A qualitative analysis of migrant social workers' work experiences and perceived prejudice from an empowering acculturative integration approach

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ABSTRACT: An increasing number of migrant social workers are employed in the UK social work sector. This article explores the acculturative integration experiences of a small group of migrant social workers. We critically observe that research on migrant professionals' trajectories should adopt theories that emphasise people's empowerment and potential for agency. We use a framework drawing on liberation psychology for analysing the autobiographical narratives of a sample of migrant social workers employed in England. Findings indicate that the participants perceived prejudice on a number of occasions and circumstances. Even though in their narrative of survival they talked about activating several psychosocial resources, they were skeptical about their professional development and dissatisfied at work. The paper discusses the emerging findings while highlighting the framework's relevance for understanding these experiences from an empowering acculturation perspective and suggesting ways of improving migrant social workers' acculturative integration by addressing systemic barriers.

KEYWORDS: migrant social workers, acculturative integration, professional development, perceived prejudice.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade there have been calls for changes in the way social work is taught and practised. Internationally, there are proposals for social work to adopt a post-conventional

approach emphasizing principles of interconnectedness, and co-operation with clients, carers and the community (Bell, 2012); to use a critical reflexive awareness of the structural context of practice (Gould, 2016); and to adopt a cultural diversity approach reflecting the globalisation of social work practice (Nash et al., 2006). Similar changes have been proposed in the UK such as the Professional Capabilities Framework, which has changed the social work education curriculum, but is not clear yet whether this framework has reformed social work practice (Higgins, 2016).

In general the impact of these reforms in social work education and practice is still largely unexplored and there is little critical analysis of this process (Taylor and Bogo, 2014), with a few exceptions (e.g. Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2012; Moriarty et al., 2015).

In the UK, these reforms have been taking place in an atmosphere of fragility in terms of social work professional status (Dickens, 2012). Yet there are also dynamic changes in the sector as it attracts increasing numbers of internationally educated professionals (Moriarty et al., 2012). After a longstanding shortage of social workers there has been active recruitment of social workers from abroad and they continue to increase annually (Hussein et al., 2010).

In this context of reforms and active recruitment of international staff, it is interesting to explore work experiences of internationally educated social workers employed in the UK. There is some limited research on how well this group adapts in the English social work sector and if they are given sufficient opportunities for professional development (Beddoe & Fouché, 2014; Hanna & Lyons, 2014).

The small-scale study presented in this paper aims at exploring the acculturative integration of social workers who have been trained abroad and are employed in England. The analysis of the participants' work experiences—with an emphasis on perceived prejudice—is carried out through an innovative theoretical framework that highlights people's ability to rebuild

their psychosocial resources and respond as active agents to their new challenges (García-Ramírez et al., 2010). Thus another aim is to emphasise this framework's relevance in understanding such work experiences and its applicability in suggesting ways of improving migrant social workers' acculturative integration.

DEFINING MIGRANT SOCIAL WORKERS

Various terms, such as ‘internationally educated social workers' (Pullen-Sansfacon et al., 2013), ‘migrant social workers' (Fouché et al., 2014), and ‘overseas-qualified social workers' (Fouché et al., 2016), are used for defining this population. Welbourne et al. (2007) caution against stereotyping international social workers as individuals who relocate from poorer countries to richer ones as economic migrants and point out that this population chooses to relocate for a range of personal, professional and financial reasons (p. 36).

In our study all participants migrated to the UK for career advancement in the social work sector. This deliberate move implies agency, and as ‘the migrant is the one least defined by its being and place and more by its becoming and displacement' (Nail, 2015: 3), we selected the term ‘migrant' as appropriate for our participants. Moreover, we choose this term in accordance with studies in the UK (Simpson, 2009), which found that migrant social workers may feel like a ‘quick fix' in response to shortages. These professionals may experience mobile social positions, not fixed identities (Nail, 2015) and a sense of ‘otherness': not only do they do a hard job, but may also be viewed as ‘second-best' and that is a stereotype difficult to escape from. The sense of ‘otherness' these professionals may carry renders the term ‘migrant social workers' pertinent in this study, which looks at perceived prejudice at the workplace.

MIGRANT SOCIAL WORKERS AND PERCEIVED PREJUDICE

There is rich literature on the importance of social workers being aware of their own prejudices towards the disadvantaged or vulnerable people they work with (Moffatt, 1999). There is also literature on the importance of social workers being aware of possible prejudice and discrimination towards ethnic minority, migrant and refugee beneficiaries (Harrison & Melville, 2010; Robinson, 2009).

However, there is very little research (e.g. Stevens et al., 2012) on migrant social workers' perceived prejudice. There are studies looking at challenges migrant social workers face such as insufficient induction (Beddoe & Fouché, 2014), professional recognition assessment of qualifications across borders and securing licensure (Papadopoulos, 2017) and the stresses of working in an unfamiliar socio-cultural, legislative and political environment (Fouché et al., 2014). Yet in limited studies (e.g. Pullen-Sansfacon et al., 2013) there is discussion of the prejudice that migrant social workers may perceive as receiving from managers, colleagues and clients.

We believe this lack of analysis happens for the following reasons: First, there are different forms of prejudice neither immediate to identify, nor easy to research. Prejudice is defined as the negative attitudes, thoughts and beliefs about an entire category of people formed without full knowledge of the facts (Weiten & Lloyd, 2006). Yet there are subtle types of prejudice such as *symbolic racism* (expressed by those who justify their negative judgment of others by asserting that the others do not abide by traditional values of the dominant group), *aversive racism* (practiced by people who will avoid people without overt racist intent) and *micro-inequities* (tiny damaging characteristics of an environment that indicate lack of respect by

virtue of membership in a group) that play out in the professional and personal lives of social workers who may often be unaware of their impact (National Association of Social Workers, 2007).

Also, another factor impeding the analysis of perceived prejudice in migrant social workers is the lack of appropriate theoretical frameworks. Most of the research studying socioeconomic states or psychosocial outcomes in migrant social workers focuses on structural challenges this population faces as they enter the social work workforce (e.g. Moriarty et al., 2012) or as they build their career (Pullen-Sansfacon et al., 2013). Most of these studies either draw on rather one-dimensional psychological or sociological theories or lack a theoretical basis altogether. Such approaches do not allow a more in-depth understanding of migrant social workers' perceived prejudice.

In our study we elicit the autobiographical narratives of a group of migrant social workers in England, and analyse work experiences and perceived prejudice via a theoretical framework drawing on liberation psychology.

DEVELOPING THE UNDERSTANDING OF MIGRANT INTEGRATION: FROM ACCULTURATION TO LIBERATION

Berry's (1997) psychological acculturation theory and its uptake by other scholars (e.g. Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010) have been widely used for examining migrants' adaptation to the host society. Acculturation, is defined as ‘the process of cultural change and adaptation occurring when individuals from different cultures come into contact' (Gibson, 2001:19).

Berry (1997) described acculturation attitude as determined by the extent to which an individual is willing to retain an old culture and adopt a new one. This results in four types of

acculturation attitudes: integration (accept both old and new culture); assimilation (reject old culture, accept new); separation (accept old culture, reject new); and marginalisation (reject both). The longstanding assumption has been that when the host society is positively oriented towards migration, then migrants have high chances of successfully integrating. This assumption has been criticised, as it conveys a rigid two-dimensional view of acculturation, according to which migrants find themselves either in a positive new context, thus integrate easily, or in a negative context that thwarts opportunities for smooth integration (Wilczek et al., 2009).

Today's migrants emerge as more different from those of the previous decade because they are very diverse in terms of country of origin, profile and motivation (OECD, 2015). Also many of them have a good educational background, transnational ties, skills, and strong coping mechanisms. This means that the ways in which they integrate (or not) in the society where they resettle are new and dynamic. Currently therefore, as migrants' profile is changing the concept of migrant integration has been dynamically developing.

Recent theories on migrant integration have been moving from approaching integration as a static and one-sided phenomenon, to an increasingly dynamic and multi-level process (Prilleltensky, 2008). One such framework is the one by García-Ramírez et al., (2010) which draws on liberation psychology and sheds light on migrants' ability to rebuild and even restructure psychosocial resources and respond actively to new challenges.

In our study we choose this framework as it shows not only what migrants experience in the new culture, but specifically how migrants can develop resources to cope with perceived disadvantage. Understanding this empowerment process in migrant social workers is important because social workers are expected to be beacons of strength (Banks, 2006).

ACCULTURATIVE INTEGRATION FROM A LIBERATION PSYCHOLOGY THEORETICAL LENS

According to the framework by García-Ramírez et al. (2010), acculturative integration implies a self-construction process linked to the capacity of human beings to a) create meaning and act with intentionality; b) show reflexivity or the capacity of thinking of oneself and society as a whole; and c) maintain one's culture, which provides a symbolic system necessary to make sense of new encounters (De la Mata & Cubero, 2003 in García-Ramírez et al. (2010)). Figure 1 represents the empowering acculturation process experienced by migrants. It illustrates movement from marginalisation, assimilation and/or separation (left) to integration (right) on the three human ecological levels (i.e. citizenship, interpersonal and intrapersonal) through the process represented in the three overlapping circular areas:

FIGURE 1

The three circles show the psycho-political processes of empowerment and liberation which unfold as migrants reconstruct themselves and in turn may bring changes to the existing society: at the intrapersonal level *critical thinking* develops, which prompts people to build strengths. Then at the interpersonal level new social networks are created, and these naturally increase migrants' *social resources* and capacities to respond to injustice. Finally, this process leads people to take initiatives (or *civic actions*) oriented to the construction of fair social contexts. The boxes in the left column show the self as a result of experiences of oppression in segregating or marginalising receiving contexts. For example, at the interpersonal level oppression is based on experiences of conflict, isolation and distrust. The boxes in the right column depict the self as a result of empowering experiences in host societies that support integration (adapted from García-Ramírez et al., 2010, p.89).

This framework expands classic acculturation models by including a self-construction process which shows how migrants experience vulnerability and risk of social exclusion but also how they critically view injustices, build up niches and develop resources to protect themselves, and overcome oppression (Sonn and Lewis, 2009 in García-Ramírez et al. (2010).

In our analysis oppressive processes are reflected in the participants' quotes where they talk about perceived prejudice at the workplace. But liberation psychology also supports that every group can resist oppressive powers, so empowerment processes such as critical thinking, and building networks are also detected in the participants' words.

THE STUDY

Our analysis draws on a small-scale qualitative study, which aimed to explore the professional pathways and psychosocial well-being of overseas-trained health and social care professionals before and after migrating to the UK (Authors, 2014). We focused on the professions that attract most overseas professionals—medical doctors, nurses and social workers—who had obtained their qualifications in their home countries and were employed in the UK health and social care sector. The participants were recruited via the authors' professional networks in Southwest London. In this paper, we discuss findings pertaining to the migrant social workers.

METHODOLOGY

The purposive sample consisted of four women and one man who had been residing in England for an average of 7 years. One participant originated from Southeast Asia, two from Africa, one from North America and one from Eastern Europe. Their ages ranged from 30 to 40 years old. They all had a university degree in social work from their home countries and had worked in various settings with populations such as children, young offenders, abused women, homeless people or mental health patients. In England they were all employed full-time as social workers in posts based in or around South London. Four of them were working in public social services and one in the private sector.

Ethical approval for recruiting and interviewing was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health and Social Care Sciences which both authors were affiliated with at the time of the research. All participants were ensured of confidentiality and anonymity of the accounts they provided and they gave their consent to participate in writing.

The autobiographical narrative interview was chosen as the technique for data collection. This in-depth interview allows the researcher to approach the interviewee's experiential world in a more comprehensive way than in the question–answer scheme of traditional semi-structured interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

Once each interviewee provided informed consent, the interview began with the generative narrative question: "*I would like to ask you to tell me the story of your educational and professional life before and after you came to the UK. You can start by talking about your education and work experience in your home country, and then about education and work experience in the UK until today. After that you can also tell me your thoughts about your professional future"*. There were also specific narrative inquiries, i.e. regarding experiences with UK institutions (e.g. "did you approach an employment agency?"), psychosocial

resources such as social networks (e.g. "how are your relations with other co-ethnics?") and coping ("do you think you are in control of things?").

Interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. A questionnaire, where participants provided demographics and an outline of their educational and professional history, after the interview allowed us to contextualise biographical accounts. Verbatim transcriptions of interview data were analysed with the assistance of a qualitative analysis programme, NVivo.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first phase in the narrative analysis consisted of repeatedly reading through the interview transcript in order to grasp the emerging significant topics. The second phase was to identify the three principal elements to be found in every autobiographical narrative, that is, narrative tone, imagery and themes (McAdams, 1997).

Narrative tone is the most pervasive feature of an autobiographical narrative and is conveyed in the content of the story and also the form in which it is told. For example, the tone can be predominantly optimistic or pessimistic. Then every autobiographical narrative contains and expresses a characteristic imagery. For understanding a narrative the researcher must explore the unique way in which the narrators employ meaningful images, symbols and metaphors to make sense of who they are but also to describe others. Finally the researcher searches for the dominant themes in one's autobiographical narrative with the aim of understanding the message the narrators convey.

At the same time it was important to look not only at what (content) and how (form) it is said but also under which circumstances it is presented. Parker (2005) identifies key ideas in narrative analysis, that is, temporality and context. Temporality refers to the order of telling and context refers to the socio-cultural background against which a narrative story is set. When the process of identifying these elements was applied to all interviews, one distinctive narrative emerged that encapsulates how the participants made sense of their work experiences (with an emphasis on perceived prejudice).

The narrative analysis showed that participants had several negative but also a few positive experiences at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels in the workplace. Most importantly however our analysis highlighted several barriers at the systemic level, or the citizenship level according to the framework by García-Ramírez et al. (2010), which ultimately made the participants pessimistic about their professional development and dissatisfied at work.

In the following pages the emerging narrative is presented in the form of a coherent whole interspersed with relevant interview quotes to support it. After the analysis, the discussion section shows how the framework by García-Ramírez et al. (2010) sheds light on the meaning of the participants' narratives.

EMERGING NARRATIVE: THE NARRATIVE OF SURVIVAL

The interviewees made sense of their post-migration experiences through a narrative of survival. Narratives of survival have emerged in studies with migrants, e.g., Kiwanuka (2010) on migrant women in South Africa; van Meeteren (2014) on irregular migrants in Belgium

and the Netherlands; and Author (2010, 2011) on highly skilled refugees in the UK.

An ambivalent, neither optimistic nor pessimistic tone could be traced in this group's narratives. The general message was that 'things are very hard while living in the UK' and that 'one has to keep on trying to make it through'. The imagery used for others was sometimes positive (e.g. portraying colleagues from Britain as helpful) and sometimes negative (e.g. pointing out how some of these colleagues showed distrust towards migrant social workers). An indicative quote is the following where the participant describes attitudes from English colleagues. The quote captures what earlier on was defined as 'micro-inequities at the workplace':

> *'Colleagues welcomed us so that was very nice... and tried to help us...But I also sensed from some they assumed things like coming from a poor country we Eastern Europeans would not know how to use a computer...So they came with assumptions, stereotypes...But it's ignorance that's why I feel it would be useful to have some introduction in the culture where foreign colleagues worked in... a presentation, a short movie...for preventing pre-judgements'* (Participant 1).

The imagery referring to themselves was also sometimes positive (e.g. presenting one's self as active professionally and confident) and sometimes negative (e.g. demotivated):

> *'….all the social workers, even the British, are working just as hard. But if you look at the support systems, they probably have a cushion [protecting them]... So that's where you have those dilemmas...And there is always the issue of knowledge…I think that with the international social workers because we're feeling we don't know the system you do much more time...and still have doubts' (Participant 2).*

The themes evolved around pre-migration issues such as looking for social work posts in the UK and experiences of the recruitment process (e.g. getting credentials and work experience from one's home country recognized in the UK). The following quote is indicative:

'The other challenge was trying to prove my qualification was at the same level as the British qualification or equivalent and I had to get my paperwork… So I got the backing of my lecturers, they sent letters and I provided all that. But I remember thinking I've done 4 years, why do I need to prove all this?... I thought that instead of fighting the system I need to try and get a professional qualification and maybe that will iron things out' (Participant 2).

The themes referred also to post-migration difficulties, such as language-barriers, role ambiguity at work and sense of alienation in the new system and the solutions they attempted to find for addressing these. In the following quote, this participant reflects on the first integration difficulties she faced due to language-barriers.

'…maybe because my accent at that time was stronger they said that they may not understand certain things I was talking about, so I had to adapt to how they understand the terms as well. So one issue was that at that time...'

She also reflects on having to accept the major differences existing between the welfare systems of her home country and the UK:

'... in [my country] there is a small welfare department but no benefits if you are not working. If you're a family in need you can apply for grants for utility bills, but there's no "if you're off work you get Job Seekers [allowance]". So this one big thing I needed to accept culturally…because I came from a background where if you don't work, you don't think your government has a responsibility to feed you' (Participant 3).

Experiences of differential treatment were also noted, as in the quote of another participant:

'I felt when I first started [work in the UK] that the treatment was not the same. All 3 of us started in October. In December we had a recall day with our agency to find out how we're getting on. I said "oh we're fine" and the other colleagues who were white

South Africans said "oh we're so busy". So they had much more cases than I did...I felt the difference because the response given was "we're not sure how to work with people of colour". I don't know what that's about because I did the same degree as them..." (Participant 4).

In the narrative of survival the emphasis was on how difficulties remained, and less about how the problems were resolved. The interviewee below expressed disillusionment as he elaborated on ongoing problems at work such as the bureaucratic nature of his post and the ensuing role ambiguity:

'*...One of the reasons I came here [was] to learn more and have experience in a culture presented as one of the best social work systems... But the reality was different because social work is more a bureaucratic and administrative task rather than practical one, which was disappointing. So I have to adapt my professional culture...It is difficult because we wanted to do things with children and families, but we are dragged into things and act as line managers, business managers...*' (Participant 1).

Another theme concerned their life satisfaction: they were feeling satisfied with certain things when compared to life in their home country (e.g. professional progress), but discussed how they still needed to achieve things and be fully content with their new life in the UK. In the quote below this participant notes the differential payment between residential and statutory social workers and reflects on how much this impedes satisfaction:

'Sometimes it's very difficult to do your actual social worker job. Because there's a lot of paperwork, you have to record everything, do the... risk assessments, which are huge documents. I wonder if because I work in a residential place it means I'll never be able to do what I was doing? And there's a different pay structure: Statutory sectors normally pay better and residential social workers are not as well paid. So it's a matter of where you want to be, are you satisfied with what you do and how much

you get for it. I don't know really what lies ahead' (Participant 3).

The following extract, where the interviewee narrated her first experiences as a social worker in the UK, illustrates several aspects of the narrative of survival:

> *"[in my home country] we had a 2-tier approach so we did our crisis line and counselling and then also fund raising and political things, writing to MP's or, making social comments... I liked that work. I came here, I went to a crisis centre and there were only 40 people, in London...Moving to a big city I assumed there would be more people, more ideas, more prevention and equality, it's just not. Plus there's tremendous pressure on social workers... huge case loads, no time to breathe... I like talking to people and getting to know them... I miss not being able to do the most rewarding part of the job which is doing something preventative...this means having a manageable caseload to be able to see everything and talk to people who are doing well so that they can reach their potential best. If you take that out of the equation what is there? Just getting burnt out from constantly dealing with the same kind of issue…*" (Participant 5).

The same interviewee discusses conflicts with a supervisor in one of her first posts:

> *'My first supervisor was great....But when she got another job they hired another social worker as my boss who was absolutely horrendous. It was really bad, to the point that he was quite bullying with me...I remember feeling shocked. I had in mind that the UK would be a very progressive place and I found many things were very sexist....I remember him saying my education wasn't as good as his and things like that.. I talked to HR who was really supportive of me. The woman kept saying, you know, you should report this. I didn't want to cause a problem, or lose the job and I was quite attached to the patients, let's just work this...I wish I had said something*

earlier. It ended up quite a mess. I had to quit and get another job...So it was a very strange experience.'

Finally the same interviewee discusses interpersonal issues at the workplace—mixed experiences of symbolic racism targeted to migrant social workers but also instances where there was support between colleagues:

'An outside patients care coordinator came and I pointed out some issues around finances... a care home taking care of someone's big finances, and were spending it on a funeral plan and I said this is wildly inappropriate... this woman said "that might be how you do it in your country but we don't"... you know, that could be considered racist...But others like my manager here, he is very supportive and mentioned it's good that I have a different education. So I think it has been both sides of the coin.'

The general tone in this narrative was not optimistic. Most sections describing experiences (such as work-related observations in a crisis centre in London) finished with a negative message ('just getting burnt out'). The verbs and phrases used often had a dynamic, decisive quality: 'I like talking to people and getting to know them', 'I had to quit and get another job', 'I said this is wildly inappropriate'. As far as imagery is concerned, the interviewee portrayed herself often as perceptive and strong-willed, despite being surprised because of cross-cultural differences. Regarding the main themes, this narrative included the sequence of problem–solution–pending problem.

With regards to temporality the order of telling seemed rather circular: first a problem was described (e.g. experiencing bullying from a supervisor), then the decision she took for resolving it was described ('I had to quit and get another job…'), along with an evaluation of that decision ('So it was a very strange experience'). In terms of the general context, the participant appeared to be oriented at the present time and place ('there's tremendous pressure

on social workers', ‘my manager here is very supportive').

In summary by constructing a narrative of survival the participants made sense of their post-migration life in the UK by viewing their overall experience as a difficult process where survival was key. The issue of overcoming difficulties was featured more like a struggle instead of a challenging task. Several problems at work were discussed and the finding that all of them—despite activating various psychosocial resources—emerged as dissatisfied and skeptical about their career suggests they are not yet integrated. Implications of these findings for migrant social workers' acculturative integration—both in terms of the framework by García-Ramírez et al. (2010) and in terms of practically improving their acculturative integration—are discussed below.

DISCUSSION OF ANALYSIS USING AN EMPOWERING ACCULTURATIVE INTEGRATION FRAMEWORK

In his section we discuss how the framework by García-Ramírez et al. (2010) and its three levels of acculturative integration illuminate the meaning of the participants' narratives of survival.

The intrapersonal, interpersonal and citizenship levels are not innovative per se; similar levels are suggested in other holistic conceptual frameworks, such as: the ecological approach to study the human experience while acknowledging the wider political, social, historical, economic and spiritual realms of their reality (Trickett, 2009); and, Prilleltensky's (2008) framework that considers the individual, family/relational, organizational/communal, and societal/ecological levels when studying migrant well-being. What is innovative in the framework by García-Ramírez et al. (2010) is that through its conceptual lens we can read

through the participants' narratives and see not only their perceived experiences, but also how the interpersonal and citizenship contexts shape the construction of these perceptions.

All participants described their experiences through a narrative of survival where they attributed difficulties to various interpersonal factors such as prejudice from colleagues, differential treatment from supervisors and colleagues and also systemic factors such as unfair recruitment and pay conditions, role ambiguity and the bureaucratic nature of social work. In the case of the social worker from Canada whose quotes were extensively cited, such interpersonal and systemic factors emerged as obstacles in her professional development and work-related satisfaction. The participant described how one of her supervisors bullied her that she found herself compelled to ‘quit from a job' she was satisfied with; and how the ‘tremendous pressure put on social workers' makes them gradually forget about the rewarding parts of their jobs (‘doing something preventative') and eventually feel ‘burnt out' and demotivated. The acculturative integration framework highlights how such factors at the interpersonal and citizenship levels can influence negatively the way migrant social workers eventually perceive their post-migration experiences, by discouraging them and implicitly hindering their opportunities of professional development. In a previously noted quote this discouragement is clearly captured: ‘*So I have to adapt my professional culture...It is difficult because we wanted to do things with children and families, but are dragged into things and act as line managers, business managers...*'

The framework indicates that the psycho-political processes of empowerment—expected to unfold as migrants adapt in host societies which support integration—are thwarted at least in this study's participants. On the surface it may seem these individuals live in a host society that supports integration, because they are active members of the UK labour market. Yet the analysis of their experiences, which reveals perceived conflicts and distrust at the

intrapersonal level and barriers at the citizenship level, indicates these social workers may not be truly integrated, as their professional prospects are impeded.

It emerges that migrant social workers, like some of their clients from minority groups who find themselves de-valued (Danso, 2009), are caught between their own determination and aspirations, optimistic discourses, which are often implicitly discriminatory (Healy et al., 2010), and certain unfair policies and systemic practices (Johns, 2005). Some of the participants regard injustices critically, do build up networks and take action to protect themselves (Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2010, p. 88). However, their integration is thwarted because it is bound to social norms of the host society (Prilleltensky, 2008), which in this case emerge as rather suppressive. Such discouragement entails a very serious form of disempowerment: this is where processes like internalized oppression (Hardiman & Jackson, 1994) may occur, whereby people come to believe the stereotypes about them are true (in this case that they cannot fully utilize their potential as professionals) and may even behave in ways analogous to these stereotypes (Lipsky, 1987).

In general the analysis confirms that participants had several negative but also a few positive experiences at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of acculturative integration. These findings agree with similar conclusions drawn in studies exploring experiences of different migrant professionals in the UK (Alexis et al., 2007; Oikelome & Healy, 2007) but also studies with migrant social workers (Brown et al., 2015; Hussein et al., 2011).

Yet at the same time the finding that in several cases these actors and systems played an important role into making the participants perceive their chances of professional development through a pessimistic lens, indicates that such actors and systems may thwart the potential of their highly skilled migrant workforce. In this way it emerges how this framework is valuable for understanding migrant social workers' experiences at the

workplace and therefore opens suggestions for improving their acculturative integration.

It is important to note that some of the barriers at the citizenship level are not limited to migrant social workers; low pay, bureaucracy, limited scope for creativity, and role ambiguity have been found to affect social workers in general in the UK (Moriarty et al., 2015). Yet we agree the framework by García-Ramírez et al. (2010) is particularly relevant to understanding migrant social workers' experiences and their sense of alienation and discouragement and what steps individuals may take to progress from feeling like ‘second best' (Simpson, 2009) to more active agents, that is, from marginalised states to more integrated ones.

Another important contribution of this study lies in highlighting issues of prejudice that migrant social workers may face themselves from employers, colleagues or clients. As discussed earlier, there is rich literature on the importance of social workers' anti-discriminatory practice towards their disadvantaged clients (including migrant beneficiaries), yet there is scarce research on the prejudice migrant social workers may experience themselves at the workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

Migrant social workers often bring a wealth of global professional knowledge, most having qualified and practiced extensively in their home country (Fouche et al., 2016: 107). However, as Simpson (2009) notes and as our findings confirm, prior experience can only partially prepare social workers for practicing in a new country. Indeed, their experiences on many occasions showed that despite their ‘desirability' for the English social work sector they were neither easily adjusted nor actually integrated to the latter. Perceived symbolic racism,

and micro-inequities at the workplace emerged as playing out in the lives of migrant social workers who may be unaware of their long-term impact.

The above complex processes can be examined through longitudinal research designs and theoretical frameworks such as the one by García-Ramírez et al. (2010) which shed light on the barriers people experience and the resources they may activate, but more importantly on how the interpersonal and citizenship levels affect their perceptions of their experiences.

A limitation of our study was the small sample that cannot capture the diversity of experiences. Also the homogenous negative nuance emerging from the narratives might be possibly enriched if the participants were interviewed at a different point in time. These limitations can be addressed by using larger and more diverse samples and by employing longitudinal research designs for following people's professional pathways over time. Our study offers a significant opportunity to consider professional experiences of migrant social workers according to the acculturative integration framework and to highlight concerns of perceived prejudice and discouragement as evidenced by participant narratives.

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FIGURE 1

Acculturative integration as a psycho-political process (Garcia-Ramirez et al, 2010)