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Enhancing International Social Work Education to Prepare Social Workers for Crisis, Flight and Social Transformation: Mindful-Based Intercultural Communication & Resilience Training (MBICRT)[1]

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Abstract

In today's time of global crises, and the resulting increase in turmoil and migration movements, Social Work needs to expand its methodological repertoire and adapt its working and teaching practices accordingly. This fact has become very palpable in recent discussions with Social Workers from Lebanon and Jordan. This paper is based on the insights gained from conceptualizing and implementing a module called "Mindful-Based Intercultural Communication & Resilience Training" (MBICRT) within a Master program in International Social Work and with Lebanese partners. The module was developed in recognition of the ongoing crisis that Lebanese social workers are facing. This occurred before the ongoing war and has thus increased in relevance now. It was initially set up from a module for Lebanese students at the Modern University of Business and Science (MUBS) and for international students within the Technical University of Applied Science (THWS) in Germany and was later broadened to integrate students from the German Jordanian University (GJU). This paper lays bare the theoretical foundations used for the conceptualization of that module. The module's effects have been tested with scales afterwards, resulting in insights that will be published at a later stage.

Key Words:

1. Introduction

> *"The peacebuilder must have one foot in what is and one foot beyond what exists."*
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> *"Authenticity asks for transcendence and grounded realism, accessibility and broad vision, strategic capacity and immediate behavior. In turn, these require the disciplines of the moral imagination in the public sphere."*
>
> *John Paul Ledearach: The Moral Imagination*

In today's time of global crises, and the resulting increase in turmoil and migration movements, Social Work needs to expand its methodological repertoire and adapt its working and teaching practices accordingly. In doing so, it is primarily important to learn

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from the experiences of social workers in the global south, who have had to develop skills to respond appropriately to exceptional situations and crises and interact in conflicting socio- cultural paradigms since their birth (Kahi, Ghanem 2021). This "learning" might not be learning through books, as a lot of this knowledge is not (yet) extracted into the scientific body of research. It might demand instead that "learning sites" (Ropers, 2000: 42) or "learning space" (Ropers, 2008: 36-37) be created to access the practical knowledge and bring it into the awareness within the group learning setting. I believe that we can learn a lot from the field of peace-building, conflict transformation and peace education here, which have vast experience in this so called "elicitive" (Lederach, 1996) approach of "teaching" to expand the regime of knowledge. This whole process is a "work-in-progress" creation, with the panel and this article forming integral components of its development.

Considering the focus of Social Work is on those excluded and marginalized, the difficult situation of many people on this planet is clearly reflected in the field of work of International Social Work. Social Work professionals face significant challenges in dealing with conflicting imperatives and uncertain contexts shaped by increasing economic disparities, environmental, economic, and health crises, as well as various forms of group-focused enmity, misanthropy and violent extremism. The profession finds itself as an actor in poverty conditions, overburdened health systems, refugee camps, conflict areas, or as an agent in repressive systems with beneficiaries who have experienced massive human suffering. This brings us to the importance of self-awareness and self-care to strengthen their personal capacities to handle such difficult situations, termed in the medical discourse as "stress". The importance to insert these self-care modules into the teaching repertoire became very clear in our interaction with Lebanese Social Workers within the "International Social Work Acting in Crisis: Attitude Matters (AttiMa) Project"[3] and "International Social Work from Crisis to Sustainability (ThRIvE)"[4]

Furthermore, even if International Social Work must act locally, be well anchored and orientate itself on the locally valid interpretation schemes, it always acts in its professionalism in the light of universally valid claimed maxims of action (Cox/Pawar, 2013). This tension brings forth change and transformation, but also entails ethical dilemmas and challenges (Healy, 2008). Additionally, even in the local, concrete practice, it is desirable to be aware of our global interconnectedness and interdependencies, including unequal power relations and unequal access to resources with something, which I would like to call a "glocal" (Swyngedouw, 1997) awareness. They manifest sharply in the daily life of the urban, consumer culture. This brings us to the significance of culture itself and the impact of culture shaping our perception of reality, our interactions, behaviors and beliefs, and thus our socio-cultural creations and the mode how we interact with ourselves, with each other and with the planet. In the context of migration, "culture", "trans-cultural", "inter-cultural encounters" and "intercultural communication" have been at the centre of investigation and have brought to awareness an understanding of culture far beyond the nation-state or linguistic borders. Yet, for Social Work education, it is not enough to fathom the competence to deal with different systems of interpretation theoretically, but it has to be experienced concretely and practically (Tesoriero, 2006) to

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[3] For further information see: https://ifas.fhws.de/international-social-work-attitude-matters/

[4] For further information see: https://ifas.thws.de/en/international-social-work-thrive/

be embodied by future Social Workers (Reich & Di Rosa, 2021). This needs to broaden or even transform, as Social Work education is further boosted by the future scenarios ahead of us: On the one hand, crisis easily leads to politics and a social climate of fear, which legitimizes discrimination, scapegoating and de-humanizing of the "other". On the other hand, migration will amplify due to climate change and altering living conditions. Thus, the need for an integration of diverse cultural perspectives will increase even further to avoid the surge of discrimination, exclusion, and in many regions of the planet also violent conflicts.

