Invisible but present: Black Southern African social workers' experiences working in Children's Services in England

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Abstract

The thesis reports on a practitioner-initiated practice-near research study investigating the experiences of Black social workers who have migrated from the Southern African region to England and practice in children's services settings. The study involved a qualitative psychosocial methodology, with a total of 14 in-depth interviews and a focus group being completed. The seven social workers who participated in this study spent their formative years in the Southern African Development Community region. Analysis of the interview accounts revealed multitudinous challenges linked to discriminatory practices, inequalities in workload management and everyday incivilities and microaggressions. These challenges compounded other adversities experienced as a Black African migrant professional and were reflected in a personal subjective experience of feeling isolated, unsupported and rejected. Additionally, for the participants, migration was found to be as much a psychological experience as it was physical and cultural, with upbringing and childhood experiences significant in shaping how social work was embraced as a vocation. Through the analysis, the thesis contributes to the wider professional field via insights it affords into the journeys and personal and professional identities of Black Southern African social workers practising in English children's services. It focuses on how members of this community navigate power dynamics and in organisations, support structures and the social and emotional demands of frontline child and family social work. This has implications for the way in which anti-racist supervision and leadership are conceptualised and further understanding of the influence of postcolonial histories on workplace relationships, foregrounding ground-shifting approaches to changing practice.

Keywords: African social workers, Southern African Development Community, children's services, child protection, microaggressions, migration, practice-near research, practitioner research, postcolonial melancholia, racism

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Key terms defined

Cultural dissonance is a sociological and psychological concept capturing a state of discord, conflict, or tension that individuals or groups experience when their internalised cultural norms, values, beliefs, or expectations clash significantly with those of a different cultural environment or a changing cultural context.

Emotional labour is the process of adjusting one's own feelings and attitudes to make them more acceptable to others, helping signal belonging within a group.

Institutional power is a form of agency rooted in history and structure, in which organisations and socio-cultural systems shape knowledge, influence behaviours, and determine access to life opportunities.

Institutional racism denotes the reproduction of racism through institutions. It can be used to reference organisational capacity, or indeed inability, to deliver suitable, professional services or support to individuals based on race, cultural background, or ethnicity.

Organisational anxiety denotes unconscious mechanisms in an organisation to manage deep-seated anxieties prompted by work tasks and relationships.

Organisational defences are a collective, unconscious mechanisms developed by organisations or groups to manage anxiety and emotional stress inherent to work.

Psychological defences are the unconscious mechanisms that individuals and social systems employ to manage or shield themselves from overwhelming anxiety, painful emotions, or internal conflict.

Transnational mobility is the movement of people across national borders in ongoing, multidirectional, and socially connected ways, enabling individuals to maintain relationships, identities, and activities in more than one country simultaneously.

Transnationalism denotes a multidimensional set of social fields and processes that facilitate the persistent interconnection of actors across national borders, thereby shaping and transforming the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Race and racism are significant issues of concern for the social work profession, and considerable numbers of social workers working in the United Kingdom are from backgrounds other than white British. However, the experiences of Black social workers, both of direct practice and workplace environments, are under-researched, particularly social workers from Africa working in the United Kingdom (see, e.g., Dzudzor, 2021; Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022). This thesis reports on exploratory, qualitative research which seeks to help remedy this gap, focussing on the experiences of Black social workers from the Southern African region working in English children's services.

This chapter introduces the research project by providing a definition of Southern Africa and a brief account of the project as a 'practice-near', practitioner research study, as well as an initial statement of researcher reflexivity which details aspects of my professional and personal motivations for undertaking the research. At the end of the chapter, I outline what each of the component chapters of the thesis addresses, in contextualising the research study, relating the findings and considering their implications.

The Southern African Development Community

For the purposes of the study, Southern Africa will be defined as countries that comprise the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The SADC is a regional economic community comprising 16 member states: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The participants in this study are Black social workers who hail from the SADC region.

As an area, the SADC region has been shaped, in significant ways, by migration over the past two centuries, with links between the people across the region who are, dominantly, the Bantu-speaking community (Choudhury et al., 2021). Bantu-language populations are groups possessing a shared linguistic ancestry and a historical legacy connected to early farming communities that expanded through the Bantu dispersals (see Vansina, 1995). In the SADC region, there are, though, also other communities, such as the Khoi-San, who lived in the region prior to the arrival of Bantu-speaking peoples (see Daimon, 2021). The connectedness is confirmed by some scholars (e.g., Daimon, 2021) who highlight that present-day Malawi was historically used as the transit route for Bantu-speaking populations moving South.

This research is grounded in an appreciation that the population of the SADC region have a shared culture or have influenced each other's cultures over a significant period of time, and across the boundaries of the countries that make up the region. My own experience is an example of this. Growing up in the region meant that I had relatives across several countries, and links in different locations. My tribe originated in (what is now known as) South Africa, I lived in Zimbabwe during my childhood and have relatives in Zambia.

The SADC region has not only been influenced by groups from within the African continent but also profoundly shaped by colonialism. From the late eighteenth through to the nineteenth century, European groups began settling in some parts of the region, notably South Africa, which was used as part of a trade route (by the Dutch East India company) between the Indies and Asia (Loveland, 1999). This contributed to some of the countries' occupation by Dutch, Germans, French and British nationals, and, alongside the presence of Christian missionaries, this influenced local cultures, with, for example, the Dutch East India Company 'allowing' its employees to engage in relationships with the indigenous black tribes (Loveland, 1999).

The post-colonial period witnessed the development of the frontline states and then the Southern African Development Community as independent geographical entities seeking to reduce their dependence on apartheid South Africa (Muntschick, 2018). Whilst borders have remained, these endeavours, in different ways, brought the communities of nations closer together in a way that resembled relations prior to the nineteenth century when the British occupants created arbitrary borders between countries (Christopher, 2001). The SADC states not only focussed on reducing dependence on apartheid South Africa but also decolonisation across the region. The frontline states of Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia were founded in 1974 and constitute one of the most important mechanisms in response to colonialism and its effects on the region, as well as on the continent (Hwang, 2007). Departing from a common assumption that this region was economically underdeveloped prior to the beginning of the colonial era in the 1890s, Hwang (2007) emphasises that Southern Africa was not devoid of economic growth or governance. This was realised through pastoralism via the indigenous people and Bantu-speaking community with knowledge of ironworking from the North, together with trade.

The development of the SADC can also be characterised as stimulated by strengthening familial and communal bonds disrupted by colonisation. The collaboration of member-states on social issues, defence, and politics and shared values find form in the SADC's objectives as outlined in the 1992 treaty (le Pere and Tjønneland, 2005), and communal efforts to stabilise the region. To give an example, post-2000, which was around the time I left Zimbabwe to move to the UK, the impact of political of instability led to people migrating across the region with some settling there long-term. Movement between member states of the SADC-region is, it can be said, challenging. This is due to conflicts between tribes in the region which date back to the 1800s, as in recent times with the rise of xenophobia in South Africa, where people from the region and beyond have competed for resources, and communities that

originated outside the region have been considered a threat to be excluded, if not eliminated (Magidimisha et al., 2018).

During the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, many left the country for Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa. There they were accepted due to the determination of these member states to see their liberation (Hwang, 2007), with Botswana accommodating these refugees as a neutral country. South African liberation leaders were welcomed by their neighbouring countries, demonstrating a willingness in these countries to suffer the consequences to support their kin. Movement between the region will continue to shape the cultures (Lurie and Williams, 2014; Hadebe, 2022; Rugunanan and Xulu-Gama, 2022). Although borders separate these countries, before the borders were erected by European settlers, most of the population was moving from one area to the other due to shared values (Ehret, 1997; Christopher, 2001).

Studying Black Southern African social worker experiences in UK children's services

Prompted in part by a lack of staffing for posts within public and healthcare services, there has been a drive to recruit health and social care professionals to work in the United Kingdom from other regions of the world, which has combined with the migratory movement of many skilled professionals for economic reasons (Naidoo and Kasiram, 2006; Hakak et al., 2023). Upon arrival in the UK, a range of challenges awaits these professionals, in becoming accustomed to a different culture and language.

The phenomenon of professional migration is not a recent one. Available evidence suggests that the recruitment of overseas social workers to the UK rose in the late 1990s and continued into the early 21st Century (Hussein et al., 2011; Moriarty et al., 2012; Chogugudza, 2018). This has happened due to various 'push' and 'pull' factors, i.e., of push factors in the

sending countries and pull factors in destination countries. (Mejia et al., 1979). Highlighted 'push' factors comprise those that are political, social, economic, legal, historical, cultural, or educational in nature, with a longstanding high vacancy rate for frontline social workers in the UK, being the main reason for social workers from various countries migrating there (Chogugudza, 2018). Vacancies have continued to increase, partly due to problems facing the children's social work profession, despite the increase in people training to be social workers (MacAlister et al., 2012). In these respects, social, economic, and political forces have shaped both social work practice and daily life of migrant social workers, influencing migration pressures (Tinarwo, 2011). Indeed, workforce shortages in UK local authorities can be considered as a significant pull factor and conditions such as low professional status, poor employment prospects, workplace tensions, political instability, and economic decline contributed to migration, though these directly affected only a minority (Tinarwo, 2011). More generally, the promise of improved living standards, greater stability, better work environments, and broader family and career options abroad has influenced social workers' migration decisions (Engelbrecht, 2006; Hanna and Lyons, 2016a).

Local Authorities have played a role in advancing this process by directly recruiting social workers from overseas, albeit with some social workers migrating and then seeking employment upon arrival in the UK (Welbourne et al., 2007). However, there has been a tendency to use employment agencies that can help with visa arrangements and travel costs, and to provide support once workers arrive in the UK (Hussein et al., 2010). The recruitment of social workers has tended to be from English-speaking countries (including in Southern Africa), though at one point there was a focus on European countries (Hanna and Lyons, 2011). Labour migration to the United Kingdom follows a clear pattern shaped by historical colonial relationships, particularly with Commonwealth nations, and is driven by existing economic connections and geographical proximity (Hakak et al., 2023).

Presently, there is a paucity of research concerned with the journeys and experiences of Black social workers who have migrated from Southern African states to the UK, and England specifically, including regarding their experiences practising in English social care settings (Naidoo and Kasiram, 2006; Dzudzor, 2021; Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022; Hakak et al., 2023). Studies undertaken have highlighted adversity and specific challenges. Dzudzor (2021), for example, examined the experiences of Ghanaian social workers, noting the challenges of racism, subjugation, prejudice, and discrimination to which they are subject.

The study reported in this thesis engages with the experiences of both Black Southern African social workers who were born and trained in the SADC region and those who spent their formative years in the region, before completing their training in England. By adopting a psychosocial theoretical orientation, the study explores the inner experience of these professionals and the lived reality of working in English children's services. In doing so, the study attends to the role of culture, racism, as well as personal biographical experience, the nature of working practices in the community and within organisations.

Reflexivity in practice-near research

The study is categorisable as a practitioner-initiated practice-near research project, i.e., as a doctoral project undertaken by a practising social worker with a focus related to their experience in practice (see, e.g., Fook, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Mitchell, Lunt and Shaw, 2010; Archard and O'Reilly, 2024; Archard et al., 2025b). The idea for the project arose from my own experiences as a Black social worker who was born in Zimbabwe and then moved to England in my early twenties to live, study and work. Undertaking this study, I hoped to make use of my experience and to provide a platform for the experiences of this community of social workers.

My intention for the project was not to develop a means of helping social care organisations find ways to assimilate this community of professionals into English children's services settings (though, it may be said, there is something of a tension with how the findings might inform such an endeavour). Rather, my hope was (and is) that the study findings might inform the development of a framework or strategy to support this group in the field of child and family social work consistent with the profession's commitment to social justice and anti-racism.

As a practitioner research project, my own positioning as a (practitioner-)researcher is attended to closely and, to reflect this, the thesis is written in the first person. I also provide a brief reflexive account of the personal and professional experiences that led me to undertake the study here.

Reflexivity is definable as the acknowledgement of (and respect for) researcher subjectivity within research enquiry (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), and as conscious self-awareness and an ongoing process of the researcher reflecting on their subjective responses in undertaking research (Finlay, 2002b). Equally, it can be recognised in terms of the researcher's influence on research participants (Berger, 2015). For this study, my experiences have similarities with those of the participants, yet they are not the same; and, in the absence of reflexive awareness, there is increased potential for confusion about what belongs to whom, impacting the credibility of the analysis.

Struggling with resilience

I have been engaged in direct work in the field of child welfare for most of my professional career. During my first few years in social work practice, I found I often had to adapt due to not being accepted by all the families I visited and supported, with some making it all too clear

that I was a Black man sent to work with vulnerable young people. This challenged one of my core personal values: respect for others, which I considered vital to community cohesion. I had to learn to make additional efforts to tolerate this and work with a lack of acceptance, not only from the families I served but also from colleagues.

At the heart of social work, as a profession, is a pride in respect for others; hence, there is a challenge when, as a social worker, others do not seem to respect or value you, and I was led to question why I had been able to withstand some of these obstacles. I have observed that there are times when my views or ways of working appear to differ from those of my colleagues. I have reflected on my capacity to 'function' in this environment amidst distrust, seemingly based on racism, and resource constraints which compromised my ability to build trust and collaborate with families.

I view myself as a product of a community where I was expected to take responsibility at a young age. Growing up rurally, I was left to find a solution to boredom away from my family while at the same time playing a role in helping with work and facing barriers in accessing education and meaningful employment. I now see these formative experiences as leading me to develop different personal qualities that are evident in the way I approach my work: resilience, respect for others, patience and determination, as well as a belief in the value of hard work and cooperation. I have, I would say, had to work much harder for things that others appear to have acquired with less of a struggle. Although others might consider these formative experiences as lacking privilege, I have sought to embrace them as a source of strength. Yet, I also wonder how much this means I am complicit with certain assumptions about my 'place' as a social worker and how much aspects of my upbringing have contributed to an acceptance of being undervalued in my work. During my frontline practice, I have found that I managed to work with families considered the most challenging, where others struggled or opted out. I find that I continue to care about the welfare of others, even at times when it

comes at my own expense, and that I can be more concerned about the collective health of the team rather than the cost to my own (as a 'good servant' of the organisation). While it can be seen as something positive, it is worth reflecting on, particularly the cost to oneself.

On respectability and the expectation of accountability

In reflecting on these tendencies for public 'selflessness', I have asked myself questions, such as: Why did I not agitate in some way to try and prompt change or apply for certain (more senior) positions when they became available? Have experiences of racism or discrimination played a part in my not wanting to feel rejected (perhaps more than I would consciously accept)? I have also reflected on the possibility that I became comfortable with the way I had positioned myself in the middle of workplace structures, not at the bottom or the top, relying on my work to do the talking about who I am. I am aware that supervisors and managers I have worked with have viewed me as 'solid' and that I have a reputation as a safe pair of hands: someone who can be relied upon to work more complex cases and for defensible decision-making. This being so, at times, I have struggled with the uncertainty about the level of confidence afforded to me to contribute to the organisation amongst colleagues (from other backgrounds). There were times when I was valued as 'solid' but not really expected to progress or support others via more senior posts, and hence, stay where I am in the workplace hierarchy. I was left wondering how much this was an effect of working in an anxiety-provoking line of work (and risk-averse systems) and the perceived differences and implicit expectations about the capacity in which I could help the organisation.

Yet, in seeking to avoid (what could be deemed as) the shallow ambition I see in others, I have wondered how much opportunity this afforded colleagues who did not share these ideals and sought to progress regardless and how much I am directed, more than others,

to find ways to work with families without adequate resources. There were times when I felt that either no one was listening, or senior managers turned a blind eye to what was happening, and unlike others and despite my commitment to the collective, I was left exposed in a way that colleagues were not. I questioned my own respectability, thinking that I had struggled to articulate myself and then found myself viewing white colleagues as having a sense of entitlement.

Links between this and the effects of (post-)colonialism can be made. At the beginning of my career, it took me time to develop the confidence to challenge senior management colleagues and families. Initially, I saw a white person as someone to be respected and not to speak back to, because of who they were, but also due to a belief in the importance of respecting elders and those in authority. Yet, of course, in social work, as in other caring professions, dialogue involves more than one party. Although I have learned to be more resilient in spite of challenges, I have not always taken adequate care of my physical and emotional health. Alongside my formative experience, and independence at a young age, I have learnt to be creative in my work. I prefer working in a collective, but I can also work well alone once I am clear about what I am expected to do. I recall previous managers saying that I was managing them instead of them managing me. This was said because I value my independence, and I know that, even if I am working in isolation, there will be a time when my work will be evaluated. This scenario is the same as the role that I fulfilled as a child. Even when I was given tasks that adults did not want to do, typically due to being seen as relatively insignificant, there was still an expectation of accountability.

Institutional racism, professional anxieties and professional identities

I have a dual professional identity, having trained as both a youth worker and a social worker, and I view myself as having joined the social work profession after having passed up doing so for some time. I sought training in youth work as an undergraduate because, at the time, the profession of youth work aligned with my values and appeared to offer a freedom to support people without stringent boundaries, as well as a sense of community with colleagues and young people. I ended up training as a social worker because I felt I had outgrown most of the positions I held as a youth worker. Part of me wanted to continue with this work. However, there were times I felt constrained in handing over certain tasks to social workers, losing something in the process and letting down families with whom I had built relationships. As a Black man in the social work profession, I have thought a lot about the reproduction of institutional racism and the subtle (and not so subtle) forms it takes in this work. Fakhry (2011) observes that 'to be black in a white world is an agony. This is because the white world is racist, if you are black, you are seldom allowed to be an ordinary, regular human being' (p. 1). Racism does not, I would agree, exist outside of everyday, institutional experience. It is part of the very fabric of systems within them. In my work, there have been times when I felt I could not have the same expectations as colleagues from different, i.e., white, and other backgrounds. I was confronting a range of invisible barriers as a Black social worker. In this way, my experiences are a guiding motivation for undertaking this project. This is not so much for informing educational initiatives for social workers from Southern Africa working in England, but so local authority children's services, as organisations, can appraise how they support this group as practitioners and employees. Although, in the social work profession, notions of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice are foregrounded, this does not seem consistent with the experience of discrimination and oppression that are experienced by Black social workers.

I am also keenly aware of the impact of working in the context of states of organisational (and professional) anxiety amidst poor public opinion of social work (see, e.g., Shoesmith, 2016). When first looking to train as a social worker, I was advised to avoid the profession due to the negative public view and I considered it to involve 'rigid' ways of working based on procedural imperatives rather than relationship-based support. I therefore trained as a youth worker first because I felt that it gave me flexibility to work with people without the same power differentials. Moreover, when I started practising as a social worker, I felt ill-equipped and fearful of making mistakes that could lead to scrutiny, but I also wondered what this meant in terms of a compromised personal or professional agency in the work and capacity for curiosity and 'negative capability' (Cornish, 2011). I resolved that (excessive) anxiety, fear and feelings of inadequacy would make for self-constructed barriers. At the same time, I found social work is a profession that does not simply 'help' others but involves being enrolled into certain ways of dealing with others: working in a context that is risk-to-self-averse, which circumscribes opportunities for self-awareness. Consequently, certain ways of thinking become 'off-limits' and thinking must be managed/processed by the system in a particular way, which shapes the type of 'inequalities imagination' social workers and social work organisations might realise. In this way, continuing to stand still, perhaps partly because of my formative experiences, is a (im)possibility that I have been prompted to face in undertaking this research, as are issues of disappointment at the absence of a feeling of belonging.

Thesis structure

Including this first chapter, the thesis is organised into seven chapters. This chapter has introduced the research project, including a brief comment on the contribution the project makes to the wider disciplinary field and a reflexive account of my own personal professional

motivations for the project. Chapter 2 provides further context for the study via a review of relevant literature, with a focus on studies addressing the experiences of Black social workers, Black African social workers and health and care professionals. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the research, including detailing how principles from a specific method of in-depth interviewing, Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2012) psychosocial approach, were adapted for the study and combined with a focus group, alongside reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the material generated. Chapters 4 and 5 then detail the findings of the analysis, addressing the identified themes. After this, Chapter 6 considers the implications of the findings for future research, policy, and practice, alongside the research's limitations. In Chapter 6, I also provide some reflections on the methodology used. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with some personal reflections on my experience undertaking the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews relevant research concerning the experiences of Black social workers, including those working in children's services in England, and other Black African health and care professionals working in care systems in the UK, foregrounding the complex challenges these professionals encounter in a predominantly White, Western professional environment. Employing a narrative review methodology, I draw together different strands of scholarship to construct a coherent understanding of the issues linked to my focus of this thesis. These issues include identity, cultural differences and challenges with transitions whilst also attending to the matters of race and racism within English child and family social work. Particular attention is dedicated to the lived realities of Black social workers within children's services, whilst acknowledging the intersections between race, identity, and professional practice in their experiences there. Additionally, the review contextualises the experiences of Black Southern African social workers by engaging with other relevant child welfare literature, thereby situating the challenges they experience within a broader framework.

Narrative review methodology

A narrative review methodology was adopted as a flexible approach to develop an in-depth and comprehensive overview of the literature surrounding a specific topic (Munn et al., 2018). A narrative review approach enables key themes to be identified alongside ongoing debates and existing gaps for scholarship. There are several steps to the narrative review process: selecting a topic, defining a research question, conducting a literature search, selecting and organising relevant studies, synthesising findings, and writing and structuring the review (Green, Johnson and Adams, 2006). As a mapping and synthesis of existing literature, a narrative review affords

a holistic overview of a topic whilst also facilitating a critical interpretation of available research findings (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Green, Johnson and Adams, 2006; Grant and Booth, 2009; Ferrari, 2015; Snyder, 2019).

A narrative literature review is particularly suited for exploratory research where the aim is to synthesise diverse perspectives, attend to relevant concepts, and critically interpret complex social phenomena like the matter of racism in social work. Compared to a systematic review, which focusses on narrowly defined questions and predefined criteria, a narrative review supports interpretive depth and conceptual flexibility (Greenhalgh, Thorne and Malterud, 2018), rendering the approach ideal for topics where there is heterogeneous empirical evidence and evolving theoretical frameworks, and where contextual insight is important (Baumeister and Leary, 1997).

Literature review rationale

As I acknowledged in the first chapter of the thesis, this research is a doctoral project I undertook as a practising social worker and involved a focus related to my experience in practice (see, e.g., Cooper, 2009; Archard and O'Reilly, 2024). My personal and professional experience led me to consider exploring the journeys and experiences of other social work practitioners from a similar background to mine. In practice, I experienced challenging situations that I found it hard to process and comprehend, leaving me with a sense of isolation. I was led to think about my experiences of migration and education before settling in England and how, as someone who left family in Southern Africa and lost a support network. The first seven years I spent in England involved grappling with being a migrant, having the sense of not belonging. I did not arrive in England as a qualified social worker but rather started my journey towards this by working in different care settings before training.

When I began to review relevant research literature, I found there were several studies focussing on social workers who trained outside the UK and then moved to the UK. My study includes social workers who were trained in the UK and those who arrived in England ready to work as social workers. Although there are several studies that explore the shared experiences of Black African social workers, these studies tend to take different methodological approaches. Despite the differences in methodological approach between these studies, similar findings are evident. There is extensive social work literature addressing the issues of racism, diversity and inclusion, however, specific attention to the experiences and perspectives of Black social workers from the Southern hemisphere and international social workers remains (relatively) sparse (Tinarwo, 2011; Pullen-Sansfacon, Spolander and Engelbrecht, 2012; Roche and Flynn, 2018; Obasi, 2022; Fitzhenry et al., 2022; Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022; Dytham, Mallett and Walters, 2024). Moreover, no studies I identified examined social worker experiences from a collective Southern African perspective and the experiences of social workers from the SADC region that have trained in the UK, nor this community's experiences practising in child welfare or child protection social work specifically.

A range of research studies evidence how structural inequalities pervade the UK's child welfare system (see, e.g., Featherstone et al., 2018; Bernard and Harris, 2019). However, the focus has largely been on the inequities experienced by service users. There has been less concern for the racialised experiences of social work professionals and how Black African social workers navigate whiteness and institutional power within children's services settings (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). Some studies have examined how migrant professionals adapt to the UK's bureaucratic, social work environment (Coyle et al., 2005; Finney and Simpson, 2009), but these focus on Eastern European and Commonwealth professionals without delving into the racialised emotional labour performed by Black Southern African social workers (Mirza, 2009). Put differently, for this project, searching for literature that aligned with the focus

concerned the nature of a specific community's experiences and whether there was another body of research available that I could learn from. Through this process, it was apparent that there were relevant studies regarding migration and social workers' experiences. Yet, there also were also clear gaps and a more in-depth analysis of migration and the lived experiences of Black Southern African social workers was required. Indeed, given current recruitment strategies that increasingly rely on overseas-trained social workers to fill UK shortages (Welbourne, Harrison and Ford, 2007; Hussein, Stevens and Manthorpe, 2011; Hanna and Lyons, 2016b; Lepper, 2023), there is a clear need to better understand how Black Southern African social workers experience the professional roles they hold. Also, the perspective of these professionals is important to inform anti-racist policy, recruitment and retention strategies and developmental pathways (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2021).

Search and appraisal process

A rigorous literature search is foundational to any doctoral level research inquiry, and engaging with academic databases is a starting point. However, for a topic as multi-dimensional as the lived experiences of Black social workers, a broader, more exploratory approach was necessary (Robson, 2024). Alongside searches of the databases, such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and Scopus, the search strategy was expanded to incorporate diverse sources, including grey literature (notably, unpublished doctoral theses) and citation chaining (Carey, 2013).

Following Whittaker's (2012) guidance on identifying thematically linked material, I used backward and forward citation analysis to trace conceptual lineages and current debates relevant to my research focus. Careful consideration was given to the epistemological challenges attendant to this activity, meaning a need for reflexive and critical engagement when navigating multiple sources and conflicting arguments and claims (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004),

as well as an iterative search process, with relevant knowledge spanning disciplinary boundaries.

In undertaking the literature review, I was also influenced by Bryman's (2016) argument that the early phases of literature searching are constrained by rigid inclusion/exclusion criteria; hence, a strategy should be used that allows for serendipity and conceptual exploration. This openness allowed a broader engagement with literature that, while not always directly aligned with my topic, offered supplementary insights into social work epistemologies and the matters of institutional racism and professional identity. Further, in this respect, the literature search was engaged with not merely as a technical task but as a dialogic process connecting my developing ideas with established discourses in the wider disciplinary field (Fox, Martin and Green, 2007).

Following this iterative phase, I sought to systematically evaluate selected studies for methodological robustness, relevance, and theoretical contribution. The reports of these studies, discussed in the following sections, were chosen for their empirical and conceptual alignment with the focus of my study, particularly social work post-migration and how social workers experience and respond to racism in practice settings. A narrative review framework was applied to synthesise and critically interrogate the literature, drawing connections between findings to consider knowledge gaps.

Experiences of African social workers post-migration in the UK

Table 1 provides an overview of selected studies with strong connections to the focus of the empirical research reported in this thesis, i.e., of African social workers' experiences post-migration in the UK. Although one of these studies focuses on the experiences of social workers

from Ghana, which is not part of the Southern African region, it offers valuable insights into the experience of African social workers practising in England post-migration.

