Canadian Social Work Review
Revue canadienne de service social

Migrant Social Workers, Foreign Credential Recognition and Securing Employment in Canada
A Qualitative Analysis of Pre-Employment Experiences

Amy E. Fulton, Annie Pullen-Sansfaçon, Marion Brown, Stephanie Éthier and John R. Graham

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Article abstract

Canada is a culturally diverse *receiving country* for transnational migration, and social workers are among the professional migrants who arrive in Canada each year. This article draws on findings from a four-year, grounded theory study on the professional adaptation processes and experiences of migrant social workers (*n* = 66) in the Canadian context. Study findings highlight a range of internal (personal) attributes and external (contextual) elements that interact to serve as either *protective* or *vulnerabilizing* factors during the pre-employment phase of professional adaptation. The focus of this article is to describe the interactions of protective and vulnerabilizing factors associated with the experience of obtaining recognition of foreign credentials and securing employment as a social worker in Canada. The findings demonstrate that migrant social workers in Canada face significant barriers in these two pre-employment phases of professional adaptation. A range of research and policy implications is identified. In particular, we highlight the disconnect that exists between Canada's migration-friendly policies, and the lack of organizational and governmental supports and services to facilitate successful labour market integration of migrant social workers.

MIGRANT SOCIAL WORKERS, FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION AND SECURING EMPLOYMENT IN CANADA
A Qualitative Analysis of Pre-employment Experiences

Amy E. Fulton
Annie Pullen-Sansfaçon
Marion Brown
Stephanie Éthier
John R. Graham

Abstract: Canada is a culturally diverse *receiving country* for transnational migration, and social workers are among the professional migrants who arrive in Canada each year. This article draws on findings from a four-year, grounded theory study on the professional adaptation processes and experiences of migrant social workers ($n = 66$) in the Canadian context. Study findings highlight a range of internal (personal) attributes and external (contextual) elements that interact to serve as either *protective* or *vulnerabilizing* factors during the pre-employment phase of professional adaptation. The focus of this article is to describe the interactions of protective and vulnerabilizing factors associated with the experience of obtaining recognition of foreign credentials and securing employment as a social worker in Canada. The findings demonstrate that migrant social workers in Canada face significant barriers in these two pre-employment

phases of professional adaptation. A range of research and policy implications is identified. In particular, we highlight the disconnect that exists between Canada's migration-friendly policies, and the lack of organizational and governmental supports and services to facilitate successful labour market integration of migrant social workers.

Keywords: Professional adaptation, international migration, foreign credential recognition, labour market integration, grounded theory

Abrégé: Le Canada est une société culturellement diversifiée reconnue comme *pays d'accueil* pour la migration transnationale. Les travailleurs sociaux font partie des migrants professionnels qui arrivent au Canada tous les ans. Le présent article se fonde sur les données d'une étude théorique à base empirique de quatre ans sur les procédés d'adaptation professionnelle et sur l'expérience des travailleurs sociaux migrants (*n* = 66) dans le contexte canadien. L'étude expose une série d'attributs personnels (facteurs internes) et d'éléments contextuels (facteurs externes) qui interviennent pour *protéger* ou *vulnérabiliser* le migrant lors de la phase d'adaptation professionnelle préalable à l'emploi. L'article vise à décrire les interactions entre les facteurs de protection et de vulnérabilisation qui sont associés aux efforts déployés par le migrant pour faire reconnaître ses titres de compétences étrangers et trouver un emploi comme travailleur social au Canada. Les résultats montrent que les travailleurs sociaux qui immigrent au Canada doivent surmonter d'importants obstacles lors de ces deux étapes de l'adaptation professionnelle préalable à l'emploi. L'article dégage un ensemble de répercussions au niveau de la recherche et des politiques. Il met notamment en lumière le décalage entre les politiques canadiennes favorables à la migration et le manque de soutien et de services de la part d'organismes et du gouvernement pour faciliter l'insertion des travailleurs sociaux migrants dans le marché du travail.

Mots-clés : adaptation professionnelle, migration internationale, reconnaissance de titres de compétences étrangers, insertion sur le marché du travail, théorie empirique

*C*ANADA IS A CULTURALLY diverse *receiving country* for transnational migration, and social workers are among the professional migrants that arrive in Canada each year (Brown, Pullen-Sansfaçon, Ethier & Fulton, 2015; Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown & Graham, 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown, Fulton, Tetrault & Ethier, 2014b). Like other developed nations, Canada is currently undertaking large-scale intensive measures to attract new immigrants and streamline its immigration processes for skilled workers (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2015). In 2014 alone, Canada welcomed a record-breaking 262,000 new immigrants (CIC, 2015), with a target to admit 285,000 more in 2015 (Drolet, Hamilton,

Esses & Zavrazhyna, 2015), and an additional 300,000 in 2016 (CIC, 2016). In Canada, migration policies implemented by the Citizenship and Immigration department promote immigration of internationally educated professionals who are highly valued for the wealth of skills, knowledge, and experience they contribute to Canadian society and the Canadian economy (CIC, 2013; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009; Man, 2004). Social workers are included among the professionals Canada seeks to attract under bi- and multilateral agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Mexico (NAFTA Secretariat-Canadian Section, n.d.).

Building upon our earlier publications on professional adaptation of migrant social workers in the Canadian context (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2014a; Brown et al., 2015), this paper considers the experiences of internationally educated social workers ($n = 66$) who migrated to Canada after 2001, with regard to their pre-employment experiences. Through our investigation of the professional adaptation of migrant social workers we have theorized that professional adaptation is an interaction between external systems and structures, and internal factors, such as interpretations, ways of being and ways of experiencing, each of which sits on a continuum ranging from protective to vulnerabilizing (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2014b). In this paper we present an analysis of the continuum of internal (personal) attributes and external (contextual) elements that serve as either protective or vulnerabilizing factors in the pre-employment phase of the larger professional adaptation process. Specifically, the present analysis focuses on *protective* and *vulnerabilizing* factors associated with the experiences of obtaining recognition of foreign credentials and securing social work employment. The analysis demonstrates that migrant social workers in Canada face significant barriers with these two pre-employment aspects of professional adaptation. Exploration of these experiences is an under-researched area that has potential relevance to a diverse audience including scholars, policy experts, and social work employers throughout Canada and in other industrialized countries. Organizational and social policy implications that may influence policy development, research, and capacity-building initiatives, that will promote awareness of the need to create a welcoming context that is responsive to the lived realities of migrant social workers while being facilitative of their successful professional adaptation to social work practice, are also discussed (Brown et al., 2015; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012).

