Smooth sailing with the occasional 'culture shock': the experiences of Romanian social workers in England

'Smooth sailing' cu ocazionalul șoc cultural: Experiență asistenților sociali români în Anglia

Yohai Hakak & Simona Anton

Published online: 01 Nov 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Smooth sailing with the occasional 'culture shock': the experiences of Romanian social workers in England

'Smooth sailing' cu ocazionalul șoc cultural: Experiență asistenților sociali români în Anglia

Yohai Hakak [a] and Simona Anton[b]

[a]Brunel University London, London, UK; [b]Ealing Social Services, Children and Families, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of social workers trained in Romania and then immigrated to England. It explores how they understood and negotiated the English culture. While a small number of studies mentioned migrating Romanian social workers, none of these closely considered issues related to culture. Bourdieu's 'habitus' adjusted to explore national level groups was instrumental in understanding Romanian social workers' cultural capital, and the interplay between it and English culture. The study aims to explore how Romanian cultural habitus shaped their experiences of immigration and their unique perspective. Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire. Interviewees express greater life satisfaction following their migration, however, they also discuss the obstacles they encountered, including the differences regarding the place of the individual in relation to the family, wider society and the State, the status of social work and definitions of politeness and impoliteness. We explore the participants' responses to these tensions, the constraints they identified and the need for a comprehensive induction programme before starting to practice in England.

ABSTRACT

Acest studiu analizează experiențele asistenților sociali calificați în Romania care au emigrat în Anglia. Studiul explorează modul în care aceștia au înțeles și au negociat cultura engleză. Exista un număr mic de studii ce mentionteaza migrarea asistenților sociali români, însă niciunul dintre acestea nu a studiat îndeaproape elemente legate de cultură. Conceptul de 'habitus' al lui Bourdieu, adaptat la grupuri la nivel național, a fost esențial pentru înțelegerea capitalului cultural al asistenților sociali români și interacțiunea dintre acesta și cultura engleză. Studiul își propune să exploreze modul în care experiența migrației le-a fost influențată de habitusul cultural românesc și perspectiva lor unică. Datele au fost colectate prin interviuri semi-structurate și un chestionar online. Participanții au exprimat un grad ridicat de satisfacție în viață în urma migrației, cu toate acestea, ei discută și despre obstacolele pe care le-au întâlnit, inclusiv despre diferențele în ceea ce privește rolul individului în raport cu familia, societate și Stat, statutul asistentei sociale și definițiile politeții și nepolitetii. În acest studiu explorăm răspunsurile participanților la aceste tensiuni, limitările identificate de aceștia, și nevoia de a li se oferi un program amplu de inducție înainte de a începe să profeseze în Anglia.

Introduction

The ongoing global economic crisis following the 2008 financial collapse, the rise of the far right in many European countries, and Brexit more recently, all bring to the fore transnational immigration and its consequences for individuals and societies across Europe. Staff shortages and high turnover rates plaguing social work in England have led to a trend of recruitment of foreign social workers. Since 2009, the role of the Children and Families Social Worker is continuously on the United Kingdom Shortage Occupation List (Full Review of the Shortage Occupation List, 2019), endorsing overseas recruitment campaigns as a potential solution. In addition to social workers from English-speaking and Commonwealth countries (Hussein, 2011), recruitment shifted towards Eastern Europe, including Romania. The exact total number of social workers trained in Romania and currently registered in England is unclear. According to Community Care, based on Freedom of Information requests, between 2012 and 2017, 150 Romanian social workers registered in England (Turner, 2017). During these years, Romanian social workers were the second largest group of migrating social workers after Australian trained social workers. Between 2009 and 2010, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) received 133 applications for registration from Romanian qualified social workers, this being the most significant number of internationally qualified social workers wanting to practice in England during that period (Hussein, 2011; Zanca & Misca, 2016).

Research conducted by Hussein et al. (2011) and Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2014) shed some light on the experiences of international social workers in England, looking at their adaptation, implications for practice and factors influencing supply and demand. However, these studies did not explore the unique experiences of social workers from each of these countries and were not sensitive to their culture and how it interacted with the local culture. One article on the immigration of Romanian social workers highlights the need for more empirical data to evidence their experience and calls for social work education providers and regulators to better support them (Zanca & Misca, 2016). This article will aim to bridge this gap by exploring the experiences of Romanian social workers who immigrated to England. This study is part of a larger research project exploring the migration to the UK of social workers trained in Australia, Canada, Ghana, India, Romania, South Africa, the USA and Zimbabwe, and the migration of British social workers to Australia. The Primary Investigator (PI) for the project was Dr. Yohai Hakak from Brunel University London. Data for the study reported here were gathered through a mixed method approach using semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire. While both authors have migrated to England, only the second author arrived from Romania. As a Romanian migrant studying to become a social worker, the co-author found this research of personal importance. It allowed exploration and a better understanding of her own experiences. It also strengthened the drive to complete this project with the hope it will improve our ability to support future migrating Romanian social workers, as well as acknowledge their contribution to British society.

