

To be or not to be: A meaning-making process for migrant Hong Kong social workers in England

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Abstract

This article examines the meaning-making experiences of migrant social workers from Hong Kong in England. Individual interviews were conducted with 22 migrant social workers. *Family comes first, regaining confidence from self-doubt and persevering and keep fighting* are the meanings they attributed to their resettlement experiences. García-Ramírez et al.'s acculturative integration framework offers insights into how migrant social workers can regain their sense of agency, activate and expand their support networks and mobilise collective resources to overcome systemic barriers. This approach enables them to adapt to their new lives and potentially restart their profession in a new country.

Keywords

Acculturation, acculturative integration, re-engagement with profession, resettlement, social work values

Introduction

Since 2020, there has been a new wave of emigration from Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2022). The wave has been triggered by the enactment of the National Security Law in June 2020, leading to

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heightened fears about the erosion of civil liberties and autonomy promised under the ‘one country, two systems’ framework. Many Hongkongers perceive their prospects in the city as uncertain and seek to secure their personal freedom in foreign destinations.

In July 2020, the UK government introduced a new immigration route for Hong Kong British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status holders, which allows them and their family members to live, work and study in the United Kingdom and subsequently seek British citizenship status (Home Office, 2021). It is estimated that between 258,000 and 322,400 Hongkongers may come to the United Kingdom by 2026 (Gower and Kirk-Wade, 2021). Since its launch, about 191,000 people have applied for a BN(O) visa and more than 144,500 have arrived in the United Kingdom as of the end of January 2024 (Loughton, 2024).

Among all migrant Hongkongers, social workers are one of the major migrant groups, as their core beliefs in social justice, human rights and democracy are severely threatened by the National Security Law (Leung et al., 2022). Many consider their civic engagement to be constrained or even risky if they stay in Hong Kong. It is estimated that between 950 and 2,200 social workers will have migrated to the United Kingdom by 2026 (this is based on the estimation that between 258,000 and 322,400 Hong Kong BN(O) holders will settle in the United Kingdom and 0.37% of the Hong Kong population comprises social workers). Many of them are experienced practitioners aged 35 to 54 with high levels of skills and qualifications (Kong and Chow, 2023). This skilled and experienced workforce can contribute significantly to addressing the workforce shortage in the United Kingdom.

Social workers have remained on the United Kingdom’s Shortage Occupation List, replaced by the Immigration Salary List, for over a decade (Home Office, 2024). Recruiting overseas qualified social workers has been an important strategy to fill the gap. The number of registration applications from overseas social workers has increased significantly, from 611 in 2020–2021 to 1,684 in 2021–2022 (Social Work England [SWE], 2023). In response to our Freedom of Information request (IRR-1755, dated 8/3/2024), SWE disclosed that since 2019, they have received 334 registration applications from social workers qualified in Hong Kong. Out of these applications, 297 were from the same individuals, suggesting that 37 of them submitted multiple applications because their first application was not accepted. Most of these applications were made in 2022 and 2023, and as of March 2024, 207 applicants have successfully registered. Challenges in registration include unclear information about the registration requirements, strict timeframes and difficulties in providing evidence such as placement details (Kong and Chow, 2023).

Research evidence shows that in addition to dealing with registration, migrant social workers encounter difficulties in language issues, cultural adjustment, discrimination in the workplace and in social life in countries like the United Kingdom (Hussein et al., 2011), New Zealand (Fouché et al., 2016; Peter et al., 2022) and Canada (Fulton, 2016). More recent UK-based studies identified similar challenges experienced by migrant social workers from Ghana (Dzudzor, 2021), India (Hakak and Francis, 2022), South Africa (Hakak et al., 2023b), Zimbabwe (Willett and Hakak, 2022) and Australia (Hakak et al., 2023a). Social workers from Ghana have expressed feeling unprepared for their social work duties and the lack of sufficient induction training. Social workers from the Global Majority such as from African countries and India experience more cultural tensions in practice compared to their counterparts from western societies. They tend to adopt a collective and community-based approach, which is very different from the case management and rights-based approach used in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, there are cultural differences in safeguarding practices in children services, attitudes towards mental health issues and the role of family and community in caring for vulnerable individuals (Hakak et al., 2023b; Hakak and Francis, 2022; Willett and Hakak, 2022). Apart from challenges experienced in their professional practice, they have to make adjustments to a new social and cultural life in the United Kingdom.

Migrant social workers from Zimbabwe (Willett and Hakak, 2022) and Ghana (Dzudzor, 2021) have expressed their intention to return to their home country due to a lack of sense of belonging and feelings of loneliness.

Berry's (1992) acculturation model has been widely used to examine how migrants adjust to the social, psychological and cultural changes when they resettle in a new culture. He identifies four acculturation strategies, which are determined by migrants' readiness to retain their cultural heritage and adopt a new culture: *integration* (accept both cultural heritage and new one), *assimilation* (reject cultural heritage and accept new one), *separation* (retain cultural heritage and reject new one) and *marginalisation* (reject both). However, this acculturation model has been criticised for its viability. For example, the validity of marginalisation as an acculturation strategy has been questioned, as it is unlikely that a person can develop a sense of cultural identity without drawing on either their heritage or the new culture (Schwartz et al., 2010). In addition, there is an implicit assumption that migrants are expected to adopt and conform to the dominant culture, suggesting that they are passive participants in the acculturation process.

García-Ramírez et al. (2011) conceptualise the acculturative integration framework as a psychopolitical process of empowerment and liberation through which migrants are self-reconstructed on three levels. They act as active agents instead of passive reactants during the acculturation process. At the *intrapersonal level*, individuals must develop critical thinking through self-reflection. This form of critical thinking empowers them to develop their strengths and fosters the belief that they can change their circumstances. Although life can be very challenging for migrant social workers in the United Kingdom, they 'keep on trying to make it work' (Hatzidimitriadou and Psoinos, 2019: 477). Some ascribed meaning to their professional life as a struggle for survival (Hatzidimitriadou and Psoinos, 2019). Others draw on their internal resources, to 'self-educate' and 'learn on the job' to survive in the new working environment (Dzudzor, 2021). At the *interpersonal level*, it involves establishing new connections with other people and organisations. Indian and Zimbabwean migrant social workers formed their respective professional networks for mutual support (Hakak and Francis, 2022; Willett and Hakak, 2022). These new social ties, in turn, enhance migrants' resources and capabilities to cope with challenges.

Ultimately, this acculturation process leads to engagement at the *citizenship level*, with the goal of creating a just and fair social environment. This intricate process entails a two-fold transformation of both the self and the environment: from hopelessness to psychological well-being at the intrapersonal level, from isolation to participation at the interpersonal level, and from exclusion to belonging at the citizenship level (García-Ramírez et al., 2011). While there is a growing body of literature on the experiences of migrant social workers that enhances our understanding of their acculturation process at the first two levels, there is limited analysis of how they navigate the citizenship level.

Against the backdrop of the shortage of social workers and the arrival of Hong Kong social workers in the United Kingdom, the experiences of their resettlement and re-engagement with the social work profession raise justified concerns. This article aims to explore the factors that influenced their decision-making to re-engage with the profession. García-Ramírez et al.'s (2011) acculturative integration framework is applied to understand the meaning-making process of their subjective experiences of resettlement at intrapersonal, interpersonal and citizenship level, an area that has not been extensively explored.

Method

The conduct of the study was influenced by Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962). As asserted by Heidegger, understanding and interpretation are inseparable in the process of

learning about one's lived experience. Understanding is like a 'hermeneutic circle'; any personal values, previous experience and knowledge play an important role in the act of meaning-making. Central to phenomenology is its emphasis on conscious subjective experience of the lived world (Husserl, 1983). In this study, we explored how migrant social workers gave meaning to their lived experience of resettlement and adjustment to their professional trajectory and social life in the United Kingdom.

Data collection

Convenience sampling was used to recruit 22 participants who were qualified social workers in Hong Kong, migrated to the United Kingdom under the BN(O) scheme, and had settled in the United Kingdom for at least 6 months before the study commenced. All recruitment materials and consent forms were produced in both Chinese and English.

All researchers are migrants from Hong Kong with a background in social work, and two of them arrived in the United Kingdom in 2021 under the BN(O) scheme. Potential participants were identified from our personal networks; invitations were sent to them via different messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. We also asked participants to identify other Hong Kong social workers from their personal network, resulting in the recruitment of three additional participants through snowballing. The research team met every 2–3 weeks during data collection to discuss our initial understanding of how participants navigated challenges encountered during resettlement. Recruitment stopped when data saturation was achieved, in which new data repeated what was expressed by previous participants (Saunders et al., 2018).

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used. We asked questions such as 'what are the main reasons for your migration?' and 'what is your resettlement experience like?' to enable participants to fully articulate their experiences. All interviews were conducted between April and May 2023 via MS Teams, and each lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions, participants were given the option to turn off their cameras before the interviews began. Three participants muted their camera to ensure anonymity. All consented to have their interviews audio recorded, using Teams' recording function. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the most spoken language in Hong Kong. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw, and pseudonyms are used in this article to protect their identities. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Hertfordshire, protocol number: HSK/SF/UH/05286.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were checked for accuracy. To enhance the credibility of the study, transcripts were analysed in Chinese to preserve the original meaning of the participants' experiences and retain any linguistic nuances (MacLean et al., 2004). Only identified key themes and verbatim quotes in this article were translated into English. NVivo version 12 was used to store and retrieve data. As all three researchers were migrant social workers, to avoid interferences from their migration experiences, no pre-set-coding system was used. We followed the five-stage framework approach to analyses the data: familiarisation, identifying themes, indexing, charting, interpretation and mapping (Ritchie et al., 2003). This systematic approach generated a matrix output to contextually compare and contrast data across our 22 participants and themes. The first author read through all interview transcripts, developed initial codes and then the thematic framework. The other two authors cross-checked all transcripts independently and reviewed the thematic framework. All authors discussed the overarching themes and agreed on the themes identified that illustrate how participants gave meaning to their resettlement experience.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of 22 participants interviewed between April and May 2023.

Characteristics		Number
Gender	Female	12
	Male	10
Age	26–30	3
	31–40	3
	41–50	7
	51–55	9
Social work qualifications	Dip. SW	1
	BSW	9
	MSW	12
Years of practice in social work	0–5	3
	6–10	3
	11–20	3
	20–30	13
Registered with SWE	Yes	6
	No	16
Current work status	Social work post	4
	Health and social care sector	7
	Other industries	6
	Counselling	2
	Not in paid employment	3
Region of residence	West Midlands	8
	London	5
	Northwest	4
	Northeast	2
	Southwest	3

Summary of their characteristics can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

Trustworthiness

This study is informed by the intersectional positioning of the research team. We recognise the reflexive relationship between our values, social locations, and personal migration histories, which may influence data collection and analysis. The shared experiences between the researchers and participants facilitated easier access to potential participants. The common values and beliefs in the social work profession provided a safe space for participants to express themselves. We are mindful that our ‘closeness’ to the participants may bring bias to the study (Lichtman, 2013). Therefore, conscious efforts were made to bracket our prior assumptions. Reflexivity is employed to critically reflect on how our own positionalities and personal experiences may impact data collection and analysis.

To manage participants’ and researchers’ bias, researchers did not interview participants with whom they had prior knowledge, thereby enhancing the credibility of the study. Participants were given the option to be interviewed in their preferred language. All chose to be interviewed in Cantonese, which enabled them to fully express themselves, and promoted the authenticity and trustworthiness of the study. Furthermore, due to the social work backgrounds of the research team,