Literature Review

The depth and timing of the literature review is a disputed topic in grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014; Tan, 2010). In order to obtain conceptual and theoretical sensitivity, we first conducted a brief review of the existing literature on adaptation processes and experiences of

migrant social workers and other professionals.

Research on the professional migration and adaptation of social workers has been increasing in volume internationally over the past decade (Beddoe, Fouche, Bartley, & Harington, 2012; Beddoe & Fouche, 2014; Brown et al., 2015; Fouche, Beddoe, Bartley, & de Haan, 2014a; Fouche, Beddoe, Bartley, & Brenton, 2014b; Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2010; Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2011a; Hussein, Stevens, Manthorpe, & Moriarty, 2011b; Hussein, 2014; Manthorpe, Hussein, & Stevens, 2012; Moriarty, Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon, Spolander, & Engelbrecht, 2011; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2014a; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2014b; Simpson, 2009; Sims, 2012; Walsh, Wilson, & O'Connor, 2010; Welbourne et al., 2007). The existing Canadian literature reveals that the transnational mobility of social workers interfaces with the Canadian labour market at several critical junctures including pursuing credential recognition, engaging in the job seeking process, and adapting to daily realities and required tasks within the new practice context once employment has been secured (Brown et al., 2015; Fang, 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012).

Remennick (2003) has summarized a set of determinants of successful professional adaptation and integration for migrant professionals from various disciplines. Indeed, a critical predictor of successful professional adaptation and integration is, "how far apart the standards of professional education, accreditation and practice are in the home and host countries" (Remennick 2003, p. 718). Differences in the success rates of professional adaptation and integration also depend on the specific profession of the immigrant within "culture-dependent professions." As such, professions such as education and journalism would face the greatest challenges in transferability of skills. Alternatively, professions, such as medicine and social work, have rather "objective internationally comparable bodies of knowledge" (Remmenick, 2003, p. 718), which are said to have an intermediate level of cultural dependency with successful adaptation and integration being contingent on the specifics of the new professional culture. Still other professions, such as engineering, are reported to be the most transferable between home and receiving countries as they are the most culturally neutral (Remennick, 2003).

While Remennick (2003) considers social work to have internationally comparable knowledge and an intermediate level of cultural dependency, others have argued that social work is a culturally specific and locally driven profession (Beecher, Reeve, Eggertsen, & Furuto, 2010; Gray, 2005). This assertion seems to be supported by recent research on professional adaptation of migrant social workers emerging from the United Kingdom and New Zealand where they found that migrant social workers experience challenges related to acculturation once they arrive in their new country as they attempt to apply the concepts, practices, and skills they learned in their countries of origin to their new practice

contexts (Beddoe et al., 2012; Dominelli, 2010; Sims, 2012). Beecher et al. (2010) characterize such struggles as a lack of "generalizability" of social work education received in a home country to a new context. Thus, for many social workers, transitioning to social work practice abroad requires personal and organizational inputs involving extra time and supports in order to successfully acculturate (Beddoe et al., 2012; Sims, 2012). Successful professional adaptation to employment as a social worker in a new country requires the successful completion of several pre-employment tasks and requirements. This paper focuses on the discussion of migrant social workers' experiences and understandings of these pre-employment tasks and requirements in the Canadian context.

Indeed, in Canada, prior to becoming employed as a social work practitioner, internationally educated social workers must go through the process of having their foreign credentials assessed by a designated regulatory body that is authorized to provide a license to practice social work in a particular Canadian jurisdiction (Brown et al., 2015; Fang, 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012; Ngo & Este, 2006). The specific process of credential recognition varies by province, although work on developing pan-Canadian credential recognition standards is currently underway (Fang, 2012).

The existing social work migration and adaptation literature contains little detail about how migrant social workers experience credential recognition processes. However, research with other groups of migrant professionals demonstrates that in some instances, migrant professionals may live in a receiving country for several years before obtaining employment in their field of study (Ngo & Este, 2006; Remennick, 2003). Professional migrants in Canada have reported that they often experience credential recognition as a confusing process mired in numerous personal, cultural, and structural obstacles (Basran & Zong, 1998). This is significant for many reasons. In particular, evidence suggests that difficulties in making a successful occupational transition in a receiving country are linked to problems with personal adaptation to the new context including inadequate income and mental health issues (Remennick, 2003). Additionally, there is a positive correlation between economic well-being and acculturation (Manhart, 2008). In essence, a pattern has been established that shows that as immigrants become more acculturated to their new context, their economic well-being also improves (Manhart, 2008). In addition to the significant challenges with obtaining formal recognition of foreign credentials experienced by migrant professionals, including social workers in Canada (Fang, 2012), underemployment and de-skilling of professional migrants are also common issues reported in the literature (Man, 2004; McInnes, 2012; Remennick, 2003).

Given the numerous challenges involved in migration and adaptation on both the personal and professional levels, delays in seeking

credential recognition and employment once migrants arrive in their new country are understandable (Basran & Zong, 1998; Fang, 2012; Ngo & Este, 2006). On the other hand, this situation can be viewed as being undesirable because receiving credential recognition is regarded as an important initial step in the process of "rebuilding a professional identity" in a new context (Cardu, 2007, p. 433). Prior studies have also found that migrants who do not pursue their previous professions once they arrive in their new country are more likely to experience low earnings and other financial issues (Basran & Zong, 1998; Ngo & Este, 2006; Reitz, 2001). Furthermore, there are "societal costs" associated with non-accreditation of migrant professionals including racial tensions, higher social welfare costs for supporting low-earning migrants, human rights concerns, and community integration issues (Mata, 1999; Remennick, 2003).