Historical setting and social work practice

The beginnings of social work in Romania, as in many other countries, were in charitable and philanthropic activities, often religiously motivated and based in monasteries and churches (Lazar, 2015). After the Communist Party came into power in 1947 it gradually abolished all social work institutions. In 1969, the ruling Party finally cancelled all existing social work programmes and eliminated the role of social worker from the occupational code. The party believed that the administrative system could solve all problems aside from 'hostile elements' who could not be socially integrated (Anghel et al., 2013). It was also believed that the only way to assist orphaned or abandoned children, people with disabilities and the elderly was through admitting them to an institution. In contrast, since the 1960s in Western countries, alternatives to institutionalisation were emerging as studies showed its negative effects. After the fall of communism in 1989, the worldwide public was shocked by images of children abandoned, locked up and mistreated in institutions in Romania.

Following the 1989 revolution, 1990 represented the new beginning for social work, marked by the re-establishment of higher education programmes in social work. After the revolution, the development of social work as a system and profession faced the same obstacles it did between 1920 and 1930. The most acute issue was the lack of qualified staff. In 1990, there were few with formal training, and the newly constituted university education had to resort to external experience. Social service roles accordingly were initially carried out by unqualified staff.

With the change of the regime after 1989 and the lifting of restrictions that Romania had regarding internal and external mobility of its population, emigration increased. Globalisation meant the disappearance of the nation-state, and the blurring of borders and brought an ease of mobility and communication. A pattern of emigration from East to West Europe developed in the last decades. Romanians, Polish, Czech and Bulgarians immigrated to Western Europe, Germany, the UK, Austria, Denmark and Belgium (Taran, 2009).

Conceptual framework

The Habitus is one of the most important concepts proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1980). It was originally used in his seminal book, Distinction (Bourdieu, 1979), to explain why the French school system, which is meant to be meritocratic, only replicated the existing class structure. If the most talented were indeed able to rise to the top, one would expect they would come from all class groups, but as Bourdieu showed, that wasn't the case. Bourdieu showed how the Habitus – the embodied preferences, dispositions, behaviours and tastes members of different class groups have internalised – sets them apart, often unknowingly. As Bourdieu's book title suggests, these preferences and dispositions create a distinction between members of different class groups and prevent those from the working classes to integrate into the middle class. Such embodied preferences and dispositions can be gradually modified, if the individual is aware of them. Accordingly, the focus of this research is on how social workers adapt the way they act and practice within the social circumstances they find themselves following migration. One of the main interests of this research is to examine how Romanian social workers respond to the new cultural context they find themselves in and how/if they are able to adjust to it. How does Romanian culture shape their interpretation of and interactions with the local cultures they encounter in England? Which aspects of the local culture do they internalise, and which do they reject? Bourdieu's ideas about the habitus, originally meant to examine the unique culture of different classes, were later adopted by other scholars to examine the unique culture of different nations (Hadas, 2020; Kuipers, 2012; Yair, 2015, 2017). This study intends to employ a similar approach to investigate the interaction between Romanian trained social workers and English culture.

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was employed combining 10 semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire completed by 31 participants. Eight interviewees identified as women, two as men. Nine of the interviews were carried out face to face, and one over Skype. All the interviews were conducted by the second author, they were recorded and then transcribed and took on average an hour. All identifiable information was removed to ensure anonymity. The online questionnaires included both closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire started with a series of demographic questions followed by questions exploring push and pull factors for migration. Other questions explored experiences of migration and integration, including any challenges. Our focus was on questions exploring cultural similarities and differences between country of origin and destination, and their implications for practice, which will be the centre of this article. These questions were led by Bourdieu's Habitus adjusted to national level groups. Finally, we also included questions exploring and assessing well-being. These questions were explored at a much deeper level through semi-structured interviews. Using convenience sampling, participants who were trained in Romania and