Table 1: Characteristics of studies addressing the experiences of African social workers practising in the UK post-migration

Author(s) and year of publication	Reporting format	Research aim	Methodology/study design	Participants	Key findings
Dzudzor (2021)	Doctoral thesis	Exploring the lived experience of Ghanaian trained social workers in child protection in England.	Qualitative, interview-based (free association narrative interview method: FANIM) with thematic analysis	10 Ghanian trained social workers working in England	Challenges adapting to a new professional culture, navigating racism and institutional bias. Reconciling differing child protection practices between Ghana and the UK.
Hakak, Onokah and Shishane (2022)	Journal article	To explore the experiences of South African social workers in	Mixed-methods design: qualitative and quantitative, questionnaires and interviews. Thematic	10 social workers who trained in South Africa now working in England.	Differences between the religious tendencies more prevalent in South African society and the much more secular tendencies of English culture. The South African-trained social workers shared that they did not get support

		the United Kingdom.	analysis was used to analyse data.		from their first job, work being rushed due to staff shortages and negative supervision experiences contributing towards anxiety as a practitioner.
Naidoo and Kasiram (2006)	Journal article	To explore personal journeys, and the process of cultural adaptation for migrating social workers from South Africa to England.	Exploratory, qualitative study involving focus groups. Content analysis was used to analyse data.	10 South African-trained social workers working in the UK	Burnout as a problem for South African social workers. Push and pull factors for social worker migration, such as financial incentives, professional development, and socio-political issues in South Africa
Tinarwo (2011)	Doctoral thesis	Examining the migration.	Exploratory, qualitative study involving semi-	24 Zimbabwean-trained social workers -	Systemic challenges Zimbabwean social workers face in the UK labour market, including institutional injustices and

		experiences of Zimbabwean social workers recruited from Zimbabwe to come and work for a single local authority.	structured interviews and postal questionnaires. The study used analytic induction and thematic analysis.	working in the UK (one British city)	discriminatory practices. These adversities appear to prompt a shift away from navigating conventional career pathways/professional progression, i.e., to instead pursue careers as independent or agency-based practitioners.
Willett and Hakak (2020)	Journal article	Exploring the experiences of social workers who were trained in Zimbabwe and migrated to England.	Mixed-methods design: qualitative and quantitative, questionnaires and interviews. The study used thematic analysis.	10 Zimbabwean-trained social workers currently practising in England (Greater London area).	Participants reported cultural differences in relation to the place of the individual in the community and in relation to risk, corporal punishment and domestic violence. They shared their surprise at individualistic tendencies they encountered, notably emphasis on privacy, and practice focusing more on casework and the nuclear family unit.

The studies in Table 1 comprise prior empirical investigations into the transnational experiences of African-trained social workers practising in England and the United Kingdom. Notably, Dzudzor's (2021) study examines the lived experiences of Ghanaian-trained social workers who have migrated to the UK. Employing a qualitative design grounded in a psychosocial framework, and specifically Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2012) 'free association narrative interview method' (FANIM), this study offers an in-depth exploration of how personal and professional identities are negotiated in the context of transnational migration. Further contributing to the literature are two mixed-methods studies (Willett and Hakak, 2020; Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022), which explore the trajectories of South African and Zimbabwean-trained social workers respectively. Both studies integrate qualitative and quantitative methods, i.e., questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to examine how South African and Zimbabwean social workers adapt to the UK practice environment. These studies highlight common themes such as professional devaluation, regulatory pressures, and cultural dissonance, while also capturing resilience strategies and professional agency.

Tinarwo's (2011) research provides an additional qualitative perspective, focusing specifically on 24 Zimbabwean-trained social workers employed within an English metropolitan context. Participants initially completed postal questionnaires, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews. This study illustrates how macro-level factors such as immigration policies and employment regulations interact with micro-level experiences of workplace integration and identity negotiation. Furthermore, the qualitative study by Naidoo and Kasiram (2006) examines the experiences of South African-trained social workers who transitioned into UK practice. The study findings underscore the complexities of professional adjustment, including challenges related to recognition of qualifications, adapting to new ethical frameworks, and the emotional toll of migration, foregrounding the importance of

cultural competence and organisational support in facilitating successful integration into the UK social work field.

Collectively, these studies not only spotlight the significance of transnational mobility among African-trained social workers. They also provide critical insights into the structural, cultural, and emotional dimensions of professional practice within a host country, which is accomplished by a range of methodological strategies ranging from psychosocial approaches to mixed-methods designs.

Dzudzor's (2021) doctoral research explored the lived experiences of Ghanaian-trained social workers working in child protection services in England. Using FANIM, Dzudzor's analysis highlights the challenges of adapting to a new professional culture, navigating racism and institutional bias, and reconciling differing child protection practices between Ghana and the UK. Despite these challenges, participants spoke about professional growth and resilience. The study findings illuminate the importance of cultural competence and organisational support for migrant social workers. FANIM, it can be said, offers rich, in-depth insights by encouraging participants to speak freely, revealing unconscious processes and personal meaning-making (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 2013). The method's open-ended structure facilitates deeper emotional narratives often inaccessible through structured interviews (albeit it is an approach that is time-consuming, analytically complex, and highly dependent on interviewer skill) (see Archard, 2020, 2021; Archard and O'Reilly, 2022a, 2022b).

Hakak, Onokah and Shishane's (2022) study examined the cultural dissonance experienced by South African social workers in England, particularly around religion, authority, and family structures and a perception of diminished community-oriented values in the UK compared to collectivist cultures in South Africa. The study illustrates how value

conflicts influence migrant social workers' sense of purpose and belonging, while also examining the negotiation of professional identity in a secular, individualistic society. Similarly, Willett and Hakak (2020) explored social workers' migration journeys, including the socio-political push factors and motivations behind moving to England, illuminating challenges in requalifying, gaining recognition, and managing expectations around professional practice. The study also touches on experiences of racism, identity negotiation, and the desire to return home. The Zimbabwean participants displayed a strong commitment to both personal and professional survival, often shaped by a complex interplay of feelings of hope, disillusionment, and resilience.

Both Hakak, Onokah and Shishane (2022) and Willett and Hakak (2020) involved comparable methodological approaches being deployed focussing on what participants said in terms of intended meanings rather than a 'depth' psychosocial interpretation (as in Dzudzor's (2021) enquiry). Also, the studies explore the perspectives of social workers trained in South Africa and Zimbabwe before migrating to England using a mixed methods approach, primarily to develop a comprehensive understanding by combining the depth of qualitative data with the generalisability of quantitative results, which is viewed as the value added by this approach (see, e.g., Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

Tinarwo's (2011) doctoral research affords a nuanced ethnographic examination of Zimbabwean social workers navigating post-migration life in the UK, foregrounding the critical function of social capital in shaping this community's adaptation strategies. Tinarwo argues that the reconstruction of social networks especially those grounded in familial relationships functions as a vital mechanism for resilience and survival in an often alienating professional and sociocultural environment. The study findings also shed light on the systemic challenges Zimbabwean social workers face in the UK labour market, including institutional injustices and discriminatory practices. These adversities frequently catalyse a shift away from

traditional employment structures, prompting some to pursue careers as independent or agency-based practitioners.

Complementing Tinarwo's (2011) perspective, Chogugudza (2018) explored the complex realities faced by Zimbabwean social workers who migrated to the UK beginning in the late 1990s. Drawing on qualitative insights, the study critically examines the recruitment process, including ethical concerns around active international hiring, and delves into the professional and cultural challenges these workers encounter once employed such as adapting to unfamiliar legal systems, navigating complex child protection work, and experiencing discrimination and racism. Recognising these difficulties, Chogugudza also attends to the resilience and adaptability of Zimbabwean social workers, arguing that they have made a significant, though often undervalued, contribution to the UK's social care sector. Therefore, ethically sound recruitment practices and better support systems are needed for migrant professionals. The analysis also highlights differences in social work practice within Zimbabwe, detailing the history of its education system, training and employment opportunities, as well as challenges facing social work education.

Tinarwo's (2011) and Chogugudza's (2018) enquiries offer critical insights into the systemic and interpersonal challenges faced by internationally educated social workers, including racism, employer mistrust, and restricted opportunities for upward mobility in organisations. However, neither study sufficiently interrogates how Zimbabwean cultural norms and pedagogical foundations in social work shape the professional identities and practices of these migrants within the UK context. Amongst other things, the omission signals a compelling area for future research, namely, in-depth exploration of how pre-migration professional socialisation interacts with post-migration practice, and how these dynamic influences both individual adaptation and broader service delivery outcomes.

In this respect, Naidoo and Kasiram's (2006) focus on examining the motivations, transitions, and workplace challenges of South African-trained social workers who migrated to the UK is helpful. This study identified key push-pull factors such as financial incentives, professional development, and socio-political issues in South Africa. The study also documents difficulties with adapting to the UK's bureaucratic systems and cultural expectations. Emotional strain, identity conflict, and limited support networks were recurring themes in the analysis, alongside a sense of pride for the participating social workers in navigating these challenges.

Although the studies above focus on African social workers, another relevant study, specifically concerning Romanian social workers, was undertaken by Hakak and Anton (2020). This study addressed the culture shock experienced by Romanian social workers as migrant professionals working in the UK. Hakak and Anton report on initial beneficial transitions due to EU mobility and language preparedness yet also observe how cultural and systemic 'shocks' were still encountered by this group, particularly in established hierarchies, communication styles, and work expectations.

Hakak et al. (2023), in their study examining both incoming and outgoing migration of social workers in the UK, contrast motivations, experiences, and outcomes for international social workers entering the UK with UK-trained professionals moving abroad. Addressing career advancement, dissatisfaction with domestic systems, and personal development in the social work field, the study highlights structural inequalities, professional recognition issues, and policy implications for social work workforce planning and international regulation which bear similarities to the experiences of African social workers.

In summary, examination of literature on the postmigration experiences of African social workers reveals, apart from Dzudzor (2021), a role for further psychosocial exploration

of this experience, as well as a clear need for further research, as authors of these studies emphasise. For example, while social capital and adaptation strategies are important, so are the emotional experiences of communities of migrating social workers trained in England and in their home countries. Similarly, certain methods, for instance focus groups, have been used in effective ways to examine collective experiences, but a more in-depth understanding of individual experiences and biographical trajectories will help provide further insights. For example, prior to starting this research project, based on my own experience as a social worker in England, I anticipated that there would be meaningful differences between those who completed their social work training in Africa and those who qualified in England. This is a distinction that requires further attention based on the available research literature, along with more focussed exploration of the experiences of different groups of Black African social workers.

Black social worker experiences

Black African social workers from countries like Zimbabwe face specific challenges adapting to working in the new environment of professional contexts in England (Chogugudza, 2018), but their experiences also display parallels to what other Black social workers working in the UK are known to experience. Dytham, Mallett and Walters (2024), for example, investigated the challenges faced by Black newly qualified and student social workers in England, highlighting systemic inequities, episodes of discrimination and inadequate workplace support.

Other studies also highlight professional challenges for the Black African community in the social work profession (Hussein, Manthorpe and Stevens, 2009; Tedam, 2021; Olusa, 2021; Samuel, 2023), reflecting a history of racialised identities and inequalities in social work institutions such as the children's care system in the UK (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2025).

This body of research highlights challenges and identifies areas for improvement that can be revisited in future research. Tedam (2015) investigated the placement experiences of Black African social work students in England, revealing challenges such as racism, isolation, and differential treatment for these students. This study, like other research addressing the experiences of Black trainee and qualified social workers, prompts questions about the motivations of members of the Black community for entering the social work profession, given the challenges this entails, in terms of adverse experiences in the workplace, and how Black social workers sustain themselves as part of the social work workforce.

That study, like others, also touches on the question of identity formation. This question applies to social workers within the African diaspora, as in Chogugudza's (2022) exploration which engages with the dynamics of transnationalism, social networks, and identity formation, focusing specifically on Zimbabwean social workers moving to the UK. The study raises important questions about whether and how transnational networks and emergent diasporic identities sustain social workers in a professional field that, while appearing to welcome them, often stops short of recognising them as part of the institutional mainstream. It is also a question that applies to Black social work students in the UK who navigate the process of professional formation, and the intersection of racial, cultural and professional identities, in practice and academic settings (Rafter, Sangha, and Mano, 2024).

Dytham, Mallett and Walters (2024) highlight a multitude of challenges faced by Black social workers and social work students, including higher failure rates in professional assessments, feelings of isolation, and lack of representation in senior roles, identifying how the mentoring given to Black qualified social workers and trainees often lacks racial awareness and Black social workers are subject to higher rate of fitness-to-practice panel referrals. These challenges continue throughout careers and can be (re-)produced within systems of 'support'. The support systems intended to help these professionals appear to continue to uphold and

reproduce historical systems of oppression. Moreover, these different studies highlight how Black social workers from various regions of Africa, including parts of Southern Africa, as well as those born in England, appear to have encountered similar structural challenges within the profession.

These shared experiences point to the value of collaborative and change-orientated scholarship that supports an anti-racist agenda, as is the case with Moseley et al.'s (2024) reflections on the collaborative experiences of a research team comparison of Black social work practitioners and academics examining the career progression of Black social workers. These authors acknowledge the value of co-production of strategies in addressing structural racism, creating safe spaces for authentic dialogue, and challenging power dynamics within research. They also reflect on the emotional labour involved, the value of shared lived experiences, and the complexities of navigating both practitioner and academic roles as a person of colour. They demonstrate how collaboration can produce richer, more inclusive insights into racial inequality in social work careers, including the impact of racism and barriers to occupying leadership roles.

The advantages and importance of this collaboration notwithstanding, there are risks in homogenising the experiences of diverse groups of Black and Black African social workers, including in distinguishing between those who have experienced migration and those who have not. For example, social workers born in England are less likely to have faced the complexities of cultural displacement, which is a significant influence on one's professional and personal identity. Being 'home' affords one access to more established familial and social support networks. Conversely, for migrant social workers, the absence of these networks can intensify the sense of isolation and vulnerability. As Dytham, Mallett and Walters (2024) highlighted, academic or professional failure can carry a heavier existential toll for Black African students and professionals, particularly those who have migrated, as their sense of belonging and

security in the host country is more fragile. Moreover, subtle but impactful distinctions such as language, accent, and pronunciation can serve as markers of 'difference', influencing how migrant and non-migrant Black practitioners are perceived and treated within professional settings.

Across the reviewed literature, there is strong consistency in the challenges identified. This holds despite differences in participant groups and contexts. Studies on Black social work students (Tedam, 2015; Rafter, Sangha and Mano, 2024) reveal experiences similar to those of newly qualified and practising social workers (Dytham, Mallett and Walters, 2024). This suggests that these challenges are structural rather than stage-specific. Chogugudza's (2022) study adds to this discussion by examining Zimbabwean social workers practising in the UK. It highlights how racialisation intersects with migration and professional adjustment. However, its reliance on secondary data limits engagement with the lived, emotional, and relational dimensions of these experiences, dimensions which are more fully captured in primary qualitative research.

Methodologically, the studies adopt distinct qualitative approaches that shape their findings. Tedam (2015) uses an interpretive qualitative design underpinned by critical race theory. She collects data through narrative interviews and reflective diaries, centring Black students' voices and experiential knowledge. Rafter, Sangha and Mano (2024) use constructivist grounded theory informed by intersectionality. This allows a theoretically generative analysis of how multiple social constraints intersect to produce disadvantage. In contrast, Dytham, Mallett and Walters (2024) apply thematic analysis to identify and categorise key challenges faced by Black social workers in England. This method offers a more descriptive account. While these approaches are methodologically sound, they tend to privilege either discursive meaning-making or structural explanation. There is limited attention to how social structures and individual psychological processes interact.

In contrast, this study is underpinned by a psychosocial approach informed by critical realism. It draws on the foundational work of Bhaskar and Archer (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer, 1995). In doing so, it examines how enduring social structures generate patterned inequalities while recognising human agency and reflexivity. The psychosocial lens strengthens this approach. It foregrounds how these structural conditions are emotionally experienced, internalised, and negotiated by Black Southern African social workers trained in both their home countries and England. This combined framework enables a deeper analysis of the causal mechanisms shaping experience. It moves beyond surface-level descriptions to reveal how structure, agency, and subjectivity interact within racially stratified professional contexts.

Black African health and social care professional experiences practising in the UK

The experience of marginalisation is not singular to Black social workers but also includes other Black health and care professionals, with a range of studies focussing on the experiences of other health professionals, nurses in particular (Likupe, 2006; Alexis, Vydelingum and Robbins, 2007; Likupe and Archibong, 2013; Tuffour, 2022; Hombo et al., 2025). Black African nurses in the UK are, for example, known to face discrimination in pay and working conditions (Likupe, 2006). Likupe and Archibong (2013) completed interviews with 30 Black African nurses, uncovering experiences of racism and discrimination from colleagues, managers, and patients, and a lack of equal opportunities in the workplace. Exploring the experiences of African nurses and their managers' perceptions, Likupe (2015) similarly found that, despite existing equality policies, African nurses continue to face incivility and discrimination, highlighting the need for robust measures to combat this in the workplace.

Alexis, Vydelingum and Robbins (2007) focused on experiences of overseas Black and minority ethnic nurses in the NHS, revealing challenges related to integration, cultural

differences, and workplace discrimination, finding that members of this group often feel undervalued and face obstacles to career progression and skill development within the NHS. The need for transparent implementation of equal opportunity policies to ensure fair treatment of nursing staff can be said to be particularly true for Black African mental health nurses (Tuffour, 2022), with experiences of discrimination and marginalisation being reported, including being judged on language, accent, and racial stereotyping. Indeed, the findings of these studies highlight how Black health and social care professionals are treated as outsiders despite being personnel heavily relied upon and discrimination and marginalisation being prevalent for African professionals. This includes being disadvantaged by support structures in the workplace, creating spaces in which psychological support is either absent or hard to make use for stresses related to racist treatment.

The studies conducted by Alexis, Vydelingum, and Robbins (2007), Likupe (2015), Likupe and Archibong (2013), and Tuffour (2022) collectively offer substantial qualitative evidence that Black African and other overseas nurses in the NHS encounter systemic racism, discrimination, and limited access to career advancement and professional development. Across various NHS settings and time periods, participants consistently reported disparities in opportunities for training, skills acquisition, and progression, as well as differential treatment by managers, colleagues, and patients.

Methodologically, these studies primarily utilised qualitative interview-based designs, such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups, and analysed them using thematic, phenomenological, or framework approaches. Although these methods effectively captured nurses' experiences, the analyses largely remained descriptive and experiential, focusing on individual narratives and institutional practices. The primary analytical focus was on observable discrimination and perceived inequities, frequently contextualised within policy and equality legislation frameworks.

Although certain studies acknowledged structural racism (see Likupe, 2015) and organisational power asymmetries, the interplay between individual subjectivity, unconscious processes, and institutional structures was not explicitly theorised. Additionally, while insider-outsider positionality was recognised (e.g., Tuffour, 2022) as contributing to interpretive depth, reflexivity was not systematically employed as an analytic tool to examine meaning-making processes or underlying causal mechanisms.

This study diverges from previous research by advancing from experiential description to explanatory depth. Employing a psychosocial approach within a critical realist framework facilitates an examination of how discrimination is simultaneously experienced, internalised, resisted, and reproduced at psychological, relational, and structural levels. Rather than conceptualising racism and marginalisation solely as reported experiences, this study aims to identify the underlying generative mechanisms, including organisational cultures, racialised power relations, identity negotiations, and unconscious defence processes, that perpetuate unequal outcomes despite the presence of equality legislation.

Race, racism and social work

Exploration of the experiences of Black social workers and nurses reveals issues of inequalities, isolation and racism within health and social care and social work professions. This fact presupposes the value of a theoretical framework that deals directly with prejudice and oppression, for which we may think of critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Such frameworks help in understanding personal narratives, i.e., of how Black Southern African social workers experience their racial, professional, and migrant identities intersect within hostile work environments and are embedded in broader structures of systemic racism. Furthermore, these frameworks support an

engagement with lived experiences to bear witness to different forms of inequality, including those encountered by Black social workers and nurses, as ways to inform the construction of more meaningful support structures and better understand how colourblind practices and policies marginalise racialised families and workers alike (and the profession of social work confronting white privilege more directly) (Baines, 2017).

For this study, critical realism is the preferred framework for conceptualising experiences of Black Southern African social workers not as ends in themselves but as outcomes of underlying generative mechanisms embedded in historical, material, and institutional structures that exist independently of discourse (Tinsley, 2025). By asking 'what must exist for these experiences to occur?' (Netto, Islam, and Bailey, 2025), critical realism supports analytic attention to how colonial legacies, racialised labour markets, and welfare institutions continue to shape professional marginalisation. This can be contrasted with how critical race theory and intersectionality tend to be associated with a focus on lived experience as emergent and meaning-centred (Jorba and López de Sa, 2024), though connected to a concern with the structural reproduction of racism over time.

Dominelli (1997) argues that racism is embedded in the policies and procedures of social services, and therefore a notion and practice of being 'non-racist' is insufficient. An anti-racist approach would conceivably include attention to how the Black African diasporic community can be served (Marovatsanga and Garrett, 2022), decolonising social work training, attending to the systemic barriers that social workers of colour face, such as exclusion from leadership and challenges in field placements (Phillips, 2011), and acts of resistance to the erosion of anti-racist practice in UK social work via 'diversity-friendly' approaches that lack structural analysis (Lavalette and Penketh, 2014). Lavalette, and Penketh (2014) argue that racism is often minimised or rendered invisible in contemporary social work practice and call for a return to more overtly political, anti-racist ideals.

There appears to be a need for a great deal more work in this direction. In the training of social workers, there is evidence that Black students reported experiencing racism during placements from colleagues and service users, including microaggressions, stereotyping, and higher levels of scrutiny of their practice and academic work (Fairtlough et al., 2014; Masocha, 2015). Once in practice, overt racist comments, the refusal of care based on ethnicity, and discrimination by employers are still experienced by Black social workers, including those with migrant backgrounds, racism being dismissed as 'part of the job' (Stevens, Hussein and Manthorpe, 2011; Scottish Association of Social Work, 2021). A recent survey found that a number of social workers have considered leaving due to racism from their colleagues and managers and experienced increased anxiety and worsened mental health, with Black and Asian workers saying that racism and microaggression are common, and that they work long hours but are subject to higher scrutiny, heavier caseloads, and missed promotions (Fitzhenry et al., 2022). In media coverage around this time (Pollock, 2023), the experience of racism as a social worker was represented as 'death by a thousand cuts', emotionally exhausting due to having to work harder and shine brighter' as a non-white person just to maintain credibility.

Research study rationale

The gap in knowledge that the study reported in this thesis contributes to remedying can be considered from different perspectives. First, there is the matter of context. This study considers the experiences of social workers from the SADC region in working in English children's services. By comparison, other studies are concerned with social workers from different geographical contexts internationally, including individual countries in the SADC region, but using a different approach (Naidoo and Kasiram, 2006; Tinarwo, 2011; Chogugudza, 2018;

Willett and Hakak, 2020; Hakak and Anton, 2020; Dzudzor, 2021; Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022).

Second, there is the type of research represented. As a practitioner-initiated practice-near research study, this research aligns with other studies involving social workers conducting 'insider' research, notably Dzudzor's (2021) contribution. This study also involves a psychosocial approach like Dzudzor's, with principles from a FANIM-based approach being deployed. FANIM facilitates open-ended, narrative-style interviews that encourage participants to share stories, enabling access to deeper, potentially unconscious meanings embedded within their experiences (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 2013; Archard, 2020). Where this research diverges from Dzudzor's study is in terms of the participant demographic, which differs geographically, focusing on Black social workers from the SADC region, as well as those trained in England (of the seven participants, only two were trained in their home countries, reflecting a distinct profile compared to the sample in Dzudzor's research). Also, for this study, I took part in an auto-ethnographic interview before engaging with participants to reflect on my researcher positioning in the enquiry during the research process.

This study also used reflexive thematic analysis as an extension of thematic analysis, which, in different ways, is represented in the studies reviewed (Willett and Hakak, 2020; Dzudzor, 2021; Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022). Whereas thematic analysis is a structured process aimed at identifying and reporting patterns within the dataset, reflexive thematic analysis, as conceptualised by Braun and Clarke (2019), emphasises the researcher's active, interpretative role in the analytic process. As such, it is an analytic approach which recognises subjectivity and reflexivity as integral, supporting the construction of themes being iteratively developed through sustained engagement with the data. This approach situates me centrally within the research process, which aligns with the study being practitioner-initiated research (O'Reilly et al., 2025). Embracing reflexivity and acknowledging the influence of one's own

positionality is methodologically valuable, as it enriches the depth and authenticity of the analysis. By comparison, Kasiram and Naidoo (2006) use content analysis. This supports a systematic, replicable approach to analysing textual data and identifying patterns (Krippendorff, 2018) and a capacity to handle large volumes of data for both qualitative and quantitative analysis (Neuendorf, 2017). However, it affords less scope to consider deeper meanings in data (White and Marsh, 2006).

Third, beyond methodology, this research involves a biographical orientation which is not strongly represented in prior research in related areas, i.e., in focussing on aspects of childhood, culture and migration, and how these influence the experience of working as a social worker in children's services. The study is concerned with how this group of social workers perceive the environment as shaping their experience, and conversely, how they influence it. Although identity and cultural influence are addressed in previous research studies on the experiences of social workers in the UK post-migration (notably Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022), this study explores further the influence in and on the experience of doing social work.

Reflecting on the place of theory in research (and experience of reviewing the literature)

This literature review has established that challenges faced by Black social workers and health care professionals are well-documented across various studies and reports. This evidence highlights the persistence of issues such as racism, marginalisation, and structural inequality, but there remains a gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of Black Southern African social workers, and questions around how formative experiences, culture, and upbringing shape professional identity and direct practice.

In undertaking the reading for this literature review, I found I was increasingly drawn to a conceptualisation of psychosocial research, as, for example, articulated by Clarke and

Hoggett (2009), which apprehends social life as a complex interplay of psychological, social and cultural dimensions. This framework aligned well with the aims of this research, in seeking to make sense of the emotional, relational, and systemic dimensions of social workers' experiences in particular organisational contexts, alongside sociohistorical considerations, i.e., of colonial hierarchies. As local authorities are organisations comprised of humans and relationships, emotional life is an important dimension of their functioning (Armstrong, 2005). Moreover, staff supervision and organisational support can be viewed as dynamic entities subject to wider systems, where organisational defences, much like individual psychological defences, can distort engagement with reality (Halton, 1994).

In reading the literature for this chapter and contemplating the experiences of the social workers who were represented in the studies reviewed, I found myself thinking more about Armstrong's (2005) concept of the 'organisation in the mind', i.e., the internalised mental representations individuals hold of their workplaces and the organisations they practice in. I reflected on how migrant social workers, including myself, will enter their practice roles with an imagined version of the organisation, and how they may perceive it as a source of safety, structure and stability, only to confront a dissonance between their expectation and actual experience. This led me to think more about how organisational psychodynamics can reflect wider social psychodynamics and channel oppressive forces (a point of psychosocial concern in itself: see, e.g., Frosh, 2013), as well as the fact that, just as institutions shape the experiences of social workers, so too do these professionals leave an imprint on institutional cultures.