There is broad agreement in the academic literature that support with professional adaptation and acculturation would be beneficial to migrant social workers. However, most of the existing research lacks specificity as to the exact shape and form such support should take. Beddoe et al. (2012) argue that the process of professional acculturation should be a "two-way exchange" between migrant and local social workers as each group brings strengths, assets, and unique perspectives into practice. They recommend development of mentorship programs in combination with the implementation of several additional forms of support (Beddoe et al., 2012). Similarly, Fouche et al. (2014b) discuss the need for better access to formal induction opportunities for migrant social workers. While these suggestions are a positive step forward in identifying the need for targeted supports for migrant social workers, current research lacks an explicit and detailed focus on how to support migrant social workers in gaining entry to the labour market. This is likely due to the fact that barriers that migrant social workers face in regard to labour market attachment are understudied. This article helps to address this gap by analyzing in depth experiences with two specific pre-employment stages of the professional adaptation process: foreign credential recognition and securing employment.

Methodology

Grounded in a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) our four-year grounded theory investigation of the experiences and processes of professional adaptation among migrant social workers in Canada involved engagement in a national team-based research project. The team employed grounded theory, a widely used qualitative research methodology broadly defined as an inductive approach to "building theoretical understanding of complex social processes" (Whiteside et al., 2012, p. 504). This methodology was particularly suited to our team's research interests for several reasons. First, the study involved

investigating a phenomenon and population that has received minimal attention from other researchers and thus specific theories that explain the professional adaptation of migrant social workers are not yet developed. Grounded theory is focused on drawing interpretations directly from the data rather than from the extant literature, therefore gaps in the literature are not necessarily a deficit in grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006). Instead of relying on the extant literature, grounded theory calls for building mid-range theory "from the ground up," based on the experiences of a particular context-specific group of participants (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2014). Second, drawing from successive iterations of coding and data analysis using the constant comparative method and thematic analysis, grounded theory allows researchers to pursue emerging concepts and themes in increasing depth as the study progresses (Creswell, 2013). This iterative approach provided us with the scope and fullness of detail we were seeking in order to make meaning of each participant's narrative. Indeed, grounded theory methodology is an ideal tool for exploring the richness available within a dataset, enabling researchers and participants to "get beneath the surface of social and subjective life" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 13).

The study was initially designed to follow classical Grounded Theory procedures and processes, however the design was thoughtfully adapted on an emergent basis based on co-researcher's and student research assistant's understandings and training in various streams of grounded theory inquiry. Through consensual team-based decision-making processes, we were able to engage an intentional and purposeful mixture of grounded theory methods that complemented the diversity of our team members. This approach to engaging in team-based grounded theory is consistent with the literature on engaging diverse grounded theory methods within a single study (Aldiabat & LeNavenec, 2011; Bryant, 2014; Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown, Fulton, & Ethier, under review). This literature highlights the similarities and consistencies across grounded theory streams, including the theoretical framework underpinning the study (Aldiabat & LeNavenec, 2011) and the data collection and analysis tools (Barnett, 2012). For further discussion of the team's research methodology, please see (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., under review).

At the start, the project underwent ethical review at each of the three Universities (Université de Montréal, Dalhousie University and University of Calgary), ensuring it meets the Tri-Council Policy Statement for Ethical Research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 66 internationally educated social workers that attained, at a minimum, an undergraduate degree (or equivalent) in social work from an institution outside of Canada, and subsequently settled in Canada after 2001. The inclusion criteria required participants to have their social work education recognized in Canada and that they be licensed by their respective provincial regulatory body, namely the Alberta College of Social Workers

(ACSW), the Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers (NSASW) and L'Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec (OTSTCFQ). This final criterion ensured participants met the minimum standards to practice in their respective jurisdictions.

Participants were recruited through targeted emails and letters distributed on behalf of the research team through the provincial social work regulators in Nova Scotia, Alberta, and Quebec, as well as through snowball sampling. Congruent with grounded theory methodology, we aimed to achieve maximum variation in the sample by recruiting widely, seeking participants from all corners of the globe with a wide range of experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The sample was heterogeneous, with experiences of migration varying significantly according to the many dynamics, factors, and characteristics that shape the migration experience overall, including gender, race, language, and cultural background (Xu, 2007; Xu, Gutierrez, & Kim, 2008).

The participants came from diverse geographic regions representing 22 countries, including India (5 participants), Pakistan (1 participant), Brazil (1 participant), Colombia (2 participants), Venezuela (1 participant), Australia (1 participant), New Zealand (1 participant), Philippines (1 participant), Lebanon (4 participants), Israel (1 participant), France (12 participants), Spain (1 participant), Romania (5 participants), Czech Republic (1 participant), Germany (1 participant), England (8 participants), Ukraine (5 participants), the Netherlands (1 participant), United States of America (USA) (10 participants), Liberia (1 participant), South Africa (1 participant) and Nigeria (2 participants). Their reasons for migration ranged from personal motivations of curiosity, adventure, and desire to leave their country, to relational motivations such as partner and family, to professional motivations such as seeking new practice knowledge and career development opportunities. All participants had completed their social work education in their countries of origin prior to migrating to Canada. There was a variety of migratory patterns between country of origin and arrival in Canada, with some participants arriving directly in Canada from their countries of origin and others taking more circuitous routes to their eventual migration here.

