

# Social Workers Migrating between England and Australia: Linking Social Hierarchies, Bureaucracy, Trust and Politeness

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## Abstract

For many years, several Western countries have been relying on migrating social workers to fill local shortages. While studies documented the assumption that migrants moving between Commonwealth English-speaking countries will find it easier to integrate, scholars found that such transitions are often more complicated than assumed. Despite this general awareness, research has neglected to explore the impact of the specific culture migrating social workers are coming from and the new culture in which they find themselves. This is the gap we aim to fill. Using a mixed method approach that included online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, we explore the experiences of migration and integration of Australian trained social workers in England and English trained social workers in Australia. Using National Habitus as a key theoretical concept, the findings highlight cultural differences connected with the acceptance of social hierarchies in England compared with the cultural emphasis on egalitarianism between white people in Australia. Such hierarchies produce in England a strong top-down approach which is more bureaucratic and procedural while also emphasising a less direct and more inhibited form of interpersonal communication with line-managers, colleagues and service users compared with Australia. Our findings will help better support future migrating social workers.

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## Introduction

Ongoing workforce shortages in front line social workers, both in England and Australia, have led to national, regional and local recruitment drives offshore (Beddoe and Fouché, 2014). A significant number of them are from English-speaking developed countries including those migrating from England to Australia and from Australia to England. Australia consistently emerges as the top destination for long-term British migrants (Murray *et al.*, 2012). According to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), the UK was the largest supplier of social workers to Australia during most of the years between 1998 and 2012 for which data are available (Papadopoulos, 2016). Britain is also one of the favoured destinations for migrating Australians including social workers, and Hussein *et al.* (2010) found that around 32 percent of the international social workers in the UK were trained in Australia. There is a general assumption that due to the two countries' shared history and language, social workers migrating between these countries will adapt quickly. At the same time, there is also acknowledgement that cultural dissonance may still exist (Hanna and Lyons, 2016). The common history and language might in fact lead in some cases to underestimating the enormity of the transition (Fenwick *et al.*, 2003; Fouché *et al.*, 2016; Hanna and Lyons, 2016). There is limited research exploring the experiences of international social workers, and their attempts to adapt and integrate (Pullen-Sansfacon *et al.*, 2012), and there are currently no mechanisms in place to support such transitions (Modderman *et al.*, 2018). Especially limited are the studies exploring the impact of culture on these journeys. This article will help filling in this gap in the literature by closely exploring the experience of migration and integration of Australian social workers in England (ASWIE) and English social workers in Australia (ESWIA) and how they both attempt to adapt to the local culture and context.

## Entangled history: England and Australia

As some knowledge of the history of European settlement in Australia is required to understand aspects of white Australian culture, its language, idioms and social norms, we will briefly present it here. The white colonialist settlement in Australia and the modern story of Australia began with James Cook claiming New South Wales for Britain

in 1770 and the British convict settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788 (Morgan, 2012, p. 1). The colonial governments pursued policies of assisted migration based on free or subsidised passage from Britain until 1950 when the federal government extended the system to other Europeans (Mantu and Guild, 2011). During the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, Australia's first Prime minister, Edward Barton, spoke about the need to preserve Australia's white Anglo-Celtic heritage (Morgan, 2012). This was followed by the 'White Australia' policy effectively excluding non-Europeans as migrants to Australia from 5 June 1901. In 1966, the Australian government eased restrictions on non-European immigrants, and in 1973 the 'White Australian policy' was finally dismantled, but its cultural and structural impacts remained (Morgan, 2012). Such preferential treatment of white people was coupled throughout Australian history by extremely oppressive and exclusionary measures against its indigenous population (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson, 2016).