practice in England were recruited through a variety of means including snowballing (Habti & Elo, 2019), through a recruiter, through LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter, and through contacts in London's Local Authorities. The initial contact was through an invitation message, email or social media post. This included a link to the project's webpage and a more detailed Participant Information sheet, both providing information. Those who indicated in response that they are interested in taking part were invited to complete the online questionnaire and/or to take part in a semi-structured interview. Those interested in completing the questionnaire were sent a link to the questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire ensured participants were aware they are taking part in research and that they are happy to do so. At the end of the questionnaire, we informed participants that we are also conducting semi-structured interviews and invited those interested to email the researcher or leave their contact details. We tried as much as possible to ensure a good range of ages, years in practice and years in England, etc. Interviewees were asked to sign an informed consent form before the interview began. The project got ethical approval from Brunel University's Research Ethics Committee.

31 participants completed the questionnaire of whom 27 (87%) identified as female and 4 (13%) as male. 15 (48.3%) were between the ages of 41–50, additional 13 (41.9%) were between the ages 31–40 and 3 (9.6%), between the ages 20–30. 18 (58%) have been living in England for over 10 years, 8 (22.2%) between 5 and 10 years, 4 (12.9%) between 1 and 5 years and 1 participant under 1 year who was still looking for a social work position. 19 (61.2%) secured their position before moving to England and 11 (35.4%) only after moving. 11 questionnaire respondents indicated residing in the Greater London area were all the interviewees resided too. The rest of the questionnaire respondents indicated residing in different parts of England. 19 (61.2%) indicated practising in Children and Families, 4 (12.9%) in Adult Services, 3 (9.6%) in Mental health, 1 (3%) in Higher Education and 1 (3%) were unemployed.

Data analysis

Transcribing the interviews started the familiarisation with the data. This was followed by collating the qualitative data from the questionnaires, and re-reading all the qualitative information gathered as the first stage of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second stage was generating the codes, which were represented by key words or phrases. According to Neuman (2013), the process of scanning the data, categorising and dividing or interpreting according to themes is defined as coding. The third stage was searching for themes. As there were abundance of data, the research produced many themes, however, in stages 4 and 5 – reviewing the themes and naming them – a clearer view of the most important themes was achieved. This guided the final stage – producing the report by filtering it through the concept and theoretical ideas in the literature review to provide an analysis.

Transcribing the interviews, gathering the results from the questionnaires and re-reading all the information gathered helped in increasing familiarity with the materials as the first stage of our thematic analysis. The second stage was generating the codes followed by the third stage of searching for themes. The first author of this article was drawn to this topic of research as she herself migrated from Romania a few years ago. She soon realised that her belonging to the same national group might impose certain biases which highlighted the need to be self-reflective. On the positive side, sharing the same national cultural background and the similar professional interest helped to build with participants a relationship based on trust. Sharing the same native language, despite the interviews being carried out in English, facilitated communication, and improved understanding between interviewer and interviewee. The findings section will present key themes emerging from the data and highlight our participants' perceptions of the local culture – including the professional culture – they encountered after immigration, and how they understood and responded to it.

Findings

Charity versus social justice

Interviewees were asked if there are any differences between the culture, values and practices they were familiar with in their personal and professional life at their home-country (either from working or studying social work), and the culture, values and practices they encountered after migration. One of the key issues highlighted by many participants is the foundational ideas at the core of the Romanian and British States directing the delivery of support and services. Here is how one participant describes these differing ideas:

> Romanian system of social work is still heavily based on a welfare and charity/non-governmental service provision or the 'good Samaritan' approach, while the UK has a system heavily based on governmental intervention and assessment of risks.

The British Welfare State is known for its rights-based approach to social assistance (Woodroofe, 1968). Many rights are enshrined in law, including for example the right for social security through unemployment benefits and disability allowance, and the State's role is to ensure these rights are protected. Contrary to that, in many countries, social assistance is still not seen as a right and is not enshrined in legislation, or as in the case of Romania, social assistance is only starting to be perceived as a right. Such changes are very slow due (Mihai-Bogdan, 2019) to Romania's economic difficulties, and according to Caimi (2016), it is the EU country that invests the least public money in social services. Possibly exacerbated by economic difficulties, 'the introduction of human rights into social work education is a relatively new development in Romanian curricula' (Mihai-Bogdan, 2019, p. 5). Instead, social assistance is more often seen as a 'gift' from the State. This gift must be returned by the citizen in the form of complying with the existing political order and remaining indebted to the State. In Guidieri's (1984) re-interpretation of Mauss' theory, what the French sociologist defines as 'gift,' is in fact, a loan. The one who receives it knows they must return the gift, and even more than they have received. The gift that was received creates an obligation and a relationship of mutual co-dependence. It binds the person who receives it, and it limits their freedom. In the case of charity, the obvious nature of the gift is that it does not have to be returned in its material form, however, there is the expectation that the receiver must be grateful and morally indebted. Someone who is not grateful for the act of charity shows ingratitude. Between the gift maker and the gift recipient, a power relationship irreversibly settles. The equality between the one who commits an act of charity and the one who receives it disappears. In a society built around the principles of charity, even if poverty reduction is successful, inequality represents the moral and normative background of the interaction between people. In such a society, a disadvantaged individual cannot legitimately claim to be helped; the poor no longer claim their right to something that suits them, they only benefit from the favours that are done to them through the mercy and generosity of others. They are passive subjects of the social play; they cannot make claims; they have no right to comment on what they have received.

Unlike charity, social justice does not position the beneficiary in an unbalanced relationship. A system built on social justice is not centred on the gift, and the social interaction configured around it becomes non-essential, marginal. The gift is replaced by social benefit and aid, defined as an expression of a fundamental right. The one who receives social benefits is not the subject of a favour. In a society based on social justice, the gift takes the form of a kind of moral and financial reparation; it is an act of justice that is done to its beneficiary. This approach is based on a philosophy that implicitly recognises the essentially unjust and arbitrary nature of this world and tries, through the tools available to it, to mitigate the consequences of the fundamental injustice of the world. To offer these material repairs means, in fact, to guarantee the equal exercise of fundamental rights by all citizens, not just by the wealthy. Social justice is not institutionalised mercy, nor compassion managed by the state, but a radically different approach to human relations which emphasises the rights of the one who receives, not the virtues of the one who gives.

The community, the family and the individual

The lack of a comprehensive protective legal framework ensuring one's rights in Romania shifts responsibility to the family and wider community, and might explain another closely related key finding: the tensions between the perceptions that interviewees brought with them regarding the place and role of the family and wider community, compared with what they encountered in England. One interviewee explained:

> The biggest difference that I can immediately identify is the role of the extended family. In my culture, parents play a crucial role in their children's lives way beyond their reaching adulthood; they are there to guide and support throughout their children's lives. Children are raised with a strong respect towards their parents and the elderly. It is extremely rare, almost unheard of culturally, for a 16-year-old to leave their family home; or for a parent to expect their child to 'leave the nest' unless they were ready to. Teens respect and value their parents and parents value their children as individuals. The commitment of the extended family is stronger.

Possibly because of its recent communist past, Romanian culture as transported to England still puts less emphasis on individualism and more on collectivism compared with England. Following from that, Romanian participants attribute greater importance to building strong relationships with a wider group and the extended family where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of the group and family. As another participant explained, these differences have varied implications:

> in my country there was a close community with my neighbours, we visited and helped each other; in UK - very individualist; children's playground - in my country, the kids play together around the block of flat/houses; in UK - they play only in children's playgrounds.

While the changes described by the last interviewee are also connected to the rise of the Risk Society (Beck, 1992) and the general growth in awareness and preoccupation with risks caused by fellow humans, these changes are enhanced by the fact that once-communal bonds get weaker, public spaces are seen as less safe and parents gradually limit and control their children's free movement, confining them to more protected spaces.

The greater role played by the family had some additional implications across the life span, as described by another interviewee:

> In Romania the family is expected to support and look after their members (children, elderly) and don't expect the authorities to take responsibility for them, while in UK there is a certain reliance (on the authorities) and a sense of entitlement of citizens, without any, or (with only) a minimal sense of responsibility and accountability for their families. In Romania there is more value placed on education and on being in work, while in the UK, the welfare system is producing generations of 'low aspirations' individuals, without much or any contribution to the community and society.

Looking at the history of Romania, the role of the family was crucial during communist years, and this cultural trait persisted. We can speculate that due to the limited support from the State, people relied on their families to support each other. Since they could not put their trust in the State, parents invested in their children and in their education so that later in life, their children would support them in return. In order to support their children and for them to attend school, Romanians found it crucial to be in employment. These historical elements shaped Romanians' perceptions towards work, role of the family and their relationship towards State benefits. From this perspective, the much more active role taken by the State in England has some negative consequences including a 'sense of entitlement', 'low aspirations' and dependency. Another result of the shift to a social justice model in which the State plays a more active role in securing rights and protecting vulnerable individuals, is a shift in the public's approach and expectations towards seeing social workers as the State's representatives on these issues. This is how another interviewee describes it:

> In my country social workers have a positive image as the people who help others; in UK, service users' perception was that I was there to control and to punish.

