

# ‘People Here Are Their Own Gods’: The Migration of South African Social Workers to England

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## Abstract

The migration of social workers has become an established trend internationally. Existing research largely ignored the impact of culture on this migration. The study presented here focused on the experiences of social workers who were trained in South Africa and migrated to England. South African-trained social workers had to adjust to significant cultural differences, ranging from the place of religion, the characteristics of the family and parenting, forms of interpersonal communication and what is considered polite and impolite behaviour. Whilst these issues have a wide societal impact, they also shape the daily reality of practising social workers. Implications for practice are discussed, and pre-migration education about the host country's structures, a systemic induction process, mentorship and supervision with an emphasis on culture, is recommended.

**Keywords:** culture, England, migration, religion, South Africa

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## Introduction

Local shortages have led to increased recruitment of international social workers in England. Scholars estimated that over 10 per cent of England's qualified social workers trained abroad (Beddoe and Fouché, 2014; Hussein *et al.*, 2011; [Headline Social Worker Statistics: Adult Social Care Workforce Dataset, 2021](#)). Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) data provided in response to our Freedom of Information (FOI) request (FR07188) indicates that between 2014 and 2019, out of a total of 30,298 social work registrations, 5,249 (17 per cent) were trained abroad. Migrant practitioners are faced with navigating the opportunities and challenges posed by working and living in countries where they did not obtain their professional qualifications (Beddoe and Fouché, 2014).

Although a small body of literature in this area exists, the experiences of internationally qualified social workers are under-researched, and the impact of culture is mainly ignored (Hugman, 2010; Lyons and Huegler, 2012; Pullen-Sansfacon *et al.*, 2012). This study is part of a large research project exploring the migration of social workers trained in Australia, Canada, Ghana, India, Romania, South Africa, the USA and Zimbabwe to the UK. Our FOI request (FR07188) revealed that just between 2014 and 2019, 203 South African-trained social workers registered with the social work regulator that period, the HCPC. In 2010, the General Social Care Council had 940 South African social workers on its register (Carson, 2010). Thus, with the growing number of South African social workers in the UK, this project focused on their migration to England and the specific role culture played in their attempts to adjust to the English context. As we understand culture as encompassing people's values, beliefs, customs, practices and artefacts, we discuss here a wide range of such issues affecting migrating South African social workers, both professionally and personally, and which turned out to be particularly contentious in their experience.

## Migration, culture and adaptation to England

The World Migration Report (2020) estimated that 3.5 per cent of the world's population are international migrants. England, alongside Australia and New Zealand, has remained the primary destination for South Africans who are the eighth largest foreign national group in England (Banerjee *et al.*, 2008; [Office for National Statistics, 2020](#)). Bartley *et al.* (2012) argue that governments, health and social service employers and the profession, are yet to develop adequate means to understand and engage international social workers.

Pullen-Sansfacon *et al.* (2012) defined professional acculturation as the process that occurs when ‘individuals who qualified in one country, subsequently move to a new country and undergo resultant adaptations in personal, professional, social, and cultural identity’ (p. 38). Furthermore, Pullen-Sansfacon *et al.* (2014) state that professional adaptation intersects with all spheres of the person’s life, including personal, social and cultural. Learning about culture, language and social norms is part of the general acculturation process. Adjusting to a new country’s professional and workplace culture poses its own challenges (Beddoe and Fouché, 2014). The extent to which social workers encounter a welcoming environment and the opportunities to gain local knowledge will determine how quickly and successfully they will adjust (Fouché *et al.*, 2014).

It has also been reported that UK migrant social workers were disappointed that, whilst their pay increased, their professional status was diminished (Simpson, 2009). For social workers accustomed to esteem within the social care environment or society generally, it becomes upsetting to find social work poorly or negatively regarded (Fouché *et al.*, 2014).

## South Africa: past and present

To understand the cultural background of our migrating South African social workers, we consider here its historical and social context. Whilst the apartheid system ended almost thirty years ago, South Africa is still recovering from the systemic racial discrimination that resulted in significant discrepancies in the provision and access to social welfare systems between people based on race (Brown and Neku, 2005). The policies apartheid governments put forwards ensured that the majority of non-White and especially Black population remained poor and included a centralised state-monitored labour regime powered by a strict set of administrative and security measures (Neocosmos, 2008). In the 1920s and 1930s, social work in South Africa was primarily a White profession concerned with White poverty and largely based on Roman–Dutch law and British social welfare models. This focus changed in 1959 through the University Extension Act, which saw the National Party Government creates separate universities along racial lines (McKendrick, 1990, p. 101).

After the end of Apartheid in 1994, social work evolved largely under the influence of neoliberal ideals and imperatives, with the White paper for social welfare outlining broad policy guidelines with principles such as democracy, equity, Ubuntu, non-discrimination and partnership. This required social workers to depart from the forms of intervention and service provision of the apartheid regime (Punt, 1999).

## Religion and religiosity

According to [Roman \(2014\)](#) and [Roman \*et al.\* \(2016\)](#), during the Apartheid years, religion was one of the factors the National Party used to wield its power. For example, ‘it encouraged a patriarchal society, based on biblical beliefs, with the view that women had to be subservient, were considered minors and therefore could not access resources without the permission of a male family member. Regarding parenting, the belief was that if you “spare the rod, you spoil the child” and therefore authoritarian parenting was the approach used to discipline children or minors’ ([Roman, 2014](#), pp. 213–4). Whilst things have changed since 1994, when Apartheid ended, such practices, attitudes and perceptions endure much longer.

Existing data indicate that whereas religious belief is declining in England, it is on the rise in Africa ([Phillips \*et al.\*, 2006](#)), and significant religious differences exist between the two countries. In total, 84.5 per cent of the South African respondents in a Gallup poll stated that religion is essential in their daily lives compared with only 26.5 per cent of the UK respondents (Nation Master, 2014). [Edwards \*et al.\* \(2015\)](#) found similar differences between university students in both countries. [Naidoo and Kasiram \(2006\)](#) studied South-African social workers who migrated to the UK. Whilst their participants saw several significant advantages to their life in the UK, they felt unable to fulfil their spiritual needs ([Naidoo and Kasiram, 2006](#), p. 123).

## Politeness

According to [Fox \(2014\)](#), introductions and greetings tend to be uncomfortable for the English. ‘How are you?’ is far too personal and intimate a question for first-time introductions and is avoided at all costs. The English privacy rules ensure that details about personal lives and relationships are reserved for close friends and family. English people are particularly concerned with non-intrusion and non-imposition. These characteristics are part of what [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#) defined as ‘negative politeness’. This kind of politeness is largely defined by what people are meant not to do: not intrude on others’ privacy or space, impose themselves on others or interfere. Adherence to these rules varies across class groups and geographical locations. Whilst South Africa is also diverse in culture, language and ethnicity, making it challenging to describe cultural concepts from a national perspective, most South African are warm, direct in communication, outspoken and respectful ([Cultural Atlas, 2021](#)). As we will show, such cultural differences, especially unacknowledged, have a significant impact on the adjustment of South African social workers in England and their interactions with service users, colleagues and managers.

## National habitus

Bourdieu (1986, 1988) described the habitus as the learned dispositions, including bodily comportment, ways of speaking or thinking and acting that people internalise and adopt in relation to the social conditions in which they exist. Bourdieu (1990) stresses the possibilities of the habitus transforming and reinventing itself, particularly when an individual encounters an unfamiliar field. In migrants' attempts to rewrite their history and mould a different life trajectory through geographical mobility, migrants face numerous challenges and opportunities (Oliver and O'Reilly, 2010). Whilst Bourdieu used the term in relation to the French class system, other scholars have adopted his ideas and employed them to interrogate culture at the national level (Yair, 2015, 2017; Giori, 2019; Hadas, 2020). Following Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu, we understand 'national habitus' as an alternative to the more essentialist 'national character'. Quoting Bourdieu, Garrett (2018), writes: 'Habitus is "society written into the body": the body does not memorise the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life' (pp. 126–7). Garrett (2018) also notes in this regard that 'we are not automatons or mindless vehicles of our governing habitus. Rather, habitus acts as a very loose set of guidelines permitting us to strategize, adapt, improvise to situations as they arise' (p. 128). One of the implications of our individual agency is that everyone will adopt their national habitus in a slightly different manner. Some will strictly adopt each of its characterises whilst others will adopt only some or will give their unique interpretation. Whilst being mindful of our participants' original national habitus which comes through the interviews and the literature, our analytical challenge is to see if, and how, it helps understand our participants' experiences of migration and the challenges they faced in their attempts to adjust to the English context.

## Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method approach in which the qualitative element had a more significant part. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants for semi-structured interviews. We aimed to compile a heterogeneous sample based on gender, race, age and length of time residing in England. The questionnaire and interview guide were informed by literature and were amended following a pilot. Participants for both the questionnaire and interviews were recruited through LinkedIn and our connections with local authorities in and around London. Most of our interviewees also completed the online questionnaire.

From the ten interviews we conducted, six were female and four were male. Out of the six females, two were white and the other four were

black. The four men were all black South Africans. The group had a good mix of ages and number of years residing in England. Prior to the interview, participants were sent detailed information about the study and a consent form. Interview questions were designed to encourage open-ended answers and explore migration experiences and the adjustment process. Interviews were conducted online and in English between June and July 2020 and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The questionnaire included closed and open questions, which enabled quantifying and examining satisfaction, push and pull factors and the challenges experienced. Twenty-two out of thirty-two (68.8 per cent) of the questionnaire's respondents were female, seventeen (54.9 per cent) of them arrived in the last five years and ten (32.3 per cent) of them arrived more than ten years ago. Seven (21.9 per cent) of them were between the ages of 20 and 30; thirteen (40.6 per cent) of them were between the ages of 31 and 40; nine (28.1 per cent) were between the ages of 41 and 50 and three (9.4 per cent) were over the age of 51; twelve (40 per cent) practised with children and families, seven (21 per cent) in adult services and seven (21 per cent) with people with disabilities. Twenty-three (71 per cent) of our respondents were motivated to migrate to England to improve their financial situation and sixteen (50 per cent) were motivated by better opportunities for professional development. This is a relatively small sample which isn't statistically representative of all South African social workers practising in England.

In analysing the qualitative data, we applied [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six stages of thematic analysis, which began with familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and writing up. We also used axial coding to check if participants say the same things in different ways. The most relevant themes that helped us answer our research questions were prioritised.

This article will focus on the qualitative findings. The research received approval from Brunel University London's ethics committee. All participants gave their informed consent to participate and for their data to be analysed and presented. To protect anonymity, all identifying information has been removed.

## Findings

### South African religiosity versus English secularisation

Findings from our interviews and the online survey helped us explore the implications of how religion is perceived and experienced in both countries and how it impacted the migration experiences of our participants. Here is what one of our Black interviewees said about it:

In South Africa, we are religious people, we believe and fear God. Most people rely on God for their day-to-day survival ... not so much on human effort... Here in the UK, people are godless, they are Atheists, Agnostics, and the many more anti-God whatever ... When they find out that you are a God-believing person, they look at you as if you have lost your mind.

According to this interviewee, the differences in attitudes towards religion resulted in judgmental attitudes experienced by those who dared to express their religious beliefs in England, especially if done in public. Their sanity is questioned. In comparison to the reliance on God attributed to South Africans by the previous interviewee, another interviewee suggests the English have replaced God and affiliated institutions altogether:

They (The English) will not go to church on Sundays but will go to the Pub; it is as if the Pub is their church!... Here, they have everything; they have a system that provides help for them, so why would they believe in God ... People here are their own 'gods.'

Having 'everything' is generally thought to be an excellent outcome. However, according to our interviewee, it might also eliminate the need to believe in God. This resonates with [Norris and Inglehart \(2004\)](#) who argued that secularisation is best understood against the background of existential security. The growth in industrial capitalism and redistribution of wealth through the Welfare State has made most English people more satisfied with their life and less prone to turn to religion for comfort and security. To a Black South African, the reliance on God for their existence and survival cannot be separated from the insecurity of life and livelihood in South Africa. This difference requires South African social workers to adjust:

... I like to share the word of God with people and even encourage people from bible verses. I can never do that here. To start with, they do not even believe there is God and doing that might get you in real trouble of being referred to a professional suitability panel.

