Beyond cultural competence.
How mental health and psychosocial support practitioners’ perception of culture influence their work with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan.

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Foreword
We would like to thank all the practitioners that contributed with their time and valuable insight, enabling us to write this thesis. A special thanks is directed to our friend and local practitioner that helped and supported us a lot throughout the research process. This thesis is dedicated to the Syrian refugees in exile, in hope of returning to their homeland one day.

"I Am Syrian"
Written by Youssef Abu Yihea
Translated by Ghada Alatrash

I am a Syrian.
Exiled, in and out of my homeland, and
on knife blades with swollen feet I walk.
I am a Syrian: Shiite, Druze, Kurd,
Christian,
and I am Alawite, Sunni, and Circassian.
Syria is my land.
Syria is my identity.
My sect is the scent of my homeland,
the soil after the rain,
and my Syria is my only religion.
I am a son of this land, like the olives
apples pomegranates chicory cacti mint grapes figs ...
So what use are your thrones,
your Arabism,
your poems,
and your elegies?
Will your words bring back my home
and those who were killed
accidentally?
Will they erase tears shed on this soil?
I am a son of that green paradise,
my hometown,
but today, I am dying from hunger and thirst.
Barren tents in Lebanon and Amman are now my refuge,
but no land except my homeland
will nourish me with its grains,
nor will all the clouds
in this universe
quench my thirst.
Abstract

Since the start of the Syrian war, Jordan has received many Syrian refugees with around 650,000 Syrians now residing in the country. As the state has received a lot of help from the international community, funding refugee camps and providing basic necessities, a lot of international humanitarian practitioners have come to Jordan to work alongside Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners. The situation therefore has brought practitioners from different academic, professional and geographical backgrounds together to work with people of a different cultural background than their own. Syrians represent a vast diversity in terms of ethnic, religious, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. Research have addressed that practitioners’ sensitivity to how cultural complexities may influence social problems can facilitate a better understanding of the client’s path to recovery. The purpose of our study was to increase the knowledge of mental health and psychosocial support practitioners’ understanding and experience of a culturally sensitive social work in Amman, Jordan and discuss how this affects their practice with Syrian refugees. Through qualitative interviews we found that the practitioners’ perception of Arab culture as one and the same makes culture a non-issue in terms of cultural diversity, and that this perception influence the practice with Syrian refugees in a number of ways.

Subject terms

Social work, Syrian refugees, Syrian refugees in Jordan, culture, cultural sensitivity, ethnic sensitivity, anti-oppressive practice, mental health and psychosocial support, symbolic interaction theory
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Introduction

As the war in Syria continues on its fifth year we are witnessing the largest number of refugees in the world since World War 2. The latest numbers from the United Nations High Commission of Refugees (UNHCR), from 2014, show that there are among 54 million refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and stateless persons under the UNHCR mandate. In addition, there are another 5 million refugees under the mandate of The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Currently the highest number of refugees of the same nationality in the world are Syrians. Since the start of the war in March 2011 almost eight million people have been displaced within Syria and an additional five million Syrians have fled out of the country (http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php), which means that more than half of the population has been displaced.

Jordan is one of the countries that have received the highest number of Syrian refugees, with around 650,000 Syrians residing in the country (Murphy, Woodman, Roberts & McKee, 2016). The international community have been providing Jordan with aid to fund refugee camps and basic necessities as well as social services for the refugee communities (Murphy et al., 2016; Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2014). This situation brings a wide range of international humanitarian practitioners to Jordan to work alongside the local practitioners which creates a mixed group of practitioners from different academic, professional and geographical backgrounds. As in other refugee-hosting countries around the world, the practitioners in Jordan are to a great degree therefore working and meeting with people of a different cultural background than their own.

Syrians represent a vast diversity in terms of ethnic, religious, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds (Hassan, Kirmayer, Mekki-Berrada, Quosh, el Chammay, Deville-Stoetzel, Youssef, Jefee-Bahloul, Barkeel-Oteo, Coutts, Song & Ventevogel, 2015). As many Syrians have become or will become clients of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services in Jordan it is worth taking into account the research that has addressed the importance of acknowledging clients’ diversity. Practitioners’ sensitivity to how cultural complexities may influence social problems can facilitate a better understanding of the client’s path to recovery (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo & Ananeh-Firempong, 2003). The diversity influence relations and dynamics among family and community, explanatory models of illness, coping mechanisms and help-seeking behaviour (Hassan et al., 2015) which are all factors that affect the social work. Researchers have addressed how social workers should relate to this through exploring various concepts such as cultural competence (Lavizzo-Mourey & MacKenzie, 1995; Betancourt et al., 2003), ethnic sensitivity (Schlesinger & Devore, 2015), ethnography (Kleinman & Benson, 2006) and anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002; Larson, 2008).

This is of particular importance for social work practices that engage with minoritized groups, such as refugees, in which there is often a reproduction of a subordinated position of these groups relative
to the practitioners’ positions (Park, 2005). We have interviewed nine practitioners working with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan. In the light of the context described, where both Jordanian and international practitioners receive a high number of Syrian refugees in the psychosocial and mental health services, it is relevant to look at the practitioners’ sensitivity to culture and how this influence their social work with refugees in Jordan.

**Problem analysis**
Social workers’ understanding of how and when culture, ethnicity and power comes into play can contribute to a more culturally sensitive social work practice in line with the profession’s commitment to engage in diversity and an intersectional understanding of the client. This is of particular importance for social work practice that engages with minoritized groups, in which there is often a reproduction of a subordinated position of these groups. Little research has been done on how a culturally sensitive social work can be understood in the Jordanian context, and with Syrian refugees in Amman in particular. In the situation that Jordan faces right now, with an influx of international practitioners working together with Jordanian practitioners to deliver social and mental health services to the Syrian refugees of various cultural backgrounds, our study aims to explore the understanding of a culturally sensitive social work in this context.

**Purpose, research questions**
The purpose of the study is to increase the knowledge of mental health and psychosocial support practitioners’ understanding and experience of a culturally sensitive social work and discuss how this affects the practice with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan.

- What are the social work practitioners’ perceptions of culture in the work with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan?
- How do these perceptions influence the social work practice with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan?
**Methods**

**Research approach**

Since our research field is not explored to a great extent we decided to initiate this study with an exploratory approach. Watt Booslen (2007) describes an exploratory study as a descriptive study with the aim of generating hypotheses that will later be investigated. In this way we initiated with the aim of describing the context and the concepts necessary to formulate a hypothesis, or in our case research questions, that we would later answer.

Our research approach can also be explained by the fact that we used an inductive process. Induction is the process in which the researcher observes a number of cases with the aim of coming to generalised conclusions of the given case (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014). We started our observations, in our case interviews, without having any theories or hypothesis about our chosen field of study to try or confirm, which would be the case if we had chosen a deductive process (ibid.). We did however have elements of deduction in our research approach since we used practice theories on culturally sensitive social work to facilitate our preparations for the interviews and understanding of the subject. Practice theories are theories that are developed for social workers for social work practice (Healy, 2014), including the theories on culturally sensitive social work practice that we chose to focus on in this study. These practice theories were later incorporated into our conceptual framework and the reference for analysis of our data, since we used theoretical interpretation as a form of interview analysis, as explained by Kvale and Brinkman (2014). We will describe this procedure in the following chapter.

**Research procedure**

**Preparation**

At the beginning of our process, when deciding on the topic of our study, we made a study visit to the Red Cross Center for Tortured Refugees in Stockholm. The purpose of the visit was to get an understanding of the situation of the refugees from Syria that have managed to reach Sweden and through that get a clearer picture of what we wanted to focus our study on. The visit was very valuable both in terms of direction for our research questions and in terms of initiating our knowledge base of the situation for refugees in the world.

**Sample selection**

The respondents for the semistructured interviews were selected through a mix of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is described by Bryman (2011) as choosing respondents on the basis of who is available to participate in the study. We chose this sampling method due to our limited time in Amman and our limited contacts.

To initiate our sample selection, we studied a mapping of MHPSS services in Jordan (IASC, 2014), conducted by World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Medical Corps (IMC) by the
mission of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), and the inter-agency information sharing portal of Syria Regional Refugee Response (https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/partnerlist.php). Out of the organisations active in MHPSS in Amman we chose 19 organisations to contact with a request of social work practitioners to interview for our study. Our definition of social work practitioners, as described in our information to the organisations, is someone working in the field of mental health and psychosocial support with Syrian refugees, both Jordanians and internationals. We chose this broad definition since cultural sensitivity is important at all levels of the social work.

Out of the 19 organisations we contacted we received a positive response from four organisations and through those contacts a snowball sampling resulted in two more contacts. We conducted interviews with practitioners from six organisations, three of the organisations contributed with two respondents each which resulted in a total of nine respondents. Five of the respondents were from Jordan, two were from another country in the Middle East and another two from countries in Europe. They all worked at different positions in the field of mental health and psychosocial support for Syrian refugees. The majority of the respondents worked at international non-governmental organisations (INGO), whereas two of the respondents worked at a Jordanian non governmental organisation (NGO) and one of them at a development aid foundation with its base in Europe. We chose to include respondents with different educational backgrounds and positions as it does reflect the reality and diversity of the social work field in Jordan.

Since our sample selection is small it will affect the study's external validity. External validity is related to the generalisation of the study (Bryman, 2011). This can often be described as a problem in qualitative research as case studies or limited sample selection is often used (ibid.). The results in our study will not be generalisable for a larger population because of the size of the sample selection and the fact that the practitioners do not represent a unified profession or academic group. The results can however give us an idea of the situation and give inspiration and implications for further research.

Choice of theories
As the field of culturally sensitive social work is not thoroughly researched in the Middle Eastern region we decided to approach our study with a conceptual framework that would allow for us to explore the understanding of culturally sensitive social work in the Jordanian context. This means we decided to combine different theoretical perspectives to grasp the concept of cultural sensitivity. This included perspectives on culture in social work research (Park, 2005; Kleinman & Benson, 2006), social work practice theories on ethnic and culturally sensitive social work as well as anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002; Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Foronda, 2008; Larson, 2008; Parrott, 2009; Schlesinger & Devore, 2015). We chose these perspectives based on our readings of the literature and research on cultural sensitivity in social work. These perspectives hence formed the theoretical knowledge base of the subject and served as points of reference for understanding culturally sensitive social work, while symbolic interaction theory was used for analysing how the practitioner’s view of
culture influenced their practice with Syrian refugees. Because of its strength in emphasising meaning as a result of interactions (Blumer, 1969) we chose symbolic interaction theory. This allowed us to analyse how the practitioners’ perceptions of culture, resulting from the interactions and relations within the Middle Eastern context, influenced the way culture is understood in the social work practice with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan.

We included anti-oppressive practice theory as a component of a culturally sensitive social work since anti-oppressive practice emerged as a response to the struggles of ethnic minorities (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), and since anti-oppressive practice is relevant in addressing mental health settings where the bio-medical discourse and models have been and still are dominating the field (Larson, 2008). Meanwhile, critics have claimed that AOP practice values are not enough to address the cultural complexities of service users but need to be complemented by analytical tools for understanding how culture initially shapes behaviour (Larson, 2008; Parrot, 2009).

Even though the theories on cultural sensitivity were developed to challenge the Western basis for social work practice, using theories that have themselves emanated from an understanding of a culturally sensitive social work in a white majority population, which is what we have done in this study, can be criticised (Danso, 2015). However, the aim and purpose with this study was not to export concepts but rather to contextualise the understanding of a culturally sensitive social work in the Jordanian context. The reason for combining different perspectives on cultural sensitivity, including anti-oppressive practice, within our conceptual framework was that it allowed us to explore the subject from the multiple angles deemed relevant for the specific context in which our study was carried out.

**Data collection**

Our data was mainly collected through semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide. The questions in our interview guide were written based on practice theories related to cultural sensitivity. We included questions that touched upon the different topics that the literature contains. After grouping the questions in appropriate themes and removing questions that were not directly connected to our research questions we reviewed the interview guide with a local practitioner in the mental health field. By doing so we got valuable insight on how our questions could be understood by practitioners and some suggestions on what to change in order to make ourselves more clear, as well as what could be interesting to add to the interview.

**Processing of data**

We were able to record all interviews except one and transcribed them shortly after in order to start the analysis of each interview before the next one and in that way prepare for any changes that needed to be done in the interview guide or in the direction of our study. During the interview we were not allowed to record, notes were carefully taken.
We alternated in having the role of interviewer which resulted in having responsibility of three to four interviews each. The one that did not interview took notes and could ask follow up questions at the end of the interview. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) write about reliability in qualitative interviews and the risk of getting different answers from respondents depending on who is interviewing. Since we alternated interviewing between us we have to take into account the social differences between the interviews and how this is a factor that jeopardises what Bryman (2011) mentions as external reliability. External reliability describes to what extent a study can be replicated. This requirement can be difficult to meet since it is difficult to recreate the exact social environment in which the original study was conducted (ibid.).

Method of analysis
Interview analysis as theoretical interpretation is an analysis method used to interpret interviews with theoretical perspectives (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014). Although we initiated this study with an inductive process, as we arrived at the point of analysis we had chosen practice theories on culturally sensitive social work that we used to interpret our data. The theoretical interpretation of interviews can be questionable due to the risk of losing valuable information as a consequence of seeing our results only through the lens of our conceptual framework (ibid.). Being aware of this risk, we did multiple readings of the interview texts. The first reading was out of general interest, looking for general points of importance. The second reading was specifically to highlight the themes that had to do with our practice theories on culturally sensitive social work. After the two first readings, which were performed individually, we discussed the findings and came up with 14 different themes. The themes were then grouped up and made into five major themes and then a final reading followed, in order to make sure that we did not miss anything of importance, specifically related to the five themes.