Participants were asked about how professional experience, education, values and understanding of the social work profession in their countries of origin have influenced their approaches and interventions in Canada, as well as their experience of professional adaptation to their new social work practice contexts. Interviews were conducted in both English and French depending on the participant's preference and geographic location. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Full transcripts were retained in their original language rather than being translated, in order to retain the essence and meaning of the participant's words in the language in which they were spoken. For the purposes of presenting or disseminating the data, transcript excerpts have been

translated from French into English, on an as needed basis. In presenting excerpts from interviews with participants during data dissemination, we identify the participants by their country of origin only, and not their current location, in order to protect the participants' anonymity.

In order to facilitate team analysis in a multi-site study, the research team met regularly by Internet and telephone throughout the data collection and analysis processes. In person meetings were also conducted on an annual basis. In order to maintain the centrality of site-specific contexts and contextually derived experiences and interpretations, team members kept individual, site-specific memos and brought these into the team analysis on a regular basis (Charmaz, 2006). The data were analyzed through a process of team coding by researchers who were fluent in both of Canada's national languages. Emerging codes and categories were discussed in depth, within and across research sites, in order to achieve internal validity.

Data analysis began at the time of the first interviews, comparing differences and similarities in the processes of adaptation among the participants. The team progressed through three data analysis steps common to grounded theory. Step one involved line-by-line open coding at each site. Next, the research team completed axial coding collaboratively. This level of coding involved comparing data from each site and identifying emerging themes. Finally, the team reached consensus on a coding matrix arising from the preliminary data analysis.

In round one, five interviews were conducted in each site (Quebec, Nova Scotia and Alberta) for a total of 15 interviews. The findings of the analysis of these first interviews served as the basis for the development of the second interview schedule used for round two, where 32 additional interviews were conducted across the three research sites. Based on emerging themes and findings from the second round of interviews, a third round of data collection and analysis took place involving an additional 19 interviews across sites. Finally, the data were presented to, and validated with, key stakeholders including research participants, social work practitioners, regulators, researchers, and public servants at two knowledge exchange forums held in Montreal and Halifax in the fall of 2014.

Findings

Recognition of Foreign Credentials

Issues with recognition of foreign credentials often represent a major barrier to career trajectories of migrant professionals once they have arrived in Canada, both among regulatory bodies and potential employers (McInnes, 2012). Indeed, as identified in previous research on professional adaptation (Brown et al., 2015; McInnes, 2012), social workers experience similar issues as other professionals in terms of getting prior experience recognized by regulatory bodies and potential employers.

Data from our study demonstrate that many migrant social workers in Canada can encounter significant challenges with credential recognition (Brown et al., 2015). As a participant from the Netherlands illustrated: "See one of the questions is foreign credentials, recognition of foreign credentials…is a huge, huge, huge, huge issue…for every newcomer in this country, before they come, and when they are here."

We found that recognition of foreign credentials is perceived as an important issue amongst migrant social workers in Canada. Participants identified that understanding the process of credential recognition in Canada is challenging, as a participant from Romania explained:

> I admit that I have had many, many questions. I was blowing in the wind and that made me lose a lot of time because [the process] was not obvious. I did not know to speak with the [provincial social work regulator]. There was no information accessible to make it clear that it was necessary to go there.

We found that not only must professional migrants determine who the appropriate licensing body is, they must also produce various documents and pay fees, often while encountering additional barriers associated with language, culture, and transportation. Given the challenges associated with credential recognition processes, some migrant social workers may decide not to pursue credential recognition at all, as the participant from the Netherlands attested: "I know for a fact that a lot of immigrants, permanent residents, who come here, who have a social work degree, do not apply for social work jobs. Because they're scared they have to go through the association."

Indeed, for some migrant social workers the concept of being part of a regulated profession is entirely new due to the fact that, in many countries, social work is unregulated (Fouche et al., 2014a). As a migrant social worker from France remarked:

> The thing that initially surprised me was the [provincial social work regulators]…I find it different…We are obligated to be affiliated with a provincial regulator…in France, there is no regulator for the profession, you are not required to be in a professional association…that is a difference. Here you do not have a choice.

Once engaged in the pursuit of foreign credential recognition, the participants encountered a myriad of external challenges including: bureaucratic red tape, difficulty obtaining required documentation from their countries of origin, and a lack of guidance and information about the credentialing process. They also experienced personal issues and limitations such as low-level language proficiency and financial difficulties. As a participant from India who was required to complete a practicum as part of the credentialing process explained:

> I had to work five months for free, eight hours per day. I was working and
> there was no recognition of anything about it…I don't know if I could…
> support my family. Some of these issues are very challenging for us when
> we come. There is no financial support for us when we have to do free
> hours. That is the most difficult part I find.

The time that it took for migrant social workers to receive confirmation
that their credentials were recognized varied from less than six months
to up to four years. However, time periods of one year or less were most
common across jurisdictions. While it is possible to pursue social work cre-
dential recognition in Canada prior to migration, very few participants in
our study pursued that option, with most opting to wait until they arrived
in Canada to initiate the process.

Despite the numerous challenges involved in credential recognition
for migrant social workers, many participants reported an overall impres-
sion that the credential recognition process was smooth or smoother
than they had expected. One area where considerable concerns were
raised was the perception that assessment of foreign qualifications and
registration is a two-step process, involving first a provincial level qualifi-
cation assessment, or an assessment by the Canadian Association of Social
Workers (CASW), depending on the province in which the migrant social
worker intends to practice, and then a further assessment process by the
provincial social work regulator. This patchwork-like process was criticized
by participants as being overly complicated and lacking coherence. As a
migrant social worker from Israel stated:

> I submitted all the requirements with the Canadian Association of Social
> Workers and they basically approved and accredited me. Yet, they said
> that if I wish to work in a province, I would have to apply again for the
> local college [of social workers].

