Abstract

Undocumented migration is a global phenomenon. Social work practice with undocumented migrants, worldwide, is ethically complex as social workers are positioned between the mandates of the state, designed to deter “illegal” migration, and the needs of their undocumented clients. Yet, despite this complexity, the relationship between social workers and their undocumented clients remains largely unexamined. In this article, we draw on interviews with 13 social workers to analyse how character is constructed in narratives of practice with undocumented migrants. We have used narrative analysis to explore: the relationship between social workers and their undocumented clients; the influence of other key actors; and social workers’ constructions of their own practice. We identified three key findings from our analysis; i) the emergency circumstances in which social workers encounter undocumented migrants made it difficult to establish relationships and, consequently, undocumented migrants were weakly drawn in social workers’ narratives; ii) off-stage actors who existed outside of social workers’ gaze (migrants’ relatives, employers and migrant brokers) exerted power over undocumented migrants and inhibited trusting relationships with professionals; and iii) tension between social workers’ moral claims about undocumented migrants and their personal empathy led to the construction of social workers as characters enmeshed in emotional conflict.

Keywords: character, narrative analysis, relationship, social work, undocumented migrants

# Teaser text

This article is focused on social workers’ constructions of undocumented migrants. Social workers’ accounts of their practice with undocumented migrants suggested that:

• The emergency circumstances in which social workers encounter undocumented migrants make it difficult to establish relationships

• Off-stage actors who exist outside of social workers’ gaze exert power over undocumented migrants

• Social workers’ moral formulations convey the emotional and ethical complexity of practice with undocumented migrants

The construction of character in social work narratives of practice with undocumented migrants

Undocumented migration is a global phenomenon and, worldwide, undocumented migrants experience multiple harms, including; trauma and death during migration journeys (Allsopp and Chase, 2019; Cornelius, 2001); precarious and exploitative employment (Bloch and McKay, 2015; Massey and Gentsch, 2014); difficulties accessing mainstream services and healthcare (Cheong and Massey, 2019; Calain-Watanabe and Lee, 2012); and fear of detention, deportation and destitution (Andersson, 2014; Bloch and Schuster, 2005), which may lead to chronic stress that affects daily life (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012; Sigona, 2012a).

Traditionally, governments have responded to undocumