

International migration of social workers across the Atlantic Ocean: Moving between Canada and England

Yohai Hakak ^{1,*}, Glory Alade ², and Jahmila John ³

¹Department of Health Sciences, Brunel University of London, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, Kingston Lane, UK

²Mental Health Social Worker, Brent Adult Social Care, 33 Wembley Hill Road, HA9 8AD, UK

³Adult Learning Disability and Autism Service (ALDAS), Hounslow Council, Hounslow House, 7 Bath Rd, UK

*Corresponding author. Department of Health Sciences, Brunel University of London, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, UK. E-mail: yohai.hakak@brunel.ac.uk

Abstract

Transnational social workers continue to play a crucial role in resolving shortages within social services in England. This paper presents findings from a mixed-method study exploring the experiences of transnational social workers migrating between England and Canada and focusing on the impact of culture on their migration. The two studies reported in this article employed semi-structured interviews and online questionnaires. The findings highlight that the Canadian social workers in England and the English social workers in Canada experienced difficulties adjusting to local cultures, with some reporting culture shock. While there are many similarities between the two cultures, existing differences were often significantly greater than expected. These differences included tensions between direct and indirect communication, forms of politeness and humour, emotional expression, and the place of therapeutic culture in practice. Service users are not well served when transnational social workers are ill-prepared for the specific cultural and organizational contexts they encounter in new

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practice environments. Accordingly, this paper argues for culturally specific induction, critically informed professional preparation, and workplace support, while recognizing that such measures do not replace the need for structural change within social work systems.

Keywords: transnational social work; professional migration; cultural differences; English culture; Canadian culture; Canadian social workers; culture shocks.

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Introduction

Social work is a global profession, and many western countries recruit internationally to compensate for their local shortages. Both Canada and England have experienced such shortages for many years. To incentivize social workers as well as other skilled workers to migrate, both countries created routes where existing restrictions on migration are removed such as the Federal Skilled Worker Program in Canada or the Shortage Occupation List, recently replaced by the Immigrant Salary List, in England. Neither Social Work England's Annual Report nor The Canadian Social Work Workforce Survey Report (Kim 2025) measures 'internationally trained' social workers. Instead, reports highlight place of birth. The Canadian Social Work Workforce Survey report found that 8 percent of bachelor's-level social workers were immigrants and 16 percent of master's-level social workers were immigrants. Skills for Care (2021) indicates that about 10 percent of the Adults Social Workers in England have foreign nationality and another report from the Oxford Migration Observatory found that 20 percent of all health and social work professionals are migrants (Fernández-Reino and Rienzo 2021).

This article is part of a wider study examining the migration of social workers to and from the UK. It focuses specifically on the migration of Canadian social workers in England (CSWIEs) and English social workers in Canada (ESWICs). While existing research on migrant and transnational social workers has examined issues such as credential recognition, workforce integration, and professional adaptation, comparatively limited attention has been paid to how national and professional cultures—particularly those associated with the country of origin—shape social workers' dispositions, perceptions, and practice following migration (Hakak *et al.*, 2022, Hakak, Onokah, and Shishane 2023). Moreover, the literature rarely engages explicitly with the role of English and Canadian middle-class cultures, which underpin dominant forms of professional knowledge, communication, and authority and significantly shape social work practice in both countries. These cultural underpinnings should be brought into light

so such practices can also be understood as a social and cultural construct rather than as the only and the ‘natural’ way things should be done. If ‘culture’ is considered in the existing literature, it is in most cases the culture of Indigenous minorities social workers interact with and should be aware of (Fouché et al., 2016; Modderman, Threlkeld, and McPherson 2017; Modderman et al., 2021; Peter, Beddoe, and Bartley 2022).

We use the term transnational social workers to refer to professionally qualified social workers who migrate and practise across national borders. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of national habitus, this article addresses these gaps by examining how culturally and class-embedded professional dispositions formed in the country-of-origin shape social workers’ encounters with the professional and organizational cultures of the destination country. The analysis explores participants’ experiences of migration, the challenges they encountered, and the ways they responded to cultural and professional dissonance in practice.

Canadian culture

Culture reflects shared ideas and beliefs (Beaty et al., 2010). Canadian national identity is influenced by its history with Great Britain and the USA. The process of separating from Britain and differentiating from Americans has shaped many Canadian myths, emphasizing peacefulness, tolerance, and a strong social safety net. Despite sharing some English traditions, Canadians believe their identity has been uniquely shaped by their landscape and environment (Hedler 2003).

Canadian cultural policies promote diversity, openness, and tolerance (Devine 2010), celebrating a multicultural ‘mosaic’ (Brown et al., 2014). However, the ongoing effects of colonization have resulted in significant displacement and oppression of Indigenous Peoples that have a significant lingering and ongoing impact (Blackstock 2011). Although child welfare in Canada, understood here as welfare practice and professional intervention, is deeply shaped by settler-colonial histories, including the overrepresentation of First Nations children and the dominance of Euro-Western professional knowledge (e.g. Modderman et al., 2021), this article focuses on how English and Canadian middle-class professional cultures interact to shape social work practice and transnational adaptation. A sustained analysis of Indigenous—settler relations and Indigenous child welfare therefore lies beyond the empirical and conceptual scope of this study.

Acknowledging that settler-colonial relations shape social work as a profession rather than a single field of practice, this article does not suggest that enhanced knowledge can replace structural transformation. Rather, it argues that until such transformation occurs, transnational social workers

require critically informed understanding of the historical and political conditions in which their practice is embedded.

English culture

Different scholars ([Paxman 1998](#); [Macfarlane 2014](#)) argue that England's island geography fostered a sense of distinctiveness and stability and increasing individuals' ability to pursue their personal pursuits. According to Macfarlane, the origins of English individualism can be traced back to the thirteenth century, much earlier than in any other place. English philosophers wrote extensively about 'negative freedoms' and scholars have defined English politeness as 'negative politeness', where politeness is defined by non-intrusion, contrasting with positive politeness, which emphasizes being welcoming and appreciative ([Brown et al., 2014](#)). The literature ([Fox 2014](#); [Miller 2016](#)) also highlights a sharp separation between private and public life in England, where socializing often occurs outside the home, and personal information less easily shared, often perceived as coldness by outsiders. Dr Kate Fox discusses the English 'social dis-ease', a potential difficulty in forming deep social connections linked to individualism. This contributes to a particular English emotional grammar where displays of strong emotion are often less valued, and a more reserve communication is preferred. [Fox \(2014\)](#) also highlights England's deeply ingrained class system, and the simultaneous attempt to disguise its importance.

Canadian and English social work: key differences

England requires 1,500 practice-learning hours versus Canada's 700 hours, with England mandating placements in two distinct service models while Canada emphasizes geographically relevant placements ([Canadian Association of Social Workers, CASW 2018](#); [Social Work England 2023](#)). England operates centralized regulation through Social Work England; Canada uses decentralized provincial regulation creating regional variations ([Hick and Stokes 2017](#); [Canadian Association of Social Workers, CASW 2018](#)).

Canadian social work evolved from early twentieth-century social reform, becoming professionalized and publicly funded after World War II ([Hick 2002](#)). Child welfare remains challenging in both countries, with social workers facing heavy workloads, administrative pressures, and inadequate resources ([Canadian Association of Social Workers, CASW 2018](#)).

National habitus

This study adopts Bourdieu's habitus adjusted to the national level (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1996; Bourdieu 1999). It will help us understand the unique cultural perspectives, differences, experiences, and challenges faced by CSWIEs. This will allow the linkage of their lived experiences to the construct of national habitus. The habitus has the great virtue of allowing us to conceive individual forms of thinking, feeling, perceiving, wanting, acting, and interacting as structured by corresponding general patterns. Habitus loosely structures personalities and individual behaviours. Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu presented national habitus as an alternative to the more essentialist 'national character' (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1996; Bourdieu 1999). Elias describes habitus as a 'second nature' or 'embodied social learning' that is culturally available and shared by citizens in a specific historical moment (Elias 1996). Garrett (2018) helpfully clarifies 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).

Research design

Methodology

This research examined the experiences of transnational social workers migrating between England and Canada in both directions, employing identical methodological approaches for CSWIEs and ESWICs. The study adopted a constructivist paradigm with an interpretivist epistemological stance, using mixed methods to capture both breadth and depth in understanding migration experiences (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005; Rubin and Babbie 2014), grounded in Bourdieu's theory of national habitus (Bourdieu 1984, 1999).

Data collection

An online questionnaire collected demographic data and explored motivations, experiences, and challenges. Semi-structured interviews (~90 minutes) were conducted via video conferencing, exploring cultural adaptation challenges and differences in practice contexts.

Sampling

Non-probability purposive sampling identified participants originally from England or Canada, holding professional social work qualifications, who had migrated to and were working in the other country. Recruitment

occurred primarily through LinkedIn, with secondary efforts through Facebook groups and recruitment agencies.

Participants

The study recruited forty-three questionnaire respondents and twenty interview participants total. ESWICs (18 questionnaire respondents, ten interviews during 2018–9) were predominantly female (73.7 percent) with diverse ethnic backgrounds, having practiced in England before migration, with time in Canada ranging from one to over fifteen years. Primary motivations included improved living standards (50 percent) and professional development opportunities (37.5 percent). CSWIEs (25 questionnaire respondents, ten interviews during 2021–3) were also predominantly female (80 percent), with 48 percent working in Children and Family services, and were interviewed between January and July 2019.

Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) thematic analysis, with themes related to research questions, literature, and the national habitus framework ([Bourdieu 1984](#); [Elias 1996](#)). Quantitative data underwent descriptive statistical analysis.

Ethics and limitations

Ethical approval was obtained from Brunel University with informed consent from all participants. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms. Limitations included small sample size restricting generalizability, limited geographic representation, and self-selection bias from LinkedIn recruitment. Notable differences emerged, with 37.5 percent of ESWICs versus 3.8 percent of CSWIEs reporting qualification non-recognition. Despite limitations, the bidirectional examination provided comparative insights, while theoretical grounding in national habitus provided a framework for understanding cultural contexts.

Reflexive acknowledgement

The lead author immigrated to England at 37, having previously worked as a social worker in a different country. The second author migrated to England as an adult before training, and the third author was born in England to a migrating family. These shared migration experiences made us attuned to the ways local cultures shape everyday life and social work practice, a sensitivity that proved particularly beneficial for this study.

Findings: moving between Canada and England

The unexpected challenge of cultural similarity

Despite Canada and England's shared history, language, and Commonwealth ties, the transition between these two countries proved far more complex than most participants anticipated. The cultural similarities that initially seemed reassuring masked significant differences that caught many social workers off-guard. This phenomenon of unexpected cultural challenge despite apparent similarities emerged as a central theme across participant narratives involving both professional and personal dimensions.

Linda's experience captures this surprise eloquently: 'Coming from Canada, which is English-speaking Commonwealth country ... and having a Scottish mother and an English father, I didn't think I would have much cultural challenge, but it was culturally challenging ...' Like Linda, many Canadian and English participants underestimated the potential challenges they would face, assuming that shared language and historical connections would smooth their transition.

The practical challenges participants reported ranged from seemingly mundane tasks like opening bank accounts and finding suitable accommodation to more substantial professional hurdles including getting qualifications recognized and adjusting culturally to workplace norms and expectations. These everyday difficulties were compounded by deeper cultural adjustments that participants had not anticipated.

Canadian directness versus English understatement: navigating communication styles

One of the most frequently mentioned and impactful cultural differences involved communication styles, specifically the contrast between the English emphasis on understatement and indirect communication compared with Canadian preferences for more direct, transparent interaction. This difference permeated both personal and professional relationships, creating misunderstandings and requiring significant adjustment from both groups.

The English art of indirection

Jill, a CSWIE, articulated her awareness that English people employ coded and indirect language with underlying meanings she might easily miss: 'British people are not particularly direct in my experience and tend to hedge statements that mean other things. In Canada, we would be transparent ... We would be direct with someone if job performance had been inadequate whereas, here in English culture I find someone will say

something is fine when they mean it wasn't fine at all. You spend a lot of time and effort interpreting what someone is trying to say'.

What appears as simple workplace communication becomes an interpretive exercise requiring constant attention to subtext and implied meanings, creating genuine barriers for Canadian social workers accustomed to more straightforward exchanges.

Canadian directness: asset or liability?

The relative directness of Canadians arriving in England could itself be misinterpreted, as another CSWIE noted: 'Canadians are direct ... more assertive ... it took a while for my team to get used to how direct I can be ... the English can see it as rude'. What is valued as honest, efficient communication in Canada may be experienced as blunt or aggressive in England.

However, not all CSWIEs experienced their directness as a liability. One participant found that their direct communication style became a significant asset in their work with families: 'I am very open, plain-speaking and direct with families ... I just say to them, "this is your family, you tell me why I am here." They will just look at me and say "no one has ever spoke to us like that" ... You are an adult, I am an adult, and I treat you like an adult. What are we going to do to get your children home?'

The families responded positively to being addressed directly and treated as competent adults. This finding suggests that while adapting to local cultural norms is important, maintaining certain aspects of one's professional communication style may benefit service users, particularly those who have experienced disempowering relationships with social services.

Humour across cultures: what's funny and what's lost in translation

Communication pattern differences extended into humour, revealing significant cultural gaps. English humour is characterized by dry wit, sarcasm, and irony (Fox 2014), stemming from cultural tendencies towards indirection and understatement.

Several ESWICs found that English humour simply does not translate well in Canadian contexts: 'the dry humour passes them and they're very literal ... Sarcasm surpasses them'. Canadian humour, reflecting cultural emphasis on clarity and openness, tends to be more literal and explicit. Another ESWIC explained: 'I feel like I always have to add (that) I'm joking'—explicitly marking humour represents a significant shift from English norms where humour lies partly in ambiguity.

English self-deprecating humour was particularly misunderstood. In a society simultaneously class-conscious yet ideologically denying class

importance, self-deprecation signals: 'I am not claiming superiority; I am not a threat to your position' (Fox 2014). Research demonstrates that self-deprecating humour builds affiliation and solidarity (Kim 2014), while high-status individuals use it strategically to appear agreeable and non-threatening (Greengross and Miller 2008). However, this nuanced social function was lost in Canada, where such humour was interpreted as genuine lack of confidence rather than sophisticated status-levelling.

Understanding these cultural nuances in humour proved crucial for social workers, as humour significantly impacts relationship-building and professional connections. According to Moran and Hughes (2006), humour serves as a valuable coping mechanism contributing to social work team resilience, making cultural mismatches potentially detrimental to team cohesion and individual wellbeing.

Emotional grammar: navigating different rules for feeling and expression

Several participants described what can be termed the 'emotional grammar' of both countries—the cultural rules and norms prescribing the sharing and expression of emotions: who can express what, when, how, and in whose presence. The findings reveal a profound divergence between England and Canada, characterized by a shift from the reserved, often-suspicious social climate of England to the open, overtly friendly nature of Canadian life. These differences also partly explain the stronger presence of a therapeutic culture in Canada, where psychological and emotional frameworks are more likely to shape how people understand themselves and their lives (Eramian, Mallory, and Herbert 2024).

Canadians in England: encountering social distance and suspicion

Canadian social workers frequently found the English social fabric difficult to penetrate, describing the English as 'reserved when they don't know you'. Many reported that social life in England, particularly in London, was 'harder to break into' and centred on long-established networks. This insularity led many Canadian social workers to form social circles primarily with other expatriates, as attempts to connect with English colleagues and neighbours often proved frustrating.

This social atmosphere made belonging feel 'fragile' for Canadian participants. Everyday interactions, particularly in urban contexts like London, were frequently described as 'rude' or 'transient', with simple gestures of friendliness like eye contact or a greeting sometimes met with coldness or suspicion.

Rebecca's experience captures the confusion and eventual understanding many CSWIEs developed: 'I found at first that many English people

would treat my eye contact and pleasant “hello” with suspicion. At first, it confused me, but I came to realize from speaking with others in England that this is a natural aspect of English culture to be suspicious of nice people, as it is interpreted as though you want something or trying to take advantage’.

Rebecca’s reflection reveals a learning process: initially confused by cold responses to her friendly overtures, she gradually came to understand her behaviour was being interpreted through a different cultural lens, one where unsolicited friendliness raises suspicion rather than being welcomed as social warmth.

The workplace as cultural microcosm

These patterns of emotional reserve extended into workplace settings, as Laura’s account demonstrates: ‘There is something that all my Canadian colleagues observed ... you walk into a place where nobody says hello, nobody says good morning, nobody says goodbye, nobody talks to you, and is hot-desking, so you can sit down and work all day and nobody would even look at you, and I think we have started to change the culture, because we are often entering different teams and different areas, saying morning, morning ... yes, very weird ... very cold’.

Such descriptions of the English workplace repeated themselves among other CSWIEs and social workers from other countries. The practices Laura describes—silence upon arrival and departure, hot-desking without acknowledgment, working all day without interaction—represent polite non-intrusion within English cultural norms, yet appeared shockingly cold from a Canadian perspective emphasizing positive acknowledgment.

Significantly, Laura and her colleagues actively worked to ‘change the culture’ by consistently greeting colleagues despite the initial lack of reciprocation.

The impact of this repeated experience of coldness extended beyond simple discomfort. As one participant noted: ‘an act of coldness could leave people who are culturally warm, embarrassed and less valued’. This observation highlights how cultural differences in emotional expression can create genuine psychological harm, making people feel diminished and questioning their worth. For some participants, these experiences of social distance were intensified by the political context of Brexit. Brexit appeared as a recurring symbolic backdrop that fuelled feelings of exclusion and instability.

Understanding negative politeness

[Hitchings \(2013\)](#) offers an important interpretive framework for understanding these dynamics, stressing that what appears to outsiders as

unfriendliness is actually a form of consideration. English people, he argues, judge others by themselves and assume that everyone shares their need for privacy and dislike of intrusion. Consequently, they mind their own business and politely ignore people, believing this is what others would prefer.

This connects to scholarly discussions of ‘negative politeness’ (Brown et al., 2014)—politeness defined by what one avoids: not intruding into others’ space or time, not impinging on or disturbing them. English colleagues were relating differently rather than refusing to relate, in contrast to the ‘positive politeness’ of inclusion and social approval that framed Canadian expectations.

ESWICs: learning to be warm and positive

On the other side of the Atlantic, ESWICs faced the mirror image of these challenges, needing to adjust to Canadian expectations for more openly positive and warm emotional expression. While CSWIEs experienced English culture as cold and unwelcoming, ESWICs found Canadian culture almost overwhelmingly friendly and expressive.

A culture of warmth and inclusion

English migrants in Canada consistently described the culture as ‘warm, welcoming and caring’. One participant captured the enthusiastic embrace they experienced: ‘They talk about Canadians being friendly. That is 100% correct, like it is beautiful... we just were like scooped up as a young couple and made into their family’. This vivid image of being ‘scooped up’ suggests an almost overwhelming level of welcome and inclusion that contrasted sharply with their experiences of social connection in England.

Unlike England’s pub-centric social life, Canadian culture is viewed as more ‘wholesome’, with a heavy emphasis on outdoor activities like camping and skiing, and family-oriented sports. These differences reflect not just personal preferences but structural features including climate and different patterns of public versus private socializing.

Learning a new emotional vocabulary

One of the main indicators informing ESWICs of the expectation for more positive expression was the language Canadians use. Valeria, an ESWIC, commented on the linguistic markers of this heightened positivity: ‘there are a lot of big descriptors and big emotional words... I find myself doing it now, like the word “super” which is used a lot. Oh, that was super easy, or that was super great... super awesome... fantastic... amazing’.

Valeria's observation reveals how she has internalized and now employs these 'big emotional words' herself, demonstrating successful cultural adaptation. However, the fact that she notices and comments on this shift suggests it still feels somewhat foreign to her English habitus, where more restrained language would be normative.

The linguistic markers were closely followed by non-verbal expectations. Another ESWIC described: 'Canadians like smiley faces... I'm from London where people don't smile and I had to learn that one. Sometimes I walk around with my natural "resting bxxxx face" ... but I realise ... you can't do that ... you gotta be smiley'.

The participant describes her normal facial expression as a 'resting bxxxx face'—a term that itself indicates awareness that her neutral expression is read negatively in the Canadian context. She explicitly frames this as something she 'had to learn', recognizing that her habitual, comfortable facial expression was culturally inappropriate in her new environment and required conscious modification.

Shifting social norms and authentic self-expression

Some ESWICs described the adjustment to Canadian emotional norms as liberating. One participant explained: 'I've had to learn to say, oh, it's OK to look up and have eye contact with people. And doesn't mean that you're a creep ... yeah, totally different'.

This statement reveals how deeply ingrained English norms of avoiding eye contact with strangers had become, to the point where making eye contact felt transgressive and potentially threatening. Learning that eye contact in Canada signals friendliness rather than intrusion or threat required unlearning deeply embodied habits.

However, not all ESWICs found these adjustments entirely comfortable. Some described the expectation for constant positivity as challenging because 'it can feel disingenuous ... a little bit fake or forced'. This tension reveals a fundamental challenge in cross-cultural adaptation: when the new culture requires emotional expressions that feel inauthentic or excessive, how does one maintain a sense of genuine self while adapting to local norms?

Mental health practice and the therapeutic culture divide

Social work training in Canada includes substantially greater focus on therapeutic and intervention skills compared to English training, which emphasizes statutory responsibilities, safeguarding, and case management (Spolander 2011; Kourgiantakis et al. 2023). Accordingly, Canadian social workers compared with their English colleagues play a more central role in delivering mental health services. This professional difference is

reinforced by broader cultural differences in how mental health and therapy are perceived and discussed publicly. As mentioned, England has an enduring cultural style that leans towards reserve, understatement, and indirect emotional expression. England has also a persistent and even recently worsening stigma trends in public attitudes towards mental health (Mind 2023). This is combined with a strong intellectual tradition criticizing therapeutic culture (Furedi 2004), framing it as over-medicalization or emotionalization of social life. In comparison, Canadian culture enables a freer expression of emotions and has adopted the therapeutic culture more warmly (Eramian, Mallory, and Herbert 2024).

Normalizing therapy: the Canadian approach

Several participating ESWICs described the greater openness they experienced in Canadian public debates, media coverage, workplace discussions, and among colleagues towards discussing mental health issues. This openness results partly from the more generally open and less reserved Canadian culture described earlier but also reflects specific cultural attitudes towards mental health treatment.

Vini, an ESWIC, emphasized the normalization of therapy in Canada: ‘there’s no shame at all about going to see a therapist’. This normalization means that seeking mental health treatment is viewed as responsible self-care rather than evidence of personal failing or severe pathology. Carry, another ESWIC, drew a stark contrast with English attitudes: ‘in the UK, if you are going for therapy, you’re much more likely to be considered to be a bit fucked up or that there’s a moral failing in you’.

Carry’s language choice—using ‘fucked up’—itself suggests the harsh judgement she perceives as more likely in English attitudes towards therapy-seeking. The connection to ‘moral failing’ is particularly significant, suggesting that mental health struggles are viewed through a lens of personal responsibility and weakness rather than as health issues requiring appropriate treatment.

Within this cultural framework, seeking therapy—which requires extensive emotional expression and vulnerability—may be seen as indulgent, weak, or as evidence that one lacks the personal resources to manage independently.

Quantitative evidence of attitudinal differences

These qualitative findings are supported by quantitative studies comparing attitudes towards mental health in both countries. A 2019 Ipsos Mori survey for World Mental Health Day found that 72 percent of Canadians compared to 68 percent of British respondents agreed that ‘seeing a mental health professional is a sign of strength’, indicating slightly greater

openness in Canada, though the difference is relatively modest. Different studies have indicated that particularly among older adults in England, the ‘stiff upper lip’ approach prevents many from asking for help even when it is clearly needed (Jones and Kawalek 2019; Swain 2025).

More substantial differences emerged in Meier *et al.*'s (2015) study, which reported that Canadian participants experienced fewer stigma-related incidents on nearly half of the measured items compared to their UK counterparts, suggesting a more accepting social climate around mental health issues in Canada.

Together, these quantitative findings reinforce the qualitative evidence from our participants, indicating that Canada has developed a more normalized, less stigmatized approach to mental health and therapy. For social workers, these cultural differences have significant implications for how they practice, what roles they can occupy, and how service users perceive and engage with mental health support.

Professional recognition, workplace culture, and practice differences

Differences in professional recognition and workplace culture emerged as central features of the migration experience, though the two groups experienced these asymmetrically. Overall, 37.5 percent (6 out of 16) of ESWICs compared to only 3.8 percent (1 out of 26) of CSWIEs indicated that their qualifications were not recognized in their new country. This substantial difference reflects several structural factors, including Canada's longer bachelor's degree program (four years compared to England's three-year programs) and the greater emphasis on postgraduate social work degrees in Canada, which offers a wider range of roles and recognition pathways.

English social workers migrating to Canada often described the initial qualification recognition and registration phase as extremely difficult and ‘disheartening, as it devalued my accomplishments and skills’, particularly for those with a BA rather than an MSW. The credential recognition process—frequently described as a ‘nightmare’—could take many months, involving substantial fees, additional coursework, and examinations while unable to work professionally.

Employment success rates also differed between the groups: 73 percent (19 out of 26) of CSWIEs compared to 50 percent (8 out of 16) of ESWICs reported they had no problem finding employment in their new country. These differences highlight how the structural features of professional education and regulation in each country create asymmetrical experiences for Transnational social workers. Once registered and employed, the two groups reported markedly different professional experiences that extended well beyond initial registration difficulties.

ESWICs: therapeutic autonomy and balance

Despite initial frustrations with professional registration, once settled and successfully registered, English social workers reported feeling ‘valued and trusted’ in their roles. ESWICs’ accounts emphasized positive workplace experiences, describing Canadian practice culture as more holistic, clinical, and therapeutic, with social workers functioning as therapists or psychotherapists with greater professional autonomy. The workplace hierarchy was ‘much flattened’, with managers seen as approachable clinical supervisors rather than bureaucratic overseers.

Crucially, Canada offered vastly superior work-life balance, including ‘paid Mental Health Days’ and strictly respected boundaries. As one practitioner noted: ‘Colleagues think very highly of Social Workers here (more so than in the UK)’ and ‘The work-life balance is amazing... because I have every other Friday off’. This sense of professional validation, combined with better work-life balance and higher living standards, contributed to sustained professional satisfaction, with 60 percent of ESWICs reporting satisfaction with their professional life.

CSWIEs: bureaucracy and constraint

By contrast, Canadian social workers in the UK more frequently described ongoing professional misalignment that extended beyond registration into everyday practice. CSWIEs consistently characterized UK social work as overly bureaucratic and risk-driven, shaped by managerialism and austerity. Practitioners reported that paperwork consumed 80%–90% of their time, reducing them to ‘case managers’ rather than skilled practitioners engaging directly with families.

The workplace was often perceived as highly hierarchical and unsupportive, with some managers described as ‘horrible’ or inaccessible, contributing to high burnout and ‘blame culture’. As CSWIEs stated: ‘UK is waaaay more process driven!! It’s so bureaucratic and there is little room for creativity’ and ‘I can see a lot of case management, but I can’t see the work. Because at home (Canada)... you actually work with families... it is much more hands-on’. One respondent captured this succinctly: ‘I do not identify with how social work is practised in the UK’.

While the UK provides a structured multi-agency framework, it was often experienced as a ‘cog in a machine’ culture where professional judgement was constrained by procedures and risk-averse management. This contrast resulted in slightly lower professional satisfaction among CSWIEs, with 54 percent reporting satisfaction compared to 60 percent of ESWICs—a modest difference that nonetheless aligned with qualitative findings suggesting more sustained professional frustration among those working in England.

Professional implications

These findings highlight how national professional cultures shape not only access to social work roles but also longer-term experiences of recognition, belonging, and ethical alignment. Canada was viewed as a more emotionally and professionally sustainable environment where practitioners were trusted as autonomous clinical professionals, while England's structured approach, though providing clear frameworks, often constrained the therapeutic, relational practice many Canadian social workers valued. Understanding these differences is crucial for both Transnational social workers and the organizations that employ them.