In this way, the emotional labour, adaptive strategies, and resilience displayed by Black African social workers in navigating systemic and racialised environments provided an impetus for this research. In particular, I was interested in what was unspoken or unknown in the lived realities of my peers, and how their narratives of their experiences, whether resonating with or diverging from my own, could offer insights that help us better understand the

experiences of Black migrant social workers in children's services settings. For example, one can ask questions about why certain communities of social workers are drawn to England or why members of particular communities are drawn to England to train in social work. As Hakak et al. (2023) observe, migration decisions are influenced by pre-existing colonial-linked social networks and cultural capital (i.e., a national habitus), facilitating professional integration and satisfaction. Considering the UK and England, language familiarity (i.e., having learned English) makes it easier for migrants to make connections. Also, colonial ties create dual 'hard' (legal) and 'soft' (social) citizenship entitlements, which facilitate migration to former metropoles and influence experiences of welfare inclusion or exclusion (Elderidge at el., 2022). Migrants from former colonies engage with welfare mechanisms to assert de-facto citizenship, drawing on deep-seated cultural expectations shaped by colonial legacies (de Koning et al., 2023). Moreover, policies funnel skilled migrants from former colonial states into low-paid care and cleaning sectors, reflecting racialised labour hierarchies rooted in imperial history (Goodfellow, 2023). This being the case, it may be a stretch to say that social work is a low-paying sector, although migrant professionals tend to populate this area. This raises different questions regarding the strength of colonial ties and the 'choice' of a qualified caring role as a social worker and points to the value of tracing professional journeys, geographically and in terms of experience, to understand individual motivations and the psychological and social forces that shape them.

Conclusion

In reviewing relevant research literature, this chapter has revealed that the experiences of Black African social workers and health care professionals in the UK share several commonalities. Despite methodological variations across the literature, a clear pattern is apparent: Black

migrant social workers and other care professionals report cultural dislocation, the loss of familiar support systems, and, like other Black professionals, pervasive challenges of marginalisation, discrimination, and racism.

The studies reviewed provide a range of valuable insights. However, they differ from the focus and methodological orientation of this research. This study seeks to move beyond a focus on specific national groups or broad categories of 'African' professionals by specifically considering the experiences of Black Southern African social workers as a distinct regional and cultural grouping with shared traditions and histories. Migration, particularly within the Southern African context, is not a novel phenomenon, and for this community, it can involve internal regional migration prior to relocating to England. Furthermore, in research addressing social workers experiences in organisations, it is important to recognise that organisations do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they are embedded within broader cultural systems and are reflective of the individuals who manage and work in them, with issues of progression, recognition, and human dignity connecting to structural inequalities and interpersonal processes that render the Black professional as 'other'.

Importantly, this research also diverges from previous studies by including participants who did not arrive in England as qualified social workers but instead completed their training within the UK after being exposed to British cultural and institutional norms. It addresses a gap whereby several studies have investigated the experiences of African social workers, but without an emphasis specifically on Black Southern African social workers and a psychosocial theoretical lens.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology of the research study, addressing issues relating to a range of attendant considerations, including the sampling strategy, interview approach, data analysis, reflexivity, ethical considerations, epistemology and ontology. Brief 'pen portraits' of the participants are also provided.

This methodology is organised around the study aim which was to explore professional journeys of Black social workers from southern African countries in migrating to and working in England, specifically in the context of social work in children's services. This also included the sub aims of considering (1) professional motivations that lead Black social workers who spent their formative years in Southern Africa to practice in children's services in England; (2) how Black Southern African social workers navigate working in children's services and a different sociocultural context, and (3) how Black Southern African social workers represent their professional and career development working in children's services.

As the research addressed a topic where there have been limited previous studies through which conclusions can be drawn, the study was exploratory research (O'Reilly et al., 2025). As already noted, the study involved the use of principles drawn from a novel, in-depth interviewing approach based on Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2012) FANIM. The application of these principles and how they were combined with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is addressed as part of this chapter.

Sampling strategy/sample

As the study targeted participants relevant to the guiding research question (which concerned subjective experiences) and because Black Southern African social workers living in England are not the easiest population to access, a purposive sampling strategy was used including snowballing (Bryman, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2025), with participants being selected based on a capacity to share experiences that could further conceptual understanding (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 2000). Participants were Black social workers who were born and lived in the SADC region during their formative years (up to the age of 8) and who had either completed their social work training in the SADC region or in the UK (see Participant Information Form in Appendix A). Furthermore, at the time of the study, participants were working, or had previously worked (i.e., in the preceding two years), in children's services in England.

As this was a small study, recruiting from the south of England provided the opportunity to recruit sufficient participants within the stipulated timescales. I promoted the research via my own professional networks and social media (i.e., LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter)) with a leaflet/flyer of study aims and inclusion and exclusion criteria. I aimed to recruit between six and eight participants and ultimately recruited seven, with fourteen interviews being completed in total, as well as one focus group.

Recruitment and data collection were a protracted process. I received a few responses from potential participants after my initial social media postings, and after a few exchanges of emails, I did not receive any responses when I attempted to arrange interviews. I then relied on my professional network to direct me to additional, potential participants. This, ultimately, proved more fruitful. However, even when prospective participants were identified, there were delays in scheduling interviews as most were in frontline practice with some confusion about what the research intended to accomplish despite several attempts to explain.

As Table 2 illustrates, as a group, the participants were experienced social workers, having spent between four and twenty years in practice. Most participants had worked in multiple local authorities, allowing for different experiences in children's services to be compared. Moreover, professional roles ranged from frontline practice to management. Most participants were trained in the UK except for two participants who trained in their countries of birth.

Table 2: Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Designation	Nationality	Years in Practice
Fadzai	Female	40-45	Senior social worker	Zimbabwean	9+
Loise	Female	30-35	Social worker	South African	10+
Lwazi	Female	45-50	Manager	Zimbabwean/ Malawian	14+
Martha	Female	50-55	Consultant social worker	Malawian/South African	10+
Patience	Female	45-50	Consultant social worker	Zimbabwean	4+
Simon	Male	50-55	Social worker	Zimbabwean	9+
Thandi	Female	40-45	Manager	Zimbabwean	20+

Participant pen portraits

Fadzai

Through her work, Fadzai, trained in England, has come to learn a lot about systemic inequities in local authorities (from working in several). Interviewing her, I found myself impressed by her authenticity and critical praxis, and how she consistently foregrounded issues of diversity

and equality, noting their persistent marginalisation within professional discourse. A recurring observation she made was around the disproportionate allocation of complex cases of families with 'unusual' surnames to her - a practice she interpreted as covertly discriminatory. Rather than acknowledging structural bias, managers reframed this, she said, as her supposed tendency to 'attract' such families, both individualising responsibility and intensifying her disfranchisement. Indeed, in her account, Fadzai underscored how racism in social work is enacted through subtle, routinised practices, while 'speaking truth to power' carried significant professional risk in terms of curtailing career advancement. Fadzai also spoke about a desire to cultivate transnational dialogue with Southern African colleagues, seeking solidarity and collective strategies to contest entrenched inequalities within the profession.

Loise

Loise's trajectory in social work is rooted in her formative experiences within a community deeply affected by HIV, where child-headed households were prevalent. Interviewing her, I was struck by how, motivated by this social reality and her personal history of living with cousins following the loss of her mother, her working life appeared to be premised on a desire to support vulnerable families. In England, as a social worker, she encountered challenges distinct from those in her home country. She spoke about how her professional authority was, at times, undermined by assumptions linked to her appearance and personal life, while she simultaneously grappled with families' adversarial use of feedback. Unlike the respect accorded to her role in her homeland, Loise perceived a culture of entitlement by some English service users, a contrast that seemed to unsettle her. Relocating to England primarily to be alongside her partner, she appeared to have benefitted from her partner's friendships and social

networks, but found the professional support she received at work insufficient, complicating the process of adaptation to life in England.

Lwazi

Lwazi has faced considerable challenges surrounding her work permit and subsequent career trajectory in England. Whilst studying, she had to leave her home country due to instability within the academic sector. When interviewed, and describing her experiences as a social worker, a key incident was the recognition of her professional competence she received from senior managers in her service, which, in turn, appeared to provoke hostility from her immediate manager. Strikingly, she also spoke about a friend's involvement with social care services and her attempts at supporting her, and the complicated situation that arose from this, leaving her with enduring frustration despite an eventual resolution. Lwazi situated this experience and her experiences at work within a wider context of institutional racism and, what she saw as, a disregard for equity in social work practice. These dynamics, she said, undermined both practitioners and service users. I found her to be someone with a strong commitment to practice whilst also being an advocate of structural reform.

Martha

Martha's identity is transnational, spanning three Southern African countries and England. My impression of interviewing her was that each location has shaped distinct dimensions of her sense of belonging in England, though she primarily identifies with her 'home' community. Unlike some of her other peers from Southern Africa, she described her pre-migration life as 'good enough,' with her relocation to England motivated less by economic necessity, but rather by opportunities for education and a vocation. Trained as a social worker in England, she has

continued to explore other professional opportunities by studying for different qualifications. She spoke about her experiences as a child at boarding school leading her to be confident and self-reliant. When interviewed, she came across as reserved and deliberate in her speech. Martha spoke candidly about racism, which she regards as endemic in the workplace and a significant impediment to the advancement of Black African social workers in England.

Patience

My impression of Patience's life narrative was of a trajectory of resilience shaped by intersecting adversities and support. From an early age, she endured bullying linked to her disability and later her son's difficulties, which appeared to be compounded by societal stigmatisation of her appearance. For her, familial and ecclesial acceptance fostered a counterbalance to this and a sense of belonging. For Patience, migration was less the product of a personal aspiration than a response to political instability in her country of origin, facilitated by her husband's prior relocation, which eased her adaptation. Her entry into social work was catalysed by challenges she experienced accessing support for her son, and, in this way, she transformed her personal struggle into vocational purpose. In her professional development, she appeared to be initially inhibited by self-doubt, but encouragement from managers enabled her professional practice. She spoke about deriving fulfilment from youth advocacy, and saw herself as struggling against the challenges of structural racism and resistance from some of her colleagues.

Simon

Simon, originally trained in a scientific field and accountancy, migrated from Southern Africa to England under a highly skilled visa, initially aspiring to continue a career as an accountant.

His migration was precipitated by the need to fund his mother's medical care, though her death preceded his eventual relocation to England. In England, he said, he encountered multiple barriers, including the demand for experience working in the country and professional hierarchies that privileged younger, predominantly white, accountants. These experiences appeared to sharpen his recognition of racialised gatekeeping, which were later reinforced during his social work training, where he found discussions with others exposed the subtle normalisation of racism in ostensibly cordial interactions. Simon's 'choice' of social work emerged pragmatically: social work offered lower entry requirements, a greater demand for paid work, and, for him, enhanced remuneration. Simon also represented his professional trajectory of career shifts and setbacks, including failed entrepreneurial efforts, as divinely mediated and, in interviews, emphasised the role of his Christian faith. At the same time, my impression of him was someone whose practice was marked by guardedness, shaped by persistent mistrust and awareness of a perceived superficiality of professional relations.

Thandi

My impression of Thandi's professional trajectory was of resilience shaped by adversity and opportunity. Initially aspiring to study law, she was redirected toward social work after being offered a place to study this as a postgraduate student at university, later relocating to England through an overseas recruitment programme. Her early life was marked by instability: her mother's mental health struggles and subsequent death meant her father was left as her primary caregiver. Her father's insistence on her pursuing education as an enduring asset profoundly influenced Thandi's values, reinforcing her commitment to learning and a strong sense of self-determination. Although she had not originally envisaged social work as her eventual career, a disposition to act as a caregiver aligned well with the profession, and was supported by her

father. Also, guided by deep religious faith, Thandi interpreted her journey to and in social work as being divinely sustained and perseverance as central to her identity. With nearly two decades of practice experience, she candidly acknowledged experiences of racism, whilst underscoring how the solidarity among social workers, particularly migrant social workers helped her to feel optimistic about change and retain her resolve to continue working in the profession.

Interview method

In-depth interviews afford a rich detailed understanding of participant experiences, which is essential for understanding complex issues in qualitative psychological and social research (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014). They enable the researcher to probe deeper based on participant responses, therefore uncovering layers of meaning (DiCicoo-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006), as well as understanding of the context of participant experiences (Seidman, 2019).

A practice-near qualitative approach is consistent with the research focus, a concern with the meanings attributed to experience and producing a situated understanding of experiences within children's services in a psychosocial context (Cooper, 2009; Archard et al., 2025b). The study was interview-based and entailed the use of material generated via in-depth interviews with a small sample of the seven social workers recruited from various Local Authorities within the southeast of England. For the interviews, I used principles drawn from Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2013) FANIM. As an approach, FANIM is premised on acknowledged parallels between forms of narrative and in-depth research interviewing and psychoanalytic therapy and the 'free associative' dialogue that takes place there. Hollway and Jefferson propose more minimally structured interviews which involve open questions or requests from the interviewer (Archard 2020, 2021). Furthermore, after initial interview

questions, I followed the participant's narrative, thus encouraging accounts that are anchored in real-life experiences and not 'well-worn' or predictable responses.

For this study, I used this type of interview for 'interviewee-centred conversations' (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2003), making use of interpersonal skills I have developed as a social worker whose work involves conversations about sensitive matters. In different ways, I deviated from what Hollway and Jefferson propose, for example, I used requests, such as 'Tell me about…', as they advise, but did not always follow up with further prompts using a participant's words as discussions shifted and there were times where participants looked to me to move the conversation forward. There were instances where direct questions were also required to clarify what had been said. On occasions, I also intervened when the discussion appeared to put participants under duress as they seemed to be stuck on certain points. Indeed, I would say that, in choosing my method, I also thought as an African, I am aware that most of us like telling stories which is what we grew up with, it is part of our community and the way of life (see, e.g., Achebe, 1958). In this respect, there seemed to be a congruence with this ethos and principles from FANIM, i.e., that the method would not restrict, but rather support, a storytelling inclination of the participant group. However, it cannot be said that FANIM accounted for a shared identity, and this represented additional reasoning.

Before engaging with participants, I participated in an auto-ethnographic interview facilitated by a colleague. This helped me reflect on my journey and experiences in practice, consider my positioning in the enquiry, and determine how I could be inclined to listen and respond to participants based on my own experience.

Each participant was interviewed on two occasions, i.e., via an initial and a follow-up interview, following Hollway and Jefferson's recommendations around the value of follow-up interviews. The first interview involved a series of core questions related to the foci of the

research study, i.e., the participant's migration journey, training and professional experience. The second interview built on the first interview by exploring themes identified there and addressing any questions for which there was insufficient time. All participants were then invited to take part in a focus group where they were asked to share their experiences in child and family social work as Black Southern African social workers and to reflect on the experience of participating in the research.

To complete the interviews, I had reliable equipment, and participants were familiar with the location. I carefully considered locations where interviews could be held to have an opportunity for producing rich narrative data anchored in actual events and experiences. I made use of available, suitably private spaces at my workplace, which included various rooms suitable for individual face-to-face interviews. Some participants preferred having interviews in their home environment, whereas other participants expressed a preference for being interviewed at their workplace. The focus group took place at a community location at the request of the participants. A suitable place was identified, and this did not seem to negatively impact participants in any way, with a relevant risk assessment being completed to ensure that participants' welfare and safety were not overlooked.

Focus group

Three participants took part in the focus group as it was difficult to bring all the participants to one location at a mutually convenient time. Although it may have been beneficial to have more participants for the focus group, a small group has its benefits when discussing complex and emotionally charged topics, in terms of participant candour in sharing personal experiences and more detailed personal accounts (Morgan, 1996; Bloor et al., 2001; Barbour, 2018).

I opted to combine interviews with a focus group to offer participants a space to share their experiences of participating in the research and working in child and family social work. This is a position which finds support in more general arguments about how combining focus groups with in-depth interviews enriches research by providing insights into group dynamics and detailed individual insights, making it a particularly helpful strategy for complex topics (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008).

Data analysis

As I completed the interviews and transcribed them, I read and re-read and re-listened to them several times and kept my own field or 'process' notes. Pen portraits were developed for participants for me to refer back to whilst undertaking analysis and writing up. In this way, material generated via the interviews and the focus group took the form of recordings, transcripts and interview 'process' notes. These were then subject to reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) using a psychosocial theoretical framework, based on Braun and Clarke's (2022) principles of RTA.

As methodological commentators have highlighted, forms of thematic analysis and RTA can be implemented in more or less rigorous ways, with the latter involving a process of codes and themes being revised and refined over time (see O'Reilly et al., 2025). Thematic analysis can be conducted either individually or within a team, without the need for multiple researchers to code the data for validation (Fryer, 2022). I opted to use principles from RTA for the analysis of this study as I considered it to be suitable for this enquiry as a doctoral study and my desire to attend to intersubjective processes as part of the research.

Braun and Clarke's framework for RTA is characterised by different elements that distinguish it from other forms of TA. One element is an emphasis on researcher reflexivity,

and a continuing process of reflecting on one's own perspective as a researcher and the influence this has on the research process. This introspection was essential for ensuring that the analysis is not merely a projection of my own assumptions but an authentic engagement with the data (and participants) (Braun and Clarke, 2019). A second element of Braun and Clarke's framework is flexibility, which enabled me to adapt my approach based on the research questions (see Appendix B), data, and theoretical framework. A third element is RTA entailing an organic and iterative, rather than linear process, where themes are developed through continuous engagement with the data. Consistent with this view, I moved back and forth between different analysis phases, refining and reshaping themes as I developed the analysis.

Stages of RTA

Braun and Clarke (2022) outline a six-stage process for TA/RTA, albeit with an emphasis on flexibility and reflexivity, which I followed with close support from my research supervisors, as per guidance on best practice (O'Reilly et al., 2025). The first stage was familiarisation with the data. As noted above, after collecting the data, I began to immerse myself in it, reading and re-reading my transcripts and notes, and noting down initial ideas. The second stage was generating initial codes, which involved systematically coding (on a line-by-line basis) features across the transcripts and collating data relevant to each code, so as to capture the essence of the data segments. The third stage was organising the themes. At this stage, I collated codes into potential themes and gathered all data relevant to each potential theme, and spent time identifying broader patterns of meaning, also using my 'field notes' and the pen portraits. The fourth stage was reviewing the constructed themes, whereby I checked against the coded data and the entire dataset to ensure that the themes accurately represented the data. The fifth stage was defining and naming themes. Once I reviewed the themes, I further refined them to identify

the essence of each theme and determine what aspect of the dataset each theme captured. The report provided in this thesis represents the sixth-stage of the analysis (producing a findings report) where the analytic narrative and data extracts are woven together to tell the story of the analysis in a coherent fashion.

Epistemology and ontology

A quandary I encountered when considering and articulating my epistemological and ontological presuppositions for this research was the relation between epistemology and ontology, and specifically, how epistemological changes can lead to ontological reconfigurations. Quine (1948) challenges a clear-cut separation between ontology and epistemology by suggesting that our ontological commitments depend on our epistemic practices and the conceptual schemes we employ. Quine cites the transition from Newtonian mechanics to Einsteinian relativity in the field of physics, observing that this not only changed epistemological understanding but also ontological assumptions about fundamental concepts like space, time and matter (Kuhn, 1962). Considering this example early on in this project, prompted me to reflect on how my understanding would shift with the availability of new knowledge, and how knowledge does not simply reflect nature but is inherently shaped by historical and cultural contexts (see, e.g., Rorty 1979).

Ontology deals with the type of knowledge under investigation, focusing on the nature of existence and the structure of reality itself (Guba and Lincoln 1989). My ontological position for this study is that there is a 'real', objective world 'which exists independent of human belief, perception, culture and language we use to describe it' (Hart, 1998, p. 85). However, this belief is not simply a reflection of naïve positivism (see, e.g., Fox, Martin, and Green, 2007 for overview), but rather based on an appreciation that a positivist philosophy can minimise the

significance of interpretation, meaning, discourses, and unobservable structures within social reality (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020). Instead, I begin from a standpoint that knowledge is socially constructed, however, one will have to look beyond constructions that may distort reality. In turn, ontologically, I appreciate that while people may share the same reality, they will experience it in individual and unique ways (Crotty, 1998).

In these respects, the research can be thought of as aligned with the tenets of the philosophical traditions of critical realism, which sits between positivism and interpretivism, and has been linked with FANIM, RTA and psychosocial research (Clarke and Braun, 2018; Hollway, 2006; O'Reilly et al., 2025). Central to critical realism is an appreciation that reality exists independently of our knowledge, and our understanding of it is always mediated by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Bhaskar, 1978). Hence, epistemic relativity is crucial to understand how individuals' experiences are shaped by broader social structures, and engage with domains of the empirical (what we observe), the actual (what happens) and the real (the underlying structures and mechanisms) (Bhaskar, 1978). For me, principles from critical realism offered a structured framework for understanding the experiences of Black Southern African social workers, distinguishing what is observed, what happens, and the deeper structures that generate these experiences, making it well-suited for exploring layers beneath lived realities.

In doing research aligned with this tradition, the process of interpretation in research analysis acts as an intermediary between the empirical and actual domains. Events are influenced by mechanisms operating within the real domain, which are not always observable, like an iceberg, where the visible portion represents only a small part of the whole, while the larger, unseen portion remains significant and connected to the visible segment.

Linked to this claim, with psychosocial research of a realist orientation, subjectivity and researcher immersion are not seen as obstacles to scientific inquiry, as they are in other traditions, but rather recognised as resources for research (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009; Jervis, 2009). By closely examining the dynamic processes through which they come to understand, researchers can gain a deeper understanding and combine psychological and sociological theory for a holistic understanding of human experiences (Williams and Green, 2022). This does not mean, as Finlay (2002a; 2002b) has warned, that the researcher's own preconceptions, i.e., their 'baggage', should be overlooked, particularly in terms of how this influences the relationship between researcher and participant. As such, as Jervis (2009) suggests, the consistent application of critical reflexivity can help mitigate these issues, the researcher needing to be continuously self-conscious in their work and question their own assumptions regarding the claims they are making.

Reflexivity

As acknowledged in the first chapter, I am a qualified social worker, who has been in practice for over seven years, and in child protection social work since qualifying. Prior to this, I also worked in youth offending services and other various support service settings for over fifteen years working with children, young people and their families during challenging and distressing times. Like all the participants in this research, I was born in the SADC region, migrated to the UK in my early twenties. This presented a challenge which I anticipated before the interviews where some participants expected me to know some of the issues they had faced. I found myself asking participants to explain their situation rather than them expecting me to finish the sentence for them. Several times, I had asked the participants to elaborate on what they meant.

On reflection, I believe most participants saw me as an insider rather than an outsider. This afforded access to information that participants possibly could not have shared with others. In addition, there were a few participants with whom I had some brief contact prior to the study, and I feel that the insider status gave me the opportunity to explore issues further as participants appeared to have trust in what I was doing and had the assurance of being protected. As already noted, I took field notes after each interview and the focus group to keep my feelings and status as a researcher in check. I also reflected on what I observed and my feelings before, during and after the interviews and the focus group, and used my field notes to prepare myself for any follow-up interviews so as manage my feelings to ensure any potential influence was minimised.

Ethical considerations

Institutional ethical approval for the study (see Appendix E) was obtained via the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Department of Education and Training ethical review process. In navigating the matter of research ethics for the study, I reflected on the risks that could arise due to participants' elicited distress and experiences (see the Risk Assessment in Appendix C). Transparency was also key to the study and consent to take part was sought from all participants (see the Participant Consent Form, Appendix D). Participation was entirely voluntary and free from any form of coercion, manipulation, or deceptive practices (Berg, 2001). As per relevant guidance (e.g., British Sociological Association, 2017), participants were given an opportunity to opt-in or out, as well as the opportunity to decline questions, terminate an interview at any point, and request data withdrawal within two weeks of an interview being completed (see, e.g., Peel, 2004). Participants were also provided with comprehensive and accessible information regarding the study in advance of taking part, and

there was open communication with the research participants. This enabled participants to inform me if they had any concerns regarding possible adverse outcomes. Also, prior to beginning the first interview, participants were asked if there was anything that could impact them if they took part in the study. I also re-arranged interviews so as not to put participants under pressure with timescales. For example, when I turned up to interview one participant, I found them in the middle of the court process. I therefore offered, and we agreed, to postpone the interview.

Confidentiality was a critical consideration in this research. I have not used the names of participants or their services, and considered the risks of deductive disclosure more generally by refraining from disclosing certain aspects of participants' accounts, e.g., the names of institutions at which they studied (see Gobo and Molle, 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the study methodology in advance of reporting the study findings. I discussed why I adopted the methodology I used. In so doing, I addressed different issues relating to research design, including sampling and the reasons why certain criterion was used to select research participants, as well as ontological and epistemological considerations, why RTA was chosen as an approach for the data analysis, and attendant ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Analysis I

Introduction

This chapter is the first of two analysis chapters which report overarching themes identified from the analysis. As established in the last chapter and earlier parts of the thesis, the analytic lens is psychosocial, acknowledging that individual experiences are shaped by both subjective experience and broader environmental structures (Archer, 2010). Moreover, the analysis foregrounds how reflexivity is central to understanding how Black Southern African social workers navigate the constraints and opportunities presented within their work environments. Importantly, the analysis illuminates how the experience of Black Southern African social workers in England's children's services is characterised by a precarious professional existence, involving a complex and, at times, disorienting process of adaptation to new working cultures, organisational structures, and professional expectations. Participants in this study described negotiating a range of challenges in both their direct practice and workplace environments. Their sense of their professional agency appeared to be constrained by contextual and locational situations, often only becoming fully apparent to them with time and lived experience. This chapter addresses the first five themes identified in the analysis which speak to those challenges, specifically those of: nomadic existence; loss and grief; fear, worry, and anxiety; performative burdens; and microaggressions and racism in and outside the organisation. Table 3 provides an overview of the themes addressed across both chapters.

Table 3: Themes

Theme	Brief description
Nomadic existence	The continuous state of movement, including migration from the SADC region to England and moving between local authorities as a professional.
Loss and grief	Participants' experiences of loss of identity, social networks and family members.
Fear, worry and anxiety	Concerns compounded by unsupportive work environments, repercussions and anxiety about making mistakes.
Performative burdens	Unrealistic expectations despite a lack of parity in workload allocation/management.
Micro-aggressions, racism in and outside the organisation	Situational actions, verbal or behavioural communications that left participants feeling as though they were discriminated against due to their identity and background.
Culture blind collaboration	Unsupportive systems that negate key aspects of one's culture and experiences.
Authenticity and professional (in)security, (mis)trust and spaces for solidarity	The feeling of isolation and loss, and the challenge to find spaces in which one felt free as a professional. Challenges to access support due to lack of trust.
Resilience, upbringing and life experiences	The positive attributes were perceived as arising from life's challenges and adversity.
Belief in the supernatural and survival through faith	Acceptance that there is a higher power supported by the idea that some issues cannot be resolved or happen without spiritual intervention.
'Options' for progress and making a (rewarding) living	Limited spaces to develop or a laboured process replete with barriers yet supported by acceptance that there are benefits and perceived rewards.

Nomadic existence

Black Southern African social workers who participated in the study shared their migration experiences and their ability to navigate practising in different local authorities. An initial challenge they encountered was departing from their home countries, and upon arrival, establishing a sense of belonging. However, when faced with difficulties in the UK, many chose to relocate. The availability of agency work supported this nomadic existence and was often

linked to their quest for environments where they felt accepted, as much as it was financial reasons that are viewed as principal drivers for migrants leaving their countries of origin (see, e.g., Lee 1966, Naidoo and Kasiram, 2006). For the study participants, such considerations were not the sole motivations for migration, with other factors playing a significant role. For instance, Patience and Lwazi departed because of instability stemming from the political environment in their country of origin. They recounted their journeys, expressing that the country's instability left them with little reason to stay.

It is also notable that not all participants trained as social workers in their home countries, meaning their departure was not necessarily for professional reasons. Loise articulated this point succinctly: 'I didn't come here to work; to be honest, I didn't come here for greener pastures, as some of us would say back in Africa. I came here because of a relationship'.

Although Loise was a qualified social worker in her home country, it is evident that her migration was motivated by personal circumstances rather than professional aspirations. The same situation was faced by Patience, who left her home country to join her husband who had already relocated to England. Although it could be said she left in search of a better life, Patience said 'I was happy when I was at home'. She went on to say that her decision to come to England was primarily influenced by the political instability in her home country. Conversely, Martha, Simon and Lwazi had previously experienced migration within the SADC region before moving to England. For instance, Simon shared his story of leaving Zimbabwe for another country because he wanted to afford the medication his mother needed. He explained

> Well, firstly, when I told you I left Zimbabwe, I held a relatively high position as a finance manager, overseeing several companies, including [Names of companies] which are fast food establishments. However, with my mother being ill and requiring

medication, we could not afford it even with my salary, so I needed to move to South Africa.

Simon's situation was one of environmental factors compelling him to leave Zimbabwe for South Africa to provide for his mother. He shared that his journey did not lead him directly to England, coming to England came later, after the passing of his mother. Contrastingly, other participants, such as Martha and Lwazi, had families that had already undergone migration within SADC for various reasons. Lwazi shared her family's story of leaving Malawi due to religious persecution, which led them to settle in Zimbabwe. As a result, she maintained connections in both countries and was later able to visit relatives when circumstances improved. Martha, on the other hand, spoke about having ties to three countries, as her family is connected to South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. She experienced moving among different family members long before her journey to England, and recounted how her family instilled a sense of multiculturalism in her, explaining:

> They made sure that I understood all the cultures because they kept reminding me that you have to understand you are not just a Malawian, you're also a Zimbabwean, you're also a South African because my grandmother raised me, I was brought up by my grandmother.

Martha's relocation to the United Kingdom was facilitated by familial support, as she had relatives residing locally who played a significant role in her transition. This provided her with a smoother adjustment compared to many other participants who lacked such a support system.

Notably, among all participants, Thandi was the sole individual to leave Zimbabwe as a qualified social worker. Her narrative sheds light on her journey towards social work, which initially began with her aspiration to become a lawyer. Following her unsuccessful application to law school, social work was suggested to her as a viable alternative. While working in Zimbabwe, she commenced her master's degree in social work. Thandi recounted

> I had started doing a master's degree in social work with the University of Zimbabwe, so I was actually sort of assisting, lecturing and also completing my program. Subsequently, a fellow student from my 2004 cohort informed me about an opportunity. [Name of local authority] Council was recruiting social workers in the UK. The news quickly circulated, and I decided to participate. And yes, here I am.

Thandi's decision to migrate was distinctive, as she departed Zimbabwe fully aware that she would be practising as a social worker, a circumstance not shared by others. Thandi's situation highlights the structural challenges she faced, as her career path was largely determined by the educational opportunities available to her. Furthermore, Thandi's father's previous experiences in England helped with a degree of familiarity and, what might be described as, reduced intimidation associated with relocating. Although she had family members in England, her employment circumstances precluded her to live with them upon arrival.

In these different respects, the narratives of participants revealed diverse and complex motivations underlying their migration experiences. Various internal and external factors influenced their decisions to pursue life in a different country. For some participants, such as Simon, a profound sense of familial responsibility emerged as a primary motivator. In contrast, for others, systemic issues including inadequate employment opportunities and challenging political climates, significantly contributed to their migration decisions. Despite this diversity in motivation, a common thread among participants was that their professional background in social work, having trained in England and transitioned between various local authorities.

Fadzai articulated a particular trajectory, expressing a longstanding aspiration to study business rather than social work. Initially, she intended to pursue an MBA degree in the United States; however, her inability to secure a visa necessitated a reconsideration of her options, ultimately leading her to England. She recounted

> I just had part-time work, working for a non-governmental organisation. It wasn't quite sufficient; it would be fair to say that coming to the UK was mostly

circumstantial because I could not obtain the job necessary to gain relevant experience. Additionally, my Plan A of studying in America did not materialise. Thus, that is how I ended up coming to the UK.

Fadzai's experience is not unique; she, along with participants like Martha and Simon, found themselves entering the social work profession, despite previous training in different fields. To some degree, this pattern underscored their apparent adaptability as individuals who became social workers for a multitude of reasons. Indeed, the ongoing 'migration' of the participants appeared to continue as they sought agency work and the flexibility to explore positions that align with their aspirations and where they feel valued. Simon, for instance, highlighted that working as an agency worker allowed him to avoid the constraints typically imposed by employers, thereby enhancing his professional autonomy.

With this, the issue of diversity and inclusion within professional settings was also significant. For instance, Fadzai described her experiences as challenging during her Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) due to the marginalisation she faced, which ultimately led to recommendations for her to explore alternative career options. Recalling an insightful conversation with an experienced locum social worker, who also identified as Black African, and who highlighted the lack of diversity within her environment, she stated

> She advised me that the organisation was not very diverse and suggested that, given my challenges at that time, I should consider seeking employment in a more diverse local authority. Interestingly, she had only been with that authority for two months, yet her experience underscored the importance of diversity in the workplace.

Elaborating on this point, Fadzai also spoke about the need for diverse representation and supportive environments to promote inclusion and retention in the workforce. Indeed, it could be argued that the absence of stability and a welcoming atmosphere led four participants to migrate from one local authority to another. In this way, engaging in such movement appeared

to have instilled a sense of confidence among participants, fostering the belief that having successfully migrated once, they could do so again, and that relocation offers a viable solution when faced with unchangeable circumstances.

Loss and grief

Participants reflected on their decision to leave their home country because of various reasons, and how this was a choice that resulted in the loss of their established support networks and familiar environments. Upon arriving in England, many faced significant challenges in adapting to their new surroundings, with their status as immigrants and the need for acclimatisation being among the primary difficulties. They had to adjust to a new way of life and forge new identities to successfully navigate, what constituted, an altered reality for them. Although most participants struggled to integrate into the host country, some found their transition easier due to the support of settled relatives. For instance, Martha shared her experience with her uncle, who is Welsh, noting that she had previously visited the country before deciding to settle in England. She indicated that this background made acclimatisation easier for her. Regarding cultural adjustments, she mentioned

> The culture has always been there, and I suppose most of us in Southern Africa were colonised; the British are our coloniser. So, I think we had a bit of that already in us regardless, there was a bit of that already that integration into the British culture because most of the things we do, it's all British, even in Southern Africa, most of the time it's all British.

Despite the support they received, participants encountered significant challenges within the social work sector, particularly in relation to identity loss. The most profound impact stemmed from the absence of their support systems and a grieving process linked to their inability to return to their home countries, especially in situations where instability made such

a return unattainable. In professional environments, many participants struggled to assimilate into unfamiliar workplace cultures, which prolonged their grieving process and intensified their feelings of loss. Although Martha described herself as familiar with British culture, she also clarified 'when I say home, I wouldn't refer [to] home to [as] England, England is not my home'. This sentiment was echoed by most participants, who expressed a deep sense of missing their home countries and loved ones. At times, the challenges they faced at work compounded these feelings, with simple things seemingly making a significant difference. For example, Thandi said

> I don't think that would have been a place I would have wanted to settle, only because I would have needed my hair done. I needed to get African food, I needed access to other African people, and so now where I live, I do make sure that I can identify those communities and those resources that I need because that's how I can meet my basic needs, even just to be out there to look my best. I need access to an African salon. And there was nothing like that in [name of English town].

Participants also experienced bereavements, which appeared to significantly affect their lives. The loss of a parent, often a stabilising force within the family, forced participants to navigate limited resources and adapt their lifestyles. For instance, Simon lost his mother while living abroad. These profound experiences of loss had a lasting impact on the participants, influencing both their personal lives and professional practices.

Thandi also experienced the significant and traumatic loss of her mother who died by suicide, resulting in her upbringing under the sole care of her father, a situation atypical in the socioeconomic context of Zimbabwe. Understanding the complexities of single parenthood in this cultural framework appeared essential to exploring the challenges and resilience which shaped Thandi's experience of her own identity and loss. As Thandi described it,

> There were times where she was absent, that's where I would experience the neglect and unfortunately my mother's mental health culminated in her committing suicide when I was quite young. And it was actually myself and my sister who came upon her.

So, discovering her and then the experiences with authorities at that point were quite negative in every respect as a result of that.

Fadzai recounted her experiences growing up during times when her mother was absent, and her father cared for her and her siblings – or rather, her siblings fulfilled this role. 'I was looked after by my older siblings who were more like secondary parents, that was just the general culture'. Another participant, Lwazi, shared how the passing of a parent affected her family dynamics, as her father became the sole breadwinner. She said this loss not only altered her home life but also affected her education, forcing her to transfer to a good, but not the best, school due to financial struggles. She expressed the deep sorrow she felt witnessing deaths within the families she supported.

For Simon, the passing of his mother seemed to pave the way for him to leave South Africa and relocate to England, as 'there was less to focus on there and that made me more open to leaving the country as well'. However, Simon emphasised that he had held a good job before leaving Zimbabwe and, as a qualified professional, had anticipated continuing his career in accounting. Despite his qualifications, though, Simon faced challenges in securing a position as an accountant. He recalled his experiences about interviews 'I found it very difficult; I got to a point where I saw that even when they were interviews, I didn't want to go anymore'. Simon then went on to work as a care worker before training in social work. The impact of Simon having to reassess his career path remains unclear. It was evident that Simon identified strongly as an accountant and would have preferred to pursue opportunities within his profession, but success in the form of secure employment eluded him. Simon spoke about learning from his experience allowing him to reassess his situation in life and identify a profession which has given him an opportunity to provide for his family. 'I decided, let me do something where there is a shortage'.

Loise shared that she was motivated to enter the social work profession due to her experiences of losing an extended family member. Following her aunt's passing, Loise said she had to live with her cousins. She expressed that witnessing young people struggle after losing a family member to HIV fuelled her desire to help others in similar situations. Loise explained, 'I was observing a lot of young people becoming orphans because of parents dying of HIV and Aids. I was like, I want to be this superhero, to save the world'. Similarly, Lwazi and Thandi recounted experiences where family members stepped in to raise them. These formative experiences have likely shaped each of these practitioners, and they all emphasised how their past has contributed to their identities today.

Lwazi also emphasised the distinctions between her current experience at work and the practices encountered within English children's services. She reflected on her time working within a team in London, articulating her circumstances in the following manner:

> I remember going into my team. It felt like, I was the only one and when I was in London, I've never gone into a meeting and really think about my identity and really think about bringing my whole self like, oh, I'm the only person here. I never looked around and all that, but I got into this local authority, and a lot of the time I would get into meetings, it was so noticeable that I'm the only brown person in the room and the only one with an accent and all that.

There was a resonance between Lwazi's comments here and those of other participants, who expressed a profound sense of loss of identity as they struggled to adapt to a new culture. Others described England as being different from their expectations, highlighting the challenges associated with adjusting to a new way of life, and how they felt 'distinct'. Fadzai, for example, recounted during her AYSE, how others seemed better placed to access support. She went on to speak about not getting opportunities as one fellow student who was White 'I saw how the team reacted so differently to that particular student, where she was invited to so many shadowing opportunities' thus leaving her feeling isolated without support. Fadzai spoke about

feeling socially isolated. 'A typical example is arriving in the morning and then you find that the majority of the people do not greet you, or when they greet you, you can tell that the greeting is not heartfelt'. It was unclear whether her fear of failure triggered any unconscious feelings rooted in her childhood, however, what was clear was the loss of her support network, which exacerbated the feeling of loss.

Fear, worry and anxiety

In interviews, participants displayed a pervasive sense of anxiety regarding their future circumstances, a feeling that appeared to be closely linked to their experiences of migration and cultural transition. This anxiety was also compounded by a profound sense of loss and a significant lack of timely support, leading, it seemed, to a continued state of fear. Despite these challenges, participants were hesitant to return to their countries of origin. Many individuals reported suffering in silence and perceived themselves to be trapped in an environment characterised by supervision that felt unsupportive, with, sometimes, the threat of potential withdrawal of their social work registration, further exacerbating their feelings of insecurity and distress.

A common feature of the participants' accounts were comments which indicated an inescapable sense of fear that they had to navigate throughout their professional practice. Due to the authority of their managers, they often refrained from challenging specific issues for fear of potential repercussions. Martha described her avoidance of confrontation, noting that 'sometimes [when] you challenge appropriately, you get victimised'. Fadzai echoed this sentiment, stating that a colleague of her said 'these things are very organisational'. She also said 'how do you challenge such things? …you're probably better off not challenging such things'. Although overlooking injustices should not be seen as a choice, it seemed to have

become a tactic employed out of fear of the potential consequences of speaking out. As Martha emphasised,

> I've been put in this situation; I've raised a concern. The concern has not been taken on board, instead, I've become the problem in the sense that now that I've become a problem, 'we are watching you, you want to cause issues', so that's an eye opener. So, you become mindful of your surroundings. Well, the challenges have been that sometimes you raise concerns, you raise things, but it's how it's then received by senior management. If you raise an issue, you are then victimised.

Martha was not alone in her experiences. Other participants also spoke about feeling insecure in their workplaces, which deterred them from challenging various injustices. During the focus group, participants expressed concerns they believed could not be addressed without facing negative repercussions, notably in feeling discriminated against when it came to case allocation, feeling unsupported and not being supported to progress whilst (non-African) colleagues were.

Fadzai spoke about, what she saw as, racist attitudes in different aspects of case allocation, saying 'a certain manager would not even attempt to pronounce their (families) names in supervision'. She said if there are families who were not British, the manager would say things like 'they are both from Ghana, why cannot they not get on?'. Also, Lwazi spoke about being fearful of speaking out when she felt she was treated unfairly but also feeling as though she could not do anything to counteract this, 'I was thinking, I still work for this local authority, I don't want to cause any troubles'. Fadzai highlighted the hesitance among colleagues to discuss issues of racism. She shared

> They don't want to say something and …be misconstrued that maybe they've said something and maybe they're being racist. That's what I think anyway. I think there was only one person, one white worker who will seem comfortable to have that sort of conversation.

Indeed, in constructing this theme when engaged in this analysis, I found myself recalling an Aristotle quote I read once, that it is easy for anyone to be angry 'but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – this is not easy' (cited in Goleman, 1996, p. *ix*). Participants appeared to have developed ways to channel their fears, frustrations and anger to continue with their lives. This happened despite the challenges they faced. Simon emphasised that agency work provided him with a sense of autonomy, offering greater flexibility and reduced managerial reliance on his employment. For Simon, 'if you're working for [an] agency, you make the money, but if someone tries to be racist to you, they really don't have power because you just leave'. He expressed a preference for agency work because it allowed him to leave the job at his discretion, free from the power dynamics that often affect permanent employees.

Simon spoke about finding a way to survive within the complex field. However, he also shared an experience in which both colleagues and families lodged simultaneous complaints against him, leaving him uncertain about the underlying reasons. He felt that his manager had sided with others rather than conducting an objective investigation into the situation. Simon described his experience as 'challenging' and went on to say, 'if you don't have a manager who's on your side, it can be very challenging'.

Lwazi recounted an experience in which she chose not to contest a decision regarding the care of a family friend's child, apprehensive that pursuing the matter could jeopardise her employment. Rather than receiving support from her manager, she felt compelled to hold back, aware that if she continued to challenge or voice her concerns, her job might be at risk. She recalled experiences with her manager consistently discouraging her from being assessed to care for her friend's son, even as it became necessary to convey the family's dissatisfaction. Lwazi recounted

I was thinking, I still work for this local authority, I don't want to cause any troubles, I don't want to complain, I don't want to make noise about this assessment and all that. But anyway, he didn't hold back, he just wrote and told them what he thinks, including telling them that he's not going to say everything because my wife still works there and still needs her job.

Lwazi and other participants discussed the necessity of choosing their battles carefully. However, they often felt compelled to remain observant while continuing with their work. Patience shared her experience of feeling intimidated by one of her managers, who was known for making racist comments within the team. She expressed that when she brought her concerns to her manager, they were dismissed without any resolution.

Most participants also reported feelings of vulnerability, as managers held considerable authority, including the power to use key performance indicators to justify potential dismissals. Simon recounted a time when he had to confront his manager over a decision regarding placing children in the care of a family member. He expressed that he felt unsupported and had to carefully craft his statement to avoid implicating himself. Simon recounted, 'I wrote that this is negative because of fostering, my manager made me aware that the fostering regulations will not allow it and the Judge questioned the regulation that did not exist'. Simon said this meant that he had not gone against his manager but found a way to navigate around a challenging situation. Ultimately, Simon decided to leave that team for agency work to avoid operating under the authority of individuals he did not trust.

Simon also recounted an incident where, he believed, a manager attempted to entrap him by sending an email urging him to make a decision with which he disagreed. He recalled that the email had not reached him, as it had been sent to an old address he used as a student within the organisation. Simon recalled the discussion with his manager at the time:

'But what about this email that we sent to you? Since it is on the sex offenders register'. So, I said that I didn't see any email, they said, there, there's your name, it's

printed, this is the email so, what I said is, okay, look. What I want you to do is to re-send that email. Because if you sent it to me and I'm saying I haven't got it if you send it again, I'll get it. Then they try to resend it, and it bounced.

This experience led Simon to feel insecure and ultimately leave the team. In contrast, Loise shared her own fears and appeared to take a lot on herself, particularly concerning families in the community, to the extent that she began to question herself. She said 'I can't think of a specific word but sometimes I question myself if I'm in the right profession, so I don't know what word to use for that one' (Loise).

There was also a recollection of instances when participants felt anxious due to challenges posed by parents they worked alongside. They described navigating their professional roles with the worry of a complaint being made or complaints being used as an intimidation tactic. Most often, this anxiety appeared to stem from issues related to race, which led to doubts about their professional judgment when situations did not unfold as expected. Fadzai recounted her experience with a family who questioned her professionalism to the extent that they suggested that she misrepresented herself in terms of the qualifications she held.

This being so, throughout the interviews, participants indicated that their primary concern was not necessarily the challenges posed by parents but rather the potential misuse of information by some managers to assert their authority. Referring to some of his managers, Simon said, 'when you see them smile at you, those girls, they're talking to you. I don't trust them'. Of supervision, he also commented 'generally speaking supervision for me is very superficial. I don't go into things; it's my choice not to open up'. Thandi, Lwazi, Martha, Patience and Fadzai highlighted that the nature of the social work in local authority organisations fosters oppressive and discriminatory practices, with many issues remaining unchallenged due to a lack of adequate support structures. And one could say there was an internal and collective struggle with this. Patience recalled a situation where her colleagues

came together and said, 'no, we want to complain and I said, guys, let's just leave it'. This mirrored what she said about her manager regarding her colleague, that 'she doesn't mean it in a bad way'.

Along similar lines, Fadzai commented saying, 'we work in a profession where we're not protected, that it leaves the work of being vulnerable to all sorts of things'. Thandi shared how a manager incessantly suggested she consider returning to Zimbabwe after her recruitment as an international social worker. She recalled being told to be prepared to provide an explanation upon her return from the Christmas holidays.

Performative burdens

Participants reported facing significant challenges within social work teams, primarily stemming from perceived inequitable treatment. Lwazi pointed out disparities in case allocation, highlighting that while their colleagues were assigned cases close to the locality, they were tasked with cases that necessitated several hours of travel. Despite these logistical hurdles, all the social workers in her team were expected to meet the same key performance indicators. Practitioners assigned cases in the immediate locality had the opportunity to visit multiple families in a single day and efficiently complete the necessary documentation. In contrast, social workers required to travel long distances could manage, at most, one visit per day. Yet, they were held to the same performance expectations. Lwazi gave an example saying

> I was constantly driving around the country because we're trying to look at placement out of bounds and all these visits, they take like the whole day you're just seeing one child, whereas other people they've got like these children that are local, they can quickly do their visits, that visits within a day. They've seen four or five children and I'm spending a day seeing one child. I've got one up north, I've got one in Scotland, I've got one in Norfolk, they were just like taking so much of my time.

Fadzai recounted an experience of cultural bias in case distribution. She noted that 'any diverse family where there was a surname that people found it difficult to pronounce, they were all allocated to me'. Fadzai expressed her concern that, despite the complexities of engaging with diverse cultures entailed in this, there was an expectation for her to achieve positive outcomes simply because she shared a similar cultural background with the families. She highlighted that the issue of being allocated families with migrant backgrounds became increasingly evident, especially after one of her colleagues brought it to attention. Fadzai recalled when one mother said 'Fadzai, you should understand because you're African as well'.

In the focus group, Lwazi, who was a team manager, echoed these sentiments. She pointed out that her team was responsible for nearly eighty children, while the nearest team managed only fifty. When she inquired about this discrepancy, her manager responded by questioning whether she wanted her to 'manufacture practitioners'. Nevertheless, the performance expectations remained unchanged. Fadzai shared her experience starting in a local authority in London, where she found herself with an overwhelming workload. When she sought support, she was informed that teams previously handled even more cases than she was managing. Martha similarly volunteered that 'your caseload is more complex compared to the next, your next counterpart or your next colleague you work in the same team'.

Such reflections are linked to aspects of my own experience as a social worker, specifically, how being an outsider leaves one exposed to a negative outlook, especially when internal struggles and experiences appear to reveal (once again) that you do not belong. Again, underscoring the systemic challenges faced by migrant social workers, including issues of fairness, workload distribution, and insufficient support structures within their professional environments, Martha emphasised that the caseloads did not reflect a balanced distribution within the teams. She compared her workload to that of her colleagues and noted that despite her considerable effort, there was little recognition of her contributions. Martha said in her

opinion, 'practitioners from Southern Africa are the best social workers'; however, this commitment often adversely affected their health without yielding tangible professional rewards.

Lwazi recounted her experiences with one manager who acknowledged that she had more experience than the manager herself, yet this recognition did not foster a positive working relationship. The manager reportedly felt intimidated by Lwazi, leading to her being assigned complex cases to the extent that she ultimately decided to leave the position. Four participants expressed the expectation of exceptional performance in their roles, but, when they were perceived as excelling, they were burdened with increasingly complex cases. However, most of them appeared to have used their experiences to reflect on what they could have done or are doing to make a difference for themselves. Fadzai mentioned her reluctance to pursue a senior role out of fear that it would result in an influx of additional complex cases, as did Patience who said she did not wish to progress as a way of protecting herself.

Lwazi also noted the trend of practitioners leaving their teams, yet expectations remain unchanged even when there are no replacements for those who depart. She spoke about her experience of balancing work with caring for a small child. She recalled

> I'm leaving the house at 6am and I've got a one-year-old and I'm coming home at 10 or 11pm. I can do that if it's once a month, but not when you're doing it like three, four times in a month or five times in a month, but then also have other days where you're coming late and you're leaving your baby sleeping, you're coming back and they're already in bed.

Despite these long hours, she still needed to complete her notes, often finding time to do so on weekends. Thandi shared her own challenges, 'I had risen within the team that I had been a CSW by the sort of the sixth month of my being a team manager all the team members, social workers had left the team'. Despite seeing herself as conducting exemplary work, Thandi said

she was informed about a white female employee whose behaviour would be challenging for her to manage, possibly due to the employee's connections within the organisation. She shared her assessment that 'children's practitioners are very powerful in social work teams because a lot of times they've been in social work teams longer than the team managers and the social workers'.

Three participants specifically expressed concerns about being assigned families recognised as 'difficult' or 'hard to reach' without receiving adequate support when those families' raised complaints or exhibited challenging behaviour. Fadzai shared a particular experience where she felt attacked by a parent of African descent. She recounted how her manager questioned why she seemed to attract such challenging individuals. Although these participants recognised that this issue was prevalent across several teams, they also mentioned that it had positively contributed to their professional development. They became dependable team members despite often finding their advancement was overlooked. It appeared, to them, that those who were favoured by management were the ones who progressed, despite lacking experience in handling complex cases. This situation raised further concerns about the guidance they could offer to colleagues who relied on their expertise.

Micro-aggressions, racism in and outside the organisation

Participants spoke about racism in and outside their organisations, particularly in the form of microaggressions, i.e., frequent 'unintentional' verbal, behavioural, or situational actions that transmit disparaging or exclusionary messages toward them as individuals from marginalised backgrounds (Sue et al., 2007). This included different forms of racism that reflected the three distinct types of micro-aggressions: micro-assaults, which involve overtly prejudicial actions; microinsults, characterised by subtly demeaning remarks or behaviours; and

microinvalidations, which function to dismiss or undermine the lived experiences of marginalised groups (Sue, 2010).

The accounts presented highlighted intricate challenges encountered by migrant social workers, including workplace exclusion, cultural insensitivity, discrimination, and insufficient managerial support in confronting systemic inequalities, particularly in relation to a sense of worthlessness (see Bradley, 2014). Five participants spoke about experiencing expressed appreciation for their professional contributions, but also often feeling less than fully welcomed within their teams. Lwazi recounted a situation where her colleagues organised a social gathering without her knowledge; she only learned about the event when a colleague asked her for a lift. Upon reflection, Lwazi realised she was the only team member not invited to the gathering. Additionally, she faced challenges with her manager, who seemed to subject her to undue scrutiny, despite receiving frequent praise from senior management for her high-quality work.

Loise expressed that she found it challenging to support families in England due to a lack of respect for social workers. Contrastingly, she said, she found that families in South Africa appreciated the efforts and support provided by social workers (echoing Hakak, Onokah and Shishane's (2022) observations that social workers trained in South Africa must navigate considerable cultural variances, which include differing views on religion, family dynamics and parenting styles, modes of interpersonal communication, as well as varying perceptions of what constitutes polite and impolite conduct).

Loise recalled an experience with a family she was working with, who explicitly stated that they did not want a Black social worker. Although her manager was supportive, Loise continued to work with this family, despite their refusal to work with her. Loise ultimately ended up conducting joint visits, during which the family chose to communicate with her white

colleague, who was not a qualified social worker, rather than with her. Reflecting on her upbringing in South Africa, Loise mentioned the lingering effects of apartheid, highlighting that a white person could say something unkind to a Black person without facing consequences. Loise described her current experiences in England as reminiscent of those challenges. Loise shared that she had to reflect on the issue, commenting that,

> I tell myself that that's your problem. So, whoever, whoever that will be discriminating, that's their problem, this is not my problem. So, if they say you should go back to Africa, that person definitely has issues, they've got issues, so, I don't allow it. I don't allow it to and I think coming from South Africa does contribute because racism is probably every single day and it's out there.