We aimed at keeping a high internal validity through keeping our interpretations close to the empirical data and account for this by referring to quotes from the respondents when we presented the results and analysis. Internal validity means that the observations made by a researcher and the results that later develops from the observations must correspond to each other closely (Bryman, 2011).

Internal reliability in qualitative research means that all the researchers in the team agree on how to interpret the data. Since we are only two authors of this thesis we had the possibility to easily discuss and critically review our choices of interpretations, in order to come to a joint understanding of our material. Worth mentioning is that the interviews were conducted in a setting that was new to us and in a language that is not our first. Cultural and linguistic factors can lead to differences in how respondents express their answers and how the answers are interpreted (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) and this could have affected the internal reliability of our thesis.
Preunderstanding

Both authors of this thesis have previously spent several months, at different occasions, in different countries of the Middle East. Our previous experiences from the region might have affected the way that we thought about the topics of our study before we started the research. We have discussed this throughout the process of the thesis in order to stay as unbiased as possible, while also recognising the benefits of our previous experiences in Jordan and its neighbouring countries.

From relations with friends in Amman and the region who have expressed frustrations in having to deal with professionals from other countries coming to act as experts on the Middle East we have also had to discuss our prejudices towards the international professionals and the so called expat-community in Amman.

Explanation of terms

In this section we will describe how and why we have chosen to use certains terms.

Beneficiaries - When conducting the interviews, we asked the respondents what they call the people they work with and made sure to use that term during the interview. What we found was that the most common term was beneficiaries, which is why we have decided to use that term when writing the results. Before getting into the results we use the term clients, since that is the term used in the literature.

Practitioners - While designing our study we were planning on interviewing social workers in Amman. However, it came to our understanding that social worker is not a well defined profession in Jordan and that the field of social work contains many different professionals. For that reason, we chose to interview people who are in the social work field but have various educational and professional backgrounds. Some of them are mental health practitioners, some are practitioners in the field of psychosocial support but we have decided to simply mention them as practitioners throughout the thesis. In some cases, we refer to the practitioners according to their geographical background and in those cases we have made three distinctions, Jordanian, Middle Eastern and European. More information on the practitioners is found in the results chapter.

S/he - In order to enhance the confidentiality of the respondents as well as to avoid gendered preconceptions about them, we have chosen to use the gender-neutral pronoun s/he when referring to the respondents. The possessive form of the pronoun s/he is his/her.

Ya3ni - this word will be found in some of the quotes from the practitioners that we have used to describe our results. Ya3ni (يعني) is the Arabic equivalent of like, the way it is used as a discourse particle in colloquial English, and is sometimes used by Arabic speakers even when they speak English. Encoding of Arabic using Latin script and Arabic numerals, such as 3 in this case, is known as 3arabizi or Arabish, a blend between the words Arabic and English (Bianchi, 2012).
Ethical considerations

Ethical values constitute limits for research methods and ways of conducting studies (Blennberger, 2005) and we went into the research with an awareness of this fact. The four ethical research principles concerning information, consent, confidentiality and utilisation of data (Bryman, 2011; Kvale & Brinkman, 2014) were carefully considered and served as guideposts for the research process. These principles are in accordance with the guidelines from the Swedish Research Council and the Swedish law of ethical review of research involving humans (SFS 2003:460) that protects and maintains the dignity of individuals and the human worth in any research project that includes people. In attending to these principles and before each interview, we therefore made sure to inform the practitioners, initially via email and then orally, of the subject and purpose of our study, that it was for the thesis of our bachelor’s degree in social work at Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm, Sweden. We also informed them that the interview would take about an hour. Through this we also made sure to get the practitioners’ informed consent to participate in our study, knowing that their personal information would be de-codified so as to not disclose their identities, ensuring the participants of their anonymity. All of the interviews were conducted at their convenience which most of the times meant we interviewed the respondents at their organizations, workplaces. We asked if we could record the interviews while informing the respondents of that the information would be used for our thesis only and that the recordings would be discarded upon finishing it. We payed close attention to this and respected two practitioners’ wish to not be recorded. Since we could not record this interview we did not use any quotes from it as a way to handle the data in an ethical way. Since this is a thesis for our bachelor’s degree the project has not gone through an official ethical review but the research memo and interview questions were approved by our supervisor before initiating the study.

Limitations of the study

When conducting cross-cultural interviews, it may be difficult to attain knowledge about the cultural factors that affect the communication between the interviewer and the respondent (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In a foreign country the interviewer needs time to get to know some of the many verbal and non-verbal factors that will impact the outcome of the interviews. Although both of the authors of this study have made several previous visits to Jordan and are somewhat familiar with the norms of communication in the country it was the first time conducting research and it is therefore likely that the study is affected by cross cultural limitations.

All of the interviews were conducted in English which could be considered a limitation of this study since none of the respondents have English as a first language. We could have chosen to use an interpreter but chose to have all the interviews in English since most of the respondents are working in INGOs and use English on a regular basis. Also, since we interviewed people from different countries it was more practical and created more similar conditions for the respondents to have them all in
English. However, since none of the respondents had English as their first language, we realise that this could be seen as a constraint.

We were not allowed to record one of the interviews which resulted in not having as much data from the two respondents of that interview. Notes were carefully taken and we made sure to use that data in an ethical way as mentioned above.

At two occasions we ended up having two respondents in one and the same interview. This could be seen as problematic as the influence of having another respondent in the room might have contributed to answering the questions differently than if they were alone. It can also limit the interviewer’s control over the course of the interview due to lively interaction between the respondents (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). However, since it was the respondents’ initiative to have the interviews made together with their colleagues, and they felt comfortable with this we consulted briefly with each other and chose to go with their wishes.

We are also aware of the limitations of the sample selection of this thesis. The respondents all have different educational backgrounds and positions at their organizations, and none of them are social workers by degree or profession. This is a reflection of what it often times looks like on the ground when it comes to this field of work in the Middle East. However, the sample selection could have been more unified in terms of education and/or work position.

When it comes to the subject of the thesis itself we have often times reflected on the limitations of our own limited understanding of the Jordanian context, coming from Sweden to understand more about culture, and how that have affected the research.
Background

Before going into our results we will present some areas of importance relating to the background of our study, meaningful for understanding the research topic and for placing it within a context. We will briefly discuss how practice theories on cultural sensitivity challenge the Western basis for social work and how that applies to the Jordanian context. Following that, we will give more of a situational background on Jordan; its mixed population, how social work has emerged and what it looks like today. Lastly, we will focus on the Syrian refugees, their cultural diversity and the effects of war on their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.

Challenging the Western basis for social work practice

The Western basis for social work practice and teaching in America, as well as the discrimination against people of colour in general, were first debated during the civil rights movements in the 60s and 70s. This was when social workers of colour together with white advocates started challenging oppressive structures within the professionalised social work, with reference to ethnic and cultural differences (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Literature on race, anti-racist practice and cultural sensitivity were being produced to address the relevance of social work’s Western knowledge base (ibid.) and the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) adoption of social work standards mandated content on race, racism and people of colour. While meeting this mandate, some key educational literature was produced including Barbara Solomon’s (1976) Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities, and Elfriede Schlesinger and Wynetta Devore’s Ethnic-Sensitive Social Work Practice (1981). Schlesinger and Devore introduced their interpretation of ethnic sensitive social work practice to incorporate the fact that all people are members of ethnic groups, have experienced ethnic socialisation processes and that social workers for this reason “need to understand and attend to ethnic related dispositions of all peoples just as they need to understand other elements of human functioning” (Schlesinger & Devore, 2015, p. 47). The initial focus on race and anti-racist practice led to a shift in the 1990s towards different forms of discrimination and the anti-oppressive practice (AOP) that is today recognised as one of the major theoretical and methodological paradigms in social work (Siobhan, 2008; Danso, 2015). The theoretical framework for understanding AOP builds on critical theory and radical social work, its focus on classism as a form of oppression with anti-oppressive practice focusing on different forms of oppression (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Sakamoto & Pittner, 2005).

Challenging the Western basis for social work is relevant for our study since cultural assumptions and stereotyping of the people from the area where this study was carried out, the Middle East/Orient, is a current issue (Eliassi, 2013). Stereotypically misrepresenting, overgeneralising and misrecognising people from the Orient and their cultures is what characterises orientalism (Radhakrishnan, 2012). Orientalism is mainly consisting of a discourse about the Middle East/Orient as a massive homogenic
entity without internal differences, while the West/Occident is associated with progress, democracy, cultural dynamics, and gender equality (Said, 2003). However, Said emphasises that neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; they are both made up by human construction, through identification or affirmation of the Other. Scholars have argued that social workers need to be aware of colonial and orientalist legacies and reconsider their understanding of social work and of their position and understanding of the client as the Other (Eliassi, 2013).

Many of the discourses and concepts that are used in humanitarian programs in different parts of the world have been developed in the West and later exported to be used in places affected by violent conflicts and hardships (Bracken, 1998; Summerfield, 2001), such as Jordan where this study was conducted. Bracken (1998) argues that Western psychiatry is itself a particular, culturally based way of thinking about and responding to states of madness and distress. By understanding the construction of the discourse of for example trauma and the affiliated diagnosis post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), we can understand the complications of using it outside the cultural context in which it was constructed.

Because psychiatry understands itself as scientific and thus culturally neutral, it fails to grasp the cultural specificity of its concepts and interventions (Summerfield, 2001). It is therefore assumed that the models that psychiatry produces are universally applicable and valid. It has been argued that much psychiatric universalism is based on a confusion of validity and reliability (Bracken, 1998). Just because the same specific symptoms can be identified in different cultures does not mean that the meaning of the symptom is the same for the different cultures.

As there are many western NGOs and other international agencies dealing with Syrian refugees in Jordan, the challenge is to establish ways of supporting people through times of suffering by listening and hearing their different voices in a way that does not impose a foreign system of understanding. It is a challenge which demands that social work practitioners work with humility about what the West can offer and an acceptance that there are no western diagnoses or manuals that will work as a quick fix and rid people everywhere of the suffering brought about by war or violence (Bracken, 1998).

**Jordan’s cultural complexity**

As we are aiming to discuss culture within the Jordanian context it can be useful to have some understanding of “the pseudo-schizophrenic modern Arab identity as it came to be composed and shaped by a colonial legacy and a commensurate artificial state structure” (Sabet, 2006, p. 72). Jordan as a separate state and kingdom did not exist until the 1920’s under the British mandate, having belonged to the Arab kingdom of Syria for a brief period before that. The state’s total independence from Britain in 1946 happened at a time of Pan-Arabism, the assertion that Arabs throughout the Middle East and North Africa should constitute a single nation, during which there was no sense of national community among the tiny dispersed population consisting largely of a tribal Bedouin population devoted to small scale, settled cultivation (Robins, 2004; Salibi, 1993). Jordan today is a
nation of mixed origin as its population tripled in size due to the first Arab-Israeli war in the 1960s (Robins, 2004), with registered Palestinian refugees making up about a quarter of its population (http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan). In the production of national, Jordanian identity and culture the army has played a socio-cultural adhesive and unifying role (Sabet, 2006).

Social work in Jordan
The historical development of social work in Jordan is yet to be fully documented (Cocks, Al-Makhamreh, Abuieta, Alaedein, Forrester & Sullivan, 2009) and there is also no clear definition of who is a social worker in Jordan (Al-Louzy & Olimat, 2013). The welfare of disadvantaged people in Jordan have historically been cared for within the complex tribal systems evident in rural communities across the Middle East (Cocks et al., 2009). However, this system of support was challenged throughout the 20th century, following the changes in political organisation across the region combined with urbanisation and industrialisation. The support within the tribal community started to transfer into modern social work practices with the use of methods involving fictive kinship, where the social worker gains access to families in need of services through assuming the role of a family member (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008). Many conflicts and social problems are still solved in a traditional way, by religious and tribal leaders, in combination with the formal legal system (Al-Louzy & Olimat, 2013). Examples of such conflicts are sexual crimes, family disputes and murders.

The first formal programme of social work education in Jordan was offered by Al Balqa’ Applied University in 1965, where a diploma in social work could be attained. In 2006 the diploma was replaced with a bachelor’s degree in social work. There are currently two other social work programs available in Jordan, a Master of Science at the University of Jordan and a diploma at the Hashemite University. Social work educators agree that there is a lack of qualified social workers in the kingdom (Cocks et al., 2009), which is why efforts are being made to advocate for the profession to achieve national status and recognition.

One of the challenges to professionalisation of social work is the availability of qualified social work educators at the university level. In a study of 30 social work academics in Jordan (Al-Makhamreh & Libal, 2012) less than half of them held a degree in social work, at any level, while the majority held a degree in sociology and did not have any practice experience. The lack of qualified social work educators has negatively affected the teaching process in different ways. Research has shown that students at Al-Balqa’ are not able to obtain theoretical, methodological or practical knowledge as their instructors lack such knowledge themselves (Al-Louzy & Olimat, 2013). Social work graduates face great challenges in their careers due to the inability to connect theoretical knowledge with practice while practitioners in the field are lacking the theoretical knowledge (ibid.) resulting in an uneven labour force.
The Association of Social Work was founded in 1973 with the purpose of advancing the field of social work, but did not do so in a professional way and was therefore dissolved in 1999 (Al-Louzy & Olimat, 2013). Nearly a decade later, in 2008, the new Jordan Association of Social Work (JASW) was founded. All members of JASW have at least one graduate degree in social work and all the founding members are either teaching social work at a university level or working as field practitioners in the public sector (ibid.). However, having had no active association for many years, the profession suffered in various ways. It has for example resulted in the absence of a clear conceptualisation of social work and social workers, the absence of conferences related to the professionalisation of the field, the lack of autonomy of the profession and for a long time also the lack of a code of ethics.