Pub culture: social facilitator or professional concern?

English drinking culture emerged as another significant cultural difference, particularly in how it permeated workplace socialization. Pub culture was widely mentioned as the primary way of socializing with work colleagues in England, reflecting broader patterns where English social life revolves around public spaces and post-work drinks. This contrasts sharply with Canadian culture, where socializing prioritizes home-based gatherings and family-oriented activities, partly reflecting harsh winters that make outdoor public gathering less attractive for much of the year.

Tabitha, a CSWIE, described her discomfort: 'We (Canadians) don't have a huge drinking culture; I will never go out and get completely drunk with my colleagues... Whereas it seems there is a drinking culture here, just unusual, that is different for me... a lot of families drink, like three beers a day is a lot of beer to be drinking a day... but other people here, other social workers would say like it does not seem like a lot. So that seems a bit of a challenge'.

Tabitha's recognition that her perspective differs from English colleagues, who view three beers daily as unremarkable, reveals different cultural base-lines. CSWIEs who had lived longer in England reported acculturating into pub culture as 'the best way of socializing or making friends'.

Fox (2014) notes that English drinking culture functions as a social lubricant: alcohol temporarily dissolves barriers of reserve and formality, helping the inhibited English engage and bond. While this practice serves a functional purpose within English society, it can be challenging for migrants from cultures where social connection flows more readily without such mediation.

Class structure and social mobility: accent, aspiration, and achievement

One of the most striking cultural differences noted by participants, particularly those from Canada, related to the visibility and significance of class

structure. In England, class remains highly visible through multiple markers including accent, vocabulary, educational background, occupation, and consumption patterns. In Canada, while class inequality exists and is substantial, it operates more invisibly.

Simone, a CSWIE, articulated the auditory dimension of Canadian egalitarianism: 'In Toronto everybody sounds the same ... so there is no class mentality in working with families'. She elaborated: 'you couldn't tell who is middle class, working class or lower class. We all sound the same ... even the poorest family have the same accent'. This observation highlights how in Canadian English, accent does not map onto class in the systematic way it does in England, where accent immediately signals education, social background, and class position.

Another CSWIE provided regional context: 'In England, I noticed that the class system still played a significant role in society. However, in Alberta, the province in Canada where I have spent most of my time, the mentality was different, largely influenced by the presence of the oil and gas industry. The mindset there was focused on hard work and reaping the rewards of one's efforts'. This reflects a meritocratic ideology where social position is viewed as primarily determined by individual effort rather than inherited wealth and status.

The participants' perceptions align with quantitative measures. Studies consistently show that the UK is among countries with the lowest social mobility, contrary to Canada, which ranks among those with the highest levels of intergenerational mobility ([The Sutton Trust and the Carnegie Corporation of New York 2012](#); [The Globalist 2017](#); [Jones 2020](#); [Goldman Sachs 2022](#)). England, with its long history of class divisions, is often described as having a 'calcified class structure' where birth circumstances largely determine life outcomes. Canada is frequently described as better materializing the American dream of social mobility.

Educational hierarchies and grading cultures

Edgar, an ESWIC teaching social work at a Canadian university, observed stark differences in grading expectations: 'I freaked my students out the first year because I told them that the highest mark I had ever given was 85% and that was against my better judgement. They freaked out because that was the lowest mark they'd ever got'. In the UK system, an A grade starts at 70 percent, and grades rarely exceed 80 percent, while these would be considered mediocre in most other countries.

The English educational system has traditionally prepared different social classes for specific societal roles, with roots in elite institutions like Oxford and Cambridge that historically served upper classes exclusively. This shaped grading practices emphasizing distinctions between 'ordinary' and 'exceptional' work. The reserved marking system may have reinforced the notion that only a select few could achieve the highest standards,

mirroring broader societal hierarchies. The terms ‘first class honours’ or ‘upper second class’ used to describe degree qualifications explicitly link academic achievement to class-based distinctions.

UK assessments are rigorously moderated both internally and by external examiners, leading to conservative marking (Bloxham 2009). In countries like Canada, assessments are more decentralized, allowing instructors greater discretion. Edgar noted this extended beyond universities: ‘literally every single performance I’ve been to has had a standing ovation ... my view is ... standing ovations mean you’ve done a really, really good job. Not, “thank God. We’re at the end of it”’. His reserved English habitus was at odds with enthusiastic Canadian responses, reflecting broader cultural patterns of critical reserve versus generous affirmation.

Overcoming challenges: resilience, support, and cultural change

Despite the substantial cultural and professional challenges described throughout these findings, most participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. They overcame difficulties through multiple pathways including support from colleagues, connections with fellow transnational social workers who understood their experiences, changing work roles to find a better fit, and actively advocating for workplace culture change.