Looking at the history of social work in Romania, its development was stopped by the communist regime when the profession was abolished for almost half a century. After the fall of communism, when the social work profession was re-instated in Romania, social workers' main role was to help those in need to access different sources of support and charity – some provided by the state, some by charity organisations, thus contributing to social workers being perceived as helpers. As there is only very limited legislation involving social workers in safeguarding of children and adults, in the known tension between 'care' and 'control', much more emphasis was put in Romania on social workers' caring role. The public image of the profession is therefore much more positive in Romania. Realising the differences between the public image of the profession in both countries was a difficult experience as described by the following interviewee:

> The fact that the (social work) profession (in England) wasn't held in the same regard, that could be part of the culture shock. I discovered that the press was always very negative, and people were negative about the profession. I wasn't aware of that. I was quite proud to be a social worker (until then).

Thompson's (2018, p. 25) explanation of Bourdieu's Habitus might help here. He likens the habitus to wallpaper and explains that aspects of our culture

> 'fade into the background, and, although we may be in contact with them on a daily basis, we forget they are there, and they have little direct bearing on our conscious decisions or actions. It is for this reason that we can experience what is known as 'culture shock' when we find ourselves in a cultural setting that we are not familiar with'.

This seems to describe the experience of many of our research participants.

Social work and the role of the social worker

While being aware of the limitations of social work they encountered in England, interviewees also acknowledged the fact that social work in Romania had a recent rebirth following many years of non-existence during communism. Many talked about social work in England as having extensive history resulting in a more cohesive identity, much clearer guiding values, legislation, policies and procedures, coupled with robust systems of case-file management as well as richer training and professional development opportunities. Other advantages highlighted were the greater availability and range of resources, the emphasis on partnership working and multi-agency work, supervision and time secured for reflection and for learning from mistakes, for example, through serious case reviews. The outcome, according to interviewees, was that vulnerable people are better protected in England and practitioners are more accountable. Participants who practised in Romania reported that safeguarding is still not properly understood and implemented back home. This is how one of the participants explained it:

> I think there is still that understanding that a parent might lose their temper and smack the child, but in Romania a smacking can turn into a beating and still not be prosecuted and not have repercussions, or still not be seen as a concern. Whereas here, if smacking turns into beating, somebody will find out about it, a child would be able to talk about it, a teacher would hear about, somebody would be able to take measures.

The participant doesn't explain the reason for the different responses described and we can only assume that as in many other countries, corporal punishment in Romania is still perceived as a legitimate part of parenting, and not as requiring intervention. As risk is a social construct, what constitutes as 'risk' for children changes across time and place, and in the case of Romanian social workers migrating to the England and assessing risk as part of their daily practice, this required adjusting to. In the words of another participant: 'things that were 'normal' in Romania, for example a 10-year-old at home alone, or slapping a child, triggered a multi-agency response in the UK'. While Romanian social workers familiarised themselves with the legislation in England as part of preparing to practice in England, some were still taken aback by the immense powers transferred to social workers and the

expectations directed at them regarding safeguarding of vulnerable children and adults. One partici-
pant describes her experience thus

> … In my third week in the UK I visited (a family) three times during that day, and I couldn't find the child. We
> asked for a Welfare Police Check overnight. In the morning, when I arrived at the office, I was called downstairs
> by the police who handed me a child in a car seat. I went upstairs to my manager, I remember it perfectly, and I
> started crying. I said, 'I was handed over a child, and I have no idea what PP (police protection) is, and they told
> me they gave me a PP'. She took me into a room and explained what happened and what the procedure is. That
> for me was a shock, it was a good learning point, but I had no idea that the police had the power to remove a
> child and just hand them over to you.

The unique powers conferred on to social workers seem to require additional adjustments. Reading
about these on paper is not enough to adjust to the variety of meanings and implications and these
can, as in this case, become overwhelming.