The Ministry of Social Development has now finalised a code of ethics together with JASW and the MHPSS working group. This work was ongoing for a few years and a paper has been published on the obstacles in formulating a code of ethics for social workers in Jordanian institutions (Al Gharaibeh, 2012). Some of the obstacles are part of what JASW are working on to overcome, through their aims of enabling the professionalisation of social work, developing of social policy related to the profession and education.

MHPSS is one of the fields of work where the social workers are present, which is one of 26 services that are offered within the Syrian refugee response. Other refugee response services include food security, camp management, cash assistance, child protection, return et cetera (http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php). The IASC was established to strengthen the coordination of humanitarian assistance and response to complex emergencies and natural disasters. The composite term MHPSS as used by the IASC describe “any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial wellbeing and/or prevent or treat mental disorder” (IASC, 2007, p. 1). Although the separate terms, mental health and psychosocial support, are closely related and overlap many aid workers view them as different approaches and as we will see in our results some of the practitioners work in organisations that focus on only one approach or the other. Exact definitions of the separate terms vary between different disciplines, organisations and countries but the IASC is using the composite term in order to unite as many actors as possible to meet the need for a diverse, complementary approach in providing appropriate support.

The Syrian refugees in Jordan

Among the 650 000 refugees from Syria who now reside in Jordan there is a wide diversity of social, socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds, that to a large extent represent the original population of Syria. The following is a summary of this variety based on information provided by the UNHCR (Hassan et al., 2015).

The majority of the Syrians are considered Arabs, however this is a term based on the spoken language Arabic and not ethnicity. Arabic is the official language in Syria, according to the Syrian Constitution, which does not mention any rights of other linguistic groups. In fact, the second most
common language, Kurdish, was banned from being taught in both public and private schools since the 1950’s until 2014. Armenian and Syriac/Aramaic are other languages used by smaller parts of the Syrian population.

People from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds has populated Syria as a result of various groups fleeing conflict in the neighbouring areas over the past centuries. Around ten percent of Syria’s population is Kurdish, followed by Turkmen, Assyrians, Circassians and Armenians. Other ethnic groups are present in smaller numbers, such as Dom, Persians, Albanians, Bosniac, Chechens and Ossetians. The Arabic speaking Bedouin tribal groups are also seen by some as a separate ethnic group.

Syrians are often categorised by religious affiliation, however not always taking into account if the person is an active practitioner. The majority of Syrians are Sunni muslims, approximately 75 percent of the population. 13 percent of the population belong to other Muslim groups such as Alawites, Ismailis and Twelver Shi’a. About ten percent are Christian, three percent are Druze and less than one percent are Yezidi. The Yezidis are ethnically and linguistically Kurdish but follow the Yezidi religion. The Christians in Syria mainly belong to Orthodox or Catholic churches but there are also small groups of Protestants. There are also Syriac/Aramaic and Armenian Christian.

Large numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers resided in Syria before the current conflict and were again affected by the conflict. Most of the refugees were from Iraq and Palestine but there were also groups from Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and other countries.

This ethnic, religious, national and linguistic diversity, along with age and gender, influence relations and dynamics among family and community, explanatory models of illness, coping mechanisms and help-seeking behaviour (Hassan et al., 2015). Cultural and religious value systems also play a role in the attitude towards the methods of treatment (ibid.). Therefore, it is important not to underestimate the importance of these diversities within the refugee population. For practitioners in this field understanding individual local illness models and common ways of expressing distress within a culture or community, as well as the ways that people explain and make sense of their symptoms or illness, will allow for better communication and increase the positive outcomes of the practice.
**Conceptual framework**

In this section of the thesis we will first go into how culture and cultural competence as concepts have been used and criticised in social work research. Thereafter, we will look closer at practice theories on ethnic and culturally sensitive as well as anti-oppressive social work. These practice theories and perspectives on culture in social work research will together serve as points of reference for analysing culturally sensitive social work in the Jordanian context. We will also go into symbolic interaction theory that we will use to analyse how the practitioners’ perceptions of culture is inferred from the relations with others and influence their practice with Syrian refugees. These theoretical perspectives together will make out the conceptual framework that we will use to answer our research questions in the results chapter.

**Beyond cultural competence**

To approach how the concept of culture has been used in contemporary social work discourse we have used Park’s (2005) critical discourse analysis. The analysis is grounded in the notion that the contents of culture are understood to be constructed rather than discovered. Park confirms that the concept of culture has taken on increasing significance in social work. This can be explained by the way culture as a concept has come to be a central construct in discussions of multiculturalism, diversity and issues of minorities. However, neither the meaning nor the significance of the concept of culture has been sufficiently examined in social work. Culture remains a taken-for-granted term with no evident debate or discussion on how it should be conceived and why it should be conceived in that way. In the literature reviewed by Park, although exploring methods for working appropriately or sensitively with those who have “culture”, most did not include definitions of culture and the few that did did so in a vague manner. The underlying assumption of the works reviewed is the notion that culture is something that differentiates minorities, immigrants and refugees from the rest of society, with the “white” mainstream as point of reference for differences throughout the reviewed works (Park, 2005). This difference is not used to describe the overall variance among cultures, but used particularly as a marker for ethnic minorities and people of colour. In this way the usage of culture moves towards a fusion with the usage of ethnicity or race, where the usage of culture is preferred due to its less controversial nature. Culture as the measure of racial and ethnic status is conceived as an objective knowledge that can serve as foundation for the building of social work interventions, defining the interventions as part of a cultural competence. Such interventions however can be considered as an instrument that only reinforces the negative direction of the paradigm. We will elaborate on the term cultural competence and its limitations in the following chapter.

A common used term in intercultural social work is cultural competence, which has been developed in the medical field and can be defined as the demonstrated integration of population-specific health-related cultural values, knowledge of disease incidence and prevalence and treatment outcomes.
specific for different client populations (Lavizzo-Mourey & MacKenzie, 1995). An added component to cultural competence is understanding and addressing the social context of the client (Betancourt et al., 2003). The social context may include social factors such as socioeconomic status, social support or social stressors and environmental hazards (ibid.). When sociocultural differences between the client and the service provider are not explored and communicated it may result in dissatisfaction for the client or poorer health outcomes (Betancourt, 2004).

Researchers however argue that cultural competence is a problematic term that should be replaced (Kleinman & Benson, 2006; Park, 2005). The critics claim that the term has not been properly defined by science and that there is a lack of evaluation research showing that a systematic approach to culture really improves clinical or social services. One of the main problems with the idea of cultural competence is that it assumes that culture can be reduced to a technical skill for which practitioners can be trained to develop expertise. The risk of developing an “expertise” in how to treat a client of any given background is that it leads to stereotyping of client groups (Kleinman & Benson, 2006) and oversimplification of culture (Betancourt, 2004). Cultural assumptions, or stereotyping, may hinder the practical understanding of the individual and lead to other complications. This is of particular importance for social work practices that engage with minoritized groups, in which there is often a reproduction of a subordinated position of these groups which might lead to the development of racist practices (Park, 2005). This unfortunate situation is enabled by social workers trained to view the social problems of minoritized clients mainly as a consequence of their cultural background and do not give enough attention to the significance of the structural inequalities (ibid.).

**Culturally sensitive social work**

Attributes of cultural sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity has become a buzzword used in many contexts from healthcare to education to business. Its usage is less controversial than cultural competence, which we have problematised in previous chapters. Perhaps it is less controversial because it is in fact a more appropriate and versatile concept, or perhaps it is due to the fact that it is not yet a well defined concept. No evident theories of cultural sensitivity have been established and the meaning of the concept varies between contexts and between scholars (Foronda, 2008). Cynthia Foronda (2008) made a concept analysis of cultural sensitivity based on a literature search across multiple disciplines. We will use this analysis to approach the concept and to create an understanding of the multidisciplinary use of it. Foronda searched for attributes in the literature and found five that were common for the works reviewed. The attributes of cultural sensitivity were knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect and tailoring.

Knowledge of cultural differences and values is described as a must to achieve cultural sensitivity. This knowledge can be acquired through education, trainings or experiences within a culture in various contexts. Consideration of one's background, beliefs and language is mentioned as to attain cultural sensitivity, this refers to oneself as a professional but also includes taking an individual or
group's identity into consideration. This attribute also explains the consideration of diets, customs and traditions and is most prominent in the field of health care. Understanding is mentioned mainly in terms of understanding the effects and importance of another's values and experiences. It is mentioned that the professional should aim at understanding without applying an ethnocentric perspective, which means viewing another culture solely based on the view of one's own culture, however difficult it may be. Respect is fundamental component of cultural sensitivity according to the reviewed works and examples include respecting the cultural beliefs and values of the other and respecting the needs and expectations of the other. Tailoring refers to altering or adapting to an individual or a group, in order to meet their needs. This includes taking into account the perspectives of the other, where the professional tailors his/r perspective. And it also includes the tailoring of specific interventions to fit or match the recipient of the intervention. Employing these attributes will, based on Foronda’s analysis (2008), result in effective communication, effective interventions and satisfaction.

**Ethnic sensitive social work**

As ethnicity is one of the major factors taken into account in a culturally sensitive social work practice we have chosen to highlight the theory concerning ethnic sensitive social work specifically. Schlesinger and Devore (2015) suggests ten points for practice that serves to incorporate an ethnic understanding in social work, an understanding that according to them should be no different than that of a social worker’s approach to practice in general since the impact of the ethnic reality on all people is just as important to understand as other elements of human functioning. In their view cultural phenomena is an integral but not the only component of the ethnic experience as ethnicity provides cultural identity through a group membership that is defined by unique cultural traditions that span over time and across generations (Schlesinger & Devore, 2015). Firstly (1), the services need to recognise the structural forces in generating the client’s problems. This means seeing the client’s problems as more than individual problems. It also means you’re (2) emphasising systems/institutional change approaches as you’re (3) recognising the interplay between systemic and individual forces as they impact client difficulties. An ethnic adaptation of services (4) requires practitioners to exercise great caution before suggesting intervention focused on emotionally charged issues to people. It seeks to (5) modify the customary hierarchical distinctions between worker and client when working with people who cannot consider emotional matters with a stranger or somebody close to them. When it comes to the notion of family importance, an ethnic sensitive social work should (6) respect culturally based perspectives on the types of persons who may or may not participate when taking important family decisions. According to Schlesinger and Devore (2015) the work should (7) recognise the importance of incorporating ethnic/class/minority issues at all levels of practice, including inter-staff/interprofessional relationships. This again, relates to their emphasis on seeing ethnicity as something necessary for social workers to understand in relation to other elements of human functioning. To (8) realise the importance of language and being sure to arrange the availability of a
worker who speaks the client’s language, when the official language of the country is not spoken or help with nuances is needed, and to (9) pay attention to the relative merits of having workers who are of the same group as the clients where this is appropriate are other main points for an ethnic sensitive service. Lastly, an ethnic adaption of services (10) involves assuring that social work schools and agencies facilitates the knowledge and skills of ethnic sensitive practice in the broad sense.

Apart from these ten points that are focusing on the service elements, Schlesinger and Devore (2015) have also formulated six layers of understanding that should characterise an ethnic sensitive practice. This involves understanding the social work values and having knowledge about and understanding human behaviour. It also means having the knowledge and skills to understand and effect change in social welfare policies and services, especially the ones that make out racist and structural barriers for effective practice. Self-reflection, that the social worker understands him/herself with emphasis in the ethnic sense is important as the social worker should understand the impact of the ethnic reality on all people, with special attention to those groups that are particular victims of poverty and/or racism. Understanding the route to social work or the social worker is to acknowledge that members of oppressed groups are likely to encounter social workers via coercive routes and that this is something that the social worker should be aware of.

Schlesinger and Devore’s (2015) literature review of studies on ethnic sensitivity and social work has identified earlier research and emerging issues on the subject during the last ten years. Firstly, they found that there has been a focus on “the ethnic reality” meaning the research has occupied itself with studying different ethnic groups, the main three being African Americans and various topics, Latinos and differences when it comes to values, and Asians American refugees and their acculturation. There has also been a focus on empowerment/social action/social policy issues concerning women of colour, how welfare spending impacts minority persons, black single mothers, minority children and the education and welfare system, and access to the profession with regards to minority people. They found that even though no topic was covered in depth, attention was given to people of colour and the US minority groups mentioned, with minimal attention given to other minority groups. As best as they could establish there were no articles on people from the Middle East and it was established that research looking deeper at social worker’s experiences of a culturally sensitive social work is needed.

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP)
The dynamics of oppression are described by Dominelli (2002) as a process that is shared across a range of divisions such as sex, gender, race, age, sexuality and disability. The multiplicity of the structural elements of power are located within the institutional and cultural domains in society, made seen in the un-egalitarian relations they produce and embedded in the everyday practice. Oppression therefore is seen as a process that takes place in the social arena, through people’s behaviour and actions on an interpersonal level. Oppressive relations and the injustices that they create in the practice in private and public spheres can be countered through anti-oppressive initiatives. Even though
promoting social justice might be the most difficult principle to actualise, it is one of the core elements of anti-oppressive practice (Larson, 2008; Parrott, 2009). To be a part of social interactions that creates non-oppressive relations rooted in equality is the goal.

Connected to the elements of social justice and equality is the promotion of egalitarian relationships and power sharing. Since society is unequal and the problems faced by people have both personal, cultural and structural components, social workers need to engage in dialogue with them and connect their story to the wider political processes (Dominelli, 2002; Dalrymple & Burke, 2006). AOP embraces clients as partners in the process towards change, minimising the formal expert role rather than affirming the traditional social work-helper position.