Loise's experience resonated with several participants, despite differences in their circumstances, for example, Martha, who recounted being assigned to a family that requested a change of social worker, with the parent saying, 'I'm not racist, but I just want someone who understands me'. Informed that such a change would not occur, the family continued to voice their discontent. For Martha, this constituted an organisational response with a message being sent to the family who were effectively 'told because you talk too much, you're going to get stuck with the Black social worker'. Martha shared that she eventually developed a collaborative relationship with the family, and when the manager proposed a change in social worker, the family refused, expressing their desire to continue working with her.

Fadzai recounted her experience regarding a father who reported her to Social Work England because he was unwilling to work with her due to her ethnicity. She said the father had claimed that she falsified the children's wishes and tracked her via her social media accounts. Fadzai reflected on this saying 'I realised and he actually said I shouldn't be working in this field, in this profession'. She said she felt that 'he had no grounds to complain, but he kept making complaints' and 'thought that racism was an issue that at that time'. Being positioned as somehow diminished in her personhood and professionalism, Fadzai said she

encountered a notable lack of support from her management, which contributed to her anxiety about the possibility of losing her professional registration.

Lwazi expressed admiration for her daughter, who grew up in England and demonstrated courage in standing up against issues like racism, a quality that Lwazi said she sometimes felt she lacked. Thandi shared an interaction with the head of service at her organisation, who addressed her by invoking her country of origin's colonial-era nomenclature. This encounter elicited a profound sense of discomfort in Thandi, particularly given that the remark originated from a senior authority figure, and she represented this as an act that could compound the marginalisation of individuals from formerly colonised nations. She reiterated, 'like I said, we had the head of service who clearly had an issue, obviously still calling Zimbabwe, Rhodesia, bearing in mind that that is a colonial name that comes with a lot of pain and suffering'.

All the participants shared their experiences regarding the challenges they faced within organisations when colleagues demonstrated disregard for issues related to discrimination and racism. Fadzai mentioned that some of her colleagues during her ASYE (continually) struggled to pronounce her surname, and recounted an incident where a letter was missing from her ID badge, which could lead others to confuse her with a practitioner from England or the Caribbean. Attempting to fit in, Fadzai described how she attempted to change her accent. 'You sort of felt that maybe the way you sounded was wrong'. Fadzai also noted that while her colleagues advanced during their ASYE, her progress was slower due to, as she saw it, a lack of support. After moving to a London Borough to work, she said she felt a sense of relief, as she could be herself without the need to pretend.

Patience spoke about a manager who made derogatory comments about Africa. Although these remarks were not always directed at her, the manager seemed unaware of the

emotional toll such statements had on staff. For instance, the manager frequently referred to African migrants requesting fans due to high temperatures, questioning, 'Where do they know fans from? There are no fans in Africa'. Other participants expressed frustration over the lack of institutional support in addressing this type of comment. Rather than acknowledging and addressing the discrimination faced by migrant social workers, they found that senior management figures often dismissed their worries, labelling them as overreactions.

Thandi spoke about her experience where, upon her appointment as a team manager, most of the team she was responsible for left. The team's reaction was evident to everyone, yet it went unaddressed in the organisation, forcing Thandi to move to another team as the situation became unmanageable, with the message that 'you can be one of us but you cannot lead us'. Simon shared a situation in which he felt that some professionals chose to align themselves with a family against him, resulting in multiple complaints being submitted simultaneously. However, he noted that he was in a better position this time, as one of the senior managers, who was Black, provided him with support being 'on my side' so he could 'work confidently'. He pointed out that when complaints were received from professionals and the family at once he was given the space to talk openly recalling his initial awareness of the prevalence of racism in England, a realisation sparked by one of his university lecturers.

> For me, the reason why not knowing where I stand hit me hard was because it went on for a very long time, eight years with me thinking that I'm making strides in this new community and yet I wasn't.

Thandi discussed the persistent micro-aggressions aimed at undermining Black social workers, noting that these subtle slights are often rooted in ethnic backgrounds. 'It's things like that would happen quite constantly to the point where now I use the word name Thandi, because you're just beaten down so much because you people don't even want to try to say your name'.

Despite this, she said she sought to cultivate the confidence to engage alongside other professionals, drawing strength from her shared training and experiences.

Simon articulated his preference for remaining as, what he termed, 'a simple social worker' by working as an agency social worker not seeking to progress to avoid the pervasive nature of racism as one ascends within the professional hierarchy. He expressed apprehension regarding career advancement, suggesting that it would necessitate engagement in political manoeuvring, which he did not want – an attitude shaped by prior experiences. He recounted an incident where a team manager delegated her assistant to supervise him, ostensibly as a strategy, he saw, as seeking to entrap him, a situation he promptly communicated to the assistant team manager.

Four participants specifically shared experiences of being undermined by senior management, which often involved direct communication with team members, effectively bypassing their immediate supervisors. Thandi said she found that certain staff members, despite lacking formal qualifications as social workers, appeared to exert greater influence than managers like herself, who also possess an African background. 'They've got all these routes and networks within them, so much so that they would have direct access, for example, to the head of service'. Along similar lines, Patience discussed a team member who disregarded her guidance, believing he was entitled to occupy her position, which also reflected how other colleagues related to her. 'Some of them were not even taking any instructions or directions from me because they thought they were better'.

Conclusion

This chapter, as the first of the two analysis chapters, detailed how the narratives of the participants, as Black Southern African social workers in England's children's services,

navigate a professional landscape shaped by instability, loss, and racialised pressures. Their experiences of challenges appeared to emerge not only from the demands of their roles but also from the emotional burdens associated with migration, organisational expectations, and workplace microaggressions and racism. Feelings of fear, worry, and anxiety were apparent as they navigated unfamiliar systems while seeking stability in both their professional and personal lives. The interplay between structural barriers and individual resilience is, in this way, evident, yet the ways in which these social workers internalise and respond to these challenges can vary shaped by their freedom to exercise agency within these constraints.

Chapter 5: Analysis II

Introduction

This chapter continues reporting the analysis and addresses the other overarching themes identified. Specifically, these are of culture-blind collaboration; 'options' for progress and making a (rewarding) living; authenticity and professional (in)security; resilience, upbringing, and life experiences; belief in the supernatural or faith as a source of support; and (mis)trust and spaces for solidarity. Notably, in this exploration, the role of endings and transitions is dealt with as forms of loss and hope and renewal, in the case of new beginnings (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 2013). For the participants, migration signified both an end and a beginning, one laden with contradictions, challenges, and opportunities. The analysis explores how participants navigated tensions between professional survival, career progression, and the quest for meaningful personal and professional fulfilment in an unfamiliar and, at times, unaccommodating system.

Culture blind collaboration

All the participants aside from one reported that the supervision they received at work was primarily task-oriented, with little to no opportunity to discuss cultural considerations or explore the impact of culture on their practice. There was an implicit expectation that some participants would be assigned to work with families from similar cultural backgrounds, based on the assumption that shared cultural experiences would facilitate mutual understanding. However, participants reported that little consideration in supervision was given to the potential negative effects of such assignments on both the practitioners and the outcomes for the families involved. Speaking about family allocations, Fadzai said 'I noticed that my white colleagues would have mostly white British families'. She also spoke about how managers, for instance,

assumed that social workers from similar backgrounds would automatically understand and accept their parenting approaches, which created additional challenges for practitioners. Fadzai reflected on her challenges saying 'whilst I'm from a diverse background, I wouldn't know all the different backgrounds in the world'. Fadzai shared a story of a parent who turned to her saying that 'you are from Africa like me, therefore, you should understand that this is the way we parent after physically chastising her children'. She recalled having a conversation with a colleague where they were highlighting that being allocated a family of a similar background could be counterproductive at times.

Martha shared that there was no time dedicated to understanding the cultural implications for the social worker. She went to say 'who is Martha? My manager may not be able to answer that because I don't think they know who I am'. She put it plainly, 'I think there needs to be a lot of being more culturally competent', noting that she was moulded by different cultures and this would likely influence the way she works, hence the need to consider this in more depth.

Indeed, I would argue that cultural awareness or appreciation could possibly shape how the worker feels about the manager and the team. This could be beneficial if the manager is aware of cultural intricacies that are likely to shape the social worker's practice and behaviour, and supervision could have been used as a space where issues of power, practice processes and responsibilities are incorporated into a discussion (Ingram 2013). However, based on participants' accounts, this space was (very) limited, therefore also constraining further discussion about culture between practitioners and their managers.

Fadzai recalled that during a training session on diversity and inclusion, the same people who had experienced discrimination tended be those who would end up speaking out, with other colleagues staying quiet, fearful of saying things which might lead them to be

labelled as racist. She said she found that, once she assumed this role, many colleagues disengaged and contributed minimally to discussions. Fadzai reiterated the lack of cultural awareness referring back to the incident in which her manager remarked that she 'seemed to attract challenging men', without acknowledging that it was the manager who had consistently assigned her to work with those individuals.

Martha commented on how more could be done in terms of the curricula used in universities with social work practitioners but was also resigned that things would not change:

> So, I think things may may need to change from that point. But things may never change because they still preach diversity and I think in the PCF domains if they still they talk about there's a domain that talks about diversity, inclusion, all this racism, all that, but it's all there and it never changes.

During the focus group, Thandi encouraged other participants to be actively involved in diversity and inclusion initiatives. Lwazi challenged Thandi saying that there was nothing happening in the diversity and inclusion teams she had worked with. She pointed out that the diversity and inclusion being involved in recruitment could be made compulsory. Lwazi went on to say that the diversity and inclusion teams were tokenistic. Martha spoke about work colleagues being like family members who needed each other. Elsewhere, Martha also spoke about respect.

> Well, there is always respect, you will always respect your senior management because they are seniors one hundred percent. But I also feel like when someone is ready, when someone is ready, they are ready, respect will always be given. But I don't think that that has impacted me in any way because of that, because I still respect, but I think sometimes we need to give credit where it's due.

For Martha, having a manager who was so interested in knowing about her culture helped fortify their relationship. However, she recalled that this was the only manager she had worked with who appeared to care. Since then, she has never had a similar experience. Patience

shared an experience similar to Martha, having worked with a manager who was very interested in knowing about her culture to the point that he tried to learn some words from her language. Participants shared that knowing one's culture could help 'unlock' their potential as staff as there will be clarity regarding what makes them who they are. Martha spoke about supervision being a space that could be used to understand practitioners' culture; however, she said most of supervision was a 'tick box exercise'. She added on, 'I know we talk of reflective supervision, but what does that look like? Because from where I stand, it seems like a tick box exercise where you just tick, tick, tick'. Patience emphasised how

> Culture is very important to me because that's my identity, and it's good to know other people's cultures, how it differs from mine. Because that's the cultural competence of that I need to know about, you know about Orthodox they celebrate Christmas on the seventh of January that I didn't know about.

Patience shared a conversation she had with her colleagues about respecting elders and not calling them by their (first) names. She recalled when her team were told her that she was overdoing things when she told them about having to make managers cups of tea as a sign of respect. Patience said she spoke to her managers saying 'I'll make you tea because that's the way that I was brought up'. She pointed out that 'if I feel like disrespected, I call for supervision' using it as a space to share her discontent. On the other hand, Simon pointed out that he had no space where he could discuss issues around his culture and wellbeing as he did not trust his supervisors. He spoke about having to act, in what he represented as, 'superficial' ways of relating during supervision as he did not want information about him to be passed on. Regarding supervision, Simon said, 'I just talk superficially - 'How are you? I'm fine' - because I don't trust people'.

Based on my interaction with participants, some of them pointed out that they found it a challenge to raise issues with those in authority partly due to their culture. Therefore, this

could make it essential to break this barrier down as it could have several implications. Lwazi highlighted that her culture would encourage her to think about others whereas what she has observed is 'that most individuals think about themselves most of the time not others'. Participants also shared their thinking regarding who could be called family. They shared their experiences of having many relatives and people stepping up to care for children who belonged to their relatives. However, their experiences had shown them that this was not the case in England. There was also the case of animals being 'part of' the family. Fadzai gave an example about dogs in her culture. She said,

> I'm not sure if it's a cultural thing when families have pets in the home, like dogs and cats and things like that. I don't mind dogs, but coming from Zimbabwe, where dogs tend to just stay outside, they don't come into the home. When I've done… visits and then there's a cat, which was so maybe to be stroked. I have noticed that some, some of the families, they also don't get why I'm not stroking the cat or I'm not stroking their dog while I'm not as friendly. I sort of then have to explain that, oh, I'm not very fond of dogs, or some seem to accept it. They will put the dog or the cat away.

Authenticity and professional (in)security, (mis)trust and spaces for solidarity

Some participants expressed feelings of isolation and sought support from others, particularly those with similar backgrounds. Participants also found that colleagues from a similar background were also grappling with their own challenges and were therefore not always able to offer the support they needed. Participants seemed to search for familiarity, hoping to recreate the support networks they had in their home countries. Fadzai shared that one of her managers would say that she would come to work, get on with the work and go home without talking to many people. She shared that there were times when she realised that she could not change some of the things that were happening. Fadzai recalled

> I experienced these things, but it took me a while to really process it or to actually even realise that actually this is what's going on. Whatever is happening here is bigger than me, because I was made to feel like I was the problem, that you just being there, coming from a different culture, you're the problem, you're not quite fitting in.

Fadzai referred to the lack of support she had during her ASYE years and how this impacted her. She shared that she could see others having support but that was not afforded to her. Therefore, she highlighted that she realised that there were spaces she could not fit in.

Migrating to England meant losing some of their support network. For those with family around that support continued whereas those without family took a longer period for them to build that support network. At work, colleagues did not necessarily provide support despite this being provided to them. Lwazi shared some of her experiences where she would cover for her colleagues when they would be on annual leave, but this was never reciprocated. She shared that she would visit colleagues' families when they required support in the absence of an allocated worker. However, she pointed out that when she was absent, her families would be told to wait until she returned from leave. Lwazi said the message for the families would be 'I'm sorry, she's on annual leave. She'll deal with it when she comes back'. As for most of the participants Lwazi's family was her personal source of support and the 'internal' resources she held in mind when challenged in her work commitments.

Regarding colleagues from a similar background, there was a mixed response as to what they could or might offer as support. Some of the participants shared that they had received support from colleagues from similar backgrounds yet others were sceptical about the support they received. For example, Martha pointed out that due to her having a varied background with family roots in Zimbabwe, Malawi and South Africa, some practitioners tended to take a bit longer to 'warm up' towards her as they could not easily ascertain where she is from. Simon pointed out that he tended to stay away from practitioners from a similar background, even in the community, as he found people tended to start comparing themselves and asking what he had got and showing off at times. He observed, 'at work we have a

superficial thing' and said that he felt that he could not be authentically himself with others due to a lack of trust.

Loise, on the other hand, even though she was born in South Africa, shared that she tended to relate to practitioners and people from Zimbabwe. As she put it, 'the people from Southern Africa are one'. Loise pointed out that she had no other family member in England as she had migrated to the country with her boyfriend, however, that relationship had ended.

Interestingly, most participants were enthused about my research. For Thandi, for example, 'I'm quite excited, really about this research, I think it's long overdue in social work'. Conversely, for Loise 'that conversation made me think and reflect that I'm still here'. Along similar lines, Lwazi spoke about 'areas where I think things can be better' and further said she hoped that the research 'can have some recommendations to just make our profession better'. During the focus group, Thandi highlighted that her compatriots were not offering support to one another, unlike individuals from other ethnic groups. She encouraged others to nominate each other as a means of fostering their own community, and it was interesting that Lwazi offered to go to work with Fadzai saying that she was going to offer her support. The situation appeared to have been different in terms of what participants faced when they first arrived in England.

Thandi spoke about how she felt isolated even when she was living in shared accommodation with other people from Zimbabwe, and being restricted by the agency that had brought her to England, a sentiment that was echoed by others, for example, for Fadzai, 'I believe at that time I was really isolated in the team'. Thandi spoke about not being given a choice to live with her relatives. She narrated a story about how they were promised a sum of money upon arrival in England but there was no explanation of how this money was going to be given. Without support from anyone, the money was going towards the accommodation that

she had not chosen. Thandi said that, had she been given a choice, she could have gone to live with her relatives. However, being new in the country, she was unaware of her rights and feared challenging her employer as it could have made her situation worse.

Fadzai similarly faced challenges being away from her family and managing without their support.

> I was going to a university in London, some of my fellow peers were maybe staying with family members, but I had to rent a room and stay on my own, and I had to quickly get a job so I could then, pay for my accommodation and also pay for some of my fees, which was quite challenging, working only 20 hours and trying to pay for your tuition fees.

Participants expressed feelings of mistrust toward their managers and colleagues, which created a superficial work environment. This situation posed significant challenges for the social workers, who felt insecure due to what some described as a 'lack of professionalism' (Fadzai). Despite this, most participants seemed to have developed strategies to cope, drawing comfort and support from trusted friends and family. However, there was a notable absence of someone to help process their anxieties and fears into a more manageable form, i.e., to 'contain' them (see Bion, 1962).

Although some participants were sceptical about support in their immediate work environment, Patience, Lwazi and Fadzai spoke about the support that they had received from colleagues and experienced as beneficial. However, most of the colleagues who provided support were from a similar background to them. Others, like Simon, spoke more about having authentic relationships with his friends and brothers who were in South Africa. Thandi shared that her cohort had a WhatsApp group that they used to communicate. She pointed out that, in her view, only Zimbabweans had remained in social work. Thandi shared that the friendships that she developed before became 'compartmentalised' and that her experience led to her

supporting other internationally recruited social workers. She spoke about discussing with a colleague from Southern Africa about liaising with one of the local authorities to support social workers who required integration in England. 'I remember [name of colleague] and myself, having those discussions about how we found our own recruitment and settling in the UK and how we were going to be happy to put ourselves forward to support that recruitment'.

Lwazi spoke about having a role where she was able to support practitioners who were training to be social workers. She expressed that she was able to use systemic practice in her supervision, this allowed her an opportunity to explore issues like social graces. Lwazi added 'I think it comes with manager's experience and confidence in discussing such subjects'. She was happy that she was able to do this despite her not receiving such support, and shared that she has continued using the same way of supervision that has allowed her to develop a relationship with practitioners.

Resilience, upbringing and life experiences

Participants made recurrent references connecting their ability to manage challenging situations similar to their upbringing and early life experiences, with some juxtaposing their own capacity with that of non-African colleagues who they viewed as struggling when a work situation became challenging. Being resilient and determined was something participants appeared to take pride in. According to Fadzai, for example,

> I think the resilience, obviously helped me and just sort of being determined, say, for example, whatever challenges I faced when I was having doing my ASYE, I said to myself, I'm not going to leave this place without my ASYE regardless of what happened.

All participants described their upbringing as playing a crucial role in developing their resilience at work. They described facing challenges within their families and communities that contributed to their ability to navigate difficult situations as practitioners. The participants emphasised that their experiences significantly enhanced their ability to navigate complex family dynamics effectively. In this way, 'resilience' was introduced in interviews in relation to a range of different circumstances and situations, at times like a badge of honour. For Martha

> I think you survive because you've got that resilience in you. I think it's in us, you survive, you've got resilience, you've got different ways of coping. Like I said, speaking to different colleagues, different maybe same people, same people who are minorities, same minorities, same social workers.

Martha attributed her own resilience to her experiences at a boarding school where she learned to navigate various challenges independently, for instance, the absence of a television was a concern for many of her peers, but it did not pose a significant issue for her. She also reflected on her early domestic responsibilities. She explained that she began performing household chores at the age of ten, which contributed to her ability to manage tasks within the family home effectively. When asked whether culture and upbringing had anything to do with her attitude towards work and relationships, Martha responded saying 'one hundred percent. I feel like whatever was instilled in me, my upbringing, my culture does play a part in what I do today, oh, one hundred percent definitely'.

Patience shared that many of her own childhood experiences were painful. She spoke about being laughed at and bullied because of her disability. She spoke about the different environment in England compared to Zimbabwe. She highlighted that, when she arrived in England, she did not feel that people looked at her disability and felt that she was accepted within the community compared to Zimbabwe. As she put it, 'I would walk in town and no one would ask me why my face is like that. No one would ask me, but when I was back home,

people would laugh at me'. She shared her experience that led her to become a social worker. Her son has additional needs and she had struggled caring for him. She recalled being told that her son was not going to be supported by a social worker and this encouraged her to become one so that she could help others.

Life experiences and circumstances were something that most participants pointed out had led them to come to England and becoming social workers. Thandi spoke about 'hitting rock bottom' and being in situation where you are not fazed by anything having grown up without a mother and being subjected to different forms of abuse, 'I think in a lot of ways I was subjected to all four [forms of abuse]'. Thandi's situation could be linked with Lwazi's who also lost her father meaning that her life changed completely having to adjust and being cared for by extended family members. Thandi spoke about the work her father invested in ensuring that she and her siblings attended good schools, whereas Lwazi had to lower her expectations as her father who provided was no longer there to do so, 'I would say life changed a lot for us'.

The other thing that stands out about all the participants except for Thandi and Lwazi, is that they completed degrees or advanced qualifications in other fields. These ranged from accounting and business studies to psychology. Coming to England led them to change their profession and start something new. Simon spoke about having to adapt to a new reality having trained as an accountant in his country of origin, 'I went into social work, the way I went through social work is because I needed to get two jobs so that my visa would carry on'. However, most participants had to navigate a challenging situation in their childhood and consider their upbringing to have shaped who they are today. For example, Simon spoke about attending a boarding school with the children of white farmers in Zimbabwe. He recalled that the situation was tense as this time, as it was during the war in Zimbabwe and the impact of the war was felt most in farms. Also, the children of the white farmers saw themselves as figures of authority calling themselves 'mini bosses'. Loise spoke about losing her aunt and seeing

children without parents driving her to become a social worker. She spoke about wanting to be a 'superhero' who would save children.

Indeed, this investment in being resilient also created challenges, which participants spoke about in terms of being assigned more challenging cases as 'resilient' practitioners. Thandi for example, spoke about 'the hardships that we've gone through as well [at work], I think that that has also built a lot of resilience in us to actually think that nothing can be worse than this'. As a result, tensions arose, with participants holding the impression that colleagues struggled to acknowledge their effectiveness and competence as 'resilient' professionals, but they also ended up becoming 'heavy lifters' for the teams and services.

Belief in the supernatural and survival through faith

The extent to which social work and social care professionals confront ethical dilemmas which involve their personal religious beliefs conflicting with the diverse values and lifestyles of their clients (see, e.g., Canda and Furman, 2010) held particularly true for the study participants, who identified as Christian and held different spiritual beliefs. It can be said that such conflicts can significantly challenge the ethical principle of client self-determination and the maintenance of professional boundaries. Thus, navigating these complexities requires practitioners to possess a heightened level of self-awareness and an unwavering commitment to cultural competence to practice in a way that is empathetic and respectful.

Four participants described how their faith had sustained them during challenging situations in their work. Thandi shared what she described as an experience of God's intervention when she was pressured to consider returning to her home country. Upon her return from leave, she learned that the manager who had urged her to contemplate going back had left their position. For her, faith was a crucial source of strength. 'I think my faith did play a role'.

Thandi also spoke about how, during that time, she prayed and how her beliefs kept her going. 'God, I believe I'm in the right place, and you've got everything that I need to succeed in this place here'. Thandi shared how she had navigated challenging meetings and visits to family homes by having a prayer before them and said she found that God had responded to her requests. She said she continues to believe in prayer and shared that it is something that she does every morning. Similarly, Lwazi maintained 'you need to have that hope, you need to keep the faith, and you need to think about things that are going to be fine'.

Simon spoke about an incident where he informed his supervisor that he believed in God, 'I told her that I know that you want to get me out of here, but I believe in God'. This occurred in the context of the example he spoke about of him receiving an important email that was mistakenly sent to his old student email address, leading to questions about his professionalism when he appeared not to follow management directives. He said he recognised God's hand in resolving the situation. Working in a different role and local authority, there was another occasion when he felt that God was trying to communicate with him following another challenging situation. At different points in his interviews, Simon emphasised that faith was his source of strength, something he would share directly with others. He also articulated ways in which he perceived divine communication to have influenced his life and decision-making. He recounted times he engaged in dialogue with several of his managers regarding his faith in God, particularly during situations that presented moral or ethical dilemmas. One of these managers said, 'let's see your God', and he described his experience when a positive outcome was realised, saying 'God turned up'. Simon recalled that this was an occasion when managers wanted him to remove children from extended family members he believed were suitable caregivers.

Additionally, Simon noted instances where he encountered simultaneous complaints from parents and professionals, prompting him to consider whether these occurrences were

indicative of a divine message. He recalled speaking to his direct manager and service manager, 'I said that I think that maybe I should stop for a while and just reflect on what's happening in my life. Maybe this is all spiritual'. He also disclosed particularly vivid experiences he had. The first involved a fleeting interaction with an elderly woman experiencing mental health challenges, who commented to him that 'God has got good things for you'. The second was a vivid dream Simon had regarding someone taking money from his hand prior to moving countries. He reflected on how both the dream and the woman's prophetic statement ultimately materialised in his life.

Although faith was generally represented by participants as an important and beneficial dimension of their lives, some participants also noted that their faith sometimes led them to have a belief or acceptance of 'taking things as they come', that is, leaving matters in God's hands, rather than taking a proactive stance and confronting what they perceived as unfair treatment. Most participants did, all the same, express gratitude for their faith and belief in a higher power, which helped them navigate difficult circumstances. For example, Lwazi said '[it] doesn't matter how many times someone falls, what matters is how many times they're able to stand up and keep going'. Thandi pointed out that because of her father she was grateful for even small things, and she put all her work into the hands of God.

> In terms of my belief in, in God, I rely on a supernatural force as well and that is an inspiration for me so I wouldn't want to say that I do it in my own power completely, but I do rely on my religion quite heavily.

Relying on the unseen forces or God when there are no answers, especially when everything seems lost, appeared to work on two levels: when there is a complicated situation and when the outlook towards authority, i.e., of respect for those in authority, leaves certain situations unchallenged. For example, in the challenging relationship Thandi experienced with her first manager, because she did not know what else she could do, she was able to rely on

faith to get through a challenging situation, yet it also meant retreating from the fray and the challenge of confronting inequities at work.

'Options' for progress and making a (rewarding) living

Amongst participants, there were different views regarding the options available to progress in the field and levels of contentment with current roles. Patience and Simon expressed a degree of contentment with their current roles rather than seeking career advancement. As Patience put it, 'I'm fine where I am right now', adding that progression for her might mean that she does not work directly with young people, something she does not want. Simon said he wanted to avoid exposure to greater levels of racist treatment and organisational politics he did not want to handle in supervisory or managerial roles, 'I know that when you're going for bigger positions, you do face the racism more'. He said he was satisfied as he could be as an agency worker because 'if someone tries to be racist to you, they really don't have power because you just leave'. He also explained that a career in accounting did not provide the same level of financial stability as social work, and through his agency work, he had been able to achieve financial security, 'I'm much freer, I just get my money and I invest my money'.