Trust, evidence and bureaucracy

In addition to the many favourable portrayals of social work in England, other consistent criticism
was also expressed. The following quote relates to what several interviewees described as 'lack of
trust' towards employees. Here in the words of one of them:

> The UK does not trust its workers and agencies and relies on paperwork for audit and accountability instead of improving
> the working partnership between service users and social workers to achieve higher success. There is a culture of inspec-
> tions, target driven practice where paperwork is the only way to evidence practice, which ends up being a purpose in
> themselves rather than a means of achieving success … This is different from my previous practice, where paperwork
> was minimal, inspectors spent very little time talking to the agencies and most of the time talking to service users …

New Public Management adopted in the England during Margaret Thatcher's days as Prime
Minister and is still in place with some variation, has at its foundation a lack of trust towards pro-
fessionals who are perceived as self-serving unless under the constant threat of targets and perform-
ance indicators (Horton & Farnham, 2015). Such a reality, while effective in some respects, has its
costs as indicated by the interviewee, including turning the meeting of targets into an aim in
itself – a tick-box exercise – regardless, on some occasions, of its real benefit for service users. The
lack of trust has other implications as described by another interviewee:

> The social work practice in the UK is structured and procedural and attempts to have rules and regulations for
> every scenario. This defeats the purpose because every life/individual is different. In Romania, social work prac-
> tice is less prescriptive.

The attempt to provide top-down guidance and procedures for every eventuality means that
often sooner than later, the changing reality will make the existing procedures inadequate, poten-
tially leading to ineffective or even harmful practice. But in addition, the constant emphasis on
targets and the proliferation of procedures has another less desired outcome:

> The systems in the UK in terms of statutory work are very complex and the bureaucracy is quite massive … I
> found that 80%–90% of the time is spent in front of the computer screen writing reports and case notes …
> In Romania I had more freedom to practise hands on, more contact with clients and less paperwork.

While the direct impact of a bloated bureaucracy is clear in terms of its time and labour demands,
requiring social workers to divert attention away from direct work with service users, there are
additional implications as described by another interviewee:

> The professional scrutiny here (in the England) is very punitive, with a number of inspectors, auditors and reg-
> ulators as well as the threat of the press creating anxiety to practitioners and often leading to burnout … In my
> home country … social workers were very valued, the press reporting primarily positive stories and employers
> taking equal responsibility for any failures …

The interviewee highlights the tendency to look for a scapegoat when things go wrong and the
place the media plays in increasing professionals' anxiety in such circumstances. The pressure and

stress grow further due to the central place of electronic systems used by practitioners to evidence their actions, exposing them to constant surveillance from colleagues, managers, elected members of the public and professional regulators, and increasing their sense of insecurity and threat. Other interviewees acknowledged that the pay in England is much better but spoke about their practice back in Romania as more relaxed contributing to higher morale among employees allowing them to enjoy more their work and each other's company. Other disadvantages of a bloated bureaucracy were also described:

> In my home country … mini projects and interventions could be set up ad hoc, such as by the police making a call and agreeing informally a multi-agency service which could start within days with minimal paperwork. Whist this did not leave an audit trail, it meant that crucial services could be set up with minimal costs and paperwork and could be delivered within a very short timescale.

While the disadvantages of systems lacking clear guidelines and procedures supported by an organised bureaucracy might be clear, there seem to be some disadvantages as highlighted by the interviewee. The lack of such complex bureaucracy allows a quicker and potentially more creative response when necessary.

Politeness and impoliteness

When talking about their experiences of immigration and acculturation both as social workers but also much beyond their professional roles, many participants mentioned politeness and impoliteness. Here is what one participant said:

> one of the issues that I still struggle with today is that Romanians are much more outspoken and vocal about the things that they are not happy with, and this is often seen by British people as bluntness, rudeness, aggressiveness. It is often frowned upon if you speak your mind with no concern about people possibly taking offence or seeing this as a critical or negative stance.

Romanians in general were much more direct compared to English people and this directness was often viewed in England negatively as inappropriate. As the anthropologist Kate Fox wrote about English culture, 'We are accustomed to not saying what we mean: irony, self-deprecation, understatement, obliqueness, ambiguity and polite pretence are all deeply ingrained, part of being English' (Fox, 2005, p. 137). Many of our interviewees reported similar observations but many also described how they adjusted to these new norms, as described by the following interviewee:

> I have learned a lot about diplomacy, communication finesse, discretion, holding back and not saying all that I think about a situation or a person, and perhaps learned that while in Romania being outspoken is considered a virtue and something to be proud of, here it is often seen as a weakness or lack of boundaries!