In this article, I am presenting core theoretical foundations for a module called "Mindful-Based Intercultural Communication & Stress Management" (MBICRT) created within the AttiMa/ThRIvE Project. Theoretically, the concept of the module is based on salutogenesis according to Aaron Antonovsky, who ascribes an appropriate role to the aspect of meaning and interpretation for health, and focuses on the widely studied MBSR-Program of Jon Kabat-Zinn, broadened with teaching units from the practice of intercultural communication and peace and theater education. This linkage works very well as they all are based on an experiential, participatory pedagogy and place great importance on the group and the learning process as a group. The module encompasses four SWS (three hours per week) and builds on weekly meetings over the span of nine weeks, with three full days on the weekends in between. Homework is given from session to session, and a working book is provided.

The aim of the module was firstly to empower people to deal constructively with stress. Since the constructive handling of stress can have a sustainable impact on the quality of life, this can be constructed as a building block for resilience promotion. Secondly, the module intends to strengthen emotional intelligence, as this is very important for intercultural contexts, and to increase ambiguity tolerance. For this reason, I selected the following three scales to test effects:

– The Schuttle Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).
– Adult Resilience Measure-Revised (ARM-R) by Resilience Research Center, which is a self-assessment of social-ecological resilience.
– Tolerance of ambiguity scale developed by Budner (1962).

All three scales have also been tested in cross-cultural contexts, which is central to this course, and were composed of people from very different cultural backgrounds. Further, qualitative interviews have been done with some of the students to complete a mixed method approach. The results of these data will be published at a later stage. Here I would like to lay bare the theoretical foundation of the concept. The method used is literature based and not referring to the empirical data.

The theoretical foundations presented here serve as background information, aiming to foster the educational and pedagogical theoretical discussions teaching in a migrant society. Here we need to take into consideration that people come from crisis regions and thus, a culturally sensitive approach to health and health care is needed. In my view, the following theories can be very valuable to set up intercultural seminars for well-being.

I wish to discuss the assumption, that further professionalization of International Social Care needs to integrate a transcultural perspective, a 'glocal', reflective mindset, and

modules. Thus, incorporating self-competencies and embodiment in the curricula, based on experience-based learning and informed by post-colonial curricula developments. I do so by not aiming to focus on the problems future migration will bring, but rather by focusing on the possibilities it reveals in the advancement of the existing higher education culture, to support participatory, inclusive and experience-based learning and bring more space for different knowledge-regimes into the academic bodies. As I have been trained in constructive conflict transformation, I believe addressing structures is crucial for long-term change. Although I am very well aware that inserting such a module into higher educational structures does create paradoxes and dilemmas, I hereby hope to spread some suggestions into the discussion of curricula development and the integration of the phenomena of migration into International Social Work Education.

The collaboration with Lebanese Social Workers served as a basis to develop the MBICRT Module, as much of my work is with Social Workers from Za'atari Camp in Jordan. It is my experience of their love for life despite tremendous suffering, injustice, loss and pain, that inspires me deeply and ignites my inner quest to be capable to face such circumstances without turning to nihilism, criticism, cynicism, rage and depression. I believe, if we want to face the up-coming events as humans, it is time to evolve all our capacities and focus on our human potentials.

2 Fostering the Sense of Coherence (SoC): Mindful-Based Intercultural Communication & Resilience Training (MBICRT)

The module that aimed to foster personal and social competencies of students such as ambiguity tolerance, emotional intellect and resilience to prepare the students for crises, was to be enacted in a context where students from very different contexts took part. These contexts varied not only in geographical background (from Ghana, Nigeria, Mexico, Lithuania, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, Taiwan, etc.), but also in their previous educational fields (some education related studies, some social studies, some anthropology, etc.). Furthermore, it was developed to be implemented in collaboration with the Modern University of Business and Science (MUBS) to allow for Lebanese students to participate. Thus, it was necessary for the underlying model of the course to be universal enough to meet people where they are and to be open for particularities as well as an integration of different cultural backgrounds into the training space. Therefore, it had to be conceptualized to be implemented primarily as an online module, while at the same time remaining participatory and experience-based.

Given the vast amount of evidence, Mindful-Based Stress Reduction Trainings have an impact on well-being, I chose this as a basic component and will thus begin this paper by explaining some of the basic principles these trainings convey. However, given the variety of different backgrounds, I felt a need to advance this process, with more recognition of the importance of individual, collective meaning, and meaningfulness. Here, I found that the Salutogenetic Model can deliver some important understanding by combining a more physiological perspective on health with the importance of cultural signification. I will outline this approach in the following chapter. Yet, to understand, what is meaningful to us, it is important to look to the signifying systems and practices, which brings us to the concept of culture. Although culture was mentioned previously, it is decisive to make explicit an often very implicit understanding of concepts underlying the conceptualization of this experience-based module. The module also builds on the premises, that the

separation of body and mind can no longer hold scientific validity and thus strives towards an "embodied" practice.

2.1 Mindfulness as Invitation to "Sit with the Uncomfortable", Pausing in Silence to Act from this Inner Place of Freedom

In situations of crises, migrants and social workers alike, are exposed to an enormous amount of stress. This results from the unpredictability of future events, inconsistencies and uncertainties, various (existential) threats, enormous amounts of suffering impacting one's self or one's surroundings, as well as a lack of resources and an absence of control over their environments. This constant exposure can become very harming to their long-term well-being, particularly if the socio-cultural, economical and individual coping mechanisms do not deliver any sort of alleviation. Furthermore, if social workers or migrants remain in a kind of survival mode, they focus on what frightens them and "stresses" them and are not capable of moving into a creative mode of action. Yet, this creativity is needed to build a sustainable society arising from times of crises. Generally, one can say, that the practice of mindfulness involves consciously directing attention to the experience of the present moment. In doing so, the practitioner adopts a non-judgmental, accepting, and curious attitude toward his or her experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2010; Shapiro & Carlson, 2011).

One approach that has proven to bring sustainable relief in overcoming stress and to support stress management, is the Mindful-Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR) founded by Jon Kabat- Zinn. Initially, this training was carried out in a semi-inpatient setting at the Stress Reduction Clinic in Worchester, Massachusetts, which was founded for this purpose. It then developed into an eight-week course known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), now conducted worldwide on an inpatient, day-care, and outpatient basis (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005).

The program delivers a thoroughly developed training in observing one's mode of thinking and feeling, while connecting to an awareness of the present moment. This firstly allows for awareness of the way one thinks and feels, and of the repetitive patterns of this construct. Secondly, as this awareness resumes, a dis-identification with one's own thoughts and feelings follows. This dis-identification is crucial for positioning oneself outside of this construct, and then thirdly, it enables the self to act differently, to respond to the stressors as an act of creative engagement, and to merely react in a habitual form from an autopilot modus. This present-moment awareness, or "presencing" (Scharmer, 2013), is the key for change. This positioning, however, has no real impact on one's day to day engagements with life, if it is not embodied. Embodiment needs a profound practice or regular training, in which the position of an "inner observer", of being present in the moment, with an awareness of thoughts, feelings, and sensations are practiced.

This awareness of one's way of thinking – and feeling – dismantles the notion that emotions shape our thinking. It shows how much this state-of-being, in-turn shapes the way we perceive reality and how selective our perception is.

Here we start to question our perception not in a merely theoretical way, backed-up by constructivist theories, but in a concrete manner allowing for an illumination of our inherent judgements about the statements and behaviors of others. Only then, if we manage to step back from our immediate judgements, we can build connections to others,

who might be in some ways different then us. To draw upon the famous words of Margaret Wheatly:

> "When we listen with less judgment, we always develop better relationship with each other. It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments that do. Curiosity and good listening bring us back together" (Wheatly, 2001: 2).

Wheatly brings us to another dimension of MBSR Training, which the practice of staying in the present moment can lead to an awareness of the attitudes one is currently adopting. She speaks about curiosity as essential to building a relationship with the unknown (person or circumstances). This is also a central aspect in MBSR and described within the eight foundational attitudes as the "beginners mind". Yet, as this is a theoretical text, I do not want to mention all the eight attitudes of MBSR, as it is precisely not a moral prescription of these attitudes, which bring about a release of stress-reaction advanced through their enactment, but it is the awareness of one's own process of *relating*. Which then opens up a space to relay to the world and to others in a different way, and thus experience "stress" differently. Asking the question, 'How do I relate to what I perceive right now?'[5], gives rise to more awareness of one's own thinking, feeling patterns, and their deeply embodied attitudes. This awareness of the *mode of relating* to the experience brings forward a possibility to change the process of experiencing from within.

MBSR has given rise to many new developments as it carries the seed not only as a resilience tool, but in its holistic approach, also seems capable to support a valuable living with different diseases (such as chronic pain, insomnia, depression, cancer, etc.) (Lao et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2010). Furthermore, mindful leadership, mindful parenting and mindful partnership have emerged, which support the idea, that mindfulness practice does not simply lead to an individual change of attitude but contributes to an overall modification of "relating" to pleasant, unpleasant or neutral experiences. It does so, by allowing us to become aware of the attitudes we hold in the way we relate to experiences. Thus, it opens a space to alter our attitudes towards our experiences. Such a change is very subtle but has profound impacts in creating a completely new *culture of relating*.

As a program, MBSR can be applied very well in the predominant culture of curing disease.[6] This might be part of the reason for its success, as it brings a whole new culture into the present time structures, which are still created by ways of thinking from the past and built by a dominant paradigm of deficit orientation.

This deficit orientation has far-reaching consequences, as the focus on the deficit easily leads to a "war" against the disease and the unwanted, and thus leads to the establishment of further walls and separation from different parts of each other. Instead of thinking about the problem (the stress), Peter Clark motivates us to think about "possibilities".

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[5] Maybe asking: "Am I accepting what is and feel empowered to creatively dance creatively along with it or am I feeling victimized, am in judgement about or resistance of it?"

[6] Here, there is also a big question mark: Is mindfulness by itself powerful enough to bring about a cultural change to manifest a new way of living suitable to include a wide range of diversity and new way of relating to others and the environment? Is it a seed for social, political, ecological and economical transformation or is it merely manifesting the status quo?

This approach seems to be very valid for inter-cultural settings. It brings about a new perspective. Yet, the challenges lie in the fact, that mindfulness and meditation is not for everybody. Thus alternatives, such as other co-regulative practices, like humming, play or other embodied techniques have to be implemented. Particularly, if the people are very stressed, movements like shaking with music, or sessions from body-mind-cantering (BMC) to calm down the nervous system have to be set out before a seated practice. Still, we invite the participants to step out of their comfort zones, as this is where growth occurs. It is about challenging their autopilots and habitual pattern of behavior. Therefore, it is a fine line to what extent the challenge is healthy, and students are encouraged, and not overwhelmed. It is of utmost importance to foster self-responsibility, self-awareness and self-care throughout the entire sessions, as well as guiding students again-and-again to listen to themselves, and make their own choices, particularly in intercultural settings.