While such challenges in gaining registration and recognition of
international social work qualifications is not unique to the Canadian
context, Canadian-made solutions to these issues need to be developed
in order to eliminate context-specific hurdles that create a structural
barrier to successful professional adaptation. A potential resolution that
merits further exploration is bi- and multi-lateral "mutual recognition
agreements," such as those that exist between Australia and New Zealand,
that allow an individual who is registered to practice a profession in one
country to also practice in the other country without the need to undergo
further examination (Bartley et al., 2012, p. 9). Currently in North Amer-
ica, while social workers are covered under NAFTA, this agreement only
relates to the worker's mobility and movement across borders, and not
to their professional registration status (Bartley et al., 2012). France and
Quebec have such an agreement, which, according to our study, has facili-
tated the credential recognition process for most migrant social workers
from France who relocate to the province of Quebec.

Seeking Employment as a Social Worker in Canada

Participants also faced many challenges in finding social work employment in Canada. While personal financial circumstances and stability serve as either protective or vulnerabilzing factors, the role of the external environment, in particular labour market characteristics and trends, also play a major role in migrant social workers' ability to obtain suitable employment. According to our study, seeking employment as a social worker in Canada is experienced as an economic imperative for some participants who arrive in Canada with finite financial resources. For example a participant from England stated that: "It became very, very clear that we were running out of money fast and equally, I personally needed to be out of the house so I started applying [for jobs]."

Once the decision is made to seek employment in Canada, many migrant social workers have positive perceptions of the process of securing their first social work job, describing it as "quick" or "easy." However, the specific facilitative elements leading to successful attachment to the labour market were not readily pinpointed by study participants. Several of those who fell into the category of landing a job with ease mentioned they felt a sense of being "fortunate" or "lucky" to have found a suitable position. One environmental element that was identified as being facilitative of successful labour market attachment was the absence of discrimination during the job search and hiring processes. On the other hand, migrant social workers with a negative perception of securing employment reported feeling "depressed," "frustrated," "discouraged," and "anxious" as they struggled to secure social work posts. Specific challenges and barriers related to obtaining employment as a social worker in Canada included systemic issues, namely discrimination and competition for jobs with domestically educated social workers, and specific individual vulnerabilizing factors, including language related issues, lack of familiarity with Canadian human resources strategies and practices, having foreign credentials, lacking Canadian work experience, and other "invisible barriers." These invisible barriers were reasons for not being hired that remained unknown to the migrant social workers. As a participant from Liberia explained: "I have applied for numerous jobs…some interviews I went to and I was sure I would be taken and I wasn't taken. And I really don't know why." Likewise, a participant from Australia had a similar experience: "When I got here I applied for a lot of jobs…and wasn't getting any sort of feedback, wasn't getting any information."

Given the diversity of the study participants who experienced "invisible barriers" to employment, we do not believe that ethnic and racial identification stand alone as vulnerabilizing factors, but rather that these intersect with other internal factors and environmental elements to create vulnerability in successful labour market entry for some social workers.

Job applications and interviews

However, several participants reported a perception that employers do not invite them for job interviews due to issues of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Thus, for some, not being invited to interviews created an immediate barrier to securing employment. When participants encountered this scenario, they often perceived that they had received clouded messages about their employability in the Canadian context. As a social worker from Spain explained: "The message that was sent was a subliminal message that we want to have you; we want foreigners [but then] they do not even give you the opportunity to interview."

As migrant social workers became job seekers, their expectations of the type of job or field of practice that they wished to engage in sometimes required adjustment due to a host of internal or external barriers. For example, a participant from England explained her thwarted desire to work in child welfare, the same field of practice in which she had experience in her home country:

> I really wanted to go back into child protection…I wanted it. I felt it was probably going to be a similar thing here that…if you can complete service within child protection, you're probably good for any other social work post. And plus I wanted that comparison…I really wanted to know where I could Facebook my friends saying, "Ha! It's so much easier here" or "oh my god it's the same."

However, such desires do not necessarily match up with available employment opportunities, or with the positions that migrant social workers are offered, as the experience of a participant from Venezuela demonstrated:

> The man [who interviewed me] said that [my resume] is excellent and the only thing I needed was to understand a little bit more about how the system works…He put an A+ on my resume. I said [to myself] this is the place, but I've never had a return call and what's worse is that they had tons of positions available.

Likewise, a participant from Finland expressed her disillusionment with her job search by stating: "I can prove myself if I get the chance but they don't even seem to be willing to give me a chance."

In the case of the social worker from England quoted above, the participant accepted a job working with families in a non-profit agency, as opposed to obtaining employment with a governmental child welfare agency. Despite her equivalent work experience and education, she was never invited to interview for such a position in Canada: "I still to this day have not had even one interview, never even had a reply or anything from any government social work post."

These experiences can lead to speculation that some employers systemically discriminate against internationally educated social workers: "The only deduction I can make…is that there is some prejudice against being qualified from another country." (Participant from England)

Other migrant social workers faced individual barriers associated with their lack of familiarity with Canadian human resources practices, specifically hiring processes. Our study reveals that knowledge of human resources systems and processes is important for migrant social workers as it serves as a vulnerabilzing or protective element for labour market attachment. For example, some participants reported they needed to develop new knowledge and skills in order to develop appropriate and appealing employment applications for the Canadian job market. In addition, the observation that interviewing and hiring practices vary in their structures and processes in diverse contexts led some migrant social workers to feel as if they were being commoditized (Rodriguez & Mearns, 2012). A participant from Romania articulated:

> I had to reshape my thinking when it came to applying for positions, creating resumes and cover letters, presenting yourself in an interview. I understood that here you will literally – this is my impression – sell yourself…This is who I am, this is how much I cost…What I understand here is if you do not display your assets, other people will, and they will be the ones who will be hired.

In many cases finding work in the participant's specific previous field of practice was a challenge. Some participants explained this challenge had an impact on their overall adaptation to life in Canada. For example, a participant from the USA explained:

> Being here and not being able to work was the hard part. It was really hard because so much of who I was, was my work. Having to leave all that behind and to come here and not be able to work was harder.