Several scholars have discussed the strong egalitarian tendency of Australian culture (Wierzbicka, 2002; Peeters, 2004; Elder, 2007; Goddard, 2009; Mullan, 2011). Arthur J. Wolak (2007) discusses the 'Irish Factor' as responsible for key Australian traits including the 'Australian irreverence, rebelliousness and egalitarianism' as well as 'the desire for flatter hierarchies'. Such preferences are captured in well-known Australian cultural idioms such as 'cutting down tall poppies and the social phenomenon of "mateship"'. According to Wolak, 'these Australian cultural features distinguish Australia from Canada and point to a historically significant 'Irish Factor' that Canada does not share' (Wolak, 2007, p. 85). O'Farrell (1987) argued that contrary to other smaller minorities in Australia, including the Germans and Italians who went along with the dominant British system, 'the Irish rejected or questioned the system, or at least demanded that it be adjusted to meet their requirements, with the effect of creating a new modified system... on the basis of equity' (O'Farrell, 1987, pp. 10–11). According to Akenson (1988, p. 61), from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the Irish were the second largest ethnic group in Australia, most of them Catholic. He concludes that 'Catholicism provided the Irish with a different identity, a sense of second-class citizenship in a land ruled by a powerful British Protestant elite'.

Hofstede found both Australia and Ireland to be relatively low on the Power–Distance scale and lower than England. Power–Distance is defined by Hofstede as 'the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede, 1994, p. 28). Societies with relatively low Power–Distance are characterised by 'decentralised authority and decision-making responsibility, consultative or participative management style, flat organisational structures, small proportion of supervisory staff, lack of acceptance and questioning of authority, greater

consciousness of rights, and tendency toward egalitarianism' (Hofstede, 2001, pp. 87, 107–108 quoted by Wolak, 2007, p. 89). According to Hirst (2010), the English view Australian gestures as too ample, their voices are found to be 'too loud', their approach too direct and their spontaneity embarrassing. He also notes that 'Australians' lack of class consciousness mystifies the English' who are 'relatively obsessed by calculations of relative status' (Hirst, 2010, p. 189), but are also thought to deny this heightened awareness or disguise it (Fox, 2004). Goddard (2012) compared the ways in which 'early interactions' between people who did not know each other prior to that moment, are conducted in Australian-English, English-English and American-English. He found that for Australians, such initial conversations emphasise solidarity and social equality. Contrary to that, English people are more concerned with difference and class position, as well as non-intrusion and non-imposition. These two last 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, not impose themselves on others or interfere. Contrary to that, Australian politeness fits the characteristics of 'positive politeness' and includes an emphasis on being welcoming and showing solidarity and sympathy (Haugh and Bousfield, 2012). As we will show in this article, such differences shape many aspects of social life including the organisational structures in which social workers operate, as well as their daily interactions with line managers, colleagues and service users.

## Social work in England and Australia

The origins of Australian social work emanate from the close connection between the Melbourne Charity Organisation Society, the medical profession and the reliance on the British model of almoning (Gleeson, 2008). In 1929, the Royal Melbourne Hospital commenced an Almoner Department and employed an experienced English almoner called Agnes McIntyre (Gleeson, 2008). Following the tradition of the Melbourne charity organisation society, the 'lady almoners' took on the role of investigating the economic circumstances of patients, with the aim of distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving (Gleeson, 2008). Social work in contemporary Australia is self-regulated by the AASW and is yet to attain State regulation, which will protect the title 'social worker'. In England, the first regulatory body for social work, the General Social Care Council, came into being in 2000. Since 2005, anyone who uses the title of social worker must be registered. Whereas in England most social workers are employed by local authorities who also deliver services, in Australia, each of the six states commission other organisations—mainly

charities—to deliver services for them, and each state has its own legislation, some states more progressive than others. Social work in Australia has been criticised for failing to ‘embrace the multicultural face of Australia’ (Monani, 2018, p. 79) and for the gap between the declarations about cultural competency and persistent and severe inequalities, especially regarding Australia’s indigenous populations.

## **Social workers adapting professionally to England and Australia**

While there are various studies on international social workers in England and Australia, there is very limited literature examining their unique adaptation and the impact of culture on this process. Fouché *et al.* (2016) assert that many migrant social workers suffer from longer-term transitional difficulties and professional dislocation. It is noted that migrant social workers often face challenges in effectively communicating with colleagues and service users due to a lack of understanding of language styles (Wallis, 2006, cited in Fouché *et al.*, 2016).