2.2   The Salutogenetic Model

On the topic of Salutogenesis, it is helpful to distinguish between a more general understanding of the term referring to an attitude focusing on the genesis of health, and the genesis of illness and disease, which is mostly practiced in medicine and health studies. The latter more specific application, which I adopt here, is linked to a particular model that has been developed by Aron Antonovsky in his book "Health, Stress and Coping" (1979) and was further exemplified in many other succeeding works. Antonovsky developed the model continuously, departing from the central question: 'How do we manage to stay healthy?' (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky observed that women, who have experienced the horrors of the Holocaust, had significantly more issues in overcoming their menopause than others who did not. However, a third of them did not do worse at all. This caused Antonovsky to ask, "What was the miracle?" (Antonovsky, 1990: 76). Asking this question, stood in such sharp contrast to the general pathogenic query about what causes not ease, but dis-ease, and illness. Thus, he felt the need to coin a new term to this approach and attitude towards life to mark the different orientation of attention and mode of thinking behind this approach (Mittelmark et al., 2017).

Central to this understanding is that he transcends the socio-culturally shaped binary perception of reality of humans being either "ill" or "healthy". Instead, rather suggests to display these different states of being on a continuum, between ease and dis-ease:

> "I am persuaded that the salutogenic orientation, that thinking in terms of the mystery of movement toward the ease pole of the ease-dis/ease continuum, is a significant and radically different approach to the study of health and illness than the pathogenic orientation" (Antonovsky,1979: xiv–xv).

Health is thus, according to Antonovsky, much more than low risk factors, including salutary factors. He often speaks about the metaphor of not-wellbeing as a stream: a body of water in which people are supposed to fall into when they are ill, and when health-workers have to search for treatments to pull them out. To him, this swimming in a stream is a rather normal situation of life and thus it is not that life occurs on the shores, but in the stream itself, as life is full of challenges:

> "A more fruitful vision is to see life as turbulent and inherently full of conflicts and what he called chronic life strain, referring to long-lasting structural and cultural situations such as poverty, unemployment, marginality, etc. A sad fact of the lives of many persons." (Antonovsky, 1990: 73)

He thus broadens the view on illness from a narrow focus on one particular disease, with a more holistic approach of integrating the subjective experience of not feeling well, and the socio-cultural surroundings into his quest. By doing so he recognises the fact that something, what he terms a "breakdown", the subjective experience of being ill, might occur with or without having been diagnosed with a disease[7]. Healthy is, according to Antonovsky, much more than being low on risk factors. It is connected to the mental, emotional and physiological dimension of a human. It is less of a state then a process, a verb, taking the subjective experience of the people and his capabilities to adapt to certain circumstances or so called "stressors"[8] into account: "Salutogenesis, (. . .) leads us to focus on the overall problem of active adaptation to an inevitably stressor-rich environment" (Antonovsky, 1987: 9).

Disease and stress are integrated parts of life, both as natural conditions and as the resources available to respond, with the individual's active agency being central. Here we can recognise the coherence with the MBSR approach. The achievement of this adaptation is not something evaluated from outside the being, diagnosed by another person, but it is under the authority of the person itself. This displays a deep respect for the autonomy of the human being, and the decisions concerning his life in this model. The centrality of human dignity, self-responsibility and agency are also shown in the question Antonovsky has been asking to figure out social support. Normally, one would assume to inquire about social support, and to ask how much help one is *receiving*. Yet, Antonovsky turned the question around, inquiring how much "one feels one is needed by one's spouse, children..." (Antonovsky, 1990: 75). This is pointing to the importance of giving, of *contributing* to the social surrounding to feel meaningful and self-worthy as human. A system that places people into positions from which they can merely receive things, but are deprived to create, to act and to contribute meaningfully to their surrounding is undermining human well-being.

The quest about coping strategies and the stressors that life brings about, brought Antonovsky to look for subjective dimensions, which are very much connected to the socio-cultural and economic environment. The dimension, which he found to be central to a person's perception of well-being is the so called Sense of Coherence (SoC). "The origins of health are to be found in a sense of coherence" (Antonovsky, 1979: vii).

> "The sense of coherence is a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement." (Antonovsky,

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[7] A diagnosis, defining, who is ill or not from outside, as done in the pathogenetic approach, Antonovsky stated: "blinds us to the subjective interpretation of the state of affairs of the person who is ill" (Antonovsky, 1979, p. 36).

[8] A stressor is, "(a) stimulus which poses a demand to which one has no ready-made, immediately available and adequate response" (Antonovsky, 1979, p. 72). Or later: "A stressor, in sum, can be defined as a characteristic that introduces entropy into the system—that is, a life experience characterized by inconsistency, under—or overload, and exclusion from participation in decision-making." (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 28)

1987: 19)

The three elements that Antonovsky names above, are often referred to as: comprehensibility, manageability and sense of meaning (see figure 1). The more a person is able to comprehend and integrate (comprehensibility), to handle (manageability) and to make sense (meaningfulness) of an experience or disease, the greater the individual's potential is to successfully cope with the situation or the disease. What is central to manageability is the sense that adequate resources to cope with stressors are found, either in "one's own hands or in the hands of legitimate others" (Antonovsky, 1990a: 2). Thereby, Antonovsky understands meaningfulness in a way of looking at life worth living, providing motivation which leads one to seek to order the world, and to transform resources from potential to actuality" (Antonovsky, 1990b: 79).