Table 2. Characteristics of 22 participants interviewed between April and May 2023.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of SW practice	Registered with SWE?	Intention to register?
Kam-Ling	F	26	2	Yes	
Ka-Ming	M	27	3	Yes	
Mandy	F	28	5	Yes	
Candy	F	32	7	Yes	
Florence	F	53	7	Yes	
Amy	F	39	16	Yes	
Tong	M	45	19	No	Yes
Shui-Ling	F	46	21	No	Yes
Fun	F	46	22	No	Yes
Tan	M	43	22	No	Yes
Kwong	M	50	22	No	Yes
Siu-Ling	F	50	24	No	Yes
Adrian	M	50	28	No	Yes
Pang	M	52	30	No	Yes
Chi-Keung	M	31	NA	No	No
Ka-Lai	F	53	11	No	No
John	M	53	28	No	No
Man-Lai	F	50	28	No	No
Alex	M	52	29	No	No
Daisy	F	55	30	No	No
Kelvin	M	47	22	No	Not sure
Peggy	F	49	24	No	Not sure

they were familiar with the professional jargon used by the participants, which, according to Lopez et al. (2008) enhances the trustworthiness of the study results.

Results

Out of the 22 participants, only six were registered with SWE. Of those six, four were practising as social workers at the time of the interview and they were in their late twenties to early thirties. The remaining 18 participants were relatively older; some decided not to practise social work again, most faced challenges in meeting the registration requirements, particularly the English language standards. Most of these non-registered participants were experienced social workers. Four different groups are identified.

The middle-aged parents – Nine participants are characterised as middle-aged parents with dependent children at school age. They had their well-established social work careers and were in a financially secure position. They could therefore afford to be out of work until their family settled, sometimes a year after they arrived. Family safety and their children's future are among the main reasons to emigrate. They expressed explicitly that they did not want their children to grow up in a society under an increasingly authoritarian regime.

When you look at the education system (in Hong Kong) now . . . indoctrinating patriotism . . . threats of National Security Law, won't you leave too? My children's education is the most important. (Tan)

The restarting professionals – Four young social workers have restarted their social work practice in the United Kingdom. They all resided in Greater London and had no caring responsibilities, which meant that they could focus on their professional development. Also, because they graduated in recent years, they could have their qualifications readily verified by the educational institutions. They were familiar with examination systems and found it less challenging to meet the English language requirements. Their registrations with SWE were smoother. Two got job offers shortly after their arrival in the United Kingdom.

Because I was still working in Hong Kong. I could get all the documents (about my training) from my university. My supervisor wrote me the reference too . . . I got my job offer a month upon my arrival . . . I had sent around ten applications . . . so lucky. (Mandy)

The 'carefrees' – This group was also in their middle age but without childcare responsibilities. They were financially secure too, not rushed into work to earn a living. Many thought that they were too busy when in Hong Kong, spent too much time on working and too little on living. Resettling in the United Kingdom gave them the space to re-evaluate the purpose of their life, what they truly treasured and relished.

(I am) not likely (to register), in the UK you'll find your world is so big, so much to explore . . . to do something different after being a social worker for so long . . . I treasure work-life balance more now . . . I may be more involved in civil society, or environmental protection . . . I have also enrolled in a course at the Royal Horticultural Society. (Alex)

The exiles – The last group was made up of four dissidents. They were forced to leave Hong Kong to escape persecution and imprisonment for their involvement in the 2019 democratic movement.

My bank account was frozen . . . I knew they (police) would come . . . so I fled immediately. (Kwong)

Personal safety was their main concern before leaving Hong Kong, and they had no time to plan and prepare for their departure. They shared the adjustment issues that other participants had, though their migration journey was more traumatised, especially in the earlier days of their arrival. Some had left their families behind without the opportunity to bid them goodbye.

All participants share similar yet unique experiences in their resettlement. They met challenges such as housing issues, health service enrolment and social isolation. In terms of professional re-engagement, most of them were not aware of the registration requirements with SWE before arriving in the United Kingdom and hence were not prepared. In addition, most of them obtained their social work qualifications more than two decades ago, presenting challenges for them to have their qualifications verified. Given that all social workers were practising in a Cantonese-speaking environment in Hong Kong, many expressed anxieties about verbal communication in English. The variation in accents and the use of slang also make it more challenging for them to follow conversations. For those who successfully registered, they still had to face a different practice context in the United Kingdom, including different professional roles, unfamiliar legal, and social work systems and cultural concerns.