Several researchers (Hussein *et al.*, 2010; Beddoe and Fouché, 2014; Hanna and Lyons, 2016) have studied the migration of social workers between English-speaking Commonwealth countries including England, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. They found that social workers migrating between these countries, as well as their recruiters and line managers, underestimated the challenges involved. They assumed that due to the shared language and history, such transitions are likely to be easy and smooth. At the same time, these studies have highlighted the many challenges—including cultural challenges—that these social workers experienced, indicating that their transition on most occasions was far from simple. Such underestimation was echoed by many of our ASWIE and ESWIA and was their explanation as to why they were given a higher case load. The research carried out by Hanna and Lyons (2016) further revealed that managers of international social workers had noticed that ‘while many international social workers were recognised as arriving with considerable skills and experience, they tended to be categorised as learners in their organisations rather than co-learners or as potential sources of knowledge, particularly in their initial two years’ (Hanna and Lyons, 2016, p. 730).

### **National habitus**

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1979) ‘Habitus’ refers to a wide range of learned and embodied preferences, tastes and tendencies that guide individuals and shape their perceptions, choices and behaviour. The ways in which we relate to others, the kinds of food, art, clothes, holidays,

etc. we prefer, and how we carry and present our bodies, are all directly influenced by our *Habitus*. While the *Habitus* was originally meant to explain the entrenched class system in French schools, it was later adjusted by scholars to the national level to help understand the unique culture of different nations (Kuipers, 2013; Yair, 2015; Hadas, 2020). The term can help us explore the way in which British and Australian social workers' *habitus* both shapes and shaped by their interactions with the new cultural terrain they have moved into. Costa *et al.* (2015, p. 7) state that the 'habitus is the evolving process through which individuals, act, think, perceive and approach the world and their role in it'. When the concept of *habitus* is applied to those in migration, one may consider how the disposition a migrant brings to a new country may change with time, in that new setting. Following from that, Garrett (2018, p. 128) notes that 'we are not automatons or mindless vehicles of our governing *habitus*. Rather, the *habitus* acts as a very loose set of guidelines permitting us to strategize, adapt, improvise. . .to situations as they arise' (p. 128). Our findings will illustrate such processes.

## Methodology

This study aimed to understand the experiences of migration and integration of ASWIE and ESWIA, and how they attempt to adapt to the local culture and context. A mixed method approach was chosen to achieve these aims. It included semi-structured interviews and two online questionnaires. Interviews provided an insight into our participants' perspective and what they saw as relevant and important (Bryman, 2016, p. 466). Non-probability sampling method was adopted as only Australian trained social workers who worked in England (ASWIE) and English trained social workers working in Australia (ESWIA) were included. We recruited participants mainly via LinkedIn, but also through our contacts in Local Authorities and through a Facebook group for British social workers who moved to Australia. Participants also informed their friends and colleagues about our research. Once the participant expressed their interest, a participant information sheet was sent to them. Those agreeing to participate in the online questionnaire were then sent an online link to the questionnaire. In most cases, this was the first step. Ten ASWIE and twelve ESWIA were interviewed between September 2018 and August 2019. The interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and then transcribed. All ESWIA were interviewed via Skype. All ASWIE were interviewed face to face, and they all resided in the Greater London area, where the researchers were based. These interviews took place in these social workers' offices or public places such as cafés. All ten ASWIE interviewees and ten out of twelve ESWIA interviewees were white. Two ESWIA were British Black Africans. The

participants were diverse in their gender, age and number of years in the destination country.

Thirty-four ASWIE responded to the first online questionnaire. Three of them identified as male, the rest as female. Twenty-six ESWIA responded to the first questionnaire, 4 of them identified as male.

Following these stages of data collection, it became clear that a few questions relating to the unique challenges these social workers were encountering remained unanswered. For this reason, a more specific questionnaire was designed focusing on specific cultural aspects. It was completed by twenty ASWIE and twenty-three ESWIA. These respondents as well as those responding to the first questionnaire were from all parts of England and Australia. To analyse the qualitative data from the interviews and the questionnaires, we used [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase guide to thematic analysis. This approach enabled us to identify the key themes that were then used as sub-headings for the findings chapter. The research was given ethical approval from Brunel University London.