Fig. 1.: Salutogenetic Model

Source: Antonovsky, A. (1987), visualized by author
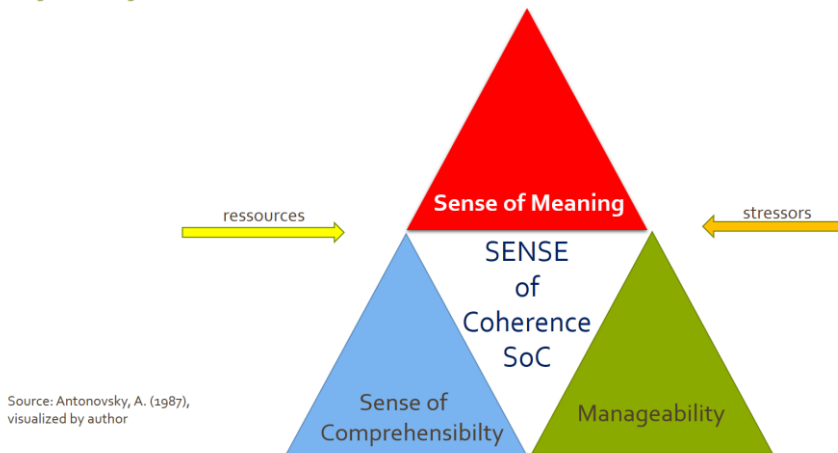
As a consequence, the movement of the dis-ease/ease scale is a lifelong learning process and is part of the experience we call life. This learning perspective is very different from an approach, which aims at turning people from "ill" to healthy at once:

> "The "magic bullet" approach, Dubos warns us, leads to "the mirage of health". It implies that all we need is a war against smallpox, another war against cancer, then a war against HIV and schizophrenia and, and, and...and soon, if we devote enough resources to these wars, we will all be permanently healthy. The salutogenic approach, seeing the struggle to move toward health as permanent and never fully successful, focuses our concentration on those salutary factors which will help people to cope as successfully as possible throughout their lives." (Antonovsky 1990: 2)

In contrast to focusing on a particular disease, disability or syndrome of a person, that must be fought a war against, salutogenesis takes many more aspects and interconnections into account as is done through a pathological lens. These aspects include the immediate surrounding of significant others, human relationships, and the community one is embedded in. It also includes the "map of meaning", referring to the culture the person is part of. In the Salutogenetic model, the cultural and historical context

can thus be understood as a vessel, which is generating psychosocial stressors on the one side, but on the other, also generates resources.

Recognizing the "sense of meaning" carves out potentials often ignored in a global view that denies the importance of the subjective meaning for a person's health. At the same time, Antonovsky does not want to open the definition of health, which would include everything and allows for "medical imperialism" (Antonovsky, 1979: 53). He does not promote "health" to be defined by this one body, as being some kind of objective reality. Rather, he positions health within the subjective experience of a state of being and into a collective, meaning and sense-making surrounding, belonging to many bodies.

He emphasized that:

> "[W]hen one searches for effective adaptation of the organism, one can move beyond Cartesian Dualism and take into account fantasy, love, playing, meaning, will and the social structures that promotes these." (Antonovsky, 1987: 9)

He thus advocates to observe collective behavior and creations such as myths, rituals, humor, language, ceremonies and so on (Antonovsky, 1987).[9] These are all central parts of culture. In turn, culture does play an important role in shaping the way we handle health and act within situations of stress, risk and crisis.

If we listen to the meaning given to people living through the crisis, and not just treat them as receivers of our humanitarian aid, we might discover valuable strategies to handle crises – also useful for Western countries. One example can be taken from the Kel Ewey Tuareg emphasized by Gerd Spittler in his research on "Agency in Famine" (2012). One noteworthy issue is that here people have been searching for the meaning of the crisis. Before they rush into mind-less action, they listen to themselves, acknowledge their fears, ask what they are afraid of the most, and then recognize that it was not merely the fear of death, but the fear to die without dignity. In response, the Kel Ewey Tuareg also used culture and spent resources on cultural activities (instead of on food) to safeguard their dignity collectively as humans. From a materialistic point of view, it could be seen as irrational not to spend everything on food. Yet, many of them chose to act otherwise (Spittler, 2012). This could be explained in a way that through their signifying practice, making things comprehensible, manageable, and giving meaning to their suffering had been all acts to strengthening the Sense of Coherence (SoC) as a collective.

2.3   Culture: The Map of Meaning of Collectives as Material for New Co-creations

In the context of migration and integration, intercultural encounters have become a major focus of research and practice. Taking into consideration that future crises, war and climate change will further increase the amount of people leaving their place of birth and wandering, or fleeing, to a place with better conditions for livelihood, it does make sense to integrate culture. Awareness of culture and competencies of intercultural communication may be included more predominantly into the curricula. Yet, this should not be done to give culture an ontological status, but it should be handled as a concept or

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[9] For Antonovsky and the roles of culture in salutogenesis and the development of the sense of coherence *see* (Benz, et al, 2014).

an idea to organize reality itself. Thus, it is important to lay bare the theoretical foundations we adhered to in the development of the module.

Since the cultural turn (Ley & Duncan 1993a; Gregory, 1993) in humanities, social science and the elaboration of "cultural studies"[10], culture has become a widely discussed concept, with an emphasis on the importance of art and culture for education, development, social criticism and change. It responded to the realization of global interconnectedness, hegemonies, the structuring of capitalism, and relationships among economic, cultural, and political institutions.