Doing so requires of the social worker to be aware of his or her own position, to understand the mechanisms behind oppression and power, and how your own role plays a part in that. Self-reflection in terms of a constant evaluation of one’s own relationships and behaviours is therefore perhaps the most crucial element in practicing an anti-oppressive social work (Larson, 2008). It is more than simply applying a ready set list of behaviours in accordance with the AOP paradigm. A social worker’s critical self-reflection of his or her own position’s contribution to the oppressiveness of the intervention through sexism, racism etcetera serves to redress the balance of power in social work practice (ibid.).

This is also done through involving clients in the decision making so that they become empowered participants and can overcome barriers and take more control of their lives. Professionalism in this sense is redefined to empower users (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006). In contrast to the competency based approach within social work that, according to Dominelli (1996), loses a holistic approach by focusing on delivering individually designed services the anti-oppressive practice seeks to make connections between different aspects of people’s lives by being concerned with what, when, how, where and who questions.

An essential feature that further user involvement and an inclusive practice is the use of non-oppressive language. To practice communication styles that do not stigmatise or enhance the professionals power over the user is key in being sensitive to the negative connotations, symbols and power attached to certain terms (Larson, 2008). The understanding is that language reflects culture, and especially the dominant culture, and that language is part of constructing and maintaining oppression as well as resisting and challenging it. To ask how people might want to be addressed, and to use vocabulary that is respectful and understood by the client are examples of how social workers can incorporate an anti-oppressive approach (ibid.).

**Symbolic interaction theory**

*Meaning, social interaction and symbols*

Symbolic interaction is a sociological tradition built around the theorists John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Robert E. Park, Herbert Blumer and Everett C. Hughes (Becker & McCall, 2009). Within this
tradition lies the notion that human beings must have a makeup that fits the nature of social interaction. “Human group life on the level of symbolic interaction is a vast process in which people are forming, sustaining and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give meaning to objects.” (Blumer, 1969, p. 12). The underlying idea is that objects have no fixed meaning but is given that meaning which people make of them through indications and definitions. In this sense meaning is a result of the interactions between people. This meaning allows for people to create facts, consisting of various interpretations (Aksan, Buket, Mufit & Sumeyra, 2009). The objects and products of symbolic interaction are classified into three categories; a) physical objects, such as trees, b) social objects, like a friend, and c) abstract objects such as moral principles, ideas. The underlying understanding is that anything can be an object given up for interpretation (Blumer, 1969). In our study this will allow us to analyse how the practitioners’ perceptions of culture as a result of the interactions with others influence the way culture as an object is understood in the social work practice with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan. Blumer was the first one to use the term symbolic interaction with its three core principles being meaning, language and thinking. Meaning here, is at the center of human behaviour. Language allows for people to use symbols, and symbols form the basis of communication. Thinking is involved in changing or pertaining the interpretations of meaning by use of symbols. Symbols thus mediate social interactions. Blumer posed three premises for what symbolic interaction theory is about:

1. People act and develop their attitudes towards things according to the meanings that things propose to them.
2. The meanings of these things are inferred or created from the social interaction between people.
3. These meanings change within an interpretative process used by the individual as he deals with them (Aksan et al., 2009).

According to Blumer, to understand human behaviour is to have an interpretative perspective that examines how this behaviour is changing; people are constantly involved in forming the definitions, processes and meanings that constitute behavioural acts.

The self and roles
Central to the idea of symbolic interaction is the concept of self, and that one can only be part of this process, responding and interpreting interaction with others, by possessing a self. George Herbert Mead, Blumer’s teacher, elaborated on this. The self-object, just like any other object, emerges from interaction with others as other people are defining a person to him/herself (Blumer, 1969). Mead has discussed how this occurs through role-taking.

...in order to become an object to himself a person has to see himself from the outside. One can only do this by placing himself in the position of others and viewing himself or acting toward himself from that position. The roles the person takes range from that of discrete individuals (the “play stage”), through
that of discrete organized groups (the “game stage”) to that of the abstract community (the “generalized other”). (Blumer, 1969, p.13).

Moreover, self-interaction is a process that exists so that we can make indications to ourselves. These indications in turn direct our actions. To be conscious or aware of anything is to make something into an indication for your own self as you are considering its importance. Mead characterise this process by making a distinction between “me” and “I”. “Me” is the organisations of attitudes, thoughts on how others in the community might perceive us, to which the individual, “I” responds. This distinction helps us realise ourselves in so far as we can recognise ourselves in others. The process of self-indication needs to take place in a social context (Mead, 2001). The individual becomes aware of him/herself as a self and “attains self-consciousness only as he takes, or finds himself stimulated to take, the attitude of the other” (ibid., p. 229). We will use Mead’s theoretical perspective on the self to analyse the practitioner’s process of self-indication and awareness of him/herself as self-reflection is one of the major components for practicing a culturally sensitive social work.

Erving Goffman is seen as one of the important symbolic interactionists. Even though some might hesitate to call his work purely interactionist they are filled with interactionist themes consisting of symbols, shared meanings and identity. Goffman used the theatrical performance in describing how people take on different roles, like actors on a stage, and use different strategies in order to present themselves to others in a way that lets them control how they might be perceived (Carter & Fuller, 2009). Using Goffman’s perspective on roles we will be able to analyse the roles that the practitioners might take in their interactions with colleagues and clients. Goffman elaborates;

When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise. Defining social roles as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kind of audience or to an audience of the same persons. (Goffman, 2009, p. 138).

Society as constructed by interactions
Blumer (1994) asserts that Mead’s analysis of the self lays the foundation for human group life, enabling us to look at society as socially constructed, recognising that the process of self-indication always takes place in a social context. Society as symbolic interaction is seen through the collective actions stemming from individual ones where meaning is constantly defined and redefined. In going from the person to the larger social structure symbolic interaction theory points to the dynamic reciprocity of the individual and the society. Blumer termed this reciprocity “joint action” whereas Mead defined it as the “social act” (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Blumer, 1994). Even though classic symbolic interactionists are critical of placing the individual within pre-determined societal structures, being acted upon rather than acting, others have emphasised the impact social structure has on how social roles are played out in interaction. Interactionists do however “maintain that the structural framework of a society may set conditions for action, but in no way does it actually determine
behavior” (ibid.). As we turn to our results, we will use symbolic interaction theory for analysing how the practitioners’ perceptions of culture influence the practice with Syrian refugees, also pointing to the dynamic reciprocity of the individual practitioners and the greater social work context.
Results
We will present our results in two chapters. The first chapter is composed of results and analysis that we find are of importance in order to answer our first research questions; what are the practitioners’ perceptions of culture in the work with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan. In the second chapter we answer our second research question; how these perceptions influence their practice. Our results are understood and analysed using our conceptual framework consisting of research on culture in social work, practice theories on culturally sensitive social work and symbolic interaction theory. But first we will present a short description of the practitioners in order to give the reader an initial idea of the practitioners’ positions and backgrounds.

Overview of the practitioners’ backgrounds
P1- Psychosocial team manager and counselor at a local community center run by an INGO. P1 is born and raised in Jordan and has 10 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P2- Regional program coordinator for a community project consisting of many youth centres across Jordan, the project is run by an INGO. P2 is born and raised in Jordan and has 3 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P3a- Outreach and partnership manager at an INGO in the mental health field. P3a is born and raised in another country in the Middle East but moved to Jordan for work and has 23 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P3b- Social service coordinator at an INGO in the mental health field. P3b is raised in Jordan but born in another country in the Middle East and has more than 20 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P4- Director of programs at an INGO that offers both mental health and psychosocial support. P4 is born and raised in Jordan and has 16 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P5a- Case manager at a community centre focusing on offering psychosocial services, run by a Jordanian NGO. P5a is born and raised in Jordan and has 3 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P5b- Psychosocial services manager at a community centre focusing on offering psychosocial services, run by a Jordanian NGO. P5b is born and raised in Jordan and has 20 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P6- Program officer at a development aid foundation with its base in a European country. P6 is born and raised in a country in Europe, came to Jordan for work and has 2 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
P7- Program manager at a local community center run by an INGO. P7 is born and raised in a country in Europe, came to Jordan for work and has 10 years of professional experience in his/r field or work.
“It’s like the same” - Cultural diversity among the refugees as a non-issue

In this chapter we have gathered and analysed the results that answer our first research question on the social work practitioners’ perceptions of culture in the work with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan. Our findings in this chapter will be analysed through the perspective on culture in social work research, practice theories on culturally sensitive social work and symbolic interaction theory. It will be presented by going into Arab culture and the Middle East, the beneficiaries as a refugee category and little problematisation of language.

The Middle East and Arab culture as the same

When asked about culture and their cultural understanding in relation to their work most of the practitioners were referring to the Arab culture as one and the same. P3a’s words are very representative of the Jordanian practitioners in the sense that stating the obvious similarities between Arab countries were often times followed by a slight nuance, differentiating them to a certain degree.

I think it’s, ya3ni, the majority of us belong to the same, like, Arab culture, Muslim culture. It’s the same there in Syria, Palestine, it’s the same culture, very minor things different in society from another society. But in the general it’s the same common culture, like the same, it’s one culture actually. But maybe, if I understand your question, then well, I think the Jordanian society more close to the Syrian society, or the Palestinian. When we used to work with Iraqis we felt like we’re a little bit, like we have enough safe distance let’s say, because geographically they are not like so far from Jordan, not like Syrians. The interactions between Jordanians-Syrians are more so you see Jordan, when you travel like to Damascus and Syrians a lot here, there are Syrian minorities living in Jordan since long time so there is a lot of relation between Syrian Sunnis and Jordanian, Syrian and Jordanian families. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

In a similar manner P3b, P4 and P7 were concluding that culture and the Middle Eastern, conservative society is similar.

Here in the Middle East I think we are a conservative society …. it’s like the same. (P3b, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

What’s helpful here that we are most of the culture aspects are similar and here in Jordan, and with other people that we are dealing with. Culture enclose the language, the different, the social, the social interactions. All of these are very close between Jordanians, Syrians, Iraqis, eh, there are a few, there are differences between the different people that we are dealing with, that we are working with. And it’s the role of the staff to be aware and to address these cultural differences, in a very respectful way. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

I mean Syria is our main target group and there is quite similar culture, Jordan, Jordanian and Syrian culture is the, is quite similar… (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

From a symbolic interaction perspective this understanding of Arab culture as similar can be seen as inferred from the relations between people in the region, and the interactions, as P3a mentions above, between Jordanians and Syrians. P7 also refers to his/r understanding of the culture as similar due to his/r relations with refugees and immigrants from the Middle East in his/r home country in Europe.

I thought like already before I came to Jordan since I’ve been working so much for many, many, many years with specifically with refugees and immigrants from Middle East, I felt like I had a quite good
understanding and knowledge about culture and religion, as most people are Muslims. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

P5a and P5b were also talking about there not being any cultural differences. However, at a later point they referred to differences in the region when it comes to child marriage. P1 is of the same view about there not being any major differences while re-stating the fact that it has been difficult for “the culture”, referring to the Jordanians, when it comes to understanding the mental health status of the refugees.

In the beginning of the crisis, Iraqi and Syrian crisis, it was difficult for the culture to accept, you know, the people who are suffering from mental health disorders, there was the social stigma. Still it’s existing until now but it’s better. With time and with the years, I have a feeling, there are no studies on that, but this is my feeling and how I understand it, that people and the culture started to understand, like sometimes the war can cause some mental health disorders. It’s not because the person is not good it’s because all the brain chemicals, emotions, frustrations, make up for that. So it’s not because they are weak, it’s not because they are bad persons. It’s like, it happened around them, it’s not in their hands. So like I feel sometimes that the culture is trying to understand them and to help them in many ways. (P1, Personal communication, 12 April 2016).

P7 is the only one who describes culture as something that is “changing over time, so it’s not like static, like, the culture of a country obviously change over time” (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016). All the practitioners were however, describing culture along the lines of values, norms, how people view things and what is considered correct behaviour. P4 talked about the need to think about culture as something that encompass more than just food, clothes and so on, and for the staff to be aware of this in their practice. In this sense P4 is the only practitioner who went into the fact that there are different cultures within Jordan itself. His/r view of culture is that it’s:

...all the aspects that you need to consider, to know, to be aware of when you are dealing with, with other, with people. So even in Jordan here we have different cultures, and this is how I feel it should be addressed. Culture is something more related not to the language, not to the food or to the dressing, it is more of understanding their entire environment surrounding the people that you are dealing with. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

To what extent this has to do with the fact that this is the practitioner with the highest education could be discussed; if a more complex understanding of the idea of culture has been inferred from the relations and interactions with people in Academia.

P2 speaks of working in his/r Middle Eastern context in contrast to Europe, saying “Europe wouldn’t become Europe because there was an era when Europe was not like that. But the people made Europe different” (P2, Personal communication, 14 April 2016). Some of the practitioners also referred to their work in relation to the international organisation’s Arab strategy or the bigger, regional office they belong to. P6 talked about their Middle Eastern offices or programs being divided into two regional programs, and P2 said that they are bridging projects in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia and Egypt under one strategy, for Arab initiative. Speaking of culture within what is perceived as Middle Eastern or Arab could therefore also be seen as inferred from the relations with international organisations and donors, addressing the Jordanian context within the overall Middle Eastern one.
Moreover, P3a talked about replicating their experience to other countries in the Middle East in order to equip “Arab professionals” because of the situation in the Middle East in general, since it’s “very important to learn, and have people from the same culture, speaking the same language, with like, having this kind of experience, to invest in our community” (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016). Having people of the same group and speaking the same language as the beneficiaries is a way to sensitize the practice (Schlesinger & Devore, 2015), so in this sense P3a was talking about the need for a culturally sensitive practice.

