I felt frozen. I wanted to do my job but felt like I was betraying my family."

Rola's account reflected a similar emotional strain in a different domain: "When the mother complained that her husband never helped, part of me wanted to say she was right. However, another part whispered, 'This is how men are in our families! You shouldn't challenge it.'"

This reflection illustrates the internalized cultural rules that guided her initial response, creating tension between empathy for the client's situation and adherence to familiar gender norms. She further emphasized the personal cost of this tension: "I felt guilty even thinking about questioning the man's authority. I worried I would disrespect my community and my parents."

In both cases, the emotional distress extended beyond immediate professional tasks. It affected their sense of competence, decision-making confidence, and ability to engage fully in their fieldwork. The students' narratives reveal that internal value dissonance manifested as a layered, ongoing challenge: Cognitive awareness of professional expectations conflicted with emotional attachment to cultural norms, producing anxiety, hesitation, and self-doubt.

Negotiating Dual Identities

A recurring theme was the effort to integrate personal cultural loyalty with professional social work values, a process that involved continuous self-reflection and emotional negotiation. Rola described her experience as inhabiting two simultaneous roles: "I felt like two people: one loyal to my family's traditions and one learning to believe in equality and openness. However, I didn't know how to bring these two women together."

This statement captures the liminality of her experience—she was aware of the professional principles she was expected to embody but struggled to reconcile them with the cultural framework that had shaped her sense of self. Rawan articulated a similar fragmentation: "They teach us to talk freely and be nonjudgmental, but if I do that, am I still a good daughter? A good Muslim? I was afraid I would lose myself."

These reflections reveal the emotional labor involved in negotiating dual identities. The students described feelings of guilt, fear, and anxiety as they attempted to navigate these overlapping yet sometimes conflicting spheres of belonging. Rawan's fear of "losing herself" reflects the risk of alienation from her cultural community, whereas Rola's hesitation about challenging gender norms illustrates the balancing act between professional advocacy and cultural loyalty.

Further expressions of this duality highlight the day-to-day challenges of integrating these identities: "Sometimes I feel I have to hide part of myself to survive professionally" (Rawan). "It's exhausting trying to honor my culture while being what I think a social worker should be" (Rola). "I want to help, but I fear the judgment from my community if I speak too openly" (Rawan).

The students' narratives indicate that negotiating dual identities is not merely a cognitive process but involves continuous emotional assessment, weighing potential relational consequences, and managing personal fears. Their words illuminate the invisible tension between professional competence and cultural authenticity, emphasizing that identity negotiation is a dynamic, iterative process.

Role of Supervision in Bridging Cultural and Professional Worlds

Supervision emerged as a critical mechanism for processing these tensions, offering a space in which students could reflect, articulate, and experiment with strategies for navigating cultural–professional conflicts. Rawan described how supervision provided validation and relief: “In supervision, I finally said out loud that I felt ashamed. My supervisor told me it’s OK to feel this way and helped me think of ways to talk about sexuality without disrespecting my culture.”

This quote illustrates how culturally sensitive supervision mitigated Rawan’s emotional burden, allowing her to explore ways to fulfill her professional responsibilities without compromising her cultural identity. She reflected on the practical outcomes of these discussions: “I learned that I can adapt how I speak about difficult topics while still doing my work properly. That realization was liberating.”

Rola similarly described supervision as transformative: “Instead of telling me to just push for equality, my supervisor asked me what equality means in my community. That made me realize I can advocate for women without insulting men.”

Other reflections underscore the centrality of supervision for emotional regulation and professional development: “Supervision helped me understand that being culturally respectful doesn’t mean ignoring professional responsibilities” (Rola). “I started to see that I can create interventions that honor both my clients’ culture and professional ethics” (Rawan). “Talking openly in supervision helped me feel less isolated and more confident in my decisions” (Rola).

Supervision functioned as a space for experimentation, reflection, and skill development, enabling students to reconcile cultural loyalty with professional integrity. It facilitated the construction of hybrid professional identities, allowing students to practice ethically and sensitively, navigating complex cultural and relational landscapes with confidence.

Comparative Insights

Although the cases addressed different specific triggers—sexuality for Rawan and gender inequity for Rola—the underlying structure of conflict was similar. Both students experienced cognitive and emotional dissonance between collectivist cultural norms and professional social work values, leading to self-fragmentation, uncertainty, and emotional strain. Supervision provided a critical mediating environment, supporting identity integration, reflective problem solving, and the practical implementation of culturally respectful professional interventions.

Synthesis

The findings demonstrate that Arab social work students face systemic challenges when professional norms conflict with deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. Emotional dissonance, dual identity negotiation, and supervision are

interdependent processes that shape professional development. Supervision provided a crucial environment for reflection, validation, and strategizing, enabling students to reconcile cultural and professional expectations and cultivate resilient, culturally sensitive professional identities.