Culture thereby could be understood both as a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, cannons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so forth (Mitchel, 1994: 102). Yet, on a more concrete understanding, Peter Jackson proposed a "working definition" for culture, "the level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life", called cultures, which themselves "are maps of meaning through which the world is made intelligible" (1989: 2).

Such an understanding of "culture" draws its traction from constructivist reasoning (Derrida, 1981, Foucault, 1972, Butler, 1993) and is – although conceived as an ordering principle – not seen as fixed or permanent, but rather as a pattern constantly in change, in becoming and in permanent re-creation (Morley & Chen, 1996).

Inspired by Stuart Hall, and the so called new-cultural geographers (Duncan & Duncan, 2004; Jackson, 1989; Mitchell, 1995), it makes sense to distinguish "culture" used on the one hand as an umbrella term for artistic expression, the arts (literature, music, theater, film, dance, etc.) or on the other hand for other understandings. Here the term culture refers more to an ordering frame, a "map of meaning" (Jacksons, 1989: 186), through which the world is made intelligible, which constituted by system of meaning and values carried around in the head (concept) and a set of signifying patterns of actions (modes of doings). This "map", although in a constant form of becoming, serves as orientation, guidelines and creative material for communication for individual and collective (self-)expression. These maps constitute modes of thinking, doings and being, driven by and giving birth to a system of power relations.

This understanding of culture as intrinsically related to power is in my understanding crucial. As the element of distinction is central to the idea of culture: "from these earliest extensions, 'culture' was an idea used to differentiate and to classify" (Mitchell, 1995: 104). This distinction is only possible by providing the possibility of the constant re-enactment of power relations. Distinction – and thus power – is also central to the process of creation.

Unfortunately, one can still encounter an essential understanding of culture, particularly in the natural sciences, in the media, or the public. As Rathje elaborates:

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[10] Cultural studies began at the University of Birmingham, England, in 1963, where Richard Hoggart established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. but became an independent department under the leadership of Stuart Hall, who largely shaped the theoretical background of cultural studies and was the director of the Centre from 1969-1976.

> "As shown at the beginning, the traditional assumption that each of us primarily belongs to a culture, usually a country or an ethnicity (primary collectivity), and that there is a certain similarity among the members of a culture (trait congruence) still dominates our everyday thinking and acting with regard to culture." (Rathje, 2009: 93)

Therefore, since the 1990s, the term "intercultural" has been criticized repeatedly as one assumes that "inter" suggests that there are two clearly distinguishable cultures – that through this perspective an essentialized understanding would be fostered, where the differences between cultures would be highlighted (see Welsch, 1994). In its place, the term „trans-cultural" has been widely adopted, which then sets off from the constructivist understanding of culture of which crossings of constructed socio-cultural boundaries are likely and ongoing (Vanderheiden & Mayer (2014: 31). Such an understanding of culture as something fluid and hybrid, in the constant making and becoming, was the basis of the outlined course. Yet, it also takes into consideration the knowledge generated within the ongoing development of intercultural competencies training, and not becoming too fuzzy about the term "inter-cultural" (Grain, 2018).

Culture is indeed a useful survival strategy to overcome situations of profound stress, such as crisis, ethno-political conflicts, destruction and war. As we know also in working with culture in conflict zones (Reich, 2012; Thompson, 1988), it is not the case yet that any cultural expression naturally promotes a peaceful interaction between humans. Cultural expressions, such as theatre, film, poetry, art, etc. can foster peace as much they can also foster war. In this, it seems to be the case with the SoC as well: it is not guaranteed that a strong sense of coherence immediately leads to a civilian rule, which values the autonomy of a human being and constrains forms of coercion (Antonovsky, 1990). Cultural expressions are not *per se* constructive or harmless. Rather they depend on the values of the collective which creates meaning through representation of cultures fueled by the values they hold. Furthermore, conflicts, flight and migration, or other crises (health crisis, financial crisis, environmental crises) could point to the fact that the cultures in which these crises occur, and our global culture, in which most of them are somehow embedded in, are not appropriate to safeguard life on the planet and its multiple expressions sufficiently. These crises call out for new cultures to be created, emerging from the future (Scharmer, 2013). In this transformation, the different perspectives, prioritizations of values and worldviews will come up. To handle these differences, methods, and tools are demanded, which can support connections despite the differences that are addressed in intercultural/transcultural communication, conflict management and peacebuilding.

To stay in contact with each other, despite differences, demands a divorce from group thinking (us versus them), and a strengthening of the group feeling within the collective. This can occur by doing something together.

Acknowledging the collective, I would like to refer again to Stefanie Rathje, who points less towards the performative and representative aspect of culture, and more to the familiarity with certain collective habits as something that is creating culture (Rathje, 2009)[11]. This also emphasizes the collective dimension of culture. It is a very important direction referring to the multiple belongings one person has and acknowledging the connection to a variety of collectives and, thus, cultures. This is not only the case when two people from two different "cultures" meet with each other. Rather,

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[11] Translation by the author.

"(w)henever individuals interact with each other, countless worlds are involved and never only two. Against this background, interculturality as a special state of affairs can no longer be objectified, but must be defined as a construction of the participants. However, since individuals in everyday practice obviously make distinctions between "normal" and "intercultural" situations that seem plausible to those involved, the question of the criterion of distinction arises. With the help of the notion of multicollectivity, the hypothesis can be put forward here that interculturality is constructed by the communication partners precisely when the participants do not activate a common collective belonging in the given situation, or experience the lack of common collective belonging as virulent (missing link paradigm)" (Rathje, 2014: 15).