Thandi, Loise, Fadzai and Lwazi cited various challenges they would need to navigate if they tried to progress further, and Martha commented that senior-level positions appeared to be reserved for certain demographic groups, with a predominance of White individuals in senior management roles and career progression appearing to be based less on performance, more on nepotism. 'There's a lot of nepotism whereby because you may not be a friend or a favourite to management, so therefore your progression becomes on hold'. She also highlighted a perceived lack of transparency in the social work sector, where managers could justify blocking promotions of certain staff even when such justifications were potentially

inaccurate. Speaking on the experiences of other social workers from Southern Africa, she recalled how they 'talked about having to prove yourself working four times harder to prove that you're capable than the next person'. Martha shared that despite the work that most practitioners from Southern Africa had put in, there was, in her view, still a lack of recognition, which would not be resolved without substantial systemic change.

Martha and Lwazi spoke about the lack of transparency during job interview processes and limited, or a lack of, valid feedback being given. As Martha described it, 'they can't even tell you, give you good feedback, they find themselves stuttering because they're like, 'Oh, you just missed by how many points'. Strikingly (and seemingly contradictorily), Martha also spoke about 'respecting decisions' but this appeared to stem more from a feeling of powerlessness and an inability to change the situation. Indeed, some participants also appeared to have been encouraged to pursue career progression, but did not perceive themselves as capable of attaining higher positions, and were uncertain whether their applications for senior roles would even be considered. Loise, for example, spoke about not being sure regarding progression as she was being sponsored, 'my current role is being sponsored, so I'm sponsored, they call it overseas social workers, so I'm still sponsored so I think getting the indefinite leave to remain will open more doors'. Reflecting on her first interview, she said 'I felt to have been focused more on the job rather than reflecting on myself' which had impacted her progression.

Both Lwazi and Thandi spoke about progression they had made, but also being, in their estimation, overlooked for posts on several occasions. Lwazi pointed out that at one point she accepted a colleague getting a job she did because there were very few male managers within the service. 'A white male colleague got the job and that was that good. I could see the rationale from the head of service; we don't have white male workers in management' (Lwazi). At the same time, Thandi and Lwazi referred to the vulnerabilities that came with being in a management position, highlighting how support for them dwindled when they required senior

management to support their management. Progression for Thandi also came with considerable challenges in managing other people, and a team that needed more experience. 'I was left with one AYSE left within the team and three children's practitioners'. She also recalled how, when she became a manager, 'social workers started to leave with one challenging my decision-making'.

Conclusion

This chapter was the second of two reporting the analysis undertaken for this research. It explored the multifaceted experiences of Black Southern African social workers navigating professional progression within, what might be described as, a culture-blind system. By examining the themes, authenticity, professional (in)security, resilience, and belief systems, it highlighted the interplay between the participants' agency and structural constraints. The contradictions inherent in their social experience were strongly apparent, being both essential yet overlooked and striving for authenticity while ensuring professional survival, illuminating the complexities of career advancement for this community in an unfamiliar environment. Furthermore, participants' reflections revealed how faith, trust, and solidarity function as crucial yet contested resources in their professional journeys. Although resilience and strategic adaptation emerged as central coping mechanisms, the challenges posed by systemic barriers and cultural misunderstanding persisted.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Introduction

This study on which this thesis is based focused on the lived experiences of Black Southern African social workers, tracing their journeys from childhood through migration and into professional practice within children's services in England. The study sought to understand how their personal histories, cultural identities, and transnational transitions shape their roles, identities, and emotional labour within the England social work system.

This chapter elucidates the salient issues illuminated by the analysis reported in the previous two chapters concerning Black Southern African social workers' experiences working in children's services. The complexities inherent in the participants' experiences encompass a range of critical concerns, including the migratory nature of social work for them, which has implications for the Black Southern African social worker community. The phenomena of loss and grief permeated their narratives, reflecting the personal sacrifices endured throughout their journeys as people and professionals. Moreover, the performative burdens they carry, often unrecognised by others, can be misconstrued as elements intrinsic to professional practice. In addition, this study highlights the dearth of spaces conducive to solidarity among this group of professionals, exacerbated by culture-blind collaboration, microaggressions, and the pervasive presence of racism both within and beyond the workplace. These factors contribute to systemic barriers impeding career progression and access to supportive resources. The research indicates that this community of social workers frequently draw upon their experiences and faith during periods of adversity, showcasing a resilience that, while beneficial to their teams, appears to also to be unacknowledged.

Key findings summarised

This study had several important findings. The first relates to how the participants went through a process of migration in mind, i.e., the persistent experience of movement for Black Southern African social workers, both geographically, from their countries of origin to England, and professionally, as they navigate transitions between different teams and local authorities. Migration was not an isolated event but an ongoing process embedded in their professional journeys.

The second finding is the extent to which participants demonstrated agency in response to the systemic and structural barriers they encountered. When conditions within one team or local authority became untenable, the participants tended to move elsewhere, taking advantage of the constant demand for social workers in England. This mobility evidenced the emphasis they placed on adaptability and an awareness of professional opportunities.

The third finding relates to tendencies to engage in professional collective preservation, i.e., the strong sense of solidarity among participants. In response to shared challenges, they developed new survival strategies, fostering mutual support and community resilience within their networks, although navigating this was far from straightforward.

The fourth finding relates to what I would describe as, the melancholic attachments the participants displayed, with a recurring emotional undercurrent of their accounts being of loss and mourning. Participants expressed difficulty in letting go of opportunities, identities, and figures from both their past and current lives. This sense of melancholia reflects ongoing emotional negotiations and a lingering connection to their places of origin and former professional contexts.

Fifthly, despite facing significant challenges, the participants exhibited a kind of earned resilience that was not innate (though they represented it as such sometimes), but rather

developed (and 'earned') through adversity. The very work pressures that served to marginalise or undermine them could also function as an opportunity for growth and strength.

Sixthly, participants described the necessity of adapting or altering aspects of their self-identity to integrate into the English professional culture. This negotiation often involved balancing personal authenticity with the pressures of conformity, leading to complex experiences of identity transformation.

At the core of these findings, I argue is a form of post-colonial melancholia and a pervasive sense of rejection. Although participants were connected to England through colonial histories, many felt betrayed by the reality of their experiences in England. This emotional dissonance, being simultaneously linked to and excluded from British society, could produce a profound sense of disillusionment.

In this discussion chapter, I will consider these findings further, making reference to relevant literature and considering how they resonate with, but also diverge from, existing empirical studies in related areas. For example, Dzudzor's (2021) earlier research highlights challenges faced by Ghanaian social workers adapting to a new professional culture, dealing with racism, and reconciling different child protection practices between Ghana and the UK. Despite these issues, participants expressed resilience and professional growth, emphasising the need for cultural competence and organisational support. Similarly, Naidoo and Kasiram (2006) document the emotional strain, identity conflict, and limited support networks experienced by migrant social workers in the UK. They also found a strong sense of pride amongst these workers in overcoming these barriers. Alternatively, Hakak, Onokah and Shishane (2022) explored how value conflicts influence the professional identity and sense of belonging among migrant social workers, particularly within secular and individualistic settings. Furthermore, Willett and Hakak (2020) shed light on issues such as racism, identity

negotiation, and the desire to return home. Zimbabwean participants in their study exhibited resilience shaped by a complex mixture of hope and disillusionment as they navigated the challenges they faced.

Although earlier research identifies processes and experiences that align with this study's findings, such as identity negotiation, racism, and resilience, this research differs in both methodological approach and in its thematic focus, particularly around professional collective preservation. This divergence provides critical insights into the nuanced lived experiences of Black Southern African social workers practising in England. Specifically, it foregrounds the often-overlooked regional affiliations of Black social workers from the SADC and situates their narratives within a broader historical context of migration as a defining feature of their collective identity. Also, unlike much of the existing literature, which tends to concentrate on internationally recruited social workers trained in their countries of origin, this study focused on individuals who spent their formative years within the SADC region and are now embedded in the professional and sociocultural landscape of England (see Figure 1, which serves to represent participants' experiences and to explore possible underlying processes).

When viewed through the lens of critical realism, it can be said that, at the empirical level, we find the participating social workers' reports of marginalisation, rejection, discrimination, and fear of managers; these reflect their direct, articulated experiences. The level of the actual encompasses events and interactions such as managerial behaviours, organisational hierarchies, microaggressions, and habitual work practices that foster fear or exclusion, whether or not they are stated. Further, at the level of the real, we find underlying causal mechanisms operate, including colonial legacies, racialised power dynamics, workplace cultures, and internalised beliefs rooted in upbringing.

Figure 1: The experience of the Black Southern African social worker

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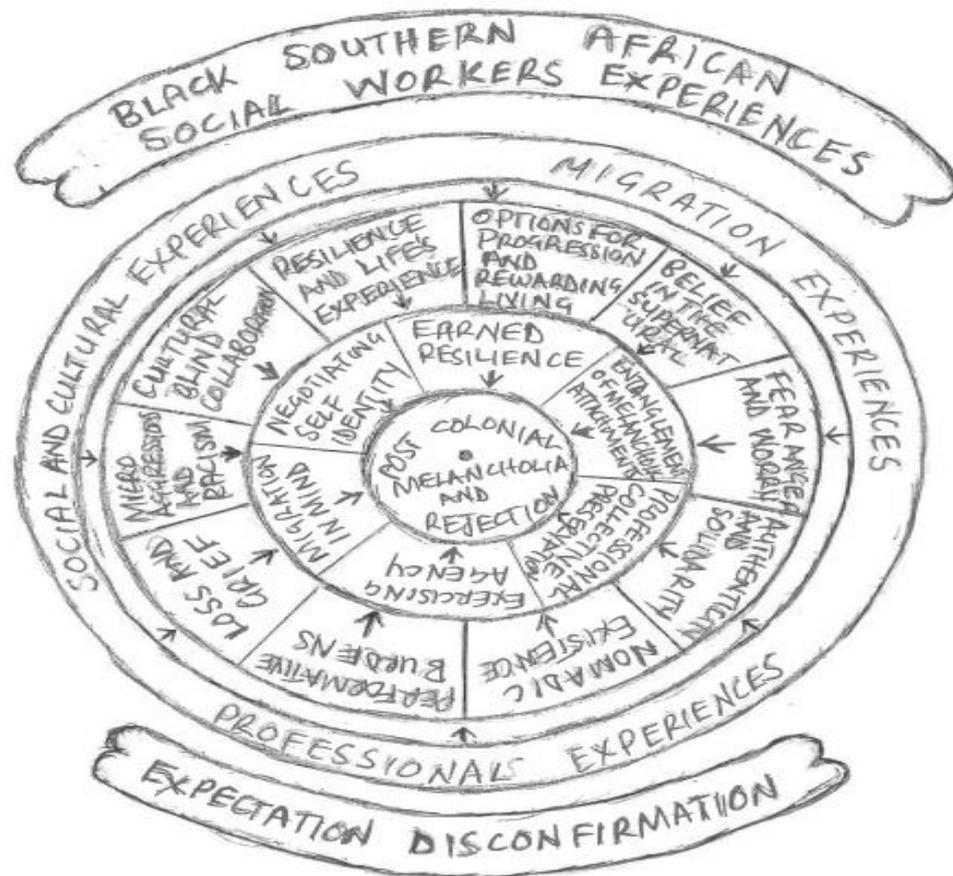
Migration in mind

This research found that the migratory element of the participants' experiences became both physical and in mind. Migrants may continue to mentally 'travel' between identities, spaces, and affiliations, migration being not just a physical movement but also involving significant psychological and emotional changes (Bhugra, 2004). Once participants completed their initial journey of leaving Southern Africa, migration became part of their lives, as an ongoing process shaping their personal and professional lives as migrant care workers (Hussein, Manthorpe and Stevens 2011; Hussein, Stevens and Manthorpe 2011; Obasi, 2022; Samuel, 2023). This was

evident in the way participants were moving from one place or job to another once they completed their studies or arrived in England.

Four of the participants spoke about challenges they faced within their home countries. The challenges that led to their migration seemed to have given them a sense of liberation as they had overcome obstacles leading them to build their resilience. Participants spoke about their freedom of movement at work which meant that when things were challenging or they felt unwelcome, they would revert to a reference point which is their initial migration. This notion of movement is also emphasised by others, for example, Hussein, Manthorpe and Stevens (2011) and Samuel (2023), who discuss how Black social workers often experience dynamic, non-linear career paths shaped by their migration status. Many anticipate or undergo job changes and role shifts, reflecting the idea of being in a constant state of movement as a professional.

One can wonder how much this 'movement' impacted the participants' progression in their careers as they were not seen as people who could provide stability, and how much it influences their capacity to manage tensions. All participants reflected on their pre-migration lives, ultimately concluding, each for their own reasons that leaving was the preferable option. This process, in different ways, reflects the idea of transmigrants (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton, 1995): individuals whose daily lives are sustained through multiple cross-border ties between their home and host societies.

One can also ask what it would take for social workers from the SADC to feel settled and focus on their work without having to move from one team to the other or one local authority to the other, and how much they are compelled to engage in 'surface acting' and emotional performance to fit in with the ongoing need to mask true feelings, thus creating emotional dissonance, increasing stress, fatigue, whilst draining personal reserves (Carder and

Cook, 2025). The issue of moving between teams did not seem to be that much of a choice for participants so much as an option they exercised due to the circumstances they found themselves in, always mindful of an 'escape route' based on previous experiences. Moving between roles and teams became something of an adaptive (and developed) mechanism employed when circumstances were no longer tolerable, but also served to depersonalise relationships with others (see Menzies, 1960) and often meant other issues were left unresolved whilst affording them some sense of personal agency.

Exercising agency

The findings of this research speak to how migrant workers, specifically migrant social workers, can exercise agency by adapting to challenging circumstances, which may include moving between employers or roles when faced with adversity (Miles et al., 2024). The findings also provide further evidence of the profound impact of workplace racism on the career advancement of Black and minority ethnic employees, particularly regarding their progression to middle and senior management roles, as acknowledged in earlier work (Research in Practice, 2021). Notably, participants reported exerting considerable effort in their professional endeavours. Yet, they also remained acutely aware of the subtle, yet pervasive, nature of racism that permeated their experiences, the analysis delineating the disparities faced by Black Southern social workers in contrast to their colleagues, underscoring the urgent need for a more profound examination of this issue within the profession, building upon previous groundwork.

Like other studies (e.g., Obasi 2022), this study bears witness to the dynamics of institutional racism as shaping the professional experiences and trajectories of Black social workers, which raises critical questions regarding how to confront these issues, including at a

structural level. The findings suggest that the existing systems often perpetuate and reinforce certain ideologies, leaving Black practitioners feeling marginalised and unsupported, regardless of their professional dedication.

Some participants chose to work for agencies rather than permanent posts (Samuel, 2023), the notice period being shorter for the agency worker, therefore enabling the avoidance of 'long goodbyes' in an unfriendly environment. Agency work also afforded a sense of control over one's work life, especially for periodic liberation from oppressive environments, i.e., to move between localities without one's growth being stifled or another having power over one's work for too long.

This did not mean being denuded of power, but rather an effort to exert control over circumscribed options, for example, for better working conditions and professional fulfilment (Turnpenny and Hussein, 2022). Exercising agency by movement was helped by the fact that social work is a profession in demand, yet also a profession in which people do not typically spend their whole working lives. Because of the challenges and barriers they have faced within the profession, some participants ultimately concluded that they would make the most out of their profession, therefore, they chose to make potential benefits work for them, notably to live a reasonably comfortable life.

Professional collective preservation

The professional demands of child protection practice English Children's Services have been extensively documented in the social work literature, with particular attention paid to the complicated decision making and emotional demands inherent to this line of work (see, e.g., Cooper, 2005; Munro, 2011; Shoesmith, 2016; Laird et al., 2018; O'Sullivan, 2018; Ravalier et al., 2020). For Black Southern African social workers, these complexities are exacerbated

by additional, culturally specific challenges that contribute to feelings of isolation and professional discontent. The well-being of social work practitioners and promoting ethical, effective practice in emotionally challenging settings relies heavily on mutual support and collective care within teams (Toasland, 2007; Banks and Westoby, 2019). The findings of this study suggest that practitioners from Southern African backgrounds can experience a lack of adequate support within the social work profession, which is further complicated by their migration to a new country. The transition to the English social work environment presents unique challenges, particularly for those trained in different contexts, with internationally recruited social workers often grappling with unfamiliar legislative frameworks, policies, and cultural norms upon arrival in the UK (Welbourne, Harrison and Ford, 2007). Participants in the study found significant difficulties in acclimating to both the operational environment and their professional responsibilities simultaneously. Furthermore, most participants experienced a lack of understanding of their culture which led to them not accessing appropriate support, and expressed concerns about the effectiveness of supervision.

Strikingly, many participants had lost the support that they had benefited from since a young age, and later, in their professional lives, found themselves in a place where support was minimal and this led to them developing their own networks through which they used support. Grant and Kinman (2014) point to how resilience in social work extends beyond individual capacity. It is shaped and reinforced through collective mechanisms such as peer support, reflective supervision, and a supportive organisational environment. The participants developed networks at times that were based on their cultural values with people having to share similar experiences. Partly, this was due to concerns about being involved with networks of people they felt they could not trust. In this way, supervision seemed to function not as a space for reflection but as a space where participants felt they had to adopt a defensive posture and engage in superficial ways of relating, fearful of exposing areas of their practice that could

be deemed as not meeting the expected standards. The challenges with this support also brought to the fore memories of support that had been lost in their lives previously.

The entanglement of melancholic attachments

Loss and grief were a dimension of the Southern African social worker's experience I had not thought about much prior to the research, and as the study analysis illustrates, were very much connected to migration and the loss of support network, loss of identity and the physical loss of family members. In different ways, the experience of loss can be considered via reference to Freud's (1917) notion of melancholia, which he characterises as a pathological condition due to its unresolved and enduring nature. Unlike mourning, which, for Freud, is a normative psychological response to the loss of a loved individual (or the loss of a significant abstraction such as one's nation, freedom, or ideals), melancholia represents the process of grieving becoming arrested or internalised. According to Freud, in certain individuals, the same precipitating circumstances that typically elicit mourning instead provoke melancholia, suggesting an underlying vulnerability or predisposition toward pathological affect.

For some participants, it appeared social work became a space where they projected their own needs and exercised their agency whilst attempting to process their own challenging experiences. Loise, for example, lost her aunt which meant that her cousins ended up living with her. She spoke about wanting to be a 'superhero' inspired by seeing households that were led by young people who lost their parents. A valuable reference point here is Eng and Han (2000), who use the notion of melancholia, as Freud's key theory addressing unresolved grief, as a lens through which to understand the layers of loss and depression linked to both psychological and material aspects of assimilation and racial identity.

Participants spoke about their ability to connect with families who were in a state of loss, especially when they have to work with families at risk of losing their children. For me, this suggested that their empathy was enhanced to a point where they 'put themselves in' the experience of loss in ways white English social workers would not be able. Participants spoke about keeping families together as they knew the feeling of losing something valuable which in this case was their families and part of their identity. Work with these families appeared to have afforded an opportunity for sublimation, yet could also lead to degrees of overcommitment, and practice that fell short of expected performance-based, organisational targets. Working closely with families could mean spending a lot of time in direct work whilst colleagues moved on to other aspects of the work.

Linked to this was an attachment to integrity, as a professional and value-based judgment regarding what is detrimental and beneficial to do as a social worker. The participants sought to work in ways that were beneficial to the organisations and communities they served, but which could also be detrimental to their own progression or survival as workers. Although they found they could be perceived as disruptive or challenging to dominant organisational norms, their labour was indispensable to the continued functioning of the system, the system relying on and marginalising them, revealing deeper tensions in how race, power, and dependency operate within institutional life.

Earned resilience

Previous research has revealed that Black social workers face extended working hours, correlating with heightened levels of burnout (Fitzhenry et al., 2022). This study indicated that this burnout may be compounded by the perception that the expectations placed upon Black Southern African social workers differ markedly from those assigned to their colleagues. The

limited avenues available for addressing these disparities raise critical concerns about professional burnout, as articulated by different social work scholars (e.g., Munro, 2011), as well as how Black women social workers may encounter increased levels of burnout, attributable to systemic issues pervasive within the profession (Turner and Kotasthane, 2024).

This adds further support that burnout should be understood and addressed less as a universal concern among social work and social care professionals across varying geographic locations, but as a phenomenon that a lack of effective communication and managerial support exacerbates, especially in contexts where workload distribution is inequitable (Toasland, 2007). This is an important issue to consider in relation to Black Southern African social workers as employees from ethnic minority backgrounds possess significantly less influence over their work responsibilities and the execution of their tasks compared to their white counterparts (Williams, Wang and Koumenta, 2023)

The study analysis illustrated that the Black Southern African social workers who participated were acutely aware of how the 'success' of social work 'tasks' had to be quantified in the form of tangible results. They struggled to reconcile a commitment to the work and supporting families and prescribed organisational timescales, and this appeared to have an effect on their emotional resilience (Vellacott, 2007). Although participants acknowledged their inability to speak up about working conditions, they emphasised that they were not alone in struggling with this issue.

Organisations exist to address human needs and are intrinsically reliant on individuals whose behaviours and decisions are often influenced by a spectrum of emotions, ranging from anger, fear, and happiness to feelings of discomfort (see, e.g., Armstrong, 2005). This emotional dimension to organisational life not only shapes interpersonal dynamics but also has profound implications for the experiences of practitioners working with families in children's services

organisations, particularly in influencing decision-making processes when these emotional factors remain unacknowledged. As Meltzer and Harris (2013) have argued, practitioners equipped with emotional resilience can leverage their internal resources to instil hope amidst challenging circumstances, which appeared to be particularly true of the Black Southern African social workers in this study. This reinforces the need to recognise underlying issues or unvoiced communications that may impact the effectiveness of social work practice in organisations (see Ruch, 2010; North, 2016; Poletti, 2018), the benefits derived from supervision, which not only bolster professional development but can enhance the overall wellbeing of practitioners working in demanding roles (Lister, 2020). This research indicates that Black Southern African social workers find the vicissitudes of performance-managed systems more troubling than their white counterparts, because of a particular commitment to an ethical or moral imperative over performance measured in metrics.

The participants' accounts also revealed both overt and subtle forms of racism and microaggressions within the profession and communities. Participants described tangible incidents, often involving direct communication from managers, and did not shy away from naming racism as a persistent reality. A key insight from the analysis was the use of case allocation as a perceived mechanism of control, with managers assigning disproportionately complex cases, such as chronic neglect or 'difficult' families to Black social workers, while other workers received more straightforward cases with clear evidence and quicker resolutions. This practice was viewed as not only impeding professional growth but also skewing perceptions of competence and efficiency in favour of those with lighter caseloads.

Negotiating self-identity

Participants often questioned their identity and ways they had changed, or tried to change, to accommodate working and living in England, i.e., in how they spoke or related to others. With this, migration continued to play a role in shaping consciousness and sense of belonging with diasporic identity (Brah, 1996), and in relation to whiteness, wherein being white could be viewed as a ticket to acceptance or success (Hook, 2018).

The religious and cultural beliefs of the participating Black Southern African social workers represented a critical resource they drew upon during periods of challenge within their professional practice. This apparent reliance on personal convictions necessitates a thoughtful consideration of how social workers navigate the inherent tensions between established work policies and procedures and their own belief systems. As such, it is imperative not to overlook the influence that these personal beliefs hold, including but not limited to religious convictions, particularly in relation to the impact that personal beliefs can have on the navigation of ethical quandaries (National Association of Social Workers, 2021; Oxhandler et al., 2024). This finding also reinforces consideration of the role of self-awareness as a crucial competency, enabling practitioners to reconcile potential conflicts between their individual values and professional responsibilities, fostering ethical integrity and ensuring effective practice within complex socio-cultural landscapes.

Postcolonial melancholia and rejection

The continuing state of loss, mourning and melancholia is the thread that runs through the analysis of this study, reflecting social relations as well as personal experiences, particularly with regard to racialised assimilation into a host country as a migrant (Eng and Han, 2000). To some degree, Participants held British culture in high esteem based on what they had

experienced before moving to England, with expectations that they would be accepted within their workspaces and the wider community. However, when these expectations were not met, this appeared to lead some participants to feel isolated and nostalgic about all they had before moving to England, alongside a sense of not (quite) belonging, and that their country's former colonisers had let them down and not repaid the debt incurred. There was a sense of being justified in accessing or sharing resources, yet feeling as though one was still perceived as a second-class citizen and that progressing through merit was not a viable reality without connections. This experience prompted different forms of adaptation, and whilst discontent could accompany feeling unwelcome and underappreciated, what kept participants going was a belief that they had no option or somewhere secure to go back to, and what might be described as, 'successful and failed' resolutions to loss (Freud 1917). Moreover, although there were spaces that were created for them to voice their discontent, participants found that these processes seemed to strengthen the very system that they were trying to challenge.

Participants appear to have felt the rejection not only of themselves but also of the rules that were taught by a former colonial power, that hard work pays, which became a myth. The meritocratic assumptions they held did not seem to apply. The myth appears to have remained due to the lack of structural support in place to enforce practice based on merit (see van Dijk et al., 2020). One could say that the support systems that are available to assist workers appear to have been managed by those who continue to uphold and reproduce historical systems of oppression. As a result, these structures risked reinforcing existing power hierarchies rather than challenging the inequities they claim to address. Without appropriate structures in place, the argument that meritocracies work as a conduit for social equality breaks down, and this seemed to be the experience of Black Southern African social workers.

Study limitations

As a practitioner-led, exploratory qualitative study, the focus resides on an in-depth understanding rather than generalisability of findings. The research prioritised a close engagement with the lived experiences of Black Southern African social workers in England. Nonetheless, the limited scope of the study, in terms of the number of participants and areas in England represented, means it cannot be taken as reliably representative of the other regions or groups of Southern African or Black social workers. Furthermore, the research was a time-limited doctoral study. Additional time would have supported further engagement with participants, i.e., via further support for feeding back findings and additional focus groups. Extended focus group formats might have also facilitated richer dialogical exchanges and a more participatory analytic process (see, e.g., Bloor et al., 2001; Breen, 2006).

Both a strength and a limitation to the study was my own positionality as a researcher who shares a racial, regional and cultural background with the participants. This insider status fostered trust and openness but also meant the study was undertaken from a specific, situated and reflexive understanding (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Some participants appeared to assume a level of shared understanding that occasionally resulted in incomplete statements in interviews, expecting me to infer or even complete their statements. To address this, I employed reflexivity with an autoethnographic dimension in the research, which allowed me to critically interrogate my own assumptions and the ways in which my identity shaped the research process and support a close empathic engagement with the participant accounts (Witkin, 2022). It is likely the interviews would have unfolded differently if conducted by a researcher with no personal or cultural ties to the participants, albeit it is fair to say that the tension between insider insight and analytical distance is a known methodological challenge in qualitative research (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015).