## Findings and discussion

In what follows, we will present key themes from our analysis and discuss them. The first theme relates to the more hierarchical social and organisational structure in England compared with a more egalitarian structure amongst white Australians. Next, we examine how this difference impacts trust towards professionals, bureaucracy and professional practice more broadly. Lastly, we examine how such differences manifest themselves through interpersonal communication and perceptions of polite and impolite behaviours. We then introduce a few of our quantitative findings to support our argument.

### Hierarchies at work—The tall poppy syndrome

The forthcoming findings mostly relate to white Australia compared with England. Before we dive into this discussion, it is important to note that our participants from both groups were very much in agreement that despite the growing inequalities in Australia ([Bowring, 2007](#)), equality between white people is still significantly greater compared to England and it is especially felt in daily interactions. Whereas accents and other aspects of cultural capital based on class are very strongly felt in daily interactions in England, these have limited presence in Australia. On the other hand, our participants were also largely in agreement that when discussing inequalities between white and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, compared with inequalities between white and Black African, Black

Caribbean or Asian minorities in England, the gaps in wealth, access to resources and opportunities, and other outcomes, are significantly greater in Australia. Whilst acknowledging that significant inequalities persist in England between the white middle class and a range of other minorities, many emphasised that minorities are better represented in the profession in England, and minority rights' discourses in England are much more advanced compared with Australia. Some of our ASWIE mentioned racism as a driver for their migration.

Many of our interviewees described their experience of working in social work in England, compared with Australia as much more exposed to top-down interventions from local and central government and the political system. For example, this is experienced through the continuous range of national reviews of social work practice and education. Another indication of the strong governmental involvement in social work in England is the central place filled by the national social work regulator. Contrary to social work in England that recently had its third regulatory body being appointed (Social Work England), Australian social work is yet to be regulated by the state, and the title 'Social Worker' is not protected by law. Whilst most employers of social workers in Australia do require evidence of eligibility for membership in the AASW, duties carried out by qualified social workers in England are, on some occasions, including child protection work, fulfilled in Australia by employees who did not qualify as social workers. This can create difficulties within teams in reaching a consensus between employees around values, skills, tools and approaches. This is how one of our ESWIA experienced the impact of this difference:

In England, most managers or senior practitioners are required to have experience and knowledge of the area they are going to be managing... However, in Australia I have worked with managers who have gained employment in a particular team when they have had no prior knowledge or experience of the 'on the ground' roles.

The fact that the profession is not regulated by a governmental agency and the title 'social worker' is not protected was described here and by other interviewees as resulting in lower levels of professionalism and status. These differences might also be a result of the shorter history of social work in Australia compared to England. However, whilst in Australia it helps minimising hierarchies, in England it justifies and maintains them, and thus the situation in both countries is in line with their national habitus. Regardless of this issue, the average starting social worker salary is significantly higher in Australia compared with England. Many interviewees also described a more positive public perception towards social workers in Australia resulting from a lesser focus on safeguarding and crisis management, which are often linked with social control.



As part of the second stage of this study, we asked participants if there were any differences in the relationships they developed with authority figures, including bosses and managers, in the two countries? 52.9 percent of ASWIE and 59.1 percent of ESWIA thought there were such differences compared to 35.3 percent of ASWIE and 40.9 percent of ESWIA who thought there were none. The rest were unsure. We then asked those participants who thought that there were differences, to describe the differences they noticed. The similarity between the answers was very high. Participants described more hierarchical organisational structures they encountered in England compared to Australia and where managers were more distant and relations more formal. An ASWIE said:

There is more hierarchy at play in work teams (in England). My experience of work teams in the NGOs I had worked at in Perth were of more flat structures and more social equity between staff and managers. In the teams I've worked in London there is more immediate hierarchies apparent and for me the feeling that there is a need to respect or be subordinate to managers or consultants in teams even if you do not agree with them or find their manner generally disrespectful.