Rathje proposes an understanding here, which departs sharply from the still very much present idea of one dominant culture coherent with one language and one nation state. She makes the actual fact palpable, by recognizing that very different collectives create diverse cultures, organizational cultures, family cultures, sport cultures, music cultures, youth culture, etc. – all created and established by different collectives with individuals of multiple belongings (see Nohl, 2014).

Such a collective is also created by participating in a joint module or more profoundly in a joint study program. Tim Middendorf has convincingly shown how the socialization into the study group actually constitutes an essential part of the personal training to become a professional social worker (Middendorf, 2021). Each study group creates a collective, and thus its own culture. This culture can be constructed very consciously and deliberately.

A culture of separation, competition, and comparison is very much present in higher education. These are often sustained by emotions of fear and nourished by mechanisms of rating and control. Transforming this into a different culture, one that is built on mutual recognition, authenticity and interdependency, and based on mechanisms of trust and emotions of respect, will create a collective of professionals that belongs to an educational culture that fosters these aspects in their professional practices. A collective experience of a deep respect for differences may enable students to enact principles of true acceptance of different "truth". Meanwhile, still connecting with people, and holding such "truth" on a human level is much easier outside of the university setting. Hereby, it is essential, that the students learn how to handle the "unknown" and become more curious about the "missing-link" (Rathje, 2014: 15) paradigm in intercultural settings.

Often, the full extent of the deeply entrenched meanings and associations of concepts and symbols, and the implications of actions cannot be accessed by outsiders from another cultural setting (Cohen, 2001; Jabri, 1996; Moore & Woodrow, 2010; Salem, 1997; Woodrow & Moore, 2002). However, the task is, to open a space for new learnings to occur and to broaden the horizon in some way. This allows for personal growth, but also for opening new scopes for action. To be open for new insights to occur in the moment, one has to be prepared to step into the unknown within the encounter and to liberate from past assumption. To do so, as social workers, we need methods

- to become aware of our own modes of thinking and thus 'decolonize' our thinking practice;
- to become aware of our state of being, our emotions, train the capacity to step in and out of our emotions (des-identify with them) and train our emotional intelligence;

- enabling us to connect with ourselves in depth, create our own sense of feeling safe, so that we can bear others to have a different worldview, without feeling threatened by their views;
- enabling us to hold space for each other; allowing to sit calm with discomforting situations, connecting to the "nothingness" from where the new can emerge.

These methods are needed to give space for transformation, realization & growth and to step into self-empowerment. Yet, one needs to be aware that if or physiology is in a state of fear or anxiety, we first need to self or co-regulate ourselves, well explained by Stephe Porges with the Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2003). This requires disciplined practice, to be able to handle deep emotions, and not to be governed by them.

This is something mindfulness practice can very well offer and offers through this "pause" the ability to respond and not to react. The capacity to respond consciously – and not to react- can be seen as central to intercultural communication to avoid decisions done on the bases of stereotypes or fears. This "pause" then allows to step into new realms, a new territory, discovering a new reality or to say: regarding the same reality with a new gaze and enriching one's own horizon. That creates a new space, which might be called with Norbert Ropers a true and deep "learning site" (Ropers, 2000: 42) or "learning space" (Ropers, 2008: 36-37). Here, the learning is connected to the individual perceptions and raising of its awareness emerging from the interactive process, pauses and reconceptualization's.

2.4 Experience-Based Learning as Prerequisite and the Dilemmas Occurring to Train within the Body of Higher Education

Such "learning sites" demand spaces for listening, beyond what is deemed right and wrong, as well as teaching approaches that differ from traditional forms. Participatory and experience-based teaching methods, which are also sometimes called "elicitive approach" (Lederach, 1995: 55) in peace education, or "emergent" (Bodhin, 2020; McCrown et al., 2010) in the mindfulness training scene, seem to be suitable. These are also acknowledged in the post-colonial teaching formats discussions. These are formats suitable for a life-long learning that fosters reflection and awareness. The reflection on modes of thinking and doing, and the intrinsic values and norms are also referred to as second-order learning (van Mierlo et al., 2010), experiential learning (Kolb, 1983) or transformative learning (Mezirow, 1996). If people can review certain situations in a different light and learn to define the situations differently, they might activate a greater room for maneuver and identify different resources for action. This in turn can strengthen their SoC, but also transforms the culture of the collective, as they start to see and act differently. However, this approach demands voluntarily participation, which is not really given in the context of higher education – even if it is announced that the participation is voluntary, and even if the grading does not depend on the participation. Within the MBICRT, it was possible to set up a proof of achievement, such as a term paper, which could be evaluated independently from the participation in the course. Still, the university as an educational center, where marks are given and hierarchies between professors and students exist, can't be seen as a neutral place, but rather its structural violence has to be taken into the account and well reflected upon. These encounters only bring deep results if deep trust is established within the seminar room. This is not so simple in the judgmental context of higher education. It indeed is very supportive, if the sessions are not implemented in the rooms of the university but in other more beautiful places, inviting