Like the interviewee above, others are wary of mentioning their faith; this is largely because, in England, religion is considered a private matter and irrelevant to a growing number of people, a decline that has been ongoing for many years ([Phillips et al., 2006](#)). According to [Fox \(2014\)](#), church attendance in England is limited to weddings, funerals and christenings.

In England, social work practitioners and scholars often hold socialist views and are much more likely to be non-religious or even anti-religious and therefore avoid or ignore religion ([Furman et al., 2005](#); [Shaw, 2018](#)). According to [Shaw \(2018, p. 414\)](#), 'religious literacy remains an unmet need on social work training programmes mainly due to concerns

regarding non-rational approaches to problem-solving as well as exposure to proselytising'. Similar claims were made by other scholars (Furman *et al.*, 2005; Gilligan and Furness, 2006; Furness and Gilligan, 2014). Contrary to that, as part of a holistic approach, the South African social work curriculum and training prepare students to be sensitive to and consider religion, spirituality, culture and tradition (Gotterer, 2001).

## Parenting values and practices

Religion has a wide range of influences on the way people shape their lives, including on many issues central to social work practice. For example, on parenting values and practices, as described here by another interviewee:

We do not want our children to engage in criminal behaviour and that is why we discipline them from an early age. As a Christian, I must instruct my children right from wrong; If for example a child is seen misbehaving, any adult can correct you, not just your family, and children know that they cannot mess about ... there are certain expectations from children such as good behaviour.

Parenting in South Africa is more likely to be restrictive if not authoritarian. Children's behaviour and social development, especially amongst Black and Indian families, is much more likely to be controlled by setting strict boundaries and closely monitoring their interests, activities and friends with limited space for negotiation and choice (Renzaho *et al.*, 2011). According to Fox (2014), the English regard adolescents as a positive nuisance who are both vulnerable and dangerous but also in need of protection. English children are active 'beings' who interpret and construct their own lives, making them more difficult to manage and more troubling (Giddens and Sutton, 2017). In England, an authoritative rather than authoritarian parenting style is much more common, especially in educated middle-class two-parent families (Chan and Koo, 2011). The different parenting style is accompanied by some differences in parenting practices, as described by another interviewee:

You cannot discipline a child here; they will call it 'abuse' ... Children are so free with their parents, even when they are disobedient to them, there are no consequences ... Young people here are stubborn; I do not know how children are raised here.

In South Africa, parenting inspired by traditional and religious ideals is more likely to impose a particular set of restrictive standards, such as valuing obedience and respect for authority (Rudy and Grusec, 2001). Most individuals are required to align themselves with a larger in-group, with respect for authority being an important feature of socialisation (Hofstede, 1994). Migrating social workers must be made aware of such



cultural differences so that they can adjust their frame of reference when interacting with families. Otherwise, they are likely to judge parents based on maladjusted expectations that might be suitable for South Africa, but not for England.

### South African collectivism versus English individualism

The findings from the interviews and the online survey show a strong emphasis on 'belonging to a wider family', which indicates a collectivist approach to the relationship one has with his/her family. When we asked what had the greatest negative impact on them since migration, the most popular option chosen by 32 per cent of our participants was missing their family and friends back home. Missing the love and support of their wider family was also echoed in [Naidoo and Kasiram's \(2006\)](#) study. The distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures lies in an individual's relationship to the collective, particularly to the in-group ([Hoorn, 2014](#)). Here, in the words of an interviewee:

My family mean everything to me; without them, I would not be here. Everybody played their part in making sure that I am supported to come here. If I make it here and become successful, that means there is hope for others. Another interviewee added 'I am not here for me alone; my family need my support'.

The above participants' comments show that South Africans, arriving from a collectivist culture, describe their relationships with other extended family members as a fundamental part of themselves. The individual social worker is not here just as part of their individual search for self-fulfilment or self-realisation, but also on behalf of his wider family and for its benefit. This commitment to the wider family was also exemplified through our interviewees' views about the role of the family in raising children and about one's own responsibility towards earning a living and supporting the wider family:

In South Africa, you must work and provide for your family ... We are brought up to know that work is necessary for survival. Here (in England), people are not held to those responsibilities, they can choose not to work, and the government will support them. The readily available financial aid from the State contributes to this attitude of 'why I should work'.

Many participants were surprised that the attitude to work they encountered in England was vastly different to South Africa. They believed the Welfare State should be protected, but that in its current version in England, it creates dependency. Contrary to the UK, the lack of support from the South African State forces families to bridge differences and stay together. In the words of another interviewee:

Here (in England), there is a lot of separation and divorce, and a lot of children are missing what family life is about, they are growing up without role models, without anyone teaching them what is required of them towards their family. Family break-ups are not encouraged. 'No matter the problems, we must stay together. We are a family'.

Due to its greater religiosity and enhanced commitment to social rather than individual goals, separation and divorce in South Africa are unwelcome and uncommon, even when the marriage is dysfunctional. Divorce rates in England are three times higher compared with South Africa where divorce is still relatively rare ([World Population Review, 2022](#)). Rather than focusing on individualism, South Africa is a more conservative country:

In South Africa, children are raised in such a way that they are responsible adults. Children are taught from an early age to respect their elders, to obey them ... Even if children are punished or disciplined, they absolutely obey and respect their parents and elders ... Say, for example, respect—you can never speak to an older person anyhow; it is just not on!

In traditional societies, elders are responsible for passing on the tradition to the following generations. They hold the greatest and most relevant knowledge and experience that should be passed on, and as such are commonly cared for within the family home until they die. Contrary to that, modern societies view progress as a goal achieved through science where the most important, new and accurate knowledge is created and held, often by very young people. The esteem held towards the elderly has implications in later life, as described by another interviewee:

I don't like the idea of abandoning your parents to the care of social services especially when they have raised you up to be who you are. There is an attitude of 'that is not my business, a social worker can deal with it, not me'. To me that is disrespectful.

The reduced sense of responsibility towards one's wider family in an individualistic society like England, compared with more traditional and collectivist societies, is a result of many social changes. Such changes are accompanied by a reduced expectation that adult children will be the carers of their parents in old age, and a greater emphasis on one's freedom to opt-in or opt-out of such duties. In this case and many others, the 'self' in England is defined as separate and independent from the group ([Burton et al., 2015](#)). However, according to some of our participants, this has a price:

People here are very unhappy. They suffer with all kinds of mental health issues ... people are so isolated ... families do not speak to each other ... they have no relationship with one another.

Individualism leads to family and community disintegration, loneliness and mental health problems (Scott *et al.*, 2004). Our participants' greater emphasis on community is seen as safeguarding individuals from these problems. The tensions observed by our participants had also a clear impact on their practice as described by another interviewee:

The UK social work model these days is all about working with families and working from families' strengths, but the families have not been nurtured into the sense of family and Ubuntu.

As expressed by this participant, the individualistic preference in England detracts significantly from the real potential power of families. For that reason, the social work intention to work from families' strengths seems paradoxical and may have limited success.

### Politeness/impoliteness

The differences between the South African and the English habitus are also manifested through the ways daily, and routine interactions are conducted. Here is what one of our participants had to say about it:

People here have no simple courtesy. They do not care who you are, no one asks your name, no one asks how you are. They seem surprised when you ask them, 'how are you?'.

Similar statements were made by other interviewees describing their experiences working in open-plan offices, a potentially lonely experience, especially for newcomers. However, despite the negative interpretation offered by the participant, such behaviour is likely to result from the English emphasis on privacy and respect for one's personal space, and not wanting to intrude or interfere in other people's lives. In South Africa, especially amongst Africans, greetings are a very important act. They signify Ubuntu, which is closely linked with values such as respect, humanity, friendliness, politeness and that you acknowledge someone's presence.

Here (in England), unlike South Africa, you cannot talk to anyone just like that. They are not forthcoming in their conversations with strangers. Back home, we talk to each other, we discuss things that are worrying us. Here, there is no such thing . . . I used to take the train to work, and I noticed that people do not talk to each other, everywhere is silent. People are either glued on their phones or reading a newspaper, and it is done stylishly.

In South Africa, revealing personal data is not a big deal. In England, however, as reiterated by Fox (2014), the English rules of privacy override those of sociability, meaning that talking to strangers is never compulsory, and confidential information is not given away lightly but only

to trusted people. Fox (2014, p. 110) explains that in English society, people use their phones/newspapers as a ‘barrier signal’ when they are in public spaces to signal to others their territory and unavailability. The dedicated reading can also simply be another attempt at contact avoidance. In their effort to break what felt like isolation and build their relations with their colleagues, several of our interviewees discovered that a direct approach to communication does not sit well with English culture:

We are called rude, too direct, intrusive, bombastic, crude, lacking in empathy and reflection, when actually, we are just saying the truth.

When direct communication is not encouraged, being direct tends to be interpreted in a range of negative ways. Several interviewees described how they learned to tone down this directness as a result. Such cultural differences will have implications on all forms of professional and personal communication. Not being aware of these will result in significant misunderstandings and tensions.

### Experiencing racism in the English social work environment

Fifty-six per cent of our South-African (SA) survey participants found a job through a recruitment agency before migrating to England. Generally, securing a position before arriving solved many difficulties. Out of those who did not find a position prior to their arrival, 66 per cent reported experiencing a range of difficulties, including employers not recognising their qualifications and/or experience as valid, discrimination and legal challenges related to obtaining the right to work. Many international social workers’ work permit in England is tied up with a specific employer, and managers and employers can use this to increase workloads or bully their employees, knowing that their dependence on their employer is much more significant.

In total, 14.3 per cent of our online survey participants noted they did not get any support when they started their first job, and an additional 32.1 per cent felt they received minimal support. They described their induction as rushed due to staff shortages and work demands, and this, in turn, contributed to negative experiences in supervision that resulted in continued feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and imposter syndrome. Migrant social workers have created a transnational professional space that demands a response from local social work stakeholders (Bartley *et al.*, 2012). Thus, effective induction of new international staff is vital and is reported as a necessary professional tool in social work. Scholars have recommended that induction should address cultural and practice learning needs and that structured supervision and mentoring are offered (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2007). Unfortunately, many of our participants had less positive experiences:

I used to leave supervision and feel like I was a total failure and not a social worker. She made me feel as if I was doing social work for the first time ... The supervisions were mostly negative ... I spoke with other Africans, and you know the funny thing is that they had similar experiences ...

The lack of support in terms of orientation (Peter *et al.*, 2020) leaves migrant social workers often feeling judged (Staniforth and Connor, 2021). Hunt (2007) and Lillis *et al.* (2006) also reported that overseas-trained health professionals experience both discrimination and a lack of equal recognition in the workplace. The ongoing exposure to the hardship of service users makes social work an emotionally draining and demanding profession (Dollard *et al.*, 2001; Guy *et al.*, 2008). The challenge is greater when this takes place in an unsupportive environment. Many of our participants reported receiving little to no positive feedback for their effort unless they have done something wrong and are being blamed for it. Supervision itself often focuses on performance management against key performance indicators (KPIs) rather than on helping the social worker get a deeper understanding of their cases and work. Several of our participants described an additional layer to their challenges, as presented here by one of them:

... seeing that my African colleagues are in the same situation—that is the price we pay to come here. They need us but we are not wanted here ... No matter how long you live here, you can never adjust, there is always something telling me I don't belong here, it is not that I am new to the profession, it is just how they do things here that is so different ... I feel as if I have lost my identity because I have really tried hard to integrate.

Bridging the differences between the cultures required much effort and left our participant feeling like they had lost their previous identity. All immigrants who adjust to a new culture in a new country are, to some extent, no longer the same people they used to be. According to this interviewee, the English need them but do not want them:

They want the social workers they have, rather than the experience, the knowledge, the different, stronger models of practice that they have imported. They are highly critical to the point of being racist for the lack of understanding of UK law, UK KPIs, UK's focus on repetitive paperwork.

Professionals who choose to practice in other countries enter unfamiliar territory that presents with uneasiness due to the disjuncture between the practice environment, their perceptions of the profession's status and their professional identity (Fouché *et al.*, 2014). Another participant described such tensions:

Dealing with angry service users (in England) ... I think I have had so much doubt in myself, my motivation and confidence are gradually

wearing out. No matter how nice, respectful you are, they do not appreciate you at all. They have power over you . . . At home people had more respect and warmth towards social workers as they understood that they are there to guide and help them. Here, social workers are not respected . . . here they are ridiculed.

