

## Social Work Around the World: Exploring Migration to the UK

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Hi, and welcome to The Social Work Community podcast. I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, careers editor here at Community Care. Today we're kicking off our new mini-series, *Social Work Around the World*, which is part of our new Season 3. This series will focus on social workers who have studied or practised abroad and come to the UK. We will be learning from their experiences, good and bad.

And this episode's guest is Yohai Hakak, who has many accolades but as a brief introduction he's a senior lecturer in social work at Brunel University, London.

This is Part 1 of the conversation I had with Yohai, which focuses on the research he leads at Brunel to do with the migration of social workers to and from the UK. The second episode is about him working in Israel, where he's from. So let's get started. [0:00:59.4]

Yohai Hakak: Thank you for having me on. I'm a senior lecturer in social work and the MsC Social Work programme lead at Brunel University, London. I conduct research on a wide range of issues, including on migration of social workers. I moved to the UK from Israel in 2007 and have taught social work in the UK since 2008.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay. And you also serve on BASW's special interest group on diaspora social workers, which really makes you the perfect guest to start this season off, which is why I really wanted to have this chat with you.

So, tell us a little bit about this research that you're involved with, the migration of social workers to and from the UK. Why was it important to carry out? And yeah, give us an overview of it. [0:02:03.0]

Yohai Hakak: Being a migrant myself, I was aware of the challenges that I experienced. Indeed, I didn't try to come here as a social work practitioner. So I did my PhD and post-doc in Israel, and came to the LSE at the beginning. I had a post-doctoral fellowship for a year at the LSE, the sociology department. And by the end of it I was looking for a job. And I was looking for an academic position.

So I didn't experience the challenges that social workers experience, but I did experience the challenges of a social work academic who would experience when migrating, and had to make lots of adjustment. There were many issues relating to the academic culture that are different, but there were other issues that are very much related to the social work and how it is practised here in the UK that were different.

But there were also lots of differences just about how people interact with each other, which have an impact no matter where you work. You know, it could be higher education or local authority as a social worker. The way that people interact with each other is slightly different, and it is different almost no matter from which country you arrive, you know. I remember just some simple examples that...there is almost like a set of social norms about how long are you allowed to stare at people in this country, whereas in Israel I felt people could stare at each other for a much longer period. Here, if you ever stare at anyone it's very sort of shy or, you know, you know that you are not allowed to do that. It's intrusive. So...

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That's a very funny observation. And I think staring is okay in a lot of countries, actually.

Yohai Hakak:

Yes, yes, yeah! So I had a range of such examples, you know. Me and my wife, the first house that we moved into here in the UK was sort of on the ground floor, and our living room, which was also our dining room, was facing the entrance of the building. And me and my wife had like this constant argument because I always wanted to shut the curtains because I felt exposed and people would stare into, you know, my...especially when I was eating. And she said, 'Oh, you're paranoid. No one will stare, you know. No one is interested in you. Who cares about you? And plus people are polite. They won't stare.' It took me a while to agree to test her, you know, argument. And indeed, people are much less inclined to stare, whereas you know, we lived on the ground floor in Israel, wherever we lived in Jerusalem, and we had this fence around the house. But people would often lean on the fence and spend a few good minutes staring at our house and at our windows and, you know, it's like...

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

And that was totally fine? [0:05:55.9]

Yohai Hakak:

Yeah, that was... And I think many people come from places where there is less of a separation between the private and the public, and where people live more communal life where one gets into other people's business more sort of freely. Yeah. These things are absolutely fine.

So you know, these are just some of the examples. I had loads of them. But it took me a while to think about this as a research project. The things that I was very much aware of were cultural aspects of migration. And this is how I tried to observe my own experience. I guess it turned into a research project once we received at Brunel an email from a group of Malayalam social workers.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Oh okay, that group, yes. The forum. Yes.

Yohai Hakak:

Yeah. Who...it's a large group of several hundred social workers who moved from Kerala to the UK. And they were looking for a place to hold their annual event. I invited them to do so and, well, got to know the group and the people and the activity. And very quickly after that it was enough to make me understand how important this issue is. And we started this research group.