In terms of the geographical constraints, by focusing solely on participants based in the southern regions of England, the research was not inclusive of the perspectives of Black Southern African social workers practising in other parts of England or the UK, whose experiences may vary significantly due to differing local policies and institutional cultures. Future research should consider a broader geographic scope to capture a diversity of experiences.

Lastly, the focus group setting, while creating a safe space for solidarity, also introduced complications. The emergence of collective empathy was evident, with some participants seeking to support or even recruit others as a protective strategy. This solidarity, while empowering, at times produced what could be deemed as a paternalistic tone that shaped how stories were shared and received. Although the benefits of shared understanding often outweigh these risks, such dynamics highlight the ethical and emotional complexities of group-based qualitative methods (Liamputtong, 2007).

Overall, then, the valuable insights that this study offers should be interpreted with consideration to its limitations. These include the scale of the study, researcher positionality, geographic focus, and methodological considerations. These constraints also point to opportunities for future research to build on and expand the contribution made by the study.

Implications for further research

There was considerable learning in relation to methodology from this study. As a researcher, I experienced discomfort due to cultural familiarity with my research participants. For me, this underscores the necessity of maintaining boundaries between one's own subjectivity as a researcher and the object of study in this type of research. I would also argue that future psychosocial research in this area would benefit from a more proactive incorporation of

participatory elements, including returning findings and analysis to participants for feedback (see Archard et al., 2025b), which seems to be an ethical imperative given the ways the Black social workers can be subjugated.

A nuanced exploration of the community's experiences was enabled by the small sample size and the interview method helped illuminate distinct cultural dimensions, with the richness of the participants narratives, combined with participant validation and the integration of group methods, strengthening the study's rigour. This being so, in undertaking the study, I have increasingly come to the view that future research should be less 'fetishistic' about methods, making more space for creative and decolonised ways of engaging with the experiences of Black professionals. For example, group meals, shared time, or storytelling could enrich another research by fostering collective reflection. A longitudinal study tracking Black Southern African social workers experiences over a longer period, e.g., three years post qualification, would help elucidate how career progression, workplace changes, and evolving relationships with colleagues impact their experiences. Given the emergent focus in this research on movement, in and for practice, such research could also incorporate mobile and immersive ethnographic methods which directly engage with how social workers engage in day-to-day practice (see, e.g., Ferguson, 2016). Another area for enquiry is the psychosocial impact of migration, especially how loss, displacement, and identity reconstruction affect professional practice. Investigating the role of clinical supervision and counselling in engaging with these effects could yield valuable insights and contribute to more holistic support systems for migrant social workers.

Implications for policy and practice

Given that there are high numbers of fitness to practice referrals for migrant Black social workers compared to their counterparts (Tedam, 2021), there is uncertainty about whether managers support or misuse their authority with this group of staff. This study's findings highlight how, in supervision, creating safe spaces where social workers can reflect openly is essential, as is early boundary-setting to build trust. Whether a separate form of supervision focusing on personal issues and barriers at work is used (see, e.g., Rothwell et al., 2021; Bostock et al., 2022; Ravalier et al., 2022) or not, supervision arrangements should involve, I would argue, case oversight and pastoral care. Social workers need supervision and time to think to make sense of the intensity of child protection practice and the dynamics of family relationships (Harvey and Henderson, 2014; Laird et al., 2017). In times of difficulty, power imbalances become pronounced, particularly when managers, with multiple cases on their desks, unilaterally assign more work without recognising emotional strain. Power in supervision must be addressed collaboratively and constructively, with shared decision-making rather than authority concentrated in the role of one individual.

In terms of career progression, pathways for Black Southern African social workers in children's services should recognise practitioners' skills, competencies, and years of service, while also considering relational dynamics, prospects for collaboration, and sensitivity to diversity. Candidates must demonstrate the capacity to support others, as rapport-building fosters transparency, and appreciation of difference can shape equitable practices such as case allocation.

Effective planning is also needed, particularly in emotionally complex areas like loss, where clarity around timelines and expectations would enhance practice. Equal caseloads do not equate to equal output, given the variability in case complexity and the emotional labour

involved. Despite Munro's (2011) identification of high caseloads as a critical issue, little progress has been made. When compounded by factors such as racism, microaggressions, and difference, certain groups of social workers may disproportionately bear excessive caseloads.

Social work is a field purportedly grounded in anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory values (Dominelli, 2002), yet participants in this study were disillusioned by the reality of a profession that, in practice, did not reflect these ideals, emphasising how these values must extend beyond academic content to the actions of professionals and organisations. Particular consideration is needed for internationally trained social workers unfamiliar with English frameworks. For example, without a structured induction which acknowledges these cultural and educational differences, expectations of equivalent performance will be unrealistic. Furthermore, a module focusing on working with differences could be introduced as part of the academic curriculum with other measures being considered for practising social workers. This is likely to enable social workers' and managers to go beyond anti-oppressive practice and work in ways that better address deeply held prejudices and stereotypes.

The Black African social workers in this study felt silenced because of fear of significant consequences for speaking out. This issue is not merely personal, but structural and societal. A space that is free from the threat of retaliation, is likely to succeed only if there is deliberate institutional design. Such a forum should be formally sanctioned by senior leadership, underpinned by an explicit mandate, and supported by robust, transparent mechanisms for dispute resolution.

Conclusion

This chapter summarised the findings of the study, addressed the study's limitations, as well as implications for future research and practice. In summary, the narratives of the Black Southern

African social workers who took part in this study reflect a continual negotiation of identity, belonging, and survival in a system that presents both visible and invisible barriers. While pathways into the profession appear open, these routes are often precarious (a door that remains only partially ajar, if not closed altogether at critical moments). A sense of conditional inclusion underscores the systemic inequities embedded within social work structures, which paradoxically position Black social workers as sites of care and justice. A persistent thread of loss weaves through the narratives of the social workers who took part, was loss of family, cultural continuity, and most critically, at times, a stable sense of self. Although some attempt to recreate elements of their previous lives before migration was made, these efforts did not restore what was left behind, and the participants' experiences speak to a deeper structural problem: the very systems intended to support them are often the mechanisms through which marginalisation is sustained. Despite these challenges, the participants also often invoked hope and faith in the broader possibility of systemic transformation. Their aspirations call for a model of professional practice grounded in authenticity, recognition, and equity, where inclusion is not simply performative, and where opportunity is not rationed but equally accessible. They underscore the need for practitioners and institutions alike to engage in sustained reflexivity, critically examining how power, positionality, and practice shape the experiences of others, and in turn, how these dynamics reciprocally shape the experiences and actions of practitioners.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

This concluding chapter brings the thesis to a close by drawing together the key insights and reflections developed throughout the course of this research. It begins by revisiting my initial motivations, tracing how the research journey has deepened and, at times, challenged my understanding. Central to this study has been the exploration of Black Southern African social workers' experiences in England, and how these are shaped by enduring legacies of colonialism and its contemporary manifestations. As a practitioner-led inquiry, this research has required careful navigation of the ethical and emotional complexities inherent in studying a community to which I am closely connected as a member. I critically reflect on the methodological and personal challenges this proximity presented. The chapter also addresses the pivotal question: what do I now know that I did not know at the outset?

On being a practitioner researcher doing practice-near research

Cooper (2009) suggests that in practitioner-initiated research, the boundaries between the self and the inquiry often become blurred, leading to a kind of epistemic immersion in which the researcher 'loses their mind' in the inquiry. This blurring raises important questions around what belongs to the self and what belongs to the research process. A defining feature of such inquiry is that the practitioner-researcher inevitably learns something about themselves through the course of the research. In undertaking this study, I became acutely aware of the role personal loss has played in shaping both my professional identity and practice. During the interviews and undertaking the analysis, I realised that my own unresolved grief (particularly the loss of my father) had silently informed my approach to social work, and that I had held tightly to the profession as a stabilising structure, perhaps as a way of compensating for what had been lost.

I had not fully recognised, until engaging in this inquiry, how deeply my personal loss had etched itself into my (understanding of) practice. It became evident that my empathetic engagement with service users was often underpinned by an unconscious identification with their experiences of grief. This imprint of loss manifested in my tendency to overcommit especially in offering time and emotional labour beyond organisational expectations. I recall a senior leader in the organisation I was working in once questioning the extent of my involvement with young people during critical periods of their lives. This was not the easiest thing to hear, but in retrospect, I wonder how much my motivations 'to go the extra mile' are a means of enacting a form of reparative practice seeking to provide for others what I had been denied. In this way, I have found that completing this research not only generated external knowledge but has also served as a reflective mirror, illuminating how personal loss has shaped my relational practice and commitment to the profession. At the time of the example above, I did not think about costly attachments. In social work, forming attachments may have significant emotional consequences, particularly when professionals absorb the grief of those they assist, potentially resulting in burnout and a loss of professional boundaries (Howe, 2011). I thought about what my father would have wanted instead of reflecting on the impact of driving myself to that level which could have led to burning out. This could also be applied to my trajectory with my studies parallel to my practice, where I consistently worked hard almost losing touch with my own wellbeing. I also think about the social worker as a 'good servant' who is told what to do, and picks things up and runs with them.

In undertaking this research, though, I was also compelled to consider the extent to which human knowledge and discovery would not progress if not for our intrinsic curiosity. Curiosity serves as a catalyst for exploration and innovation; without it, many of the advancements we now celebrate would have remained unrealised. Life, in its very essence, is

marked by constant fluidity. To experience emotions without pursuing a deeper understanding constitutes a missed intellectual and existential opportunity.

Through reflection, I have come to recognise that systems and processes often replicate historical patterns, albeit under new guises. As with those who have come before me, I am increasingly aware that achieving substantive and meaningful change in practice demands significant and sustained effort; and human adaptability must not be underestimated. As this study illustrates, individuals possess a remarkable capacity to adjust in the face of evolving circumstances.

Moreover, the instinct to survive or to safeguard one's possessions often exposes a fundamental tension: while we are all inherently equal in our humanity, disparities in power, access, and opportunity reveal a deeper inequality. In contexts where one is perceived as an outsider, the challenge of navigating emotional responses, particularly frustration and anger, becomes profoundly complex. Managing anger in a balanced manner is a formidable task which requires balanced emotions (Goleman, 1996, citing Aristotle). This difficulty could be exacerbated in environments where support structures are weak or altogether absent.

In this research, Black Southern African social workers often did not feel supported during their transition to working in England or in practice. In social work, for example, when children are looked after by the local authority, significant effort is made to provide stability, build or maintain positive connections, and offer support to stabilise their lives. My experience has been that a comparable ethos does not seem to be afforded to practitioners managing that support. Indeed, I would say the study findings illustrate how practitioners' private lives inevitably influence their professional practice; therefore, social workers need adequate support to achieve personal stability and perform optimally. While the social work profession

is grounded in values such as respect, care, and concern for wellbeing, this study shows that these principles are not consistently extended to the practitioners themselves.

A substantial body of literature has explored the experiences of migrant social workers, consistently highlighting the multifaceted challenges they encounter as they attempt to navigate unfamiliar professional landscapes that are often marked by subtle, and at times overt, hostility and an assumed, but absent, meritocracy. My initial impetus for embarking on this research stemmed from a personal curiosity: I sought to understand the professional journeys of practitioners who, like me, share a migrant background. However, the findings that emerged through the methodological approach I adopted revealed complexities I had not anticipated. For instance, issues such as case allocation and supervision, processes I had previously perceived as neutral or even developmental, surfaced as significant areas of contestation for many participants. Prior to this inquiry, I understood the assignment of particularly demanding cases as a reflection of professional trust in my capabilities, rather than as a potential manifestation of racialised assumptions or inequitable practice. My own lens was shaped by a belief in the developmental value of 'heavy lifting' within professional practice, a perspective that had, until now, obscured the structural dynamics underpinning such experiences. This research has therefore challenged and expanded my own assumptions. I find it has afforded me a more critical understanding of how organisational practices may intersect with identity markers such as race and migrant status to shape the lived realities of social work professionals.

Initially, I also gave little consideration to the enduring legacy of colonialism and its implications for the lived experiences of Black Southern African social workers. Although it is important to acknowledge that Southern Africa possessed rich, complex systems of knowledge and social organisation prior to European intervention, the imposition of Western educational models and neoliberal ideals such as the belief that hard work inevitably leads to success significantly shaped contemporary professional and societal norms. I had not fully appreciated

how colonial systems of control and hierarchy might be perpetuated in more covert forms within present-day institutions. It is widely accepted, in principle, that all human beings are inherently equal, but colonial constructs of superiority and inferiority have persisted in subtle yet powerful ways. This reflection has led me to question whether such deeply embedded perceptions can ever be fully dismantled. In a profession that explicitly upholds anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory values, it is disheartening to recognise how far there is still to go. The findings of this study have evoked, at times, a profound sense of isolation for me. They raised critical questions about the nature of freedom, whether it is truly attainable, or if it remains conditional, constrained by the structures of power and those who are positioned to make authoritative decisions.

Fakhry's (2011) evocative assertion that reflecting on being Black in a White world is an experience of 'agony' resonates deeply within the context of this study. For the participants, this articulation encapsulates the affective reality of navigating professional and social environments where systemic inequities persist. Many described the psychological toll of constantly having to negotiate spaces that often rendered them invisible or hyper-visible - spaces where they felt compelled to move, adapt, or even relocate in search of acceptance and legitimacy. For Black Southern African social workers, a recurring source of frustration stemmed from the perception that behaviours and actions deemed acceptable for their white counterparts were scrutinised more harshly when enacted by them. Their professional errors, however minor, were perceived to be disproportionately magnified, overshadowing their competencies and contributions. This hyper-surveillance and unequal standard of evaluation contributed to a persistent sense of vulnerability. A notable pattern also emerged around interview experiences: participants frequently recounted being told they narrowly missed being appointed to a new role yet were provided little to no substantive feedback, highlighting a broader issue of opaque recruitment processes and the marginalisation of Black social workers

within institutional frameworks. This was my experience at times, where colleagues were offered or asked to apply for roles without anything being said to me.

Next steps

This study has provided a critical opportunity for self-reflection and a deeper engagement with the transformative potential of social work practice. It has reinforced my commitment to channelling my professional energies toward both supporting individuals and contributing to the development of systems that are grounded in the foundational principles of social work particularly its enduring commitment to social justice. This commitment extends not only to families accessing services but also to practitioners, irrespective of their cultural or professional backgrounds. In particular, I feel compelled to explore how supervision practices can more explicitly incorporate cultural awareness and address the imbalances of power that, as participants in this study have indicated, can be weaponised in subtle and harmful ways. I find that I am interested in the reconceptualisation of supervision to include both case-related and personal dimensions, facilitated by different supervisors to promote a more holistic model of support. Furthermore, the professional development of migrant social workers demands greater attention, with significant investment in culturally attuned and adequately resourced supervision systems. Ensuring equitable access to such support structures is, in my view, a necessary condition for a more inclusive, ethical, and effective social work profession.

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Appendix A: Information sheet for participants

> **Thesis title: Black Southern African-born social workers' experiences of working in Children's Services in England.**

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project. This information sheet is intended to inform you of the key facts about this project to enable you to decide if you are willing to take part.

What is the project about?

This research project is concerned with the experiences of Black social workers from Southern Africa working in English children's services. For this study, Southern Africa will be defined as countries that form the Southern African Development Community (SADC). SADC is a regional economic community comprising 16 Member States; Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The target sample group are Black social workers who spent their formative years in the SADC region before moving to work in England. The study seeks to explore the professional journeys of Black social workers from Southern African countries in migrating to and working in England, specifically in children's services social work settings, including the ways this journey may have influenced their professional practice and career path or development.

Who is doing the research?

My name is Ganet Mabhena, and I am a qualified social worker who is still practising.

I am conducting this research as part of a Professional Doctorate in Advanced Practice and Research – Social Work and Social Care (D55).

The research is being supervised by: **Dr Philip Archard, contact details: Email: parchard@tavi-port.nhs.uk**

If you have any concerns about any aspect of this research project, you can contact the Head of Registry - academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

What will taking part involve?

If you agree to take part, I will ask you to have two face-to-face interviews, each lasting about 60 minutes, followed by a focus group lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interview and the focus group will be conducted face-to-face. However, I will use MS Teams should your circumstances change after attending the first interview.

- Phase one: First face-to-face interview (see attached interview questions).

- Phase two: This will be a follow-up interview to further explore data that was gathered during the first interview, this will take place approximately two weeks after the initial interview.
- Phase three: A focus group will be held on completion of all interviews. This will provide a reflective space to explore the experiences of participating in the research alongside other study participants.

All interviews will be voice-recorded for purposes of transcription and analysis of the information recorded. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your personal and professional experience. I will ask you to sign a consent form to confirm your agreement to take part.

What happens to the data from the interviews?

After the interviews, I will make a written transcript of what was said. I will use all of the transcripts for the research analysis.

The research will comply with the university's Data Protection Policy. Confidentiality of data is subject to legal limitations.

To protect your confidentiality in all of the transcripts and subsequent writing about the project, I will use pseudonyms, not disclose your specific birthplace, not share your place of work or any other information that will make you identifiable. My dissertation and any subsequent publications might include direct quotations from the interviews. I will ensure that these cannot be traced to any individual participant; however, if you were to read any subsequent publications, you might recognise your own words.

Right to withdraw

If you decide that you would like some or all of your interview data removed from the study you can withdraw at any time until an agreed date, outlined in the consent form.

For the duration of the project, I will ensure that the data and all related material is solely stored securely in the University of Essex OneDrive system. I will be the only person who will have access to the computer files. Once the study is complete, the original interview recordings will be stored for six to ten years and then permanently deleted thereafter.

If you would like to know more about the research, please do email me at **gm21757@essex.ac.uk**

Thank you for your interest in my research.

Your name:

Title:

Contact details:

Appendix B: Interview questions

<div style="border:1px solid #000; background:#dbe5f1; padding:8px">

Thesis title: Black Southern African-born social workers' experiences of working in Children's Services in England.

</div>

Main questions (first interview):

Introductory Question: Tell me about what you anticipate in agreeing to take part in this research. Are there things you are hoping for or worried about in relation to the interviews and research?

Question/prompt 1: Please think about your experience of working in Children's Services. Please describe this in four words. Please expand on each word in turn. The interviewer will also provide some probes following this regarding specific aspects of the experience mentioned by the participant, i.e., the organisation or workplace, supervision, relationships with colleagues and other professionals, working relationships with families, children etc.

Question 2: Please tell me about what led you to train and work as a social worker.

Question 3: Tell me about your journey to the UK and the reasons behind your migration.

Question 4: Tell me about the ways in which you think, if any, your culture has influenced your practice, professional development and decision-making as a social worker.

Probes and empathic comments will be used after each question/prompt

Second (follow-up) interview:

The second interview will consist of following up themes from the first interview and covering any questions that could not be covered there. The participant will also be given the opportunity to speak briefly about the experience of taking part in both interviews ('Tell me about your experience of the two interviews. What has taking part been like?')

Focus group (taking place after interviews):

The focus group will involve dialogue facilitated by the researcher which will explore the participants' experiences of sharing their respective experiences.

Appendix C: Fieldwork risk assessment

Name: **Ganet Mabhena**	School: Tavistock & Portman NHS Foundation Trust
Student number: XXXXXXX	Supervisor / Director of Studies: **Dr Philip Archard**
Thesis Title: **Black Southern African-born social workers' experiences of working in Children's Services in England.**	
Fieldwork location: **Institutional setting and other suitable locations, including online platforms.**	Type of Fieldwork: **Face-to-face interviews or use of online platforms.**
Proposed dates or periods of Fieldwork: **January 2024 – May 2024**	

Potential hazards or risks: *(rate high medium or low)*	
1. Adverse emotional distress *(low)*	2. Lone working *(low)*
3. *Focus group (low)*	4. Significant harm disclosure (low)
5. Disclosure of malpractice (low)	6. Online platforms without face-to-face support (low)
1.	8.
9.	10.

Potential Consequences for each hazard: *(please continue on a separate sheet if necessary)*

1. Adverse emotional distress – The research participants might find it challenging to relate some of their stories that may be elicited in the interviews and focus group.

2. Lone working – There is a risk of physical harm or allegations being made that could impact the researcher's ability to continue with the research.

3. Focus group – Some participants may struggle to interact or share their experiences in a group setting or are negatively impacted by working in a group setting.

4. Significant harm disclosure – Participants may share information about harm they suffered in the past, which might need to be reported or taken further, therefore leading to the research delay or participants withdrawing from the research.

5. Disclosure of malpractice – Research participants could disclose malpractice issues that could place other persons (i.e., service users) at risk.

6. Online platforms without face-to-face support – There is a possibility that the researcher could struggle to assess the impact of the research on participants online as they will not be occupying the same physical space.

Controls in place for each hazard in order of likely risk: *(please continue on a separate sheet if necessary)*

1. Adverse emotional distress: There will be check-ins before the sessions to assess whether participants are ready to participate on the day. The researcher will ask if there is anything that could impact the participant's ability to engage fully on the day. At the end of the sessions, the researcher will have a debrief session with participants to assess whether there was anything brought up during the research that could impact their well-being. If there is anything identified, the participants will be supported or encouraged to access support.

2. Lone working: Office space or user-friendly venues will be identified for all meetings with participants. Any security measures in place will be assessed to ensure that the researcher and the participants are not exposed to any risk or harm. If the venue does not meet the required standards, then it will not be used.

3. Focus group: The research participants will be encouraged to engage in the focus group. However, if participating in the focus group is likely to cause participants distress, then they will be advised not to participate. Those who wish to participate will be supported, and they will be advised to leave or let the researcher know when they are struggling.

4. Significant harm disclosure: Participants will be supported or referred to relevant organizations for support if they disclose any significant harm towards them. A list of support agencies will be shared with participants before the research begins. If the risk is imminent, the participants will not take part in the research and they will be supported to access emergency support.

5. Disclosure of malpractice: The research participants will be made aware that any malpractice issues or safeguarding concerns will be followed up with relevant agencies in accord with the severity of the concerns.

6. Online platforms without face-to-face support: The researcher will check in with participants to ascertain whether they are still happy to continue with the sessions, and if any signs of distress are noted, then the research will be paused to offer support or scheduled for another day. The researcher would contact people within the participant's support network to ensure the participants' safety and well-being.	
By signing this document you are indicating that you have consulted the policy and have fully considered the risks.	I agree to the assessment of risk in relation to this project.
Signature of Student:	Signature of Supervisor of Studies:
Date: 14 December 2023	Date:

Appendix D: Participant consent form

> **Thesis title: Black Southern African-born social workers' experiences of working in Children's Services in England.**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research project, which is part of a **Professional Doctorate in Advanced Practice and Research – Social Work and Social Care (D55).**

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to take part in recorded interviews with me and a focus group exploring your experiences of working in Children's Services in England. The findings from this research will be written up in a dissertation and may be published.

The decision to take part is entirely your own personal choice. You can withdraw your consent at any time before or during the interviews without needing to give a reason. After the interviews, if you wish to withdraw some or all of your data, you can do so up to two weeks after the date of the interviews (after this time, I may have already started to use the data).

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to share your line manager's details. If there is disclosure of malpractice or safeguarding concerns, this will be discussed with you, and concerns will be followed up with relevant agencies in accord with the severity of the concerns.

As the researcher, I will ensure:

- The research complies with the university's Data Protection Policy. Confidentiality of data is subject to legal limitations.
- All of the transcripts and subsequent writing about the project will not include any identifying information or names to protect your confidentiality.
- For the duration of the project, the data and all related material is stored securely.
- Once the study is complete, the original interview recordings will be permanently deleted.

The research is being supervised by supervisor details, title and contact details: **Dr Philip Archard, contact details: Email - parchard@tavi-port.nhs.uk**

If you have any concerns about any aspect of this research project, you can contact the Head of Registry - academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

The researcher is name: **Ganet Mabhena,** and course is: **Professional Doctorate in Advanced Practice and Research – Social Work and Social Care (D55)**

Consent

I have read and understood this consent form and accompanying participant information sheet. I confirm that I agree to participate in the research and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without needing to provide a reason why.

Print Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix D: Ethical Approval

<u>**Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)**</u>

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

This application should be submitted alongside copies of any supporting documentation which will be handed to participants, including a participant information sheet, consent form, self-completion survey or questionnaire.

Where a form is submitted and sections are incomplete, the form will not be considered by TREC and will be returned to the applicant for completion.

For further guidance please contact the Head of Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

<u>**FOR ALL APPLICANTS**</u>

<u>**If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters. You need only complete sections of the TREC form which are NOT covered in your existing approval**</u>

Is your project considered as 'research' according to the HRA tool? (http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html)	**(Yes)**
Will your project involve participants who are under 18 or who are classed as vulnerable? (see section 7)	**No**
Will your project include data collection outside of the UK?	**No**

<u>**SECTION A: PROJECT DETAILS**</u>

Project title	
	Black Southern African-born social workers' experiences of working in Children's Services in England

Proposed project start date	After TREC approval	Anticipated project end date	Aug 2025

Principal Investigator (normally your Research Supervisor): Dr Philip Archard

Please note: TREC approval will only be given for the length of the project as stated above up to a maximum of 6 years. Projects exceeding these timeframes will need additional ethical approval

Has NHS or other approval been sought for this research including through submission via Research Application System (IRAS) or to the Health Research Authority (HRA)?	YES (NRES approval) ☐ ☐ YES (HRA approval) ☐ Other ☒ NO

If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters.

SECTION B: APPLICANT DETAILS

Name of Researcher	Ganet Mabhena
Programme of Study and Target Award	Professional Doctorate in Advanced Practice and Research – Social Work and Social Care (D55).
Email address	gm21757@essex.ac.uk
Contact telephone number	XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

SECTION C: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above their normal salary package or the costs of undertaking the research?

YES ☐   **NO** ☒

If **YES**, please detail below:

Is there any further possibility for conflict of interest? YES ☐   **NO** ☒

Are you proposing to conduct this work in a location where you work or have a placement?

YES ☒   **NO** ☐

If **YES**, please detail below outline how you will avoid issues arising around colleagues being involved in this project:

This study will be undertaken in the South East of England; my workplace is part of this region. Therefore, there is a possibility that some participants will be drawn from my work area. Confidentiality will be essential, and participants will be made aware of this from the beginning of the research project. Research participants will be given the option to opt out if they wish. In addition, the need for confidentiality will be maintained. Research participants will be bound by the same confidentiality principles to ensure that they do not cause harm to their colleagues.