Job offers and job acceptance

Thus, for participants in our study, securing a social work job in Canada was not only viewed as an economic imperative, it also facilitated their overall adaptation to their new country. Past research has shown that in cases where obtaining employment is delayed or fraught with challenges, the associated stress and disappointment can result in personal problems such as feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness (Ngo & Este, 2006). Migrant professionals who are unsuccessful in obtaining similar employment to that in which they were engaged in their countries of origin must re-evaluate their goals and objectives in order to redefine their career trajectories, sometimes opting to work in fields outside of

their professional background or area of expertise (Ngo & Este, 2006). The migrant social workers we interviewed were able to secure work in a diverse array of roles outside the social work profession while awaiting credential recognition or seeking social work employment. Migrant social workers reported working in correctional services, tourism, retail, food services, agriculture, construction, cleaning, childcare, home health care, and human services.

In some cases, especially when these non-social work jobs were related to human services, they eventually led to social work positions once some Canadian work experience had been acquired. As a participant from England stated: "Initially it was a non-social work post, it was a home-visitor… and then now I have a social work post within the adoption program there."

Migrant social workers expressed a range of reactions to accepting non-social work jobs, varying from realization of positive benefits such as acculturation and the development of greater language proficiency in one of Canada's national languages, to disappointment and disillusionment.

From a strengths-based perspective, as a group, migrant social workers possess a number of assets and capabilities that may facilitate the process of successfully obtaining employment in Canada. Migrant social workers often arrive in Canada having obtained prior practice experience in the social work profession, having the ability to communicate in an official language of Canada or being multilingual, and possessing pre-existing formal and informal support systems, such as spouses and mentors. In addition, migrant social workers are resourceful. The migrant social workers that participated in our study reported engaging in multiple strategies as they worked toward the goal of obtaining social work employment in Canada, including applying for employment opportunities in Canada while still in their countries of origin, doing volunteer work, networking, targeting specific organizations to approach in order to inquire about employment, searching for job opportunities online, using formal services such as employment centres and job search workshops, and accepting less than ideal jobs in order to use those employment opportunities as stepping stones toward their desired careers. For example, a participant from Brazil explained that a social service agency in Canada provided her with volunteer experience when she first arrived in Canada:

> He couldn't hire me because I had no registration and he said, "lets put yourself as a volunteer social worker" and I had to sign a document, in consent saying that…I wasn't being paid any fee, I was just a volunteer. I stayed there for seven months.

Some migrant social workers also reported engaging in a process of self-deskilling or downgrading in order to secure employment as a social worker at a level that met with their perceived levels of competence for

practice in the Canadian context. As a participant from India explained:

> We will get [a] manager's position. And we are not asking for those things. We don't want them because we know we cannot manage…it is difficult for us to learn these things so at least we want to get the basic job related to social work and then learn everything. Then we can get it step-by-step, we can upgrade to our profession.

While many migrant social workers hope to begin working in the field as soon as possible after arrival, in reality, for a variety of reasons, some migrant social workers do not end up practicing social work in Canada immediately following immigration. Among the participants in our study, experiences of obtaining employment ranged from having a social work job lined up prior to arrival in Canada, to taking five years to find employment as a social worker after arrival. However, job search timeframes lasting anywhere from three to 12 months after arrival in Canada were most common. Participants attributed delayed entry into the social work workforce once in Canada to factors ranging from personal choice, family responsibilities, difficulties with credential recognition processes, lack of language proficiency, or making the decision to pursue a different career path or complete further post-secondary education. In regard to language proficiency issues, a participant from Romania explained:

> When I came to Canada, I did not know English at all. I never had training. I was just picking up a few words from movies and songs…I did not feel comfortable, or comfortable enough to go and counsel somebody… It is different working probably as a cashier or any other place. Probably my English would be okay, but to work in this field, you need more…So, I didn't trust my English…even after six months I didn't trust enough my English to be able to have a social work job.

Discussion and Implications

Like many of life's journeys, the processes of credential recognition and securing employment as a social worker in Canada are often experienced by migrant social workers as a bumpy road full of U-turns and dead ends rather than a paved and well-lit pathway. The data indicate the reality for migrant social workers in Canada – that they face a number of structurally-based vulnerabilizing factors as they attempt to adapt, including discrimination and a significant lack of proactive supports in accessing credential recognition and employment opportunities. The findings are coherent with other studies regarding migrant health professionals, which similarly established that when migrant professionals are unable to continue practicing in the same profession as they had in their country of origin, successful adaptation to the new country becomes increasingly difficult (Selvarajah, 2004; Manhart, 2008). This results in ineffective

utilization of migrant professionals' knowledge and skills as they postpone or are delayed in seeking social work positions to work in other fields, often in unskilled jobs.

Indeed, like many other professional migrants, some migrant social workers who participated in this study reported being "forced" to accept non-social work employment opportunities (Vu, 2004). Such shortcomings are indicative of the present lack of strategic planning, inter-agency coordination and governmental commitment to facilitating the successful professional adaptation of migrant social workers at the meso- (organizational) and macro- (systemic) levels. They also highlight the fact that the social work profession is not immune to the established pattern of exclusion of immigrant labour from highly desired jobs and occupations in Canada (Bauder, 2003). Indeed, our findings support Bauder's (2003) assertion that the most highly sought after employment opportunities in Canada are "reserved" for workers who are "Canadian-born and Canadian-educated," resulting in a segmented workforce (p. 699). In turn, migrant social workers are often left with a sense of disappointment, devaluation, subordination, and abandonment as the very nation that welcomed them to relocate under NAFTA or the Foreign Skilled Workers Program offers them little or no practical employment or financial assistance for professional adaptation once they have arrived (Basran & Zong, 1998; Vu, 2004). From this perspective it is easy to understand how migrant social workers may feel as though they are receiving mixed messages, and in turn, question whether or not their knowledge, skills, and credentials are valued equally to those of domestically educated social workers.