To explain these differences, many participants mentioned the 'tall poppy' culture. Here is what one of the ASWIE said about it:

Australians generally have a "tall poppy" culture, so people do not "big" themselves up and the work practices are more easily integrative, and a sense of respect is something earned, not just given'. Another ASWIE added: '...if you think you're a tall poppy, we don't let you grow too tall... so I think people can get levelled down in Australia ... this idea of giving people a fair go...'

To maintain egalitarianism and greater equality, those who 'big themselves up' are exposed to ridicule, criticism or social sanctions. Especially amongst white people, respect is not given because of one's class, but is earned through one's actions. Other interviewees explained that as part of these tendencies, celebrating one's successes or overstating one's qualifications is not looked at positively. ESWIA, unaware of these issues who arrived with strong convictions and a critical perspective towards Australian social work practice, were likely to be perceived as tall poppies and experience negative responses.

On the other side of the globe, the greater organisational hierarchies encountered in England were perceived by many of our participants as increasing separation and the chances for miscommunication between social workers with differing specialisations, as well as between different professional groups within multidisciplinary teams. The different organisational structures and cultures had direct impact on the relations they enabled between the multidisciplinary team

members, but also between service users and professionals. The more hierarchical structures in England were experienced as impeding the ability or legitimacy of questioning or challenging anyone higher in the organisational and professional hierarchy. Other participants spoke about Australian managers as more approachable, 'more friends or mates than bosses' and another concluded 'the Australian Public Sector ethos of courtesy and respect towards subordinates as well as peers etc is missed'. The different organisational structures impacted also what transpired when things did not go well. Here it is in the words of another ASWIE:

I do think that in Australia responsibility at times of crisis (e.g. serious case reviews/child deaths) is pushed and held upwards, whereas in England it is pushed downwards.

Other participants repeated similar description portraying relations with managers in Australia as such where managers are more likely to share responsibility when things go wrong. Contrary to that, in England, as described by another participant 'social workers are often blamed for case failures; professionals like to blame each other and shirk responsibility for any shortcomings'. The egalitarian, less hierarchical and bureaucratic approach in Australian organisations was not only portrayed in positive terms. It seems to also have some negative aspects. Here in the words of an ESWIA:

England is much more formal, professional, standardised. There is room for personal relationships, but the boundaries are clear, transparent, and hierarchical. Australia has similar layers of hierarchy but... in my experience less formal. And there is a lot of friendship style relationship where it's who you know, not what you know.

A less formal organisational culture that emphasises equality, in which formal qualifications play a lesser role, is likely to experience challenges in identifying leaders (Wolak, 2007, pp. 85, 96). One potential risk is that managers will appoint individuals who do as they are told and 'don't rock the boat', instead of basing their decision on a wider range of the candidate's abilities. Several interviewees spoke about nepotism as prevalent in Australia. These tendencies can lead to 'a lack of respect up the chain' as another ESWIA stated.

### **Bureaucracy, policies, procedures and trust**

Many of our interviewees described social work in England as more procedural and bureaucratic, allowing for much less time for direct contact with service users. This is what one ASWIE had to say about it:

There seemed to be a lot less trust placed on the clinical skills of social workers in England which meant a lot of admin, and very little clinical interaction with clients... I don't find this type of social work as rewarding as what I was doing in Australia ... which ultimately made me leave the profession.

The interviewee describes the lack of trust in the clinical skills and professionalism of social workers and its impact on her. The wholehearted adoption of New Public Management techniques by Margaret Thatcher enabled them to spread widely and they have flourished since with minor variations. New Public Management has at its foundation a lack of trust towards professionals. They are perceived as self-serving unless under the constant threat of targets and performance indicators (Horton and Farnham, 2015). It can be argued that in a class-based society in which the separation between the classes is greater, the trust of the upper classes in those below them will be reduced accordingly, and the adoption of such an approach is even more likely. One of the New Public Management solutions to the lack of trust mentioned is open plan offices that several ASWIE found difficult to adjust to. They expose employees to the constant surveillance of their colleagues and managers and thus reduce the need for trust in their professional integrity and competency. Many ASWIE described the move from a therapeutic model not limited to crisis/safeguarding situations, to a case management model limited almost exclusively to safeguarding as their greatest difficulty. For the interviewee quoted above, it resulted in leaving the profession. The greater bureaucracy experienced in England was coupled for some with a more positive difference explained here by another ASWIE:

I have been impressed by the clear legal frameworks in England around assessing capacity, protecting vulnerable individuals using statutory services such as DOLs and safeguarding practices and this has greatly improved my practice.

The much more detailed legislation in England providing more specific guidelines which is praised by the interviewee is meant to minimise the potential for human error in professionals' decision making. Guidelines might be effective in a majority of the cases, but as social reality keeps changing and human behaviour is extremely complex, any guidelines will always be partial and limited. Attempting to create flow chart like guidelines has a clear impact on the skills social workers are required to have in both countries, as described by many interviewees. The migration in the other direction required English trained social workers to develop their clinical skills or opt for roles for which this was less of a requirement. For some ESWIA having rich case-management experience worked well:

I think that I have been able to use my social work skills in diverse roles such as project management and change management because clinical social work roles weren't necessarily available. Personally, I think I have much more confidence, flexibility and am more independent because there were not the same support networks- (I'm more resilient.

Training and practising in England—which is described as lacking in resources—required developing resiliency. This, according to the interviewee, served them well in Australia. Very useful was also the participant's management experience when clinical roles were in short supply. The reduced need for professional decision making in England and the increased reliance on procedures coupled with the move to case management approach had a strong impact also on supervisions, which according to some of our interviewees, became 'very task oriented' and 'process driven' focusing on 'performance management'. Similarly, the shift to almost an exclusive focus on safeguarding and crisis management, coupled with fewer resources, left many feeling that as social workers, they were reactive instead of pro-active. Many ASWIE spoke about the disappointment they experienced when they realised that their therapeutic and counselling skills, which were central to their work with clients in Australia, will not be in use in England and that instead, they will focus more on coordinating the work of others. Contrary to that, ESWIA complained that the legislation and policies in Australia are many years behind. In the words of one ESWIA, they identified in Australia 'a resistance to policy and procedures... regardless of best practice or research'. Interestingly, there were those who managed to turn such differences into their unique contribution. Here is an example from one ASWIE:

The social control role is emphasised here (England) much more than the social care role whereas the social care role is where most change happens in clients... So, when I was managing a programme ... I started including elements to increase compassion... I also introduced the Secure Base model for the staff team... The programme started doing well... Senior managers initially were opposed to my suggestions and staff could not understand how to creatively apply Attachment Theory or the Secure Base model and said that it was not our role. But, when staff members got it, they started performing much better.

A professional context that enabled social workers to fulfil a role more focused on 'care' rather than 'control' required social workers to develop more comprehensive therapeutic skills. These became the unique contributions our interviewee was able to bring to practice after migration.

## Direct and indirect communication: Different approaches to politeness

Many participants mentioned the long adjustment required to understand different accents, phrases, language nuances, terminology and cultural references that are unique to each country. We asked our participants if they have experienced any differences between the ways in which they used to communicate with friends, acquaintances, work colleagues and service users in their home country and the accepted ways of communication in their country of destination, including written, verbal, non-verbal communication and body language. Eighty-three percent of the ASWIE and 81.8 percent of the ESWIA participating in our survey indicated that they have indeed experienced such differences. When asked to describe these differences, participants were unanimous in their view that Australians are more direct in their communication. Some described experiencing these differences at first as 'a shock' and struggling to adjust to them. But what exactly did these differences entail? Here in the words of an ASWIE:

Australians are more expressive than (middle class) English people - often louder in volume, (use) more hand gestures, and more animated faces! I think overall Australians are less reserved and more open to talking to anyone in the workplace - however there are differences in England based on class, culture, north/south divide too.