At that time I also decided that I'm going to work with students very, very differently and started...rather than engage with them during the

last year, I started engaging with a group from the first year of the two-year Master's. And we worked consistently. Every several weeks we had meetings. And I think this sort of really helped the project to succeed.

But very quickly what we realised when we looked at the literature on the migration of social workers was that often, in most of the studies, the vast majority of the studies, there were several problems. So one of the key problems was that social workers were lumped together, regardless of the country of their origin. So you know, there were lots of studies looking at social workers from Canada, Australia, India, South Africa or, you know, Romania. Whichever country. And you know, interviewing all of them or...and then analysing the data. And the analysis then becomes...when you look at all of these people together and mix them in one big bag, there is no way to actually be sensitive to the culture that they come from. So the analysis then takes, you know, what I believe is quite simplistic psychological models – at least from my perspective, in terms of the ability to look at nuance or cultural nuances. There was very little of that.

And studies that did look at migration from specific countries were also not very sensitive to the culture. And this is probably due to maybe limitations within our discipline, within social work, that you know, we're not trained to look at those things very deeply. You know, we're not anthropologists or...

For me, fortunately my own PhD did adopt these tools and I was supervised by people who come from these disciplines, of anthropology and sociology. So this is what I think was missing there. And as a response, what we did, we looked at these groups separately. So each student basically focused on social workers from one country and we really tried to look closely at the cultures. As closely as we could. I'm sure there is much more work that can be done. Just we need to remember that it was all sort of...the data collection is all...most of it is work done by our students. And they were always sort of limited by the amount of time that they had and so on.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: It's ongoing. It's ongoing, isn't it, the research? [0:11:11.9]

Yohai Hakak: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah.

Yohai Hakak: Absolutely.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And you're focusing on seven countries. Is that right? [0:11:18.8]

Yohai Hakak: Oh, many more. Many more by now.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: More, okay.

Yohai Hakak: Many, many more. There were...I don't think I'm exaggerating but I think we had close to twenty students now on this project. And we have many more countries.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay.

Yohai Hakak: You know, I lost count. But around thirteen, I think.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay. So, like, Australia, Canada, India, Romania...

Yohai Hakak: South Africa.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: ...South Africa. America?

Yohai Hakak: Yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Zimbabwe?

Yohai Hakak: Yeah. Ghana. Nigeria. Hong Kong.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay.

Yohai Hakak: Germany, Greece...

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So one of the things I found really interesting...

Yohai Hakak: ...Ireland...

Sharmeen Ziauddin: ...on...yeah, oh Ireland. Okay. One of the things that I found interesting when you sent me the link to the research and how it's being conducted and everything was, you know, the premise that not all local authorities hire social workers who have come from overseas and sometimes there might be a view that it's just...you know, because of the shortage in the workforce it's like a compromise that they have to make, but actually can view it more like, I think you said, experts who can enrich local practice with new approaches and perspectives. So I guess there's two ways of looking at it. And for somebody who's been...who's maybe studied social work here and has always lived in England it might be quite different to work with somebody who's come from a different country and has practised.

So I guess that's the really interesting part of it all. And what I was reading was that there has been a massive increase in the number of people coming over. So, do you know why that might be? In 2012 it was about 10% of the workforce according to the General Social Care Council, which used to be the regulatory body. And then it went up to 17% in 2019. And Social Work England recently said that the number's gone up by 175%.

So, I mean, I know there's going to be, like, many reasons, but do you know why so many social workers are coming to the UK? [0:13:31.4]

Yohai Hakak: Well, I guess the question is more, 'Why is there such a shortage?' you know.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yes.

Yohai Hakak: If there wasn't a shortage, these people would not be here. And for many years, well, in terms of the immigration legislation, until last year, for many years we had the occupation shortage list. This is the list that the Home Office advertised each year and by which they consider which professions get some kind of preferential treatment in terms of visa approval. And social workers have been on this list ever since.

So that's the question. Why are social workers – as well as many other professional groups – what's the reason for these shortages? Well, I don't know about other professions but I do know about social work, that for whatever reason...well, it's a hard job, you know. It's a hard job. We know about workloads, we know about the stresses and pressures, we know about the salaries. So, I guess all of it makes it a career that quite a few people don't consider. I guess that's the simple answer. You know, I'm sure higher bursaries...we need to remember that the bursaries were not updated now for...I don't know how many years. And so many people just decide not...it's not for them.