Improving the success of labour market integration for migrant social workers requires an immediate investment of both time and attention from those with the power and resources to facilitate the necessary systemic adjustments. Our research supports the case for enhancements in terms of the quantity and quality of supports for migrant social workers, as has been established in the existing scholarly literature (Brown et al., 2015; Bartley et al., 2012; Fouche et al., 2014b; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012). In addition, clearer guidance throughout the credential recognition process for migrant social workers would be beneficial. With increased organization and collaboration among the various governmental and regulatory bodies involved in facilitating the professional migration process, Canadian society as a whole will readily benefit from the knowledge and skills of migrant social workers who are able to successfully join the Canadian workforce in jobs that are commensurate with their qualifications and experience (Vu, 2004). The social work profession will also benefit from the contributions that migrant social workers bring with them from their education and practice experiences in their countries of origin, as intervention strategies and models of practice from other contexts may prove useful in enhancing local knowledge and

practice (Bartley, 2012). As Nonini (2002) stated "transnational labour migration involves not only the movement of people and flows of capital but also of ideologies" (p. 8).

Further research is necessary in order to identify the full scope of factors in operation in the process of professional adaptation for migrant social workers in Canada. While recent research has begun to uncover the numerous facets of this complex process, the current lack of fullness of understanding prevents the development and delivery of comprehensive services, policies, and other supports that may serve to enhance the successful professional adaptation of migrant social workers. A number of other avenues for continued research are evident. The findings point to the need for further investigation focusing on migrant social workers' professional adaptation experiences. The benefits associated with enhancing our understandings of the successful professional adaptation of migrant social workers are apparent (Barreto, 2013; White, 2006). Migrant social workers, the social work profession, service users, and Canadian society in general all serve to benefit from the successful professional adaptation of migrant social workers in Canada. Successful, professional adaptation facilitates migrant social workers engagement in their profession and maximizes the chances the demands of the new practice context can be met. Furthermore, professional adaptation is a significant element of overall adaptation across spheres, including the personal, social, and cultural domains (Beddoe & Fouche, 2014; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2012). Thus, exploring the issues of credential recognition, securing employment, underemployment, deskilling, discrimination, and other barriers to labour market integration was essential to further understand professional adaptation. However, a macro-level policy analysis on this topic would complement our research, as it would provide more details on the macro-level considerations involved in supporting migrant social workers' professional adaptation.

This paper contributes to an under-researched area and draws attention to a number of social and policy implications. A chief policy implication is the need to move from the existing patchwork system to a supportive framework that guides the way from pre-migration planning to successful post-migration outcomes for migrant social workers. The development of such a framework would be a positive step forward resulting in the development and implementation of an action plan that supports both the migrant social workers who have already migrated, and those yet to do so in the future.

REFERENCES

Aldiabat, K. M., & Le Navenec, C.-L. (2011). Philosophical roots of classical grounded theory: Its foundations in symbolic interactionism. *The Qualitative Report, 16*(4), 1063-1080.

Barnett, D. (2012). Constructing new theory for identifying students with emotional disturbance: A constructivist approach to grounded theory. *The Grounded Theory Review, 11*(1), 47-58.

Barreto, Y. K. (2013). The experience of becoming a therapist in a foreign culture. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 53*(3), 336-361.

Bartley, A., Beddoe, L., Fouche, C., & Harington, P. (2012). Transnational social workers: Making the profession a transnational professional space. *International Journal of Population Research.* Article ID 527510: 11 pages.

Basran, G., & Zong, L. (1998). Devaluation of foreign credentials as perceived by visible minority professional immigrants. *Canadian Ethnic Studies, 30*(3), 6-23.

Bauder, H. (2003). "Brain abuse," or the devaluation of immigrant labour in Canada. *Antipode, 35*(4), 699-717.

Beddoe, L., Fouche, C., Bartley, A., & Harington, P. (2012). Migrant social workers experience in New Zealand: Education and supervision issues. *Social Work Education, 31*(8), 1012-1031. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2011.633600

Beddoe, L., & Fouche, C. B. (2014). "Kiwis on the move:" New Zealand social workers' experiences of practicing abroad. *British Journal of Social Work, 44*(S1), i193-i208.

Beecher, B., Reeve, J., Eggertsen, L. & Furuto, S. (2010). International students' views about transferability in social work education and practice. *International Social Work, 53*(2), 203–216.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism – perspective and method.* Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Bryant, A. (2014). The grounded theory method. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 116-136). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Cardu, H. (2007). Career nomadism and the building of a professional identity in female immigrants. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 8*(4), 429-439.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2013, May 3). *Federal skilled workers.* Retrieved from http://www.cic.gc.ca/EnGLIsh/immigrate/skilled/index.asp

Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2015, June 5). *Graphic – Canada's citizenship decision-making process – June 2015.* Retrieved from http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en

Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2016, March 8). *Notice – supplementary information 2016 immigration levels plan.* Retrieved from http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/notices/2016-03-08.asp

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Dominelli, L. (2010). *Social work in a globalizing world.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Drolet, J., Hamilton, L., Esses, V., & Zavrazhyna, H. (2015, February). Labour market integration project: Better employment outcomes for immigrants: Final report. Retrieved from http://www.isccalgary.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Improving-Collaboration-in-Calgary-for-Better-Employment-Outcomes-for-Immigrants.pdf

Fang, C. J. (2012). *Foreign credential assessment and social work in Canada.* Retrieved from http://www.sasw.ca/council/FQR-Report2012-Final.pdf

Fouche, C. B., Beddoe, L., Bartley, A., & De Haan, I. (2014a). Enduring professional dislocation: Migrant social workers' perceptions of their professional roles. *British Journal of Social Work, 44*(7), 2004-2022.

Fouche, C., Beddoe, L., Bartley, A., & Brenton, N. (2014b). Strengths and struggles: Overseas qualified social workers' experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Australian Social Work, 67*(4), 551-566. doi: 10.1080/0312407X.2013.783604

Gray, M. (2005). Dilemmas of international social work: Paradoxical processes in indigenisation, imperialism and universalism. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 14*(2), 230-237.