social interaction and deep sharing. This also fosters a process of relationship building amongst the participants, which is very important in these sessions; the establishment of ground rules and developing a safe space. Seeing the relationships between the participants/students as an important outcome, and honoring the truth shared from each one of their perspectives is not the usual practice in higher education. We need to start to acknowledge different forms of truth, equally valid for an in-depth learning process. On the one hand it is the delivery of information, the "representational knowledge", and on the other hand it is relationship building, or "relational knowledge" (Park, 2004). In intercultural contexts, where values, experiences and perspectives are so different, the "relational knowledge" is of high significance and spaces, which create relationships across the intercultural dived are essential for personal growth and learning. These spaces foster the broadening of the horizon and of self-reflection, and raise consciousness, thus strengthening personal development. This is needed when encountering crises, where what is known falls apart. Social Work can take on a pioneering role establishing these spaces for intercultural reflections on experience-based learnings to foster personal development, as it is something that higher education would generally need to prepare all students for: to act wisely in crisis. If higher education sees itself not simply as an institution delivering information and evaluating the knowledge thereof, but also values its capacity to support personal growth through socialization, which entails living together in a certain way, then it could help develop habits on how to listen to others, hold space for emotions for each other, and give feedback to each other in an appreciative way – even in cases of having an entirely diverging perception, and without falling into blaming or de-evaluating the other's perception, and thus fostering polarization. Here we find much potential for future development.

The higher education culture is also only a "map of meaning" established worldwide due to the colonial systems entrenched by military thinking. Yet, "cultural maps", as Jackson has stated, "are capable of multiple readings" (1989: 186). This creates the prerequisite for its constant re-enactment to become structured and its need to be repeated to exist (Butler, 1997). This need to be re-enacted, for its structuring yields directly to the "possibility of its un-doing" (Butler, 1990: 14). With regards to the structure of higher education, it is for sure worth doing so. The present-time education system is re-creating a way of thinking, which has created competition, comparison and separation between groups, humans and systems. Creating spaces for relationship-building and personal empowerment, might enrich the university landscape to strengthen the capacity of social workers to encounter crises, wars & separation and to act from an inner space of peace.

3   Conclusion

This paper presented the theoretical framework on which a module called "Mindful-Based Intercultural Communication & Resilience Training" was built, within the International Social Work study program. This program was developed in recognition of the ongoing crisis that Lebanese social workers are currently facing and the need for self-care in such circumstances. Furthermore, it addressed some of the challenges and needs directed towards implementing such courses within the framework of higher education. It is directed to reach out to others working in the same field and creating spaces for intercultural exchange and experience-based and participatory teaching methods to transform higher education. Therefore, it is to integrate the reality of crises, flight,

migration and social-political transformation, by preparing our students for these challenges ahead.

I firstly spoke about the self-care tool of mindfulness and certain key elements available in such trainings. Then, I continued to elaborate on Salutogenesis, as this model could serve as a missing theoretical link which explains why culture and the sense of meaning is so important for individual and collective well-being. Furthermore, epistemologically, salutogenesis can be regarded as a constant learning process fostering the movement toward health and well-being (Mittelmark et al., 2017). This is important to recognize as I believe this collective learning process is central to this module. Then I spoke about culture and briefly discussed the understanding of this notion, as culture constitutes such an important resource. Yet, is also highly ambiguous as it can pertain values of coercion and dehumanization of the other as much as it can be serving as means to overcome crisis and deprivation in a human way.

An important question will be: How far are different truths, different stories accepted? How are minority views treated and what kind of cultural practices allow for a variety of stories to be given voice?

Methods allowing these different perceptions to co-exist in the same space are often highly emotionally charged. They are best built up on a training which first implements a certain awareness that our thoughts are not our reality and that they are strongly shaped by the state of being, our emotions we a currently in. Thoughts are never neutral. All what we seem to perceive as reality is strongly filtered by our emotions and believes as we select from all the stimuli, those which support our mindsets, believes and perspectives. Methods, which bring awareness into this process have to be practices with discipline and they have to be experienced. They cannot be learned theoretically alone. This is why experience-based, participatory learning methods are necessary.

At the end, I would like to highlight two central elements, which I propose to take into consideration in curricula developments, integrating the phenomena of migration, flight and crises.

Firstly, it might be meaningful to integrate mindfulness practice into such trainings, as they – beside many other aspects – train *to sit with what is unpleasant* and consciously *respond* from the state of inner connection and stillness in contrast to immediate reaction. This trains to not directly "react" to an outside trigger, but to "respond" from a connection with one's values, and preferred state of being. This capacity is needed to navigate not only through stress and overwhelm, but also through the unknown terrain within intercultural encounters.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the resources available in cultural practices to overcome emergencies, crises and create new futures. This force of creative agency was something we could observe e.g. in Lebanon after the explosion on 4th of August 2020 and now during the recent war in 2024 when incredible fast lots of collective creative action emerged. Given that people migrating, as well as those working in the field of migration, are experiencing a high amount of stress, it is indeed important to strengthen the inner capacities to handle stress and protect the health and well-being, as mentioned above. Yet, such skills are not enough to remain human: It is important to open spaces for them to tell their stories through their own voice in their own language, and in addition, create opportunities for contributing to the collective meaningfully, and co-creating a meaningful

future. This readiness demands that spaces are offered to share these meanings, yet, also demand to empower people to be able to listen to them, which is not always easy. Thus, we need formats of training to listen to and accept different perspectives, handle emotions and practice embracing ambiguities.

To train future social workers in the power of stillness for conscious transformation and response *and* the power of culture to create a meaningful world, both can only be trained through experience, which might be a future step to take in the integration of migration within the International Social Work curricula. This might empower social workers and migrants alike. The ability to create a more culturally diverse, sustainable and peaceful future might transform the culture of higher education itself by integrating more creativity and participatory practice into joint learning processes.

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