For all participants, migrating to the United Kingdom is a significant turning point in their lives. Most acknowledged the importance of integrating into the new culture. They viewed resettlement as an acculturation process and embraced their new lives, looking forward to meeting new people and exploring opportunities that would not have been available to them had they remained in Hong Kong.

(Registration) is not my priority, I will slow down and put my efforts in other areas . . . we (my wife and I) do packaging work in a factory . . . it's interesting, we can meet people from all walks of life, it's a good way to know the society . . . It is important to integrate into the British society, to participate, to serve, even though I cannot work as a social worker to contribute, I can still do something else to serve the community. (Pang)

Alex devoted himself to voluntary gardening work and described his choice as a 'paradigm shift'.

In Hong Kong, your career dominates your life; it defines your finance, social status, self-worth . . . It's different here. You can have other choices in life.

Participants shared their common struggles and appreciations in their new lives. They asked themselves important questions: 'what do I want in life?' and 'what is most important to me?', which prompted them to explore the meaning of their new life:

Family comes first

As mentioned, family safety and children's future are the reasons of migration for the middle-aged parents. Family well-being is always their priority. Most of them had very limited or no family support in the United Kingdom. They must be self-reliant in caring for their family whereas career development or personal goals are put aside.

In Hong Kong we had domestic helpers. They helped look after my children when I was at work. There is no support here now. When I finish work, I have to take care of the children and do housework . . . exhausted. (Amy)

However, it is also this new living style allowing them to spend more time with the family that they never had before. Better 'work-life balance' was frequently mentioned by participants. Pang said:

In Hong Kong, we worked crazy hours . . . here in the UK, I could spend more time with my family . . . When I look for job now, I don't want to miss my family life.

When searching for meaning of their struggles, Siu-ling coped by reminding herself of the original intention of her emigration:

Sometime when I am feeling low, we would talk about it in the WhatsApp group, meet other social workers from Hong Kong living nearby. I will think about my 'beginning heart' (original intention), it's all for my son, anything else is insignificant.

Family and children always come first. While they are pillars of resilience, they also represent a new meaning in life.

Regaining confidence from self-doubt

Participants also talked about moments of confusion and self-doubt, particularly when facing frustrations in work or job searching. Some were questioned in job interviews that they were over-qualified for the posts applied; others were declined due to lacking local experience. Florence and Amy were registered with SWE and were experienced social workers. However, they found themselves unable to apply for social work positions due to their childcare responsibilities and lack of

confidence. Nearly all participants expressed a lack of confidence in their spoken English. Effective communication is crucial in social work practice; any misunderstanding can lead to ‘life and death’ situations, which is something they want to avoid. Therefore, they felt the need to utilise any opportunities to practise and improve their spoken English. At the time of the interview, Florence was a teaching assistant, and Amy was a patient pathway coordinator. Like many participants who were not able to register, they were willing to take on any social care jobs, such as support worker or health care assistant, paving the way until they were more prepared. Participants remarked on the benefits of joining different social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups to meet other Hong Kong social workers, which provided a source of mutual support and information sharing.

I remember sharing with someone, feeling really rubbish about myself, couldn’t understand what people were talking about, their accent, my hands were shaking when I undertook the assessment. . . but it’s normal you did not feel confident, I need to accept this and then starting from there, I need to regain my confidence. (Amy)

The young social workers seemed to have restarted their professional pursuits smoothly. However, they also encountered different challenges in their new work settings, from diverse accents to work culture, professional roles to social care legislations.

(At the beginning) I understood only 30% (what service users said) over the phone. I prefer face-to-face interviews because you can also see their facial expressions and mood . . . that affects our relationship building. (Ka-Ming)

Participants opined that the induction programmes provided by their employers were not adequate in preparing them to deliver effective practice. They had to spend a lot of time looking up guidelines and procedural documents and take initiatives to ask colleagues and supervisors for advice. The pandemic and work-from-home arrangements made it even more difficult for them to get timely support. Candy was traumatised. She felt bullied by her first supervisor, picking on her English and newness to the job.