Is your project being commissioned by and/or carried out on behalf of a body external to the Trust? (for example; commissioned by a local authority, school, care home, other NHS Trust or other organisation). *Please note that 'external' is defined as an organisation which is external to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Trust)	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☒
If **YES**, please add details here:	

Will you be required to get further ethical approval after receiving TREC approval?	YES ☐ NO ☒
If **YES**, please supply details of the ethical approval bodies below AND include any letters of approval from the ethical approval bodies (letters received after receiving TREC approval should be submitted to complete your record):	

There will be no other ethical approval required. The study will be promoted via my own professional networks and social media (i.e., LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter) (the advert to be used for this is appended to this application)

If your project is being undertaken with one or more clinical services or organisations external to the Trust, please provide details of these:

N/A

If you still need to agree these arrangements or if you can only approach organisations after you have ethical approval, please identify the types of organisations (eg. schools or clinical services) you wish to approach:

N/A

Do you have approval from the organisations detailed above? (this includes R&D approval where relevant)	YES ☐ NO ☐ NA ☒
Please attach approval letters to this application. Any approval letters received after TREC approval has been granted MUST be submitted to be appended to your record	

SECTION D: SIGNATURES AND DECLARATIONS

APPLICANT DECLARATION	

I confirm that:

- The information contained in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and up to date.
- I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research.
- I acknowledge my obligations and commitment to upholding ethical principles and to keep my supervisor updated with the progress of my research
- I am aware that for cases of proven misconduct, it may result in formal disciplinary proceedings and/or the cancellation of the proposed research.
- I understand that if my project design, methodology or method of data collection changes I must seek an amendment to my ethical approvals as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

Applicant (print name)	Ganet Mabhena
Signed	*(signature)*
Date	14 December 2023

FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT APPLICANTS ONLY

Name of Supervisor/Principal Investigator	Dr Philip Archard

Supervisor –

- Does the student have the necessary skills to carry out the research?
  YES ☐ **NO** ☐

- Is the participant information sheet, consent form and any other documentation appropriate?
  YES ☐ **NO** ☐

- Are the procedures for recruitment of participants and obtaining informed consent suitable and sufficient?
  YES ☐ **NO** ☐

- Where required, does the researcher have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Signed	
Date	

COURSE LEAD/RESEARCH LEAD	
Does the proposed research as detailed herein have your support to proceed? YES ☐ NO ☐	
Signed	
Date	

SECTION E: DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

1. **Provide a brief description of the proposed research, including the requirements of participants. This must be in lay terms and free from technical or discipline specific terminology or jargon. If such terms are required, please ensure they are adequately explained (Do not exceed 500 words)**
This research project focussed on the experiences of Black social workers from Southern Africa working in English children's services. For the purposes of the study, Southern Africa will be defined countries that are part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). SADC is a regional economic community comprising 16 Member States; Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The target sample group are Black social workers who were born in the SADC region. The study seeks to explore the professional journeys of Black social workers from southern African countries in migrating to and

working in England, specifically in the context of social work in children's services (including their personal histories, professional practice and career paths/development).

Sub-questions:

- What are the personal and professional motivations that lead Black social workers who spent their formative years in Southern Africa to practice in children's services in England?

- How do Black Southern African social workers navigate working in children's services and a different sociocultural context?

- How do the Black Southern African social workers represent their professional and career development working in children's services?

The data will be gathered via interviews with six to eight individual participants. Each participant will complete an initial interview and then a follow-up interview on a separate occasion. Both interviews will be approximately one hour in length. Furthermore, a focus group (of approximately ninety minutes) will also be arranged and conducted with the participants.

2. **Provide a statement on the aims and significance of the proposed research, including potential impact to knowledge and understanding in the field (where appropriate, indicate the associated hypothesis which will be tested). This should be a clear justification of the proposed research, why it should proceed and a statement on any anticipated benefits to the community. (Do not exceed 700 words)**

The study is categorizable as a practitioner research or practice-near research project (see, e.g., Fook, 2002: Mitchell, Lunt and Shaw, 2010). The idea for the project arose from my own experience as a Black social worker who was born in Zimbabwe and then moved to England in my early twenties to live, study and work. Undertaking this study, I hope to make use of my experience and to provide a platform for the experiences of this community of social work practitioners.

The study aims to capture and understand the experiences of Black Southern African social workers and inform the development of a framework or strategy that help support this group in child and family social work. Furthermore, this study could help bridge a gap between Black SADC-trained practitioners and management in English Children's Services

and help develop tools for the professional support of Black social workers who had their formative years in the SADC region, as well as, potentially, others from different backgrounds.

This study seeks to help fill a gap between two different bodies of research literature regarding migrant social workers' experiences and the impact of culture when working in Children's Services. Only a handful of studies have addressed the journeys of Black social workers who have migrated from Southern Africa to England and the experiences of these social workers practising in English social care settings (Dzudzor, 2021; Hakak, Onokah and Shishane, 2022, Hakak et al., 2023; Naidoo & Kasiram, 2006). Dzudzor (2021) for example, identified a gap in the education and practice research for the Ghanaian social workers and the impact of cultural background, highlighting the challenges of racism, subjugation, prejudice, attacks, and discrimination to which they are subject.

The proposed study augments this research but also seeks to fill a gap with regard to research that has addressed the experiences of Black Southern African social workers who undertook their training in the UK. It focuses on both Black social workers who were born and trained in the SADC region and those who spent their formative years in the region before completing their training in England. This study seeks to afford insight into their inner experience working in UK children's services, addressing this in terms of different psychosocial considerations, for example, the role of culture, as well as personal biographical experience, the nature of working practices in the community and within organisations, race and racism.

| 3. | **Provide an outline of the methodology for the proposed research, including proposed method of data collection, *tasks* assigned to participants of the research and the proposed method and duration of data analysis. If the proposed research makes use of pre-established and generally accepted techniques, please make this clear. (Do not exceed 500 words)** |

A practice-near qualitative approach is consistent with the research questions and a focus on the meanings attributed to experience and a situated understanding of experiences within children's services in a psychosocial context (Cooper, 2009). The study will be interview-based and entail the use of material generated via narrative in-depth interviews with a small sample of social workers (6-8), likely recruited from various Local Authorities within the southeast of England.

Before engaging with participants, I will also take part in an auto-ethnographic interview undertaken by a colleague. This will (1) help me reflect on my journey and experiences in practice and (2) consider my positioning in the enquiry and how I may be inclined to listen and respond to participants based on my own experience.

In the interviews with the practitioner participants, each participant will be interviewed on two occasions, i.e., via an initial and a follow-up interview. The first interview will core a series of core questions related to the foci of the research study, i.e., their migration journey, training and professional experience. The second interview will build on the first interview by exploring themes identified there and addressing any questions for which there was insufficient time.

All participants will also be invited to take part in a focus group where they will be asked to speak about their experiences in child and family social work as Black Southern African social workers and to reflect on the experience of participating in the research.

Material generated via these interviews and the focus group, in the form of recordings, transcripts and interview 'process' notes, will be subject to a reflexive thematic analysis and psychosocial theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The analysis will begin while the data for the study is being collected. The analysis will be based on Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework for reflexive thematic analysis. I also intend to take specific steps to avoid an 'expert-driven' understanding of interview data which gives short shrift to the participants' own conscious meaning-making regarding their experience.

SECTION F: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

4. **Provide an explanation detailing how you will identify, approach and recruit the participants for the proposed research, including clarification on sample size and location. Please provide justification for the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate) and explain briefly, in lay terms, why these criteria are in place. (Do not exceed 500 words)**

Participants will be Black social workers who were born and trained in the SADC region and those who moved to England having lived their formative years (up to the age of 8) there but completed their training after being settled in England. I have decided to use this inclusion criteria because these social workers

would have had their formative years influenced by culture in the SADC region. Participants will be based in South East England, working or have previously worked in Children's Services in the two years prior to the study. As this is a small study, the selected region will likely provide the opportunity to recruit sufficient participants within the stipulated timescales. A purposive sampling strategy will be used, and the study will be promoted via my own professional networks and social media (i.e., LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter)) with a leaflet stating the research aims and inclusion and exclusion criteria. I am proposing a sample size of between six to eight participants. The study does not seek to provide an analysis that is representative of a wider population. Rather, the aim is to provide in-depth analysis regarding participants' subjective experiences.

5.	**Please state the location(s) of the proposed research including the location of any interviews. Please provide a Risk Assessment if required. Consideration should be given to lone working, visiting private residences, conducting research outside working hours or any other non-standard arrangements.**
	If any data collection is to be done online, please identify the platforms to be used.

To ensure a quiet place for interviews, reliable equipment and familiarity with the location, I have carefully considered locations where the interviews can be held. As has been acknowledged, the study will be interview-based, as this provides an opportunity for producing rich narrative data anchored in actual events and experiences. To undertake interviews and the focus group, I intend to make use of available, suitably private spaces at my workplace, which includes various rooms suitable for individual face-to-face interviews. A relevant risk assessment has been completed to ensure that participants' welfare needs are not overlooked (appended below). Some participants may express a preference to be interviewed at their work location or in the community. The potential for this will be considered on an individual basis. In such a scenario, any possible risks identified will be assessed by completing a risk assessment.

If there are challenges such as time and travel to arrange interviews for participants in-person, a back-plan is to complete (some) interviews online, via videoconferencing. Microsoft Teams is available to me through the University of Essex's Microsoft 365 student package and commonly used by many local authority social workers, making it easier for them to participate, on a technical level. Used between personal computers/laptops, it is a secure platform and all data transmitted during meetings is encoded. I will also take ensure the Microsoft Teams session is secure for participants by using settings as to who can bypass the lobby and who can present material and turn the meeting chat function off. I will also use various checks to ensure that participants are in a private place when being interviewed via videoconferencing and rearrange the interview if this isn't possible.

Interviews and the focus group will be audio-recorded and transcribed by me personally.

6.	**Will the participants be from any of the following groups?***(Tick as appropriate)*

☐ Students or Staff of the Trust or Partner delivering your programme.

☒ Adults (over the age of 18 years with mental capacity to give consent to participate in the research).

☐ Children or legal minors (anyone under the age of 16 years)[1]

☐ Adults who are unconscious, severely ill or have a terminal illness.

☐ Adults who may lose mental capacity to consent during the course of the research.

☐ Adults in emergency situations.

☐ Adults[2] with mental illness - particularly those detained under the Mental Health Act (1983 & 2007).

☐ Participants who may lack capacity to consent to participate in the research under the research requirements of the Mental Capacity Act (2005).

☐ Prisoners, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

☐ Young Offenders, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

☐ Healthy volunteers (in high risk intervention studies).

☐ Participants who may be considered to have a pre-existing and potentially dependent[3] relationship with the investigator (e.g. those in care homes, students, colleagues, service-users, patients).

☐ Other vulnerable groups (see Question 6).

☐ Adults who are in custody, custodial care, or for whom a court has assumed responsibility.

☐ Participants who are members of the Armed Forces.

[1]If the proposed research involves children or adults who meet the Police Act (1997) definition of vulnerability[3], any researchers who will have contact with participants must have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.

[2] 'Adults with a learning or physical disability, a physical or mental illness, or a reduction in physical or mental capacity, and living in a care home or home for people with learning difficulties or receiving care in their own home, or receiving hospital or social care services.' (Police Act, 1997)

[3] Proposed research involving participants with whom the investigator or researcher(s) shares a dependent or unequal relationships (e.g. teacher/student, clinical therapist/service-user) may compromise the ability to give informed consent which is free from any form of pressure (real or implied) arising from this relationship. TREC recommends that, wherever practicable, investigators choose participants with whom they have no dependent relationship. Following due scrutiny, if the investigator is confident that the research involving participants in dependent relationships is vital and defensible, TREC will require additional information setting out the case and detailing how risks inherent in the dependent relationship will be managed. TREC will also need to be reassured that refusal to participate will not result in any discrimination or penalty.

7. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable? YES ☐ NO ☒

For the purposes of research, 'vulnerable' participants may be adults whose ability to protect their own interests are impaired or reduced in comparison to that of the broader population. Vulnerability may arise from:

- the participant's personal characteristics (e.g. mental or physical impairment)
- their social environment, context and/or disadvantage (e.g. socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, resources, substance dependence, displacement or homelessness).
- where prospective participants are at high risk of consenting under duress, or as a result of manipulation or coercion, they must also be considered as vulnerable
- children are automatically presumed to be vulnerable.

7.1. If YES, what special arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable participants' interests?

N/A

If YES, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check **within the last three years** is required.

Please provide details of the "clear disclosure":

Date of disclosure:	
Type of disclosure:	
Organisation that requested disclosure:	
DBS certificate number:	

*(NOTE: information concerning activities which require DBS checks can be found via https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-check-eligible-positions-guidance). Please **do not** include a copy of your DBS certificate with your application*

8. Do you propose to make any form of payment or incentive available to participants of the research? YES ☐ NO ☒

If **YES**, please provide details taking into account that any payment or incentive should be representative of reasonable remuneration for participation and may not be of a value that could be coercive or exerting undue influence on potential participants' decision to take part in the research. Wherever possible, remuneration in a monetary form should be avoided and substituted with vouchers, coupons or equivalent. Any payment made to research participants may have benefit or HMRC implications and participants should be alerted to this in the participant information sheet as they may wish to choose to decline payment.

No payment will be made to participants for taking part. However, those who opt to travel to my work location to take part will be reimbursed for their transport costs within a twenty-mile radius. If participants have travelled a long distance to participate in the research, snack food and drinks will be provided to ensure that they are not out or pocket in taking part. I am not expecting any participants to travel more than twenty miles to take part.

| 9. | What special arrangements are in place for eliciting informed consent from participants who may not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information provided in English; where participants have special communication needs; where participants have limited literacy; or where children are involved in the research? (Do not exceed 200 words) |

The sample will be social workers working in professional roles in English children's services provision. On this basis, it is reasonable to assume that participants will have sufficient command of the English language not to require additional support, either to understand documents linked to the research or dialogue in the interviews or focus group.

SECTION F: RISK ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

10. Does the proposed research involve any of the following? *(Tick as appropriate)*

☐ use of a questionnaire, self-completion survey or data-collection instrument (attach copy)

☐ use of emails or the internet as a means of data collection

☐ use of written or computerised tests

☒ interviews (attach interview questions)

☐ diaries (attach diary record form)

☐ participant observation

☐ participant observation (in a non-public place) without their knowledge / covert research

☒ audio-recording interviewees or events

☐ video-recording interviewees or events

☐ access to personal and/or sensitive data (i.e. student, patient, client or service-user data) without the participant's informed consent for use of these data for research purposes

☐ administration of any questions, tasks, investigations, procedures or stimuli which may be experienced by participants as physically or mentally painful, stressful or unpleasant during or after the research process

☐ performance of any acts which might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience discomfiture, regret or any other adverse emotional or psychological reaction

☐ Themes around extremism or radicalisation

☐ investigation of participants involved in illegal or illicit activities (e.g. use of illegal drugs)

☐ procedures that involve the deception of participants

☐ administration of any substance or agent

☐ use of non-treatment of placebo control conditions

☐ participation in a clinical trial

☐ research undertaken at an off-campus location (<u>risk assessment attached</u>)

☐ research overseas (<u>please ensure Section G is complete</u>)

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11. Does the proposed research involve any specific or anticipated risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?

YES ☒   **NO** ☐

If **YES**, please describe below including details of precautionary measures.

I will be interviewing social workers about their experience at work and in their professional lives. Therefore, the research is not focused on a sensitive or controversial topic per se and does not seek to elicit distress or discomfort in any way. This being acknowledged, there is a possibility of some emotional impact when discussing personal experiences in relation to being Black, especially being subject to racism, and their migration experiences. On this basis, transparency around the process will be prioritised and relevant support will be identified. In undertaking the research, I will reflect carefully on any (perceived) power differentials between the participants and me. I will also check-in at the beginning of each interview and debrief at the end of the interviews. As appropriate, I will encourage participants to access services within their organisations for their wellbeing. I will also provide participants with additional information regarding agencies to access in case they require support to manage issues evoked by participating in the research.

12. Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress for participants, please state what previous experience the investigator or researcher(s) have had in conducting this type of research.

I am a qualified social worker, who has been in practice for over six years, and in child protection social work since qualifying. Prior to this, I also worked in youth offending services and other various support service settings for over fifteen years working with children, young people and their families at times of stress.

As well as this, during my undergraduate study, I undertook research involving persons who had sought asylum in the UK to explore the level of support available to them. As part of this enquiry, I helped participants to access appropriate support for their wellbeing and to use available services/external agencies. I also completed research as part of a post-graduate course which involved direct contact with young people, exploring their experiences of immigration.

13. Provide an explanation of any potential benefits to participants. Please ensure this is framed within the overall contribution of the proposed research to knowledge or practice. (Do not exceed 400 words)
NOTE: Where the proposed research involves students , they should be assured that accepting the offer to participate or choosing to decline will have no impact on their assessments or learning experience. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants who are patients, service-users and/or receiving any form of treatment or medication that they are not invited to participate in the belief that participation in the research will result in some relief or improvement in their condition.

It is anticipated that the interviews and focus group will afford the participants an opportunity to reflect on their professional journeys and work in Children's Services settings, and the analysis of their accounts will contribute to furthering knowledge in social work and social care regarding how Southern African social workers working in England can be best supported at work.

For the focus group specifically, participants will also have an opportunity to interact with others with similar backgrounds to their own, to share experiences and possibly explore their role of their cultural backgrounds and beliefs in shaping their working practice.

14. **Provide an outline of any measures you have in place in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes and the potential impact this may have on participants involved in the proposed research. (Do not exceed 300 words)**
Participants will be provided with all information regarding the study and will be presented with an option to opt in and out of the research if they believe it will cause them emotional distress. I will endeavor to ensure that there is open communication between the research participants and me. This will enable participants to inform me if they have any concerns regarding adverse outcomes. Participants retain the right to withdraw from the study at any time with now questions asked. In the case of distress being elicited, as appropriate, I will support participants to access additional support as appropriate, for example via in-house organizational wellbeing provision or external agencies within the community that could provide counselling. The consent form will clearly highlight steps that will be taken where there are concerns about malpractice by a participant or safeguarding concerns. Any malpractice issues or safeguarding concerns which arise during interviews will be followed up with relevant agencies in accord with the severity of the concerns.
15. **Provide an outline of your debriefing, support and feedback protocol for participants involved in the proposed research. This should include, for example, where participants may feel the need to discuss thoughts or feelings brought about following their participation in the research. This may involve referral to an external support or counseling service, where participation in the research has caused specific issues for participants.**
During the research process, I will use check-in and debriefing strategies to assess the participants' well-being and their capacity to engage in the study. Also, the focus group will support participants to reflect on their experience of participating in the research. If there is a need to discuss this with a participant and make a referral to external agencies, this will be facilitated with their consent.
16. **Please provide the names and nature of any external support or counselling organisations that will be suggested to participants if participation in the research has potential to raise specific issues for participants.**
The following agencies and their contact details will be available to the research participants, as appropriate. • MIND: Mental and emotional health support. • Samaritans: Emotional and Mental Health for marginalised communities. • Mencap: Support for those with learning disabilities and support for carers • Citizens Advice: Financial and other legal matters • HR Wellbeing teams: Counselling • Cruse Bereavement Services: Support to manage family and friends' loss. • GP: counselling referrals through the NHS

• Betterhelp: Online counselling services

17. **Where medical aftercare may be necessary, this should include details of the treatment available to participants. Debriefing may involve the disclosure of further information on the aims of the research, the participant's performance and/or the results of the research. (Do not exceed 500 words)**
I do not envisage that the study will involve professionals needing medical aftercare.

FOR RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN OUTSIDE THE UK

18. **Does the proposed research involve travel outside of the UK?** ☐ **YES** ☒ **NO** **If YES, please confirm:** ☐ I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice? http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/ ☐ I have completed ta RISK Assessment covering all aspects of the project including consideration of the location of the data collection and risks to participants. All overseas project data collection will need approval from the Deputy Director of Education and Training or their nominee. Normally this will be done based on the information provided in this form. All projects approved through the TREC process will be indemnified by the Trust against claims made by third parties. If you have any queries regarding research outside the UK, please contact academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk:

	Students are required to arrange their own travel and medical insurance to cover project work outside of the UK. Please indicate what insurance cover you have or will have in place.
19.	Please evidence how compliance with all local research ethics and research governance requirements have been assessed for the country(ies) in which the research is taking place. Please also clarify how the requirements will be met:
	N/A

SECTION G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND WITHDRAWAL

20.	**Have you attached a copy of your participant information sheet (this should be in _plain English_)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.** **YES** ☒ **NO** ☐ If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:
21.	**Have you attached a copy of your participant consent form (this should be in _plain English_)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.** **YES** ☒ **NO** ☐ If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:
22.	**The following is a <u>participant information sheet</u> checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.** ☒ Clear identification of the Trust as the sponsor for the research, the project title, the Researcher and Principal Investigator (your Research Supervisor) and other researchers along with relevant contact details.

☒ Details of what involvement in the proposed research will require (e.g., participation in interviews, completion of questionnaire, audio/video-recording of events), estimated time commitment and any risks involved.

☐ A statement confirming that the research has received formal approval from TREC or other ethics body.

☒ If the sample size is small, advice to participants that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity.

☐ A clear statement that where participants are in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers that participation in the research will have no impact on assessment / treatment / service-use or support.

☒ Assurance that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.

☒ Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

☒ A statement that the data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies.: https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/

☒ Advice that if participants have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this research project, they should contact Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

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23. The following is a <u>consent form</u> checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Trust letterhead or logo.

☒ Title of the project (with research degree projects this need not necessarily be the title of the thesis) and names of investigators.

☒ Confirmation that the research project is part of a degree

☒ Confirmation that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time, or to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.

☒ Confirmation of particular requirements of participants, including for example whether interviews are to be audio-/video-recorded, whether anonymised quotes will be used in publications advice of legal limitations to data confidentiality.

☒ If the sample size is small, confirmation that this may have implications for anonymity any other relevant information.

☒ The proposed method of publication or dissemination of the research findings.

☐ Details of any external contractors or partner institutions involved in the research.

☐ Details of any funding bodies or research councils supporting the research.

☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

SECTION H: CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

24. Below is a checklist covering key points relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Please indicate where relevant to the proposed research.

☒ Participants will be completely anonymised and their identity will not be known by the investigator or researcher(s) (i.e. the participants are part of an anonymous randomised sample and return responses with no form of personal identification)?

☒ The responses are anonymised or are an anonymised sample (i.e. a permanent process of coding has been carried out whereby direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from data and replaced by a code, with <u>no</u> record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers).

☒ The samples and data are de-identified (i.e. direct and indirect identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The investigator or researchers <u>are</u> able to link the code to the original identifiers and isolate the participant to whom the sample or data relates).

☐ Participants have the option of being identified in a publication that will arise from the research.

☒ Participants will be pseudo-anonymised in a publication that will arise from the research. (I.e. the researcher will endeavour to remove or alter details that would identify the participant.)

☒ The proposed research will make use of personal sensitive data.

☒ Participants consent to be identified in the study and subsequent dissemination of research findings and/or publication.

25.	Participants must be made aware that the confidentiality of the information they provide is subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions). This only applies to named or de-identified data. If your participants are named or de-identified, please confirm that you will specifically state these limitations.
	YES ☒ **NO** ☐
	If **NO**, please indicate why this is the case below:
	Participants will be informed about data being de-identified. The purpose of de-identifying data will be done in order to ensure that research participants are not easily identified and to prevent harm. Information regarding de-identification reasons for this procedure will be communicated to participants.

NOTE: WHERE THE PROPOSED RESEARCH INVOLVES A SMALL SAMPLE OR FOCUS GROUP, PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE ADVISED THAT THERE WILL BE DISTINCT LIMITATIONS IN THE LEVEL OF ANONYMITY THEY CAN BE AFFORDED.

SECTION I: DATA ACCESS, SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT

26.	Will the Researcher/Principal Investigator be responsible for the security of all data collected in connection with the proposed research? YES ☒ NO ☐
	If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:
27.	In line with the 5th principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), which states that personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for that purpose or

those purposes for which it was collected; please state how long data will be retained for.

☐ 1-2 years ☐ 3-5 years ☒ 6-10 years ☐ 10> years

NOTE: In line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data should normally be stored for 10 years and Masters level data for up to 2 years

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28. **Below is a checklist which relates to the management, storage and secure destruction of data for the purposes of the proposed research. Please indicate where relevant to your proposed arrangements.**

☐ Research data, codes and all identifying information to be kept in separate locked filing cabinets.

☒ Research data will only be stored in the University of Essex OneDrive system and no other cloud storage location.

☒ Access to computer files to be available to research team by password only.

☐ Access to computer files to be available to individuals outside the research team by password only (See **23.1**).

☒ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically within the UK.

☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically outside of the UK.

NOTE: Transfer of research data via third party commercial file sharing services, such as Google Docs and YouSendIt are not necessarily secure or permanent. These systems may also be located overseas and not covered by UK law. If the system is located outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or territories deemed to have sufficient standards of data protection, transfer may also breach the Data Protection Act (1998).

Essex students also have access the 'Box' service for file transfer:
https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/it-services/box

☐ Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers.

☐ Collection and storage of personal sensitive data (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political or religious beliefs or physical or mental health or condition).

☒ Use of personal data in the form of audio or video recordings.

☐ Primary data gathered on encrypted mobile devices (i.e. laptops).

NOTE: This should be transferred to secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity.

☐ All electronic data will undergo <u>secure disposal</u>.

NOTE: For hard drives and magnetic storage devices (HDD or SSD), deleting files does not permanently erase the data on most systems, but only deletes the reference to the file. Files can be restored when deleted in this way. Research files must be <u>overwritten</u> to ensure they are completely irretrievable. Software is available for the secure erasing of files from hard drives which meet recognised standards to securely scramble sensitive data. Examples of this software are BC Wipe, Wipe File, DeleteOnClick and Eraser for Windows platforms. Mac users can use the standard 'secure empty trash' option; an alternative is Permanent eraser software.

☐ All hardcopy data will undergo <u>secure disposal</u>.

NOTE: For shredding research data stored in hardcopy (i.e. paper), adopting DIN 3 ensures files are cut into 2mm strips or confetti like cross-cut particles of 4x40mm. The UK government requires a minimum standard of DIN 4 for its material, which ensures cross cut particles of at least 2x15mm.

29. **Please provide details of individuals outside the research team who will be given password protected access to encrypted data for the proposed research.**
No one outside of the research team will be provided with access to the encrypted data.

30. **Please provide details on the regions and territories where research data will be electronically transferred that are external to the UK:**
All research data will be stored in the UK. It will not be transferred electronically outside of the UK.

SECTION J: PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

30. How will the results of the research be reported and disseminated? *(Select all that apply)*	

☒ Peer reviewed journal

☐ Non-peer reviewed journal

☐ Peer reviewed books

☐ Publication in media, social media or website (including Podcasts and online videos)

☒ Conference presentation

☐ Internal report

☐ Promotional report and materials

☐ Reports compiled for or on behalf of external organisations

☒ Dissertation/Thesis

☐ Other publication

☐ Written feedback to research participants

☒ Presentation to participants or relevant community groups

☐ Other (Please specify below)

SECTION K: OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

31. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)?
No other ethical issues identified at this stage.

SECTION L: CHECKLIST FOR ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

32. Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

☐ Letters of approval from any external ethical approval bodies (where relevant)

☒ Recruitment advertisement

☒ Participant information sheets (including easy-read where relevant)

☒ Consent forms (including easy-read where relevant)

☐ Assent form for children (where relevant)

☐ Letters of approval from locations for data collection

☐ Questionnaire

☐ Interview Schedule or topic guide

☒ Risk Assessment (where applicable)

☐ Overseas travel approval (where applicable)

34. Where it is not possible to attach the above materials, please provide an explanation below.

All relevant information regarding the research will be shared with participants.