I know that many more people would...of course the salaries are very central. So higher salaries and better conditions would make a difference.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That is the correct question, actually: 'Why is there a shortage?' rather than, 'Why are people coming to fill those gaps?' In terms of how social work is viewed in other countries, there's quite a significant difference, isn't there, in terms of the image of social work, how social workers are viewed or the profession is viewed in England compared to, say, maybe Nigeria or even America? I mean, what do you think are the differences? I feel like the UK might be a minority in the way that we view social work. [0:16:22.8]

Yohai Hakak:

Well, it's a good question. I think first there is sort of a debate around how the public view social workers. If you've come across Jo Hanley's recent article about the views of the public about social work, it seems like the public has much more positive views about social work than the government seem to think. And there seem to be...the government seem to be implying on different occasions that the public has a very negative view of social workers, despite some indications contrary to that.

So I don't know. What I do know is that from our studies, social workers often are quite surprised by what they experience relative to where they come...it's a very sort of...not as positive or more negative perception of social workers. And yes, many of them are often quite surprised.

But what we need to consider is...and this is the way we understood it is in the following way. So, there are quite a few countries where there is no legislation that sort of guarantees people's rights and the kind of, you know, lots of countries don't have a welfare state. And therefore when your rights are not guaranteed, anything that you are being given from the representative of the government is a wonderful gift, and you are very grateful.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Right.

Yohai Hakak:

Whereas in countries where there are rights and you know your rights, it's the social worker's or the local authority's role to ensure that you receive your rights, you are sort of...many people are arriving with sort of...they demand their rights and their position in relation to their social workers is not as if they are going to give them some amazing gift unexpectedly. But they demand from their social

workers to fulfil their rights. So this is one thing that makes a difference.

In addition to that, because in the UK so much of the role of social workers is around safeguarding and around this side of, you know, the spectrum between care and control, so much of it is around control, that often social workers have to take measures that are perceived as...well, for someone whose children were taken away from them, probably the word 'oppressive' is not too strong. But often social workers, as part of safeguarding a child, they might take some very harsh steps.

So yeah, all of those factors together might explain...well, some of the things that we heard, often people were sort of surprised by this response that they experienced, which was much less positive than previously.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Okay. Could you give me one example of something that is really different, even that you were surprised about? [0:20:36.5]

Yohai Hakak:

Well, there were loads of them. And some of them are more nuanced and others are less nuanced. In many countries social work is much more focused on larger groups. So much more focused on communities, on families, much more emphasis on group social work therefore. So this is one thing. You know, often people...and we also thought that social workers coming from the global south or from countries that are, you know, culturally very different, will have many more challenges, and people who come from English-speaking countries will have relatively very little challenges, if any at all. And I'm not sure that that's correct.

So I know that social workers who came from Australia, for example, experienced some really significant challenges. And in this case we studied both social workers, Australian social workers who migrated to the UK and British social workers who migrated back to Australia. We realised that there are some really key differences.

So Australian social workers were very attuned to how the social hierarchies made an impact on almost every aspect of their life or work experience. So, starting from the very significant involvement of politicians and, even at the local level, in social work. So this sort of what we call 'top-down intervention'. Endless policies, endless regulations, lots of constant interventions from the top in what social workers do. So a very sort of hierarchical system.

And then this sort of continues in how they perceived interactions within organisations, within local authorities, that they were much more hierarchical and that managers, compared to what they are familiar with, were very...much more distant, and that the ability to push back if you disagree or show your disagreement was...you had to be very, very careful in how you did it. So we had several social workers who described how they were perceived as, well, impolite. And some even got into trouble with professional suitability because they just talked back and they were perceived as very uncooperative in how they responded to supervision or feedback or...

And from their perspective it was very different. They said, 'Well, I come from a place where relationships are much more sort of equal and you are encouraged to disagree. If you disagree you are encouraged to say that. But I was perceived as very uncooperative because of that.'

Sharmeen Ziauddin: That's so interesting. So, so interesting. I mean, it's just something you'd never really think about unless you are that Australian social worker moving...