DISCUSSION

This examination of Rawan's and Rola's cases revealed significant cultural value conflicts that extended beyond personal challenges, highlighting systemic tensions between collectivist Arab cultural norms and Western-oriented social work professional values (Abu-Gweder, 2025). These tensions underscore the complexity of identity formation among Arab social work students, which is a nuanced cultural and emotional process intricately intertwined with power dynamics and sociocultural contexts (Fook, 2016; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995).

The application of a culturally responsive supervision framework demonstrated its practical significance in supporting Arab social work students. By structuring supervision around the stages of experience, reflection, exploration, and evaluation, students could process cultural-professional tensions iteratively, developing hybrid professional identities. This finding shows that the framework is not only theoretical but can also guide students in translating abstract professional values into culturally congruent field practices.

Cultural Value Conflicts as Emotional Strain and Identity Tension

Both students' experiences highlight how cultural taboos—such as addressing sexuality and confronting patriarchal gender roles—can evoke intense feelings of shame, fear, and disillusionment that are culturally structured rather than purely individual (Abu-Gweder, 2025). This aligns with research showing that minority social workers frequently face emotional distress when they are navigating conflicting cultural and professional expectations (Nouman & Azaiza, 2024).

These emotional struggles are compounded by cultural incongruence in academic settings, which reduces students' academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging (Singh & Jack, 2022; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Such internal dissonance undermines confidence and professional legitimacy, fostering alienation from both their communities and their academic environments (Hardy & Bobes, 2016). This fragmentation—between fulfilling familial and cultural roles and embodying professional social work values—reflects the liminal identity space described in hybrid identity frameworks (Devassy et al., 2023).

Importantly, the emotional strain experienced by Rawan and Rola extended beyond momentary discomfort; it represented a deeper identity rupture that directly affected their professional functioning. Feelings of shame and fear translated into hesitation in client engagement, avoidance of sensitive topics, and uncertainty in ethical decision-making. Over time, such unresolved emotional dissonance may erode confidence and increase the risk of professional burnout. On a broader level, these struggles reveal systemic gaps in social work education,

in which minority students are expected to internalize Western professional values without sufficient support to reconcile them with their cultural foundations. This underscores the urgent need for structural adaptation in training programs to cultivate emotionally safe, culturally attuned learning environments that validate students' dual belonging and foster resilient professional identities.

Need for a Critical Multicultural Perspective and Supervision as a Relational and Cultural Space

The findings underscore the urgency of adopting a critical multicultural approach in social work education, moving beyond superficial multiculturalism that takes advantage of culture and reinforces hegemonic Western norms (Azaiza et al., 2015; Fook, 2016). As Nadan (2017) critiqued, conventional notions of cultural competence risk oversimplifying culture and neglecting power dynamics. This perspective problematizes the presumed neutrality of Western professional values and calls for curricula and supervision that legitimize collectivist and minority worldviews as valuable knowledge systems (Gay, 2018). In this context, culturally responsive education must not only acknowledge differences but also engage with the emotional, ethical, and epistemological tensions that minority students face when they translate cultural knowledge into professional practice.

These findings both align with and extend previous models of minority student experiences. Like Hardy and Laszloffy (1995), this study confirmed that cultural–professional tension can induce identity fragmentation. However, unlike prior studies that treated minority students' coping strategies as individualistic, our analysis demonstrated that relational supervision and structured reflection can facilitate identity integration. This finding adds nuance to the literature by illustrating that systemic and relational support, rather than individual adaptation alone, can mitigate cultural–professional conflict and promote sustained professional growth. Thus, adopting a critical multicultural perspective means recognizing that inclusion cannot rely solely on students' resilience but requires institutional and supervisory transformation that values emotional safety, reflexivity, and the legitimacy of multiple cultural epistemologies in social work education.

Building on this conceptual foundation, supervision emerged as a relational and cultural space in which tensions are not only managed but also transformed into opportunities for growth. Supervision provides a dialogical environment in which students' emotions and cultural experiences are validated and explored, which is consistent with relational–cultural and constructivist supervision models (Hardy & Bobes, 2016). Culturally attuned supervisors who acknowledge emotions such as shame can prevent trauma and promote resilience (Gehart, 2016). By coconstructing new meanings and adapting professional norms, supervisors enable students to develop hybrid identities that integrate cultural belonging with professional values (Kolb, 1984). Integrating transformative socioemotional learning into supervision also supports students' emotional capacities and fosters systemic inclusion (Hassan, 2025; Jagers et al., 2019). This approach, which emphasizes trust, confidentiality, and cultural humility,

challenges deficit narratives and supports students' autonomy in identity formation (Chu & Tusi, 2008; Sue et al., 2009).