Being able to adjust themselves to the new norms regarding directness, and politeness and impoliteness more broadly, didn't mean our interviewees necessarily accepted these norms and many shared their criticism. One interviewee explained that for her 'being direct and honest is a form of being polite'. Another interviewee went further and stated that 'racism here is often disguised in politeness and it can be a lot harder for a newcomer to identify'. The last statement implies that the external polite appearance might hide the real meaning, as further elaborated in the following quote:

> There is a significant difference between what people say and what they mean i.e. in the UK you can be told that something is very good or brilliant but in reality, you need to, and are expected to change everything.

The interviewee describes a big gap between what people think and what they are socially allowed to say. Such a gap also characterises the English 'understatement'[1] which can be perceived as hypocrisy or dishonesty (Fox, 2005). This gap came across also through some other English customs, as was described by another speaker:

If you did not know somebody (in Romania), you would just pass them on the corridor and just mind your own business. But here, when you lock eyes with somebody, even if they are a complete stranger, there is a lot of smiling involved, even if you are having to go through doors there is a lot of 'thank you', 'excuse me', 'sorry', and a lot of pleasantries and politeness being exchanged in social situations.

According to Fox (2005), the English while in the public space follow the 'Denial Rule' which 'requires us to avoid talking to strangers, or even making eye contact with them, or indeed acknowledging their presence in any way unless absolutely necessary' (p. 54). Locking our eyes with a stranger is a form of invading their privacy and is therefore followed by a series of apologies. Another distinction regarding apologies in Romanian and English cultures can be assumed by the presence of the so-called 'apology-reflex' in the English culture. According to Fox (2005), the apology in the English culture is an automatic response, and not an acknowledgment of guilt. It is a rule deeply implanted in the given culture: 'when any inadvertent, undesired contact occurs (and to the English, almost any contact is by definition undesired), we say "sorry"' (Fox, 2005, p. 58). It seems that such apologies precede any request or question. Of course, such apologies are ritualistic, not sincere, but in English culture their presence is indispensable. In English culture 'sorry' is a very useful and welcome word in any situation. Frequent presentation of excuses in English might seem insincere to Romanian speakers. If, however, in this intercultural communication this apology is absent, the interlocutor who did not present it will be considered rude. Even with a low degree of sincerity, the importance of the excuse in verbal interaction is indisputable. A representative of the Romanian culture will be considered deprived of manners, if, in the context of the English culture, he will not apologise in the situations required by the English socio-cultural norms. The lack of an apology, even a more formal one than the sincere one, can have serious consequences for subsequent communication.

Discussion and conclusion

This article explored the experiences of Romanian social workers who immigrated to England. Romanian social workers are a mobile group who generally have integrated well in England. Romanian social workers can be found in many different levels of seniority, including high management levels. 15 (48.3%) and 13 (41.9%) of the respondents indicated respectively they are either very satisfied or relatively satisfied with their professional life as social workers in England. At the same time, many of our research participants shared with us a wide range of challenges they had to overcome, many of these related to the cultural differences between Romania and England. While we are in the company of those who share a National Habitus, it is rarely spoken about, like 'wallpaper' (Thompson, 2018). The arrival of migrants from other national groups exposes the migrants to the discrepancies between their own internalised National Habitus and the one they encounter in the host country. This difference is often experienced as a 'culture shock'. Those differences will be much less clear to members of the host society who might just be baffled by the 'inappropriateness' of some of the responses, behaviours and preferences of their migrating colleagues. The findings explore how Romanian social workers understand and respond to the culture they encountered in England. One of the key findings indicates that social workers have very different status as well as roles in both countries. These differences are likely to be a result of the differences in the relationship established between the State and its citizens largely through legislation, and the stronger emphasis on safeguarding in England. These differences were experienced by some interviewees as a 'culture shock'. On the organisational level, participants described both the advantages and disadvantages of the bureaucratic and organisational mechanisms they have found, shaped to a large extent by the pressures of neo-liberal imperatives. Participants also highlighted the differences in the place of the individual and the family and the wider community in both countries. While England was perceived as a super individualist society, Romania was perceived as giving a greater weight to the place of the family and wider society. Strong differences in perceptions around what constitutes politeness and impoliteness were also reported with Romanians perceiving themselves as

more open and direct. A better understanding of these cultural differences, their meaning and causes, is important as it has the potential to improve communication between Romanian social workers, their colleagues and service users. This should improve job satisfaction and retention amongst migrant social workers, and, ultimately, the provision of better support for service users. Helping social workers to develop such deeper understanding as part of their induction process will require gaining a much broader understanding of the local national culture.