Yohai Hakak: Yeah. Yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: ...here. [0:24:39.8]

Yohai Hakak: The same they saw relationship, you know, interpersonal relationship as sort of slightly more distant and removed. The way you express emotions and what you are allowed to share is sort of much more reserved and much more cautious.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah. I was going to say, I mean, British...us British, we have, you know, the stiff upper lip and we don't...there's lots of memes and comedy about...on social media about our culture and how we don't say what we think, you know. We're too polite. And I guess that really would be contrasting to other cultures.

Yohai Hakak: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

And then social workers on the other hand say, 'Well, you know, service users really appreciated my ability to be a bit more straight and that they didn't need to guess what I was thinking but, you know, I just said it as it was.' So this is one example I can think of. Shall I give some other examples?

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah. One more example would be great, yeah. [0:25:54.1]

Yohai Hakak: So, South African social workers, South Africa during apartheid years used religion very, very strongly to justify the kind of social order that they had, both with black people and with the white Afrikaners. So social workers...and indeed, the apartheid did no longer exist but these cultural sediments or impact is still ongoing and many of the social workers who do arrive from South Africa are just more religious. And of course this shapes how people observe parenting, how people observe relationships, how people observe lots of other things. And Britain is relatively a very, very secular place. They had to make very significant adjustments. In South Africa it's much more acceptable that talking about spirituality and sort of supporting people's spiritual needs is something that you discuss or sort of is part of what you do as a social worker. But they realised that here it's a very big sort of no-no and that you need to be very careful.

But there is also, you know, the tendency...because Britain is a very secular place, I can...this is something that I also feel. We often criticise social workers – whenever something happens we criticise social workers. And it's absolutely fine. We should criticise social workers when there is a need to criticise. But I think also there is the assumption that if our systems will work properly, we will manage to avoid all such incidences, and we can actually control reality 100%.



And this is what, well, social workers who come from more religious places would say, well, we replaced God with humans and we made humans, you know, slightly like God-like, in the sense that they can control reality 100%. But just like complexity theory tells us, the fields of social work and child protection, for example, are so complex, and social reality is so complex and there's so many variables, that I don't really believe that we can always control it 100%. No matter how good the social worker is, we are not gods. And unfortunately there will always be a situation where things are not going exactly to plan and some people will get hurt. You know, of course we need to always strive to do the best but there is also something about this, you know, humility and limitations to what we do.

So again, this was something that social workers spoke about, how they feel that in the UK the pub has replaced the church and human beings have replaced God and...

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah. It's another really interesting view and difference. And certainly, yeah, as you said, talking about religion is a no-no, especially in that when you're, say, on a visit or you don't really do those kind of things. Although sometimes – and actually this is an interesting point – do some of the social workers that you've been in touch with...do they often get put with families of the same cultural background, to help build those relationships? [030:22.2]

Yohai Hakak: Yes. Often that's the case.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Surely that has its advantages? [0:30:28.2]

Yohai Hakak: And potentially disadvantages.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah.

Yohai Hakak: Yeah. Yes. I don't think I can say much more. But I know that there are some instances where they were brought especially to work with people from similar communities.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Mm. If people want to get involved with the project, is there anywhere they can go? [0:30:49.5]

Yohai Hakak: So, first of all yeah, of course. We are recruiting for a range of projects, a range of studies.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I will put the links in the show notes.

Yohai Hakak: We're still trying to learn more about migration from Greece, from Germany, from Ireland, both Irelands. I'm still hoping to recruit more social workers who migrated from Muslim countries or who are Muslims themselves and migrated to here.

There is another questionnaire that everyone, any migrating social worker, is invited to complete about learning or working across cultures. So this is something more recent.

And we are also studying the migration of social work students, international social work students. Well, it would be great if people participate because these things do make a difference and we need to do more to improve conditions and make sure that people who



come here are supported, for both their benefit and the system itself and service users first and foremost.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Brilliant. Thank you, Yohai. It's been really great speaking.

Yohai Hakak:

Excellent. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I hope you found that as fascinating as I did. To listen to Yohai's experiences practising social work in Israel listen to the next episode of The Social Work Community podcast which should follow this one. And if you're listening on your phone, please do give us a follow on Spotify, Apple podcast or whichever platform you're using to listen to. That way you will know when Part 2 of this podcast drops.

That's it for now. See you next time.