More than once she criticised, ‘English is your second language. Do you really know what I mean?’ . . . belittling me as a foreigner.

All these hardships and frustrations made the young social workers ponder about their capabilities, self-questioning about the choices they have made. Candy admitted that restarting her profession was the lowest point in her social work career, but it was also that moment she reminded herself the ‘beginning heart’,

I remembered it’s not easy when I graduated (seven years ago) . . . you would be humble to ask and to learn . . . It is a process of internal dialogue . . . when you are a new migrant in a new place, what do you expect . . . don’t be defeated by these (hardships) I told myself.

Their self-preservation and motivation to learn helped these young social workers cope with the new working environments. They gradually gained trust and praise from their employers, co-workers, and service users, overshadowing their novice’s ignorance. In addition, they brought different perspectives and skillsets into their new practice. The positive feedback from service users and commitment to the profession were noted by the management. Participants also felt that their hard work and dedication have earned the respect from their fellow colleagues.

I was working in children's service in Hong Kong, and I had effective engagement skills with children. My boss had once received an appreciation letter from the parents, thanking me for helping their child. (Candy)

I think hard working and efficiency are our (Hongkongers') strength . . . we often respond swiftly to needs and requests . . . It so happened there was another vacancy in our team, and my supervisor asked me to invite other Hongkongers to apply. (Ka-Ming)

Persevering and keep fighting

The exiles were rushed to leave Hong Kong. They had few supports in the new country. Some relied on a friend or two and some local organisations, while others often bear the feeling of loneliness.

I only know two people here, my old schoolmate and another friend . . . I knew nothing about living in the UK, not even how to apply for broadband service . . . I started attending church and making new friends there, things are getting better. (Kwong)

If you were coping all these with your partner, it's definitely much much better . . . when it's cold, get more clothes, no big deal . . . but it's only you staying in this big house alone. (Ka-Lai)

Despite all these struggles, they continued their civic participation in the United Kingdom and participated in different community-based activities. Ka-Lai continued her advocacy work to support Hongkongers; she said: 'helping others is helping myself'. Kwong, knowing he would earn less money working in a non-governmental organization (NGO) than as a social worker, remarked that 'I would rather work in advocacy work and support those people living in poverty'. He found it easier to apply his beliefs and social work values in the United Kingdom context than in Hong Kong. Chi-Keung worked as a freelance journalist. He found it a meaningful job to continue to report and raise awareness of the suppression of democratic voices in Hong Kong. They formed or joined some Community Interest Companies (CICs) and applied for public funds to support these advocacy programmes.

I have connection with a CIC . . . I want to hold some therapeutic group for other Hongkongers . . . let's help each other. (Daisy)

They regarded themselves as having a duty to help other Hongkongers resettle, as well as to inform the local communities about what has happened in Hong Kong since 2019. Persevering and 'keep fighting' are the meaning to live their lives in the new country.

Discussion

'To be or not to be' – that is the question asked by all participants. It encompasses not only the decision to re-enter their profession, but also an in-depth inner search of meaning for oneself. All demonstrated their active agency in making sense of the challenging migration process, reframing difficulties as constructive opportunities for growth.

For most participants, the drastic socio-political changes in Hong Kong forced them to uproot their families in a hurry, leaving behind their loved ones, financial security, and established careers. Participants faced uncertainties and frustrations in both their family and work lives in the *alien-world*, a sphere of difference and otherness becoming apparent when leaving their *homeworld* in

which one feels comfortable and familiar (Seamon, 2022). Through active engagement and exploration, they construct meaning in their new life in the United Kingdom, hopefully settle and conclude that these struggles are worthwhile, leading to something meaningful for them.