The beneficiaries as a refugee category

Another way of understanding the practitioners’ perception of culture was to look at how they described the beneficiaries. When asked to tell us about their beneficiaries all the practitioners answered mainly in terms of nationality and gender. Three of the practitioners, from two different organizations, work solely with women and the other organizations have mixed groups of beneficiaries. As for nationality, one of the practitioners replied that they only work with Syrians but all the other practitioners work with Syrian and Iraqi refugees and vulnerable Jordanians as their largest target groups but other nationalities mentioned were Yemeni, Sudanese, Somali, Palestinian and Egyptian.

The question was open and intended to open up for a deeper reflection on the multiple layers of who the beneficiaries are. Only four practitioners, from three organisations, added something other than nationality and gender to their descriptions. P2 gave some insight on the the educational and financial backgrounds of the youth that use the services.

some of them are students who didn’t complete their school education, some of them are people who are not able to pay for their education. (P2, Personal communication, 14 April 2016).

P3a and P3b took into consideration their beneficiaries background when describing them, mentioning their ethnic and religious background and also the reasons to why they are now using the services.

We started to respond to the Iraqi war survivors needs, 2008. And unfortunately with the beginning of the Syrian crisis we started receiving Syrians, refugees, also torture and war survivors with mental health needs. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

We are …. [also] dealing with Iraqis from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, we are dealing with Yemenis, Sudanese, Somalis. (P3b, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

P4 elaborated on the description of their beneficiaries in terms of the challenges they are facing and the reasons that brought them to the organisation’s services.

They are refugees from different countries, different locations, some of them Iraqis, when it comes to the clients we are seeing here in Amman and Zarqa, the majority are Syrians, when you go to the north of the kingdom. Male, female, most of the cases that we are dealing with they need support, they are children. And the majority of them they have depression, mood disorders, anxiety and epileptic seizures. The majority they have of course financial problems, which caused later other kind of challenges, some of them is the child labour, some of them is the early marriage, some of them are
differently, like bullying in schools, all of these kind of challenges that they are facing.
(P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

Considering the vast diversity of the Syrian refugees (Hassan et al., 2015) and the importance of recognizing ethnic, religious, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds in the social work (Park, 2005) it is noticeable that only a few of the practitioners chose to elaborate on the diversity when given the chance to openly describe their beneficiaries. Understanding and knowledge are two of Foronda’s (2008) identified attributes of a culturally sensitive social work that can be questioned here. A culturally sensitive social worker should have knowledge of the beneficiaries’ background in order to understand the effects and importance of this background in terms of values or experiences (Foronda, 2008). Our findings in this case indicate a lack of this knowledge and understanding. Not having enough knowledge of the beneficiary can lead to stereotyping and to avoid that the practitioner should ask the beneficiary about their ethnicity, background or values (Kleinman & Benson, 2006).

However, the fact that most of the practitioners’ replies concerned only nationality and gender can have other explanations than an actual lack of understanding and knowledge. Our question was deliberately not focusing on explaining the diversity of the beneficiaries, as we wanted the practitioners to reply out of what they felt most relevant to bring up. Although by not asking specifically about diversities we might have missed the opportunity to let them speak more thoroughly on that. What can be said is at least that the diversity of the beneficiaries is not the first thing that comes to mind for the practitioners when asked about them.

Apart from P2 who focuses more on youth as a wide category including refugees and P6 who works with Syrian women, all the practitioners describe their beneficiaries in terms of refugees, or population groups, rather than differentiating between that group itself. P3b elaborates on his/r work:

> Once you help those people in need, the people for your help, ya3ni, you can find yourself, you can see that you can alleviate the suffering of those people, mitigate their hard circumstances. And I think, for me, it’s one of my ambition and one of my plans to be serving refugees wherever they are, regardless of their nationality, their religious, their belonging. (P3, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

P7 who works at a community center describe the Syrians as their main focus:

> Here at the center we mainly target Syrians but again it’s open for everyone, vulnerable Jordanians, again Iraqi, Palestinian, Yemenis, Somalis, Sudan is also coming. Iraqi is our, I mean, Syrian, Jordanians and then third is Iraqi coming. But obviously our main focus is the Syrians. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016.)

From an anti-oppressive point of view siding with the refugee as a particularly vulnerable group could be seen as working for that “those who have been oppressed may regain control of their lives and re-establish their right to be full and active members of society” (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006, p. 48). However, even though the majority of refugees in Jordan come from Syria and Iraq (http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html), there was no mentioning of the cultural or ethnic variations within those categories by any of the practitioners. This is despite the fact that a report on
culture, context and the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians, published by the UNHCR, is directing special attention to these variations (Hassan et al, 2015). Since two of the practitioners are working directly with their beneficiaries and all but one are employed on managerial levels it could be implied that the incorporation of ethnic issues at all levels of practice as suggested by Schlesinger and Devore (2015) is lacking. For the practitioners who are working with mental health specifically, P3a, P3b and P4, the work seems to revolve a great deal around standardising mental health assessments and organising the services according to what Syrians, Iraqis et cetera are entitled to in order to serve the high number of refugees in Amman.

We serve here around 1000 and a half per year, clients …. And if you are familiar with like mental health center, but this is like, a huge number of clients. Because of them, they are receiving three services together. And I think the minimum, the average number of sessions, from treatment, is like 25 sessions. So this is like a huge number of sessions that we provide per year, this need a lot of, this kind of work need a lot of coordination internally between different segments. There are a lot of case management, lots of protocols to deal with the high risk cases and so on. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

There are so many tools used as the assessment tools, the care planning, project management tool that we are using. For beneficiaries, yes, all these case management tools. Case management tools they are 12 different tools that we are using, starting from the assessment, until discharge tool that we are using. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

…in the beginning of the Syrian crisis for example most of the Syrian refugees are treated free of charge in any clinical or any health facility under the umbrella of Ministry of Health. Nowadays after these, I think, the government and the UNHCR has classified the refugee for three categories... (P3b, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

The classification of the refugee into different categories could be seen as having to do with the legal framework and structural conditions facing refugees in Jordan. When it comes to having knowledge of the way individual factors are linked with oppressive ones on a societal level, very important for both a culturally sensitive and anti-oppressive practice, all practitioners are aware of coercive mechanisms and structural factors (Schlesinger & Devore, 2015) affecting their beneficiaries. Most of the practitioners pointed to the economical factor, lack of finances and work restrictions for Syrians as the major factor affecting the refugees’ lives. P3b, P4 and P6 also point to access to services as another structural factor that the beneficiaries face. P3b and P4 were especially sensitive to the fact that access to services and being aware of as well as making the refugees aware of what services are available for them is key. P3b talks about how their organization took this factor into consideration and created a new service, the drop-in sessions, open for all the refugees in order to empower them with knowledge of the programs and available services. P1, P2 and P7 are working in community centers where they are not only serving psychosocial needs but acting as a place where Syrians and Jordanians, and Iraqis and Jordanians can integrate and learn to live with each other, since there have been some tensions between the two.

…in the host communities especially because we have Jordanians and also the Syrians, refugees. So both of them living together, like in the first years it was really difficult, difficult for them to integrate in the new community, difficult for the community to, you know, to host them because ya3ni, it’s like
sometimes they think okay they are here, it’s a burden on the country, and it’s a kind of, you know, sometimes they work and we don’t work, so you know, some kind of these issues. (P1, Personal communication, 12 April 2016).

…the government have decided that 30% of all assistance must go to vulnerable Jordanians. So then it’s like 70% Syrians and 30% vulnerable Jordanians and this is to avoid that there should be any, like, additional clashes or problems between Syrians and Jordanians. Because, I mean as you know Jordan has taken a huge amount of Syrian refugees and of course there becomes tensions in the communities, and there is a lot of Jordanians also living in extreme poverty or having very little resources and so on. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

In bringing the communities together the centers are challenging the existing social relationships where the host community maintain power and influence over the refugee community, clearly in line with anti-oppressive practice (Larson, 2008). At the same time the practitioners were not referencing to any cultural or ethnic variations within these groups but referring to their beneficiaries as Syrians, Jordanians, Iraqis et cetera, suggesting that there is no ethnic adaptation of their services. Most of the practitioners also told us they have Yemeni, Sudanese and Somali people in the services but that these people only make up a smaller percentage of their beneficiaries. In serving these populations in the same services P7 stated that s/he doesn’t really see a need for paying attention to cultural variations.

I mean Syria is our main target group and there is quite similar culture, Jordan, Jordanian and Syrian culture is the, is quite similar, so it feels like people seem to be quite comfortable with that and as I said most, I mean most of the volunteers and so on are Syrians themselves. And then, yes we do have people from other countries, Somali, Yemen and so on, but there’s still quite few, it’s quite few, so I would say no, it’s not any specific training connected to that… But I don’t see a need for it either. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

This leads us further into the practitioner's’ references to culture, with regards to language.

Little problematisation of language
Relating to the principles of a culturally sensitive social work is language and being considerate towards the language of clients (Foronda, 2008), in this case the beneficiaries. Schlesinger and Devore (2015) emphasise the need for social workers to arrange for the availability of workers who speak the beneficiaries’ language, and to be sensitive to nuances available only in the beneficiaries’ language.

Once again, most of the practitioners referred to this as a non-issue in their service since most of their beneficiaries simply speak Arabic. However, the practitioners also expressed difficulties with some of the beneficiaries’ Arabic accent.

It’s, yeah, we use Arabic language in our work. And only Arabic, because it’s the main language in Jordan and yeah it’s very important… you mean the accents as well because we deal with different nationality? Okay, accents it’s Arabic but with different accents. Ya3ni, we have Syrian accent but now we are used to it, it’s easier for us now. But they understand our accent and we understand theirs. But sometimes some Syrians come from other areas like far from Damascus, so their accent is a bit difficult so it takes us time to understand, this is the only but in general it’s okay, it’s Arabic. (P1, Personal communication, 12 April 2016).

Even I think the, even the language, it’s similar like Jordanian, it’s easier to understand every single word from the Syrian compared with Iraqis. Sometimes you don’t understand all the words when they
are coming from different geographical backgrounds, it’s hard. (P3b, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

They are all speak Arabic, except that we are dealing with some Somali refugees who do not speak Arabic and here you need someone to be, to translate for you, and this sometimes is a challenge. Those are... We have more than 4000 cases that we are dealing with, those are very few, like they are less than 7, less than 7 of them do not speak Arabic. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

Both P5a and P5b who works at an organisation where only Jordanians are employed said that language is not a big issue in their work since all of them speak Arabic. The fact that language in terms of diversity is looked at as a non-issue, everybody simply speaks Arabic with different accents, could be seen as an extension of the practitioners’ perception of Arabic culture as the same, as inferred from the interactions with people in the Arabic speaking, neighbouring countries. P3a talked about the importance of using clear language with the beneficiaries, not using difficult psychological terms but speaking in a way that helps them understand the process. This can be described as a way of using non-oppressive language, that does not enhance the professional’s power over the user (Larson, 2008).

To what extent the practitioners are however, lacking a sensitive approach when it comes to language differences, hiring people from the minority refugee groups or arranging for translators for Yemenis, Sudanese and Somalis can be discussed. We found that four of the practitioners, from three different organisations, mentioned that they take into account the benefits of having workers of the same group as the beneficiaries, however none of them mentioned language as one of the benefits. Perhaps this can be explained by how most of the practitioners are saying that the majority of their beneficiaries are from Syria, Iraq and Jordan, referring to Arabic as the common language even though there are differences in dialect within the refugee communities in Amman, as well as a variation of minority languages.

The two practitioners who are from countries in Europe are not talking so much about the language/s within refugee populations but talks more about the language with reference to not speaking Arabic.

I think that is one of our weaknesses, because many times I think me, and I think also my colleagues, have identified that language, or the lack of being able to communicating in English, makes implementation and understanding quite difficult. And then if you have an interpreter you always, no matter how good the interpreter is, you always loose a couple of those nuances in the language, when it comes to communication. So also sometimes we discussed if we should have, in the field, that the program officers have to be able to speak Arabic if you are in this region, but then it’s also that then that would improve for our organisation but then globally if you look at other international organisations here don’t work that way so then in that sense, yes it would improve for our work but the problem with language would still be there. (P6, Personal communication, 20 April 2016).

P6 talked about language as a weakness in his/r practice, referring to the fact that not being able to communicate with the partners in English makes implementation and understanding difficult. P6 also says that his/r colleagues have identified this and discussed only having program officers who speak Arabic to improve the organisation’s work but have chosen to not do this with reference to that other international organisations do not take this into consideration. The superiority of English as the
working language among international organisations and NGOs can be criticised from a culturally sensitive approach to practice where consideration of the client’s language is important for attaining cultural sensitivity (Foronda, 2008), and language is seen as a reflection of culture, especially the dominant culture (Larson, 2008). P7 on the other hand referred to his/r use of English as non-problematic to practice since all the senior officers and managers speak English.