The social work role and how society perceives it can vary from country to country. Many developing countries lack legislation ensuring social security is a basic right. Therefore, anything the State chooses to give is seen as a gift and is likely met with gratitude (Hakak and Anton, 2020). Contrary to that, where a rights-based approach to social security is the norm, service users are more likely to be demanding of their rights instead of showing gratitude. Previous studies have found that migrant social workers are disappointed that whilst they earn good money and advance professionally, their professional status is diminished (Hussein *et al.*, 2010). As it seems, South African social workers are not finding this adjustment easy. Whereas in South Africa, social workers were seen as experts and enjoyed considerable professional autonomy, in England, this is much less so. South African social workers faced challenges not only because of cultural differences but prejudice as well, as implied by another participant:

I am often being given cases involving Black and Asian people because I relate well to them, I understand them well. This is high-class racism!

Whilst some White South African migrants in England (Halvorsrud, 2019) might enjoy their White privilege, Black South Africans face a harsher reality. Disregarding the great diversity of cultures, languages and nationalities existing in the global south and assuming that because one's skin colour is Black, one would be able to relate well to all Black and Asian people essentialises and flattens all black and brown people into one identical group sharing a mutual way of seeing the world and is therefore racist.

## Discussions and conclusion

This study aimed to explore the unique experiences and challenges faced by migrating South African social workers in their adjustment to England, with a special focus on the impact of the national habitus and culture. The findings emphasised differences between the religious tendencies more prevalent amongst South Africans and the much more secular tendencies of English culture. The secular perspective removes God from the picture as the key force shaping reality. It replaces God with humans and their elaborate set of professional and bureaucratic procedures which are meant to guarantee maximum control of reality. These differences were attributed to the material wealth in England and to the

Apartheid system that stripped Africans' primary resources and delegitimised their cultures and spirituality whilst introducing and encouraging Christianity.

South African Social workers were surprised to find out that mentioning one's religion and faith even amongst social workers is avoided and frowned upon. Our findings highlighted the strong notion of Ubuntu and belonging to a family and a wider social collective that is central for South Africans compared with the more individualist English culture that views the individual as an independent unit. Cultural differences were also seen to play a role in parenting styles, attitudes towards one's ageing parents, raising children and guiding them. These differences have implications for interactions with service users, colleagues and managers.

The existing induction was experienced as insufficient and ineffective. Differences in approaches to practice, the lack of supportive supervision, restrictions to the social work role and lack of autonomy and the negative public perception of social work, contributed to social workers' experience of cultural dislocation (Fouché *et al.*, 2014). International practitioners can enrich and enliven social work practice globally if host countries recognise the skills they bring (Bartley *et al.*, 2012; Peter *et al.*, 2020). Our participants expressed the feeling that whilst their labour is needed, their unique potential contribution through integrating models of practice used in South Africa is discouraged and they are expected to assimilate to local practices quickly. Assimilation tensions are likely to leave South African social workers feeling isolated from their work environments and less effective in their interactions with service users. Therefore, having a systemic approach to learning about the multi-cultural environment, and providing cultural supervision once in practice may be helpful to migrant social workers (Staniforth and Connor, 2021).

Furthermore, participants mentioned the need for a comprehensive induction into the culture and systems in England. Whilst the survey revealed that South African social workers received some support from their workplace, many felt that it was rushed due to staff shortages, which contributed to negative supervision. It may be helpful for host countries to provide pre-migration education about the culture, structures, challenges and politics of social work in the 'host' country, which would help interested social workers get a better understanding of the context.

Future studies can ask South African migrant social workers to reflect on the strengths of a range of aspects of social work in the UK compared with South Africa, for example, in terms of salary, progression opportunities, mentorship, regulatory bodies, relationships between social workers at different levels of management, inter-professional working and models of practice. Other studies can explore and compare the experiences of social workers migrating in the other direction, from England to South Africa or from South Africa to other countries.

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