García-Ramírez et al. (2011) conceptualise acculturation as a psycho-political process through which migrants experience self-reconstruction and derive meaning on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and citizenship levels. At the intrapersonal level, addressing and overcoming self-doubt is the core. Whether it was the struggle of language proficiency, hurdle in registration, experience of differential treatment at work, or feeling of alienation in the workplace, self-doubt often arose as a result. This resonates with the experiences of migrant social workers from Africa, India, North America, and Eastern Europe (Dzudzor, 2021; Hakak et al., 2022; Hakak and Francis, 2022; Hatzidimitriadou and Psoinos, 2019; Willett and Hakak, 2022). Participants addressed their self-doubt by contemplating another question: 'what is my "beginning heart" (original intention)?' Whether it concerned the pursuit of freedom and democracy or a better future for their children, family, or themselves, these reflections prompted them to think beyond their current challenges and persevere. Their internal dialogues reaffirmed that the decision to migrate was the right one; they made sense of these struggles as a necessary path to actualise their 'beginning hearts'. At the intrapersonal level, this sense-making provided significant meaning, reassuring them that they were not dissociated from their past, and empowering them to regain a sense of control to face the future.

At the interpersonal level, participants made social connections, both new and old ones, to facilitate their adjustment. Similar coping mechanisms are found among Indian and Zimbabwean migrant social workers, who draw support from their respective professional networks (Hakak and Francis, 2022; Willett and Hakak, 2022). The difference is, however, that there was no such established network to support Hong Kong migrant social workers in the United Kingdom. Participants of this study demonstrated agility; they utilise communication technologies and social media to maintain contact with families and friends in Hong Kong, as well as to make new friends, and meet other Hong Kong social workers and Hongkongers in the United Kingdom. These reinstated and newly developed social connections at the interpersonal level are extremely significant. Most participants joined online groups initiated by other Hong Kong social workers in the United Kingdom, which provided them opportunities to meet each other both online and in person. This fostered a sense of belonging, alleviated isolation, and offered a platform for sharing experiences and resources, ultimately helping them regain confidence from self-doubt and facilitating re-engagement with the profession. They derived a holistic meaning from being connected to various spheres of life including families, friendships, hobbies, and careers. This is similar to the experiences of social workers from Zimbabwe, who utilise their social networks for support 'to work, to relax and to be a person' (Willett and Hakak, 2022: 834); these connections served as a vehicle to help participants adapt to English culture and facilitated their acculturation process, rather than leading them to 'separate' from the mainstream culture.

Considering themselves not yet ready to practise social work in the United Kingdom, participants were proactive in seeking opportunities to improve their English and understanding of the new culture. They began with less-demanding roles, volunteering in local charities, and churches or taking paid positions as support workers in various health and social care settings. While some may argue that taking up these 'downward movements' in professional status is a form of deskilling and perpetuates a sense of 'otherness', potentially leading to an erosion of confidence and aspiration (Hakak et al., 2023b; Hatzidimitriadou and Psoinos, 2019; Hussein et al., 2010), it is not the case for these participants. On the contrary, they remarked that this is a necessary step to help them develop confidence in providing effective and safe practice to vulnerable individuals. These roles helped them accumulate experience, rebuild confidence, and gradually adapt to the local culture, ultimately paving the way for re-engagement with the social work profession.

Our study enhances our understanding of how migrant social workers adapt to their new lives at the citizenship level. Participants not only undergo an acculturation process by adjusting to their environment but also strive for a two-fold transformation of both themselves and their environment. Thondhlana et al. (2016: 576) describe Zimbabwean highly skilled migrants as 'competent actors who are capable of creating new forms of cultural capital in their endeavour to regain professional status in the UK'. They are not merely trying to fit in. Some participants collaborated with community organisations, funding bodies, city councils, and members of Parliament, aiming to gain more support for these groups of citizens-to-be. A few, especially the 'exiles', worked hard at the citizenship level. They established CICs and continued their fight for social justice and humanity in the new country. Others actively participated in community activities to tackle environmental issues. All these actions reflected active engagement as responsible citizens, aiming for integration rather than marginalisation or separation in their acculturation processes.