I mean, no I would say that language is very important but for me as an expat. I do not speak Arabic and it works very well actually. And I mean, most of the volunteers do not speak English and most of the beneficiaries do not speak English but still it works very well. But of course it works because the senior staff can speak English so I can communicate with senior officers and managers who in turn can communicate down to beneficiaries and volunteers and so on. So I mean that I don’t speak Arabic, I don’t think it’s a huge problem but otherwise communication overall is of course very important and then you have to find other ways to do it, which might be body language or learning some small words… (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

From P7’s point of view language is non-problematic to the extent that it is inferred from his/r relations with other local colleagues that they are able to communicate with him/r in English. P4, a Jordanian practitioner, also talked about the importance of English. S/he said the staff needs to read and write in both languages, English and Arabic since they are “dealing with different organisations and different reports and sometimes we have technical experts and they come here and they need to communicate with the team and they need to understand”. S/he also meant that mastering the two languages enables the staff to access different learning tools that they’re using, an e-learning website where the staff has access to all the materials in English. This once again, points to the superiority of English as the working language in a context where a lot of international organisations are delivering many of the refugee services in Jordan (IASC, 2014). From a culturally sensitive approach to practice, where offering services in the language of the beneficiary is claimed to be essential (Larson, 2008; Schlesinger & Devore, 2015), the extent to which the practitioners in this international context in Amman should be sensitive to the implications of language will be discussed further.

Culture at work and its implications for practice

In this chapter we answer our second question on how the practitioners’ perceptions of culture influence the social work practice with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan. To answer this question, we look to our practice theories on cultural sensitivity and use symbolic interaction theory to analyse how different examples become symbols of culture in their work and how cultural norms are challenged. We also look at how cultural orientation is only given to non-Middle Eastern practitioners, in what way self-reflection is practiced and how personal qualities becomes attributes of cultural sensitivity.

Examples as symbols of culture in the work

Despite giving the impression that culture in terms of diversity is not a prevalent issue, as described above, all practitioners had several examples of when culture is in fact an issue or when they somehow
take culture into consideration in the work that they do. Many of these examples were mentioned in relation to home visits. The home visits and other examples came to serve as symbols, forming the basis of the communication (Aksan et al., 2009) about culture. The practitioners mentioned several examples of how they think about what to do and what not to do when visiting their beneficiaries at their homes, everything from how to shake hands or not shake hands to how to kindly refuse an offer of food. In this way, the practitioners’ perception of culture as Arab, Middle Eastern and conservative, as mentioned in the first chapter, influence their attitudes towards culture in their work as related to what is perceived as typically Arab.

Like the simplest example is the home visits. When we do the home visits, you are exposed to a culture. You are for example, you should understand what are the things that you can do in this culture and what are things you cannot do in this culture. For example, sometimes if we go to urban areas we should take into consideration, like the way that we dress. For example, for me, like if I go like this with the jeans and everything, to some urban areas, they will look at you with some you know, who is she, where is she from. So, we try to respect you, respecting for example how we say, what not to say. For example, the coffee, I don’t know if you know about the Arabic coffee … . If we say no they will take it as you don’t respect us. (P1, Personal communication, 12 April 2016).

Like when you are in the camps you shouldn’t refuse someone if they invite you for food but how you can refuse gently because sometimes there is, specially in the camps not in urban area, they didn’t reach the level of cholera, no, but sometimes some diseases appear and disappear. So yeah, you have to tell them but in a good way. Because, ya3ni, the Arabs and specially the poor people, they pay a lot over food. If they have a guest they have to provide with all the food they have inside the fridge. It’s a must, you are a guest, even if they just met you today. You have to reject gently. (P2, Personal communication, 14 April 2016).

P5b talked about how they respect the traditions and the culture in their social field work. They usually do home visits for high risk assessments and they take into consideration if there is a woman alone in the house they are visiting. The organisation does home visits together with the Family Protection Department (FDP) and if it happens to be a man from the FDP and there is a woman alone or with her children inside the house then the man will not enter the house out of respect for the woman and the cultural traditions that suggest it is not appropriate to have a man visiting if there is not a man of the house present. Two other practitioners mentioned adaptations made in the practice, based on cultural understandings of gender differences.

We need to consider culture in interventions, so we have separated sessions for male, females. If you’re like, female and you’re not comfortable to talk with male we have female psychologists. So we need to consider all the cultural aspects around the interventions. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

From a symbolic interaction perspective where people will act in relation to objects according to the meaning given to them (Aksan et al., 2009), the practitioners’ understanding of culture as something that implies a separation between the sexes could be seen as influencing the way they act at work in being sensitive to the implications it has for practice; to have separated sessions for male and female, to be aware of how to behave if you’re coming alone to a home where only a woman is present. The same practitioner also mentioned the differences between handling a man or a woman crying, which
has to do with the cultural understanding of the man as a strong family protector and crying as a weakness. This has implications for practice as practitioners may find it particularly difficult to meet a man who is showing weakness in the form of crying.

Working with elderly, especially, and men also, it’s really hard when you see like a man crying, like culturally speaking. Because men are strong, they are taking care of families, and it’s really very difficult even for mental health providers to see like an old man crying. Maybe they can help, like a woman crying, we can imagine that easy. Because this is like, culturally, this is how it look like. So what’s, I think, for counsellors they need a little bit more attention when working with men, especially when they cry, how they will do, how you will act. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

Here we see how the understanding of men according to Arab, conservative culture needs to change within an interpretative process (Aksan et al, 2009) as the mental health providers need to deal with this new meaning of men as weak. The other practitioner that mentioned culturally specific gender differences did so in relation to how the beneficiaries can access the services. S/he responds to these challenges by being flexible and adapting the services so that they will be accessible for both males and females, respecting culturally based perspectives on the types of persons who may or may not participate when taking important family decisions (Schlesinger & Devore, 2015).

Once they come, usually they come with their parents. Specially if they are young women. Even with the age 22-25. But if he’s a man he can comes alone and decide if he can visit the centre back again and participate. Because the young women, if their parents are afraid about what’s going on in their lives. So usually the young girls ask for a certificate. …. So apparently she needs the certificate to prove to her parents that she was in our centre. As in that they would say that she was out with a guy or something like that. …. If they do have a challenge with their families, they can also bring their families. So there is the flexibility part. (P2, Personal communication, 14 April 2016).

This practitioner stood out in his/r statements on culture, s/he steadily described culture as a limitation, for him/herself as well as for the beneficiaries.

Our culture and even more than the religious background, from the habits and the things we do, it limits the youths dreams …. There are so many limitations within our culture. Even like the discrimination between the male and female and how can you travel. If you can do the thing you want or if it is like you are an extension of a man, or the shadow of a man. So it’s like you get married and that’s it. So you have to fight. (P2, Personal communication, 14 April 2016)

As his/r understanding of culture arise from the interactions with people in his/r social context as something that limits the youths dreams, it influences the way this practitioner focus on getting the beneficiaries to open up to cultures outside of their own.

I’m trying to connect youth from all the centres with each other. Through social media, through field visits. So that people in Zarqa can see Mafrak and can go to Madaba. And it is in our plan to take people from Jordan to go to Lebanon. And from Lebanon to Jordan. And also to other centres in Egypt. Not with us but with other partners within other clusters, so that they can have another, a better, ya3ni, they have to build their way of thinking, to see the world. Because their thoughts are really limited. Yeah. And you have to let them to see some other people. And you have to open for them some other channels. So whenever we have also volunteers, cultural exchange with Europe and America, I always say yes to whomever, come! (P2, Personal communication, 14 April 2016).

Moreover, one of the practitioners told us how they have adapted the organisation’s guidelines or tools to be more appropriate for the culture in the context that they are working with. This adaptation is in
line with Schlesinger and Devore’s (2015) points for practice. The other place in the world where this organisation functions is Africa, and some of the tools have been developed by the African branch.

Ya3ni, in their culture, in Africa, there is a lot of movement and dancing, which is not appropriate here, to start like counselling session with something like one, with dance. Here we use more writing, because you know we have a, like, writing it comes from our culture, Quran and some poems, we use a lot of techniques to write things and poem, therapy and you know also group in our culture because Muslims pray in groups, five times per day, so groups have some understanding in the culture. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

The practitioner who we previously mentioned as the only practitioner who goes into the fact that there are different cultures within Jordan itself talked about how s/he is trying to introduce this idea of culture as a diversity to the staff. In this sense, P4’s more complex understanding of culture influence the fact that s/he is recognising the importance of incorporating ethnic issues at all levels of practice, including inter-staff/interprofessional relationships.

Eh honestly, most of the staff they think that culture is something that we need to… or they are linked with either religion or either something related to the food or to the, to the back ground. But we try to give them the bigger picture of the cultural aspects. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

All the examples mentioned by the practitioners show how they take culture into account and how their understanding of culture influence- and is translated into their work. Examples such as home visits and gender differences serve as symbols of their communication of Arab culture as the same culture. Even though the examples are a reflection of the culture described in the first chapter as the same, Arab, Middle Eastern, conservative, they serve as symbols that influence the way the practitioners practice a social work that respects culturally based perspectives as suggested by Schlesinger and Devore (2015).

Cultural orientation for non-Middle Eastern foreigners
When asking the practitioners if they had a cultural orientation before starting their job we found that it’s only given to practitioners from outside of the Middle East. This could be seen as a reflection of the meaning they have attributed to the object (Aksan et al., 2009) of culture as being one and the same Middle Eastern culture. Hence, because of the way they perceive culture as a non-issue in terms of cultural diversity it influences the practice so that cultural orientation is something that is given only to practitioners from outside the Middle East, as it is deemed irrelevant for the Jordanian and Arab professionals.

It’s done for the international staff, yeah, they do receive some orientation. But for the nationals no, because it’s their culture so yeah, not for them. (P1, Personal communication, 12 April 2016).

There is an orientation but the cultural usually doesn’t go for the Arabs, it goes for the foreigners. (P2, Personal communication, 14 April 2016).

We have orientation session for everyone but they [the practitioners from outside the Middle East] have also culture … They [the Jordanian and Arab professionals] have an orientation schedule more about like, work not about like, culture, how we teach, what do… (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).
Having cultural orientation for non-Middle Eastern practitioners is mentioned by all the practitioners apart from P5a and P5b who’s organisation employs locals only, and P6 who didn’t receive any cultural orientation since s/he had lived in Jordan one year before s/he started his/r position. Moreover, P3a and P3b mention that many of the practitioners from outside the Middle East who are employed in their organisation have worked in the Middle East before and sometimes also speak some Arabic. Through the social interactions between these practitioners and the practitioners from outside the Middle East, P3a and P3b see the practitioners from outside the Middle East as experienced when it comes to the culture. From these practitioners’ answers being Jordanian or having knowledge about Jordan and Middle Eastern culture carry the meaning of having some kind of cultural understanding in the work with refugees from Syria. When it comes to the actual content of the cultural orientation that the non-Middle Eastern practitioners do get, it seems to only contain standardised information about the culture in Jordan, covering everything from taxi prices to dress codes. This could be seen as a reflection of what we described earlier on the different examples of culture becoming symbols of shared meaning (Blumer, 1969) of the Arab, conservative culture. The symbols thus mediate the interaction with everyone considered outside the Arab culture.

[It] is quite long and informing about different things connected to Jordan, connected to culture, connected to anything that you might be interesting to know. So this one I got but otherwise no, yeah, yeah, true no, and then I came and then we had like an introduction training but it was not so much about Jordan itself it was some about security, we had a security briefing but otherwise it was more about the projects in Jordan, and about the refugee crisis, yes. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

The orientation that they are getting from, for the ex... international staff are getting general, very standardised training on the culture and this is also online training that they receive. And everything related to this culture, starting from the general idea of the country and also what are the considerations, the things that they need to consider for this culture. For us as a national staff, and the people they are working with the clients here, Iraqis, Syrians, they receive a little bit different training on that. And this also change from time to time. I remember the training that we started with, I received, it’s different a little bit now than the training that we provide for the new staff that they are joining. It’s more now, we aim more attention for the cultural aspects. Specially we learn day after day that people that we are receiving now, they are not really the same, same culture. It’s always, there are differences. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

P4 is once again the only practitioner who talked about paying more attention to cultural aspects as they are learning that the beneficiaries are in fact not people of the same culture. The fact that this Jordanian practitioner attributes a much more complex meaning to culture influences the practice so that also Jordanians and Arab professionals are given training on cultural aspects. It is seen as important because of the meaning s/he ascribes to culture as more complex, pertaining more aspects than just food and clothes. Apart from P4 it is our understanding that the cultural orientations are made only for non-Middle Eastern practitioners staying in Amman, and that the trainings or manuals focus more on standardised topics concerning the culture of Jordan than on how to incorporate a culturally sensitive approach in the social work practice made up of professionals from different countries and
backgrounds. For this reason it is understandable that the cultural orientation is not offered to practitioners from Jordan or neighbouring countries, since they are considered to already have this knowledge. On a larger scale, the praxis that cultural orientation is given only to non-Middle Eastern practitioners in the Jordan could be seen as an expression of the dynamic reciprocity between individuals and society, what Blumer (1969) termed joint action, constructed by the interactions between non-Middle Eastern, Middle Eastern and Jordanian practitioners and the different international organisations.

Because cultural diversity is treated as a non-issue, as mentioned in the first chapter of the results, some of the practitioners’ reference to other documents or trainings related to ethical work values could be seen as providing common ground for practice for both international and national staff alike. P4 mentioned the Jordanian social worker’s code of ethics, both P1 and P7 referred to their organisation’s child safeguarding policy and P7 also mentioned a code of conduct that all the staff need to sign and follow.

To what extent the practitioners are made aware of cultural aspects in their work and in what way, if it’s through a training on the situation in Jordan or a manual on Jordan’s culture, is dependent upon the practitioners’ own cultural background. Moreover, it doesn’t differentiate or go beyond Jordan’s culture to that of the supposed other cultures of their beneficiaries, the refugees. How the practitioners reflect upon their own ethnic identity and the complexity of culture in the work is something that we will therefore elaborate more on below, in relation to self-reflection.