Four-Stage Supervision: A Practical Framework

Grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and reflective supervision (Davys & Beddoe, 2009), the framework informed by this study features four interrelated stages—experience, reflection, exploration and experimentation, and evaluation—that guide students through the process of reconciling cultural and professional values. Anchored in social constructionist epistemology, the model views knowledge and identity as relationally and culturally coconstructed (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1995). Triandis's (2006) concept of cultural intelligence enriches this model by underscoring the importance of adaptive intercultural skills in professional identity development.

During the experience stage, students engage in fieldwork, documenting the cultural dilemmas and emotional responses that arise. In the reflection stage, supervisors facilitated open dialog about these experiences, prompting questions such as the following: How did this intervention align with your personal values? What emotions surfaced during the process? This reflective practice builds awareness of inner conflicts and begins transforming discomfort into learning.

The exploration and experimentation stage encourages students to rehearse culturally congruent strategies—such as adapting professional language or engaging families in nonthreatening ways—often through role-playing and guided discussion. Finally, in the evaluation stage, supervisors and students jointly assess the process and outcomes, identifying lessons learned and areas for continued growth. This iterative cycle promotes self-efficacy and professional resilience while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Across all stages, supervisors maintain confidentiality, validate emotions, and model culturally respectful professional behavior. Initial resistance and limited self-awareness are addressed through trust-building and narrative ownership, which are critical in navigating the emotional intensity of cultural-professional tensions (Gehart, 2016; Hardy & Bobes, 2016). Reflection and experimentation facilitate value integration, supported by supervisors' cultural wisdom and professional experience (Chu & Tusi, 2008). Ultimately, this process nurtures cultural competence as an evolving, relational skill (Morrison, 2005) and transforms supervision into a developmental partnership that strengthens both emotional well-being and professional identity. The four-stage culturally responsive framework and its iterative process are illustrated in Figure 1.

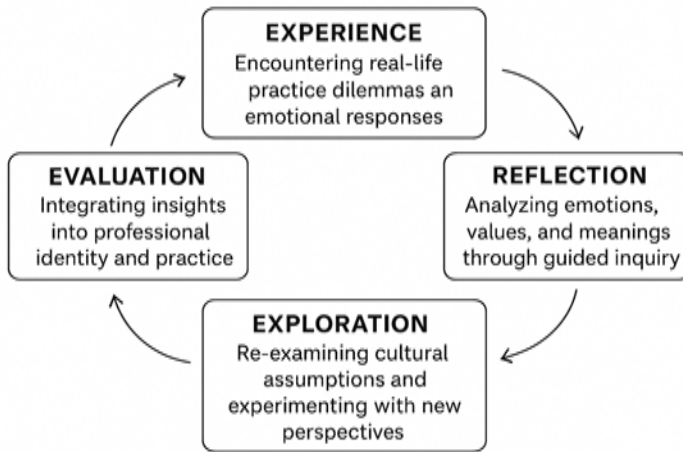


Figure 1: Four-Stage Culturally Responsive Framework

Toward Inclusive and Pluralistic Professionalism

These cases demonstrate the insufficiency of culturally neutral training and the transformative potential of supervision rooted in critical multiculturalism. Such supervision moves beyond technical skill acquisition to engage students in emotional worlds, sociocultural loyalties, and ethical reasoning. Evolving social work education to support pluralistic identity constructions that reflect the multicultural realities of practice, therefore, is imperative. By embedding relational, reflective, and culturally grounded approaches into field education, programs can foster professional identities that are both ethically consistent and culturally authentic. This synthesis of theory and practice informed a theoretically informed and empirically supported framework that empowers minority students, strengthens supervisory praxis, and advances ethical, culturally responsive social work education (Chu & Tusi, 2008; Fook, 2016).

The proposed four-stage supervision framework not only provides a structured pathway for navigating cultural–professional dilemmas but also exemplifies how critical multiculturalism can be operationalized in practice. Building on these insights, the following sections highlight the limitations of this study and the broader implications of this approach for cultivating inclusive and pluralistic professionalism in social work education.

Limitations

In terms of limitations, this study was based on only two illustrative cases, limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Arab social work students or other minority groups. This research focused on Arab students in Israel, which may restrict its applicability to different cultural or geographic contexts. The reliance on students’ narratives during supervision

sessions may have introduced subjective biases or underreporting of emotional difficulties. The study covered supervision in a limited timeframe and lacked longitudinal insight into long-term professional identity development.

Implications

Nonetheless, the study provided in-depth insight into the unique tensions that Arab social work students face when cultural values are balanced with professional expectations. The proposed principles-based supervision framework offers a novel, structured approach to supervision that addresses cultural tensions and supports identity integration in field education. This research highlights the need for a shift toward critical multiculturalism in social work training programs, which influences educational policy and pedagogy. The findings can inform culturally responsive supervisory practices that aim to reduce alienation, build resilience, and enhance cultural competence among social work supervisors and students.

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