George and Park (2016: 206) define meaning in life as 'the extent to which one's life is experienced as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals, and as mattering in the world', while the meaning framework is 'the complex web of propositions that we hold about how things are in the world and how things will be'. A meaning framework tells us 'what is', 'what ought to be' and 'what goals should be pursued'. It guides us to comprehend what is happening in our lives, directs and motivates us to pursue our life goals, and allows us to evaluate what we have lived as significant and valued in our lived world.

While literature shows that people with certain beliefs and values are drawn to social work (LeCroy, 2011), Buchbinder (2007) discusses the reciprocal influence of professional choice on personal growth. For many participants, previous social work training and practice experiences are about more than just knowledge and skillsets to earn their bread. These trainings and experiences contribute to their personal growth and provide a meaningful framework to navigate a challenging path. Whether at the intrapersonal, interpersonal or citizenship level, the participants' beliefs in social work values were deeply embedded in their meaning-makings. Beliefs in social justice, human rights, freedom, and democracy serve as the foundations for their moves. These beliefs provided them with an anchor, a source of strength and resilience, helping them endure and sustain themselves, carrying the hope that hurdles would be overcome, and a better future lies ahead.

The findings of our study underscore the utility of García-Ramírez et al.'s (2011) acculturative integration framework as an intervention strategy for migrant social workers. This framework provides a structured approach to help migrant social workers navigate the challenges of adapting to a new society. Specifically, it aids them in finding meaning and purpose in their new lives, addressing the unfamiliarity and uncertainties inherent in their new social and professional environments, which can often leave them feeling disempowered.

At its core, the framework enables migrant social workers to regain a sense of agency. It encourages self-reflection at the intrapersonal level, promoting inner strength and resilience. It helps activate support at the interpersonal level, fostering relationships that can provide practical and emotional assistance. Moreover, the framework encourages mobilising collective resources at the citizenship level, empowering migrant social workers to collaborate in addressing systemic barriers they may encounter, such as discrimination at the workplace or limited access to opportunities. This approach not only addresses the immediate challenges migrant social workers face but also provides them with a sense of empowerment. It enables them to transform these challenges into opportunities for personal and collective growth, thus facilitating a smoother transition into their new lives.

Limitations

Due to the socio-political situation in Hong Kong since the democratic movement, most participants had to leave Hong Kong hastily. Therefore, their experiences may not be applicable to other migrant social workers who have had more time to plan and prepare for working and living in another country. Given the proactive and agile nature of Hong Kong social workers, a longitudinal study is needed to understand how they fare in their personal and professional life when they are more settled in the United Kingdom. The sample size of the study was relatively small, and as with all qualitative studies, generalisability is limited.

Conclusion

What has happened in 2019 has changed the lives of many Hongkongers, with migrant social workers facing unique challenges in their acculturation processes. García-Ramírez et al.'s (2011) acculturative integration framework offers insight into how these social workers proactively build their capacities, leverage their assets, and expand their support networks, drawing upon the skills and values they learned from their social work training and previous experiences. The social work values of dedication to social justice, a commitment to professional ethics, and a strong belief in the power of mutual support are essential for migrant social workers in navigating their new lives. These core elements, combined with their determined strategies and growing support networks, are critical for their adaptation to the social and professional challenges they face in the United Kingdom. For many, this process may involve rebuilding or even restarting their careers in a new environment. The resilience and adaptability of these Hong Kong migrant social workers highlight how individuals can forge meaningful paths amid significant life transitions.

Migrant social workers bring invaluable global knowledge and diverse cultural perspectives to the United Kingdom's social work practice. They play an important role in addressing workforce shortages and increasing workforce diversity, while also contributing to the needs of a growing racially and culturally diverse population. The host country has a shared responsibility to support these workers' transition into their new social and professional lives. Proactive measures, such as streamlining the registration process and offering re-engagement opportunities within the social work profession, can help ensure a smooth transition. By creating an environment of support and understanding, migrant social workers can successfully integrate into the UK workforce, benefiting both the professionals and the communities they serve.

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Supplemental material

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