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. (2009). *Government of Canada supports labour mobility for social workers.* Retrieved from http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?nid=450449

Hussein, S., Manthorpe J., & Stevens, M. (2010). People in places: A qualitative exploration of recruitment agencies' perspectives on the employment of international social workers in the UK. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*(3), 1000-1016.

Hussein, S., Manthorpe, J., & Stevens, M. (2011a). The experiences of migrant social work and social care practitioners in the UK: Findings from an online survey. *European Journal of Social Work, 14*(4), 479-496. doi: 10.1080/1391457.2010.513962

Hussein, S., Stevens, M., Manthorpe, J., Moriarty, J. (2011b). 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. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcr008

Hussein, S. (2014). Hierarchical challenges to transnational social workers' mobility: The United Kingdom as a destination within an expanding European Union. *British Journal of Social Work, 44*(S1), i174-i192. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcu050

Man, G. (2004). Gender, work and migration: Deskilling Chinese immigrant women in Canada. *Women's Studies International Forum, 27*(2), 135-148. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2004.06.004

Manhart, D. M. (2008). *Exploring the relationship between economic well-being, pre-immigration experiences, and acculturation of new immigrants in the United States* (master's thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 1455475).

Manthorpe, J., Hussein, S., & Stevens, M. (2012). Communication with migrant workers: The perspectives of people using care services in England. *Practice(UK), 24*(5), 299-314. doi:10.1080/09503153.2012.740450

Mata, F. (1999). The non-accreditation of immigrant professionals in Canada: Societal dimensions of the problem. *Metropolis Project.* Retrieved from http://canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/conversation/MATAPAPER.html#_Toc462031394

McInnes, T. (2012). *The career re-training experience of professional immigrants to Canada: An existential perspective.* Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. MR85701).

Moriarty, J., Hussein, S., Manthorpe, J., & Stevens, M. (2012). International social workers in England: Factors influencing supply and demand. *International Social Work, 55*(2), 169-184. doi:10.1177/0020872811417473

NAFTA Secretariat-Canadian Section. (n.d.). *Appendix 1603.D.1 Professionals.* Retrieved from https://www.nafta-sec-alena.org/Home/Legal-Texts/North-American-Free-Trade-Agreement#Ap1603.D.1

Ngo, H. V., & Este, D. (2006) Professional re-entry for foreign trained immigrants. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 7*(1), 27-50.

Nonini, D. M. (2002). Transnational migrants, globalizations processes, and regimes of power and knowledge. *Critical Asian Studies, 34*(1), 3-17.

Pullen-Sansfaçon, A. Brown, M. Fulton, A Ethier, S. (under review). Researching professional adaptation: An exploration of the methodological challenges of team Grounded Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.*

Pullen-Sansfaçon, A., Spolander, G., & Engelbrecht, L. (2011). Migration of professional social workers: Reflections on challenges and strategies for education. *Social Work Education, 31*(8), 1032-1045. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2011.609543

Pullen-Sansfaçon, A., Brown, M., & Graham, J. R. (2012). International migration of professional social workers: Toward a theoretical framework for understanding professional adaptation processes. *Social Development Issues, 34*(2), 37-50. Retrieved from http://lyceumbooks.com/sdiJournal.htm

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

Pullen-Sansfaçon, A., Brown, M., Fulton, A., Tetrault, A. G., & Ethier, S. (2014b). *Emerging theory of professional adaptation.* Retrieved from http://socialworkmigration.ca/professional-adaptation/professional-integration-and-adaptation-processes/

Reitz, J. G. (2001). Immigrant skill utilization in the Canadian labour market: Implications for human capital research. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 2*(3), 347-378.

Remennick, L. (2003). Career continuity among immigrant professionals: Russian engineers in Israel. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 29*(4), 701-721.

Rodriguez, J. K., & Mearns, L. (2012) Problematizing the interplay between employment relations, migration and mobility. *Employee Relations, 34*(6), 580-593.

Selvarajah, C. (2004). Equal employment opportunity: Acculturation experience of immigrant medical professionals in New Zealand in the period 1995 to 2000. *Equal Opportunities International, 23*(6), 50-73.

Simpson, G. (2009). Global and local issues in the training of "overseas" social workers. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 28*(6), 655-667. doi:10.1080/02615470903027371

Sims, D. (2012). Intercultural consolidation: Exploring the experiences of internationally qualified social workers and the English post-qualifying framework. *European Journal of Social Work, 15*(2), 241-255. doi:10.1080/13 691457.2010.543891

Tan, J. (2010). Grounded theory in practice: Issues and discussion for new qualitative researchers. *Journal of Documentation, 66*(1), 93-112. doi: 10.1108/00220411011016380

Vu, U. (2004). Canada invites foreign workers but neglects them on arrival. *Canadian HR Reporter, 17*(9), 1,3.

Walsh, T., Wilson, G., & O'Connor, E. (2010). Local, European and global: An exploration of migration patterns of social workers into Ireland. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*(6), 1875-1900. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcp141

Welbourne, P., Harrison, G., & Ford, D. (2007). Social work in the UK and the global labor market: Recruitment, practice and ethical considerations. *International Social Work, 50*(1), 27-40. doi:10.1177/002087287071480

White, R. (2006). Opportunities and challenges for social workers crossing borders. *International Social Work, 49*(5), 629-640.

Whiteside, M., Mills, J., & McCalman, J. (2012). Using secondary data for grounded theory analysis. *Australian Social Work, 65*(4), 504-516.

Xu, Y. (2007). Strangers in strange lands: A metasynthesis of lived experiences of immigrant Asian nurses working in western countries. *Advances in Nursing Science, 30*(3), 246-265. doi:10.1097/01.ANS.0000286623.84763.e0

Xu, Y., Gutierrez, A., & Kim, S. H. (2008). Adaptation and transformation through (un)learning: Lived experiences of immigrant Chinese nurses in US healthcare environment. *Advances in Nursing Science, 31*(2), E33-E47. doi:10.1097/01.ANS.0000319570.99254.e5