Emily’s experience illustrates this journey: ‘Initially I thought I had made a mistake ... But I found that social workers in the UK have the same deep-seated passion for helping others ... as we grew to know each other, they agreed with me that the office culture should be much more supportive’. Emily’s reflection reveals initial doubt and regret, followed by recognition of shared professional values across cultures, and ultimately successful advocacy for cultural change. Her English colleagues’ agreement that office culture should be more supportive suggests that local workers may also experience cultural patterns as problematic but feel unable to challenge them without external perspective.

This pattern of cultural agency—where migrants don’t simply adapt to existing norms but actively work to reshape them—appeared across multiple participant accounts. While adaptation was necessary, many participants selectively maintained aspects of their professional identity and cultural habitus that they valued, introducing new practices into their workplaces and sometimes successfully shifting local culture.

Quantitative findings: happiness versus professional satisfaction

Despite the substantial challenges articulated in qualitative interviews, quantitative survey data revealed relatively high levels of overall life

satisfaction among both groups. Most respondents were happy with life in their new country: 87 percent of English migrants to Canada and 85 percent of Canadian migrants to England agreed or strongly agreed they were happy living there.

However, professional satisfaction showed more variation and divergence between groups. Among ESWICs, 60 percent reported being satisfied with their professional life, while 20 percent were unsatisfied and another 20 percent were undecided. These mixed results reflect the pattern described earlier, where initial registration frustrations were often followed by more positive workplace experiences.

Among CSWIEs, 54 percent reported professional satisfaction—slightly lower than their English counterparts in Canada. This modest difference aligns with qualitative findings suggesting more sustained professional frustration among CSWIEs who struggled with the procedural, constraint-focused practice culture.

While the focus of our qualitative data collection was on the role played by culture and cultural differences highlighted the challenges and revealed substantial frustration, cultural shock, and professional dissatisfaction, survey responses indicated that most participants ultimately achieved acceptable outcomes. This divergence between qualitative depth and quantitative breadth suggests that despite real and significant challenges articulated in open-ended reflection, many participants found ways to adapt, adjust expectations, access support, and achieve satisfactory if not ideal professional and personal lives in their new contexts.

This pattern is consistent with research on migration generally, which finds that migrants often report reasonable satisfaction even while experiencing substantial adjustment challenges, discrimination, or disappointment (Vohra and Adair 2000; Amit 2010). Multiple factors contribute, including adaptation over time, development of coping strategies, social comparison with others in similar situations, and reluctance to admit that migration was a mistake given the substantial investments made.

Conclusion and recommendations

Working in multi-cultural environments comes with opportunities and challenges. This study revealed how both CSWIEs and ESWICs experienced cultural differences and challenges associated with migration. Despite shared heritage, language, and history of colonization, both groups experienced culture shock with regard to communication styles, emotional expression, humour, and workplace cultures. CSWIEs found that their cultural values of directness and warmth were not always well received by work colleagues, while ESWICs had to learn to adopt more overtly positive and expressive communication styles in Canada, which some found challenging or even ‘disingenuous’.

However, the findings also revealed instances where transnational social workers successfully utilized their unique cultural habitus as professional assets. Canadian directness, initially perceived as potentially rude, proved valuable in building task-focused relationships with families who appreciated being treated as competent adults. Similarly, Canadian social workers actively reshaped workplace culture in England by introducing warmer, more collegial practices of greeting and acknowledgement, demonstrating cultural agency rather than passive adaptation.

The findings revealed the existence of significant cultural differences between the two countries. These challenges speak to the complexity of the cultural nuances within local contexts as well as the complexity around social work practice, which is shaped by regulation and policies. In England, practice is constrained by managerialism and risk-aversion, while in Canada, therapeutic autonomy and work-life balance are prioritized. However, in overcoming these challenges, participants from both groups used resilience, persistence, and continuous advocacy for change.

There is a continuous expectation that transnational social workers will adjust to local contexts for effective social work practice (Lyons 2018). This study has shown that both CSWIEs and ESWICs require support, including cultural competence training, ample time for settlement before case allocations, and proper induction. We recommend developing induction processes where transnational social workers can become aware of their own unique cultural characteristics and become familiarized with the new culture in the country to which they migrated to as well as the new work expectations involved. For ESWICs, this particularly concerns navigating qualification recognition processes and understanding Canadian therapeutic practice culture. For CSWIEs, this involves understanding English communication indirectness, negative politeness, and bureaucratic practice requirements. It would be beneficial to create spaces where employers can discuss and explore with transnational social workers how best they can be supported in transitioning into new work cultures, while also recognizing how their unique perspectives can enrich practice.

When transnational social workers genuinely understand the cultural and organizational differences they encounter, and when host colleagues recognize the values migrants bring, both sides navigate challenges more effectively. Transnational social workers should strive to understand the culture within which they practice while maintaining their own positive cultural values, thereby promoting better outcomes for the internationalization of social work and its universal principles of equality and empowerment.

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