The interviewee identifies several characteristics distinguishing Australians including more expressive, loud and less reserved compared with the English, but is also cautioning us to remember that these national characteristics might change when intersecting with different class, race and ethnic groups. Another ASWIE provided a comparative description of the English:

English people don't necessarily mean what they say, it's a bit more reserved or it's a bit hidden or it's done in a roundabout way or it's polite erm and I don't really know what that's about, but I wonder if it's about hierarchies and class. The English appear to be... much more concerned about not offending anyone and keeping up appearances. They seem to accept higher risks of harm to themselves and others rather than address the problem/s.

The participant clearly registered a difference and describes the English as more reserved. They also have a possible explanation connected with the requirements of social hierarchies and class. Addressing any tensions requires disclosing one's discomfort or dissatisfaction and being direct. This has the potential to both disregard social and professional hierarchies and be perceived as rude, as well as muddy the interlocutors' public image. As English politeness, as a manifestation of negative politeness

(Haugh and Bousfield, 2012), is defined by what one is meant to avoid doing, not being offensive is prioritised. However, not addressing the issues directly means emotions are likely to be ‘bottled up’ causing harm to one-self. Surprisingly, the preference towards greater levels of directness was shared by both Australians and English social workers. An ESWIA presented their perspective and said:

Australians are less polite, yet you see what you get, which I love. English politeness can get in the way of understanding what’s really going on.

The simplicity of ‘you see what you get’, is appealing, especially in social work in which communication must bridge many barriers. Many of our interviewees described how they adjusted themselves to the new style of communication. An ASWIE explained how they adjusted their email openings (Merrison *et al.*, 2012) so that these are less likely to be seen as rude. While many of our participants described how they adjusted their responses to the new context, other respondents were more playful with their adjustments. Here from an ASWIE:

I often get told I’m quite blunt or direct... and sometimes I use it to my advantage... in a way that’s more strategic and sort of ‘oh well, you know my Australian self’... The idea that because you’re a consultant, you’re better than me - that doesn’t work well in Australia.

This participant challenges the social and professional hierarchies she encountered in England by maintaining her direct approach and legitimising it as a ‘misunderstanding’ caused by her being an Australian migrant who is still adjusting to the local codes of behaviour. These differences in definitions of politeness and impoliteness have implications beyond what and how people talk with each other. It impacts their actions too, as described here by an ASWIE:

Polite (behaviour) in Australia would be to offer hospitality to all comers, regardless of invitation or even knowing the person if they have come with a friend; impolite would be to refuse hospitality. Polite in England would be to wait until you are invited to someone’s home; impolite would be to turn up unexpected.

Turning up unannounced would be considered as potentially impinging or intruding, and thus, according to the English negative politeness norms, as impolite. In Australia, and following positive politeness norms, one is expected to be welcoming including to those turning up unannounced. Such differences affected many aspects of our participants’ lives and shaped their communications with other colleagues as well as with service users. Several ASWIE described receiving feedback according to which they were too direct and confrontational in their communication with service users and colleagues. On some occasions, such differences caused a real problem, as described by the following ASWIE:

I have been failed on a critical segment of my Adult Mental Health professional training because my debating approach has been negatively interpreted as ‘refusal to take instruction’ and a lack of professionalism on my part. This is deeply offensive. I am in the midst of a workplace grievance over this.

What is considered as ‘professional behaviour’ is likely to be impacted by the local national culture. Australian social workers who are used to a more egalitarian approach, challenging the feedback one receives from their practice educator or other more senior colleagues, is completely legitimate. It seems that in the English context where hierarchies and power differentials are much more legitimised and accepted, such behaviour is more likely to be seen as unprofessional and get them in trouble.

Another difference in relation to professional behaviour mentioned by several interviewees was heavy drinking with work colleagues after work hours which is more common in England. Fox (2004) described the English drinking culture as a way of treating the ‘English reserve’ and helping the inhibited English to engage and bond with each other (Fox, 2004). The pub, according to Fox, serves as a protected space, removed from the English social rules and the overly reserved and inhibited approach outside of the pub.