Self-reflection and the notion of being neutral

Self-reflection is one of the major ideas within both anti-oppressive and a culturally sensitive approach to practice. In anti-oppressive practice critically reflecting on your own position is key for practicing a social work that seeks to redress the power balance in the worker-beneficiary situation itself (Larson, 2008). Schlesinger and Devore (2015) talk about the importance of understanding yourself with emphasis on the ethnic sense. This is to understand how the ethnic reality affects all people and is part of our interactions. For the Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners especially, reflecting on yourself in the ethnic sense was connected to the notion of being neutral and very much downplaying your own self in the meeting with your beneficiaries.

Actually in my work, especially when I’m dealing with beneficiaries I really put away like, my beliefs, background, everything. Because I should be, as I said before, empathetic, I should be understanding so, I don’t want to have the influence of my background on the beneficiary. And this is what we’ve been trained to do during our work so this should not affect this. (P1, Personal communication, 12 April 2016).

I think social work, its work is a neutral work, and dealing with all our clients, they are coming from different backgrounds, from different society. They are, we are trying to avoid any about what is your religious, what is your beliefs. This question, we don’t ask this question, because we are dealing with you as a human being. We respect what you, your thoughts, your language, your customs .... We are trying to preserve your dignity as much as we can and we not ask any issue that makes any resentment or reservation about ourselves. So we are a neutral organisation when dealing with them because we are
dealing with Iraqis from different ethnic backgrounds, religious, we are dealing with Yemenis, Sudanese, Somalis, so all of them are equal in our treatment. (P3b, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

[The ethnic background] doesn’t mean anything in terms of the work. So, as a professional I keep whatever I believe in or what’s my ethnic background behind and deal with different clients and different people equally because in the end, and this is something we start with in our training for our staff, we are all human and we need to address human as with dignity, with respect, so it doesn’t matter where they are coming from. If you feel, and we advice always our staff, if they feel like they are not willing to deal with this person or you can’t or you don’t accept that, then you need in a professional way to refer to your colleagues and it’s fine. It’s totally understood from our side. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

From a symbolic interaction point of view this could be seen as mirroring the attributed meaning (Aksan et al., 2009) to culture in terms of diversity as a non-issue for practice, therefore pointing to social work as a neutral work where you deal with people simply as human beings. Seeing yourself as someone that can be neutral is inferred or created from the interactions with professionals during trainings, saying that this is what they’ve been trained to do in order to be professional. Seeing yourself as neutral has emerged from the interactions during trainings on social work as a neutral work has been defined to them, the meaning resulting from the interactions (Blumer, 1969). P3b talked about neutrality in terms of giving equal treatment to beneficiaries from different ethnic backgrounds. P2 also talked about there being a lot of stereotyping in the Arab region and that the more exposure you have to other countries the more you realise how wrong these stereotypes are. In Jordan and the Middle East where people’s group affiliations in society stretch over more categories than national belonging, for example religion or tribe (Hassan et al., 2015), it can be argued that the Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners’ self-proclaimed neutrality must be understood in relation to this context. In this sense the response to culture or being sensitive to culture in the Jordanian context could mean to be neutral towards group affiliations in society by treating everybody simply as humans.

Moreover, P1 as well as P3b and P4 perceive themselves as taking on a role where it is possible to be without bias, putting away all your personal beliefs. In some regards this could be seen as a way of controlling the way they are perceived (Carter & Fuller, 2009) by the beneficiaries, especially since, from an anti-oppressive point of view the perspective is that there will always be a balance of power to human relationships (Dominelli, 2002). P5a and P5b emphasised their identities as Jordanians and that to be proud of being Jordanian is something that they have to carry with them in their work. The fact that these two practitioners’ reflected on themselves in terms of proud Jordanians could be seen as inferred from the social interactions (Blumer, 1969) and special relations that their organisation has with prominent Jordanian leaders in the country. The practitioners who are from countries in Europe, P6 and P7, reflected on themselves in a somewhat different manner. Their self-reflection revolves more around privilege and seeing themselves in relation to the Jordanian context. For them, their self-object could be seen as defined more in terms of difference since they are interacting with a
community, the generalised other, that ascribe them the role as non-Jordanians and let them perceive themselves that way.

I mean, obviously … it’s a country where we, a very well developed country with good schools and we, good educational system and so on so obviously I’ve been lucky …. And I think we have a quite good knowledge about the rest of the world, and I also had the chance to travel quite a lot, to see different parts of the world so, I think I’m quite fortunate and I mean coming here and working with people like, see that others, has quite little knowledge obviously about other parts of the world and so on… I can also feel proud coming from my country where we, compared to many other countries in the world we are very well taking care of our residents. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

P6 expressed what his/r ethnic background means to him/r in relation to always having been interested in other cultures and having a fascination for “the Other”. This relates to the fact that s/he sees him/herself in relation to others (Mead, 2001) as coming from a different background than them.

I developed a very strong interest for cultures early on and I think that comes from being from a very... Eh... [country specific] kind of context and background and… That is also, a bit bad in a way, because I guess then it develops as a kind of “the good savage” kind of reference because you know, you develop a fascination for something that “the Other” kind of… (P6, Personal communication, 20 April 2016).

In contrast to the Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners both P6 and P7 described their ethnic background more in terms of difference than claiming neutrality even though both practitioners also spoke of the work in terms of neutrality and not taking any political sides. Both of them see themselves as having a good cultural understanding in their work. P6 attributes this to always being very sensitive to cultural differences since taking an elective course on culture in high school and P7 to his/r many years of experience of working with refugees from the Middle East in his/r home country and working abroad, in other contexts before. P6 also contrasts him/herself in relation to his/r international and local colleagues.

So I would say that I’m quite much more culturally sensitive, than my [country specific] colleagues. And my local colleagues, because my local colleagues would be culturally sensitive towards their culture but not necessarily other cultures. (P6, Personal communication, 20 April 2016).

When asked to explain this further P6 mentioned differences of opinion when it comes to dress code as an example. Here, the practitioner becomes aware of him/herself as s/he is stimulated to take the attitude of the other (Mead, 2001), including colleagues from similar background as him/r. Moreover, P7 talked about having gotten to know the environment very well through only having local colleagues at the community center and that they’re always trying to do things in a culturally correct way. S/he also reflected on that s/he can question things based on his/r understanding of cultural norms. To exemplify this s/he mentioned suggesting a mixed English class, meaning for both men and women, instead of having one separate for men and one for women, as elaborated on earlier.

The European practitioners’ understanding of themselves is more concerned with taking on the role of “the Other”, whereas the Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners are seeing themselves as having to be neutral in relation to their beneficiaries. However, they all shared the attitude that they
should be neutral in some sense which could be seen as a reflection of their perception of cultural
diversity as a non-issue for practice, focusing more on the beneficiaries as human beings. The process
of self-indication looks different for different practitioners depending on their social context, if they’re
seen as part of the Arab community or not.

Personal qualities as attributes of cultural sensitivity
Regardless of any tools or competences that the practitioners mentioned to be of importance in their
work, what came up in all the interviews, through replies to various questions, were the personal
qualities that the practitioners find important in their profession. The keywords identified are respect,
trust, listening, empathy and humbleness. These personal qualities can be seen as attributes of a
cultural sensitivity, as identified by Foronda (2008). Out of the six personal qualities understanding
and respect are the two that also Foronda mentions as attributes of cultural sensitivity.
Six of the practitioners mentioned respect during the interview. Some of them spoke about respecting
the beneficiaries and their ways of living:

… and we need to respect, starting from religion to the spiritual beliefs, to the language, to the dress, to
the habits, to different way of living again and it is not related to the individuals only, it’s the
surrounding environment for them. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).

Others spoke specifically about respecting the culture, as an object by itself. One of the European
practitioners expressed this, with reference to the fact that s/he is not from Jordan:

I’m here working and I should be here to also respect the culture and make sure that I not offend
anyone and specifically not when I’m working. And I think it’s very very important, because I’m here
like a guest so to speak and I shouldn’t impose things and what is suitable in this culture. (P7, Personal
communication, 26 April 2016).

As culture becomes a non-issue for the practitioners in terms of cultural diversity, the practitioners are
referring to attributes of cultural sensitivity rather than acknowledging the ethnic reality of all people
as suggested by Schlesinger and Devore (2015). From a symbolic interaction perspective, the fact that
the practitioners develop these attitudes and see these personal qualities as important could be inferred
or created from the interactions (Aksan et al., 2009) with the beneficiaries as refugees, humans that
should be treated with respect regardless of their ethnicity and/or cultural background. Three
practitioners mentioned how important trust is in their work. Two of these practitioners, from the same
organisation, talked about how it has not been easy to build trust with their beneficiaries but it is now
part of what makes their work successful.

In the beginning, especially with the Iraqi community and Syrians in the beginning of the crisis they
were not able to share, like, stories. They were afraid, and you know we are working in very sensitive
topics, torture and other war trauma and a lot of clients having like, relatives there and sometimes they
are afraid to disclose information. So trust was the key thing and building trust and we were aware of
that this is the process. We need to take care of clients, we need to build trust with the community, this
was a very important component. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).
I think of the most important issue is how to build trust with them, with the clients, because when the clients can trust the services, he trust that you can help him. (P3b, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

The third practitioner who talked about trust mentioned it in the sense of trusting the beneficiaries. S/he told us about his/r previous job where s/he noticed a big difference in the youth s/he was working with when s/he trusted them with the responsibility to arrange their own activities.

...suddenly someone is believing in them, giving them responsibility, and then they did it, it was so good, and we had a lot of people starting their own activities and running their own activities, and it was amazing because when you run it yourself, you don’t want to destroy. So you really made sure that there was a lot of people coming, that you kept all the rules and everything. And it was so nice to see how many people we had, women, men, youth, arranging different kind of activities and activity center, and how successful that became. And now coming here I really try to impose the same, that we should trust people in the community that come to the center, we should say what they want to do, they should not just come as beneficiaries and attend but they should actually be involved in carrying out and planning and doing the activities. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

Listening to the beneficiaries was also a quality that some of the practitioners mentioned. Listening to the beneficiaries seems to mean different things for the practitioners depending on the setting they work in. For those in mental health or counselling settings listening seems to mean to listen to what the beneficiaries tell about their life stories or their wellbeing while those that work in psychosocial support or community based settings talk about listening more in terms of participation, listening to the beneficiaries needs.

So I think when it comes to social work and so on it’s important that regardless where you work in the world to be able to see new ways and listen to beneficiaries, listen to people, make sure it’s from bottom-up .... I mean most of the people knows best themselves what they need, and I think there is so many examples from around the world where people think they have done good things but in the end it has become actually worse because you have an idea of what you think is good but you haven’t really made a proper assessment or talked with people and see what they really need. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

One of the practitioners mentioned that it is not enough to try to listen and hear the difficult stories of the beneficiaries but also to be empathetic with them and with the things that they tell you.

Sometimes it’s hard for the social worker to hear different difficult stories but being trained on how to be empathetic, how to really understand without being affected as well because you should really take care of yourself, in order not to get badly or negatively affected from the stories that you hear. (P1, Personal communication, 12 April 2016).

Two of the practitioners talked in terms of not knowing it all or having all the skills needed for the challenges in their work, P4 expressed it as humbleness:

There are a lot to learn in this field, and the most important for our staff usually to know that they need to be humble and to know that they don’t know it all. They have a lot to learn here and whatever the background or the experience or the learning that you received, there are so many different things that you think that you probably captured, but you are not. And day after day you receive a different kind of experiences and learnings, from kids, from children, from women, from different people. (P4, Personal communication, 18 April 2016).
These qualities could be understood as the practitioners’ way of adopting a sensitivity in their work without actually giving much attention to the culture itself. From an anti-oppressive perspective, oppression and oppressive relations are about limiting the range of options that subordinated individuals and groups can exercise (Dominelli, 2002). To what extent this focus on the beneficiaries as refugees rather than as a culturally diverse group of people is losing a holistic approach and limits the options that beneficiaries would exercise in the MHPSS services if their cultural value systems was paid more attention, could be further discussed from an anti-oppressive perspective.

Cultural sensitivity versus cultural acceptance
As we have explained so far in the thesis, the practitioners view the culture in the context that they are working in as quite unanimous and not something they take into account. Still, they mentioned nuances and various situations where they in fact take culture into account. And even though there are elements of a culturally sensitive practice in their work with Syrian refugees one can, based on some of their responses, discuss where the line goes between cultural sensitivity and plain cultural acceptance.

Two of the practitioners mentioned cases or behaviours that are not acceptable according to the standards of their organisation, or even the legal system of Jordan, but that still will be accepted in their work since it’s considered part of the culture. P5a told us that child marriages are not allowed in Jordan, as regulated by law, but it is allowed and common in Syria. So, since some of their beneficiaries are young Syrian girls who are married, the practitioners as expressed by P5a, can do nothing about it but just have to accept that that's the way it is for them, explaining it away for cultural reasons (Parrott, 2009). From a symbolic interaction perspective this practitioner has developed the attitude that s/he should accept this as this has been inferred from the relations with the beneficiaries that child marriage is part of their culture. Moreover, it is inferred from the interactions with the organisation that this practitioner should accept this behavior as it is given the meaning that s/he is respecting their culture. As child marriage is attributed to the culture of the beneficiaries, the Syrians, the practitioners say that they accept it and don't challenge it, even though it is something they find unacceptable in relation to law and standards of the organisation. In that sense the sensitivity to culture becomes a form of acceptance that could be considered problematic in the Jordanian context.

The other practitioner who brought us into this subject did so talking about child abuse:

I think each father in this culture beat his children but there is like limits and levels, you know, if he beat him like once, and he was like misbehaved or this was because he drink alcohol and things, then he beat him. So we assess this from also cultural perspectives. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

This practitioner implies that there is a kind of acceptance of child abuse, even among practitioners, since it according to him/r is a part of the culture for a father to beat his children. This goes against the
UN convention on the rights of the child and the international standards that the international organisations have to abide by.