Note

1. According the Miriam Webster dictionary, understatement is 'a statement that represents something as smaller or less intense, or less important than it really is'.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Yohai Hakak is a senior lecturer in social work at Brunel University London. He studied social work in Israel and the USA before immigrating to the UK in 2007. Yohai's research interests are in cultural and religious minorities, the sociology of risk perception, youth, parenting, gender and mental health, and in the connection of these areas with social work.

Simona Anton is a qualified social worker. Originally from Romania, she immigrated to the UK in 2009 where she studied Anthropology. Following completion of a Masters in social work at Brunel University, she has been working with children and families.

ORCID

Yohai Hakak http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8866-4324

References

Anghel, R., Herczog, M., & Dima, G. (2013). The challenge of reforming child protection in Eastern Europe: The cases of Hungary and Romania. *Psychosocial Intervention*, *22*(22), 239–249. https://doi.org/10.5093/in2013a27
Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. SAGE Publications.
Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.
Bourdieu, P. (1980). *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.
Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.
Caimi, V. (2016). 'Social services in Romania – a reality check', Social Platform. Available online at: http://www.socialplatform.org/blog/social-services-in-romania-a-reality-check/ (accessed 11 Oct 2020).
Fox, K. (2005). *Watching the English. The hidden rules of English behaviour*. Hodder and Stoughton.
Full review of the Shortage Occupation List. (2019). London: Migration Advisory Committee, Corporate report.
Guidieri, R. (1984). *The abundance of the poor: Six critical insights on anthropology*. Seuil.
Habti, D., & Elo, M. (Eds.) (2019). *Global mobility of highly skilled people: Multidisciplinary perspectives on self-initiated expatriation*. International Perspectives on Migration, Vol. 16. Springer International Publishing.
Hadas, M. (2020). The culture of distrust: On the Hungarian national habitus. *Historical Social Research*, *45*(1), 129–152. https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.129-152
Horton, S., & Farnham, D. (2015). *Public management in Britain*. Macmillan.
Hussein, S. (2011). *Social work qualifications and regulation in European, Economic Area (EEA)*. Project report: The General Social Care Council (KAR id:68359).

Hussein, S., Stevens, M., Manthorpe, J., & Moriarty, J. (2011). Change and continuity: A quantitative investigation of trends and characteristics of international social workers in England. *British Journal of Social Work*, *41*(6), 1140–1157. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr008

Kuipers, G. (2012). The rise and decline of national habitus: Dutch cycling culture and the shaping of national similarity. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *16*(1), 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431012437482

Lazar, F. (2015). *Social work and welfare policy in Romania: History and current challenges*, Social work around the world, Anno VII, Numero 13.

Mihai-Bogdan, I. (2019). Usage of human rights practice by Romanian social workers. *International Social Work*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872819828429

Neuman, L. W. (2013). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (7th Ed.). University of Wisconsin, Whitewater.

Pullen-Sansfaçon, A., Brown, M., Graham, J., & Dumais Michaud, A.-A. (2014). Adaptation and acculturation: Experiences of internationally educated social workers. *International Migration & Integration*, *15*(2), 317–330. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-013-0288-2

Taran, P. A. (2009). The need for a rights-based approach to migration in the age of globalisation. In R. Cholewinski, & A. Pecoud (Eds.), *Migration and human rights: The United Nations convention on migrant workers* (pp. 150–171). UNESCO Publishing.

Thompson, N. (2018). *Effective communication: A guide for the people professions* (3rd ed.). Red Globe Press.

Turner, A. (2017). Why councils are looking overseas for social workers, Community Care, July 20, 2017.

Woodroofe, K. (1968). The making of the welfare state in England: A summary of Its origin and development. *Journal of Social History*, *1*(4), 303–324. https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/1.4.303

Yair, G. (2015). The Germans: Cultural trauma and the Israeli habitus. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, *3*(2), 254–279. https://doi.org/10.1057/ajcs.2015.2

Yair, G. (2017). The national habitus: Steps towards reintegrating sociology and group analysis. In E. Hopper, & H. Weinberg (Eds.), *The social unconscious in persons, groups, and societies,* Volume 3*: The foundation matrix extended and re-configured* (pp. 47–65). Routledge.

Zanca, R., & Misca, G. (2016). Filling the gap? Romanian social workers' "migration" into the UK. *Revista de Asistență Socială*, *1*, 41–47. http://www.swreview.ro/index.pl/filling_the_gap_romanian_social_workersmigration_into_the_uk