### Satisfaction and quality of life

In response to the question ‘are you satisfied with your professional life as a social worker in England/Australia?’, participants were asked to choose an answer between three (I am very satisfied) and one (I am not satisfied). As can be seen in Table 1, the mean answer for ESWIA was 2.31 and for ASWIE it was 2.10. Participants were also asked: ‘would you say you are happy living in England/Australia?’ and ‘Do you feel that you are valued by your colleagues or managers because of your training and experiences from abroad?’. Responses were on a scale from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). To both questions ESWIA

**Table 1.** Feeling happy and valued

What was assessed	Australian SWs in England	English SWs in Australia
Feeling happy about living in England/Australia		
Mean	4.09	4.56
Standard deviation	0.879	0.716
Feeling valued due to training and experiences abroad		
Mean	3.79	4.22
Standard deviation	1.023	0.870
<i>N</i>	32	26

give more positive answers (4.56 and 4.22 compared with 4.09 and 3.79, respectively) indicating greater levels of satisfaction.

These findings were found to be statistically significant even if small, and they further strengthen the qualitative evidence indicating ESWIA were more positive about their migration for a variety of reasons including professional reasons. While about 20 percent of the ESWIA indicated that their migration was motivated by the search for a better lifestyle/quality of life, many mentioned the warmer weather allowing spending more time outdoors, and their improved financial situation. None of our ASWIE mentions this as a motivation.

## Conclusions

Our findings support previous studies ([Hussein et al., 2010](#); [Beddoe and Fouché, 2014](#); [Hanna and Lyons, 2016](#)) which found that social workers migrating between English-speaking Commonwealth countries, their recruiters and line managers, underestimated the challenges involved. Some of these studies referred to the cultural differences existing between these countries, but these were not explored in-depth. This is the gap we aim to help to fill. As shown, the culture social workers internalised from their country of origin, as well as the culture of the country to which they migrated should be considered. Our participants observed and experienced key differences between the National Habitus of the two countries. They observed the English acceptance of steep social hierarchies—Hofstede’s Power–Distance—compared with an emphasis on egalitarianism, prevalent especially between white Australians. As indicated by [Hofstede \(1994\)](#) and others, this cultural tendency has many implications. Such hierarchies replicate themselves in organisational culture and the more top-down approach taken by the national and local government in England. These hierarchies were also replicated within social work organisations creating more bureaucratic structures where trust in professionals’ abilities is diminished and replaced by detailed procedures. These greater inequalities and hierarchies seem to also manifest themselves in ideas around politeness. A more egalitarian approach legitimises a more direct communication as was associated with Australians, compared to a more inhibited approach characteristic of the English. We showed that these differences shaped many aspects of their professional lives including their relations with line managers, colleagues and service users. We already also mentioned that all respondents from both groups indicated preference for the more direct style of communication. In line with how Bourdieu described the habitus as flexible and adjusting ([Garrett, 2018](#)), we also showed occasions in which migrating social workers chose adapting to certain aspects of the National Habitus while rejecting other parts, or occasions in which an aspect of their



home-country social work practice and habitus turned to be their unique contribution in the country they migrated to. The final section presented quantitative findings indicating a greater level of satisfaction amongst ESWIA. It seems plausible that this more relaxed Australian lifestyle enabling a better work–life balance is also a result of the more egalitarian and less formal Australian culture leading together to the greater satisfaction of ESWIA.

Our findings also indicate that both groups would benefit from a more significant induction process. We strongly recommend that such induction will introduce the cultural differences between the two countries. This would ease their integration and increase their ability to support their service users. We envisage such induction as more akin to a Professional Development Programme in which social workers utilise their own personal experience as migrants in becoming specialists in working with migrant service users. This study is based on a small sample of interviewees and questionnaire respondents. Future studies might explore the migration of social workers between other countries. Utilising other research methods such as participant observations might produce a deeper and more accurate understanding of the issues discussed. Future studies might wish to quantify and measure more accurately the impact of some of these cultural differences or the time it takes to adjust to them. Future work should also explore the best ways in which we can support migrating social workers making such transitions.

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