So, even if there is some international standards in the dealing and working with the LGBT or children, it’s not applicable in our culture and our national standard, and sometimes it’s a conflict because we are working in international NGO, abiding international standards. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

The case is here, once again, that the practitioner is acting in relation to the meaning which hitting your child has to him/r, as inferred by the interactions with people in his/r social context and culture (Aksan et al., 2009). Despite of expressing acceptance of child abuse, ascribing it to his/r understanding of the Arab culture, the same practitioner did not express acceptance of the discrimination and abuse of LGBT people in Jordan, who according to the practitioner are not accepted in the Middle East’s conservative societies. This is how s/he describes it together with the other practitioner from the same organisation:

I think this is one of the very sensitive cases that we receive here, the LGBT cases. You know, they are targeted in their home country, they are targeted in Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East. The phenomenon is not accepted because you are, it’s conservative societies. That’s why when they’re coming to [name of organisation] we try to help them as much as we can. (P3b, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

Culturally for us it’s difficult to work with them. Like, we as professionals are able to be with them with all respect and we offer them all they need, services. But also we understand the community. Maybe we give them like one meeting when we don’t have like high pressure of people so when they are in the session area they will clear that kind of uncomfortable environment. (P3a, Personal communication, 17 April 2016).

In this case the practitioner showed an awareness of the cultural situation and the hardships for the LGBT people and explains the sensitivity they apply when receiving them as beneficiaries. The practitioners also spoke of the work with LGBT as a component that is required by their donors. In expressing that it is culturally difficult for the Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners to work with LGBT people they could be seen as having to take on a professional role (Carter & Fuller, 2009) where LGBT, as inferred from the relations with their international partners, is given a different kind of meaning (Blumer, 1969) than that inferred from the interactions with people in their Arab, conservative societies. We here distinguish between being culturally sensitive by adapting the services according to the cultural context and being culturally accepting by recognising the cultural norms and accepting them in the practice. To what extent this distinction and the consequences it has for practice is dependent upon the relations with international partners can be discussed.

One of the European practitioners gave an example of not accepting cultural norms, but doing so in a sensitive way, s/he explained how s/he deals with the dilemma:

So I would say it’s, like, very understanding and always trying to make sure we are doing things in a culturally correct way. But I can also question certain things obviously. I mean, if there is something I think is, I can also question or ask, how come it’s like this, could we try to do this a little bit different ... For example that English classes let’s say and they say, oh we cannot have it mixed, and then I say can’t we? Do we really need to have one class with women and one class for men? I do understand,
culturally, like it’s much more divided but of course in certain activities it’s very essential that it needs to be divided but English, does it really need to be divided? …. I think those kind of things you can always ask like more, like what do you think, not like questioning “I think it is wrong”, but more like ask, do you think we could try it like this, how can we see this? In discussion it can turn out that yeah, maybe we can try this. (P7, Personal communication, 26 April 2016).

P7 could be seen as becoming self-conscious about her own cultural understanding of gender as she takes the position of the other (Mead, 2001). Challenging the cultural norms here could be seen as an attempt at making her Jordanian and Middle Eastern colleagues do the same, to go through a similar process of self-indication as they are considering the importance of having a divided English class. From a symbolic interaction perspective this is a good example of how the cultural meaning of objects such as gender, can change within an interpretative process used by the individuals as they deal with them (Blumer, 1969). This example and the way cultural norms on LGBT and children are being challenged in the work point to the importance of finding common ground on culturally sensitive social work in a context where practitioners from different countries come to work with beneficiaries from a different cultural background than their own.
Conclusions

Through this study we have, using our conceptual framework, investigated the understanding of culture among mental health and psychosocial support practitioners that work with Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan. We have also looked at how their understanding of culture influence their work in relation to practice theories on a culturally sensitive social work. From our research we have found that cultural diversity is a non-issue for practitioners to the degree that Arab culture is perceived by the practitioners as being one and the same for Jordanians, Syrians and other Arabs alike. This perception of culture as a non-issue in terms of diversity also pertains language, Arabic and English, as mostly non-problematic and seeing the beneficiaries as refugees rather than an ethnically and culturally diverse group of people.

Using symbolic interaction theory, we have seen that this perception is inferred from the relations within the Middle Eastern region and the NGO context, and that it influences the social work practice with Syrian refugees in the way that being sensitive to culture in the work means to be sensitive to that behaviour which is perceived by the practitioners to constitute the same Arab, Middle Eastern, conservative culture. Examples of this were the home visits, the separation of the sexes and the image of men as strong. The way the practitioners look at Arab culture as the same also influence the fact that cultural orientations are given to non-Middle Eastern practitioners only since the Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners are perceived as coming from the same culture as the Syrians. Moreover, the different examples become symbols of the Arab culture and contain elements of a culturally sensitive social work as reflected by the practice theories. These symbols mediate the interaction with the non-Middle Eastern practitioners so that their orientations simply revolve around these examples as information about Jordan’s Arab, conservative culture.

We also found that the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the practitioners influence their self-reflection and process of self-indication, crucial for a culturally sensitive social work, in different ways as the extent to which practitioners reflect on themselves is dependent upon their interactions and role within the social context. How much the practitioners perceive themselves as “the Other” is dependent upon if they’re seen as part of the Arab community or not. All the practitioners however, spoke about being neutral and simply treating everybody as humans which could be seen as a reflection of their perception of cultural diversity as a non-issue, focusing more on the beneficiaries as refugees, deserving respect just as much as anyone else.

Moreover, the practitioners’ interactions with the beneficiaries as refugees, rather than a culturally diverse group of people, influence the way the practitioners refer to attributes of cultural sensitivity. Personal qualities such as respect, trust, listening, empathy and humbleness were emphasised by the practitioners as important for treating the beneficiaries as humans, regardless of their ethnicity and/or cultural background.
Lastly, we found that some of the practitioners’ perceptions of cultural norms with reference to customs concerning children, LGBT and gender are confronted within the interpretative process taking place in the social work context in Amman. As Jordanian, Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern practitioners are working together with a group of people from a different cultural background than their own, relations with different national and international actors are challenging where the line goes between cultural sensitivity and cultural acceptance.
Discussion

As part of our aim with this thesis was to explore the understanding of a culturally sensitive social work in the Jordanian context, we found a limited amount of elements of a culturally sensitive social work as reflected by the practice theories; Schlesinger and Devore’s (2015) points for ethnic adaptations for practice, anti-oppressive practice ideas and attributes of cultural sensitivity. However, the limitations of a culturally sensitive approach to social work practice must be seen in relation to the Jordanian working context where beneficiaries are mainly categorized as refugees. This is especially important since the legal framework around much of the social work that the practitioners are doing and the structural conditions facing the refugees in Jordan requires this categorisation. Meaning, the beneficiaries are entitled to certain services based on their refugee status. From an anti-oppressive perspective (Dominelli, 2002) the practitioners could be seen as siding with the refugees as a particularly vulnerable group. However, in categorising and seeing the beneficiaries mainly as refugees, not paying much attention to cultural diversity, the practitioners could also be seen as limiting the options that beneficiaries would exercise in the MHPSS services if their cultural value systems were paid more attention to. The fact that these practitioners are not only meeting Syrians but also Iraqis, Yemenis, Sudanese and Somalis is only emphasising the importance of recognising how different cultural groups can claim privilege and power at the expense of others, through the articulation of their diverse needs (Parrott, 2009).

The understanding of what constitutes a culturally sensitive social work also needs to be further problematised in the Jordanian context with reference to several points of importance. Firstly, the fact that the practitioners’ understanding of what constitutes culture is given meaning through examples of Arab, conservative behaviour opens up for a discussion on how culture as a taken for granted term should be critically examined more in social work in general, as suggested by Park (2005) and in the Jordanian context in particular. Studies that further explore the cultural identities of Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners could contribute to a deeper understanding of how and when notions of cultural sameness and difference interplay with respect to the complex, modern Arab identity in Jordan (Sabet, 2006). To what extent the relations with international partners in this context also challenge Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners’ perception of cultural norms was observed through the distinction between being culturally sensitive by adapting the services according to the cultural context and being culturally accepting by recognising the cultural norms and accepting them in the practice. In order to investigate this further, we suggest studies on the interactions between local and international practitioners and partners in the Middle East specifically, and how these interactions affect the practice and challenges cultural norms, such as those mentioned in this thesis. To fully comprehend this complexity, we suggest the studies to be carried out by scholars of local origin, in accordance with the research that emphasises the benefits of being an “insider” of the context studied (Al- Makhamreh & Lewando- Hundt, 2008).
The fact that cultural orientation is seen as important for non-Middle Eastern practitioners only is problematic in relation to the orientation’s informative purpose, serving examples of Jordanian culture only. As the identity and behaviour of individuals within cultures cannot be read off from an existing menu of cultural practices (Parrott, 2009) it is remarkable that practitioners in this social work context are not introduced to a more intersectional understanding of culture. Since documents or trainings related to ethical values in the work seem to provide more of a common ground for practice, incorporating a more complex understanding of culture in them might be one way to also encourage more critical self-reflection among Jordanian and Middle Eastern practitioners.

In what way the practitioners use of practice theories related to cultural sensitivity would benefit from a continued progression of the relatively new academic subject of social work in Jordan is something that could be discussed further. A continued progression of the education and professionalisation of social work might establish a sense of professional belonging where discussions regarding cultural sensitivity could be encouraged to a greater degree than at present.

Our conclusions regarding the lack of a sensitive approach towards language touch on the fact that the Arabic language is prominent in the field, spoken by almost all groups of beneficiaries and the Syrian refugees in particular. It is however also a fact that some of the beneficiaries do not have Arabic as their first language, and it is likely that failing to recognize the minority languages will affect the outcome of the services, since offering services in the language of the beneficiary is claimed to be essential (Larson, 2008; Schlesinger & Devore, 2015).

To elaborate on the suggestion to encourage local researchers to engage in this subject we also need to discuss our own contribution to this field, as we are “outsiders” who only have limited access to the mechanisms of understanding the context. One can also discuss whether questions regarding cultural sensitivity in social work is in fact best answered by interviewing the practitioners. Throughout this thesis we have focused on the practitioners, and rightfully so since previous research on culturally sensitive social work has highlighted the lack of research concerning the social workers’ attitudes on the subject (Schlesinger & Devore, 2015). However, this field of study aims at improving the services for the beneficiaries and their experiences of being a user of MHPSS services. It should thus be of significant importance to hear the experiences of the beneficiaries, in this case the Syrian refugees. We therefore encourage similar studies to include the beneficiaries’ attitudes and perceptions of how they are being treated in the MHPSS services in Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries.
References


Appendices
Appendix I, Letter to practitioners

Hello,

We are two social work students from Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm, Sweden currently in Amman to do our professional thesis. With this thesis we aim to increase the knowledge of social workers’ understanding and experience of a culturally sensitive social work with refugees and how this affects the practice.

We want to get in touch and meet with social workers that are doing psychosocial and mental health work with Syrian refugees and have an academic education in this field of work. Both Jordanian and international practitioners are of interest to us.

To the practitioner whom this might concern, we hope that you would like to share your experiences with us by participating in an interview that will take approximately 1 hour. The information we will collect will be decoded so as to not disclose the identities of the respondents. We are available to conduct the interview until the 21st of April, but prefer to meet with you as soon as possible, at your convenience and choice of location.

This is an important area of research and we are interested in your own unique experiences!

Call or email us at:
[contact details]

We hope to hear from you and are looking forward to meeting with you,
Livia and Heléne
Appendix II, Interview guide

Personal background

- Where are you from? How long have you been living in Jordan?
- What is your academic degree? Where did you study? In what language? Do you have any specific trainings?
- What is your professional experience? (what other jobs have you had prior to this one?)
- How many years of experience do you have in this field?
- How long have you been working with this organisation and how long are you employed for?
- What motivated you to work here?

The work context

- What can you tell us about the work that you do, maybe describe a “typical” work day?
- What can you tell us about your clients? (first ask how they prefer to call the people they work with) Where are they from/ who are they?
  (for the following questions we would like you to think about the syrians that you are working with)
- How do your clients hear about/come to your organization/service?
- What are the factors influencing your clients’ life/situation? (How much does your work take those into consideration?)
- Do you work together with other organisations on changing structural factors that affect your clients, like advocacy work?
- How do your clients’ think about mental health?
- Are their views similar to your own view on mental health?
- (If no,) how do you handle that, the differences?
- What in the other jobs that you’ve had can you benefit from in the role that you have today?

Cultural sensitivity in the work - skills

- What are the most important tools or methods in your work? Are these tools/methods adapted to the context you are working in, with refugees?
- Are there any ethical values that apply to your work with your clients?
- How important is language in your work? (body language)

Cultural identity and self-reflection

Now we have some questions on culture and we’d like you to reply from your own understanding

- How would you define culture?
• How do you see yourself and your own cultural understanding in relation to your work? In relation to your colleagues?
• What does your own ethnic background mean to you? What does your own ethnic background mean in your work?
• When you hear the term cultural sensitivity, what do you think about?
• How do you see the connection between culture and social work?

Participation
• Can the clients affect the work (interventions, methods etc.) in any way?
• Do you evaluate the work together with your clients?
• What do you think are the clients’ perspective of your work?
• How do you follow up with your clients?

Colleagues/Networks
• Did you and your colleagues receive any cultural insight/orientation before you started your position? (if there is any material, can we have a copy?)
• Are there international staff in the organisation? Is there any difference between the orientation/preparation?
• Are the staff offered any self-care support?
• What do you find important for other social workers to keep in mind when working in your field? (the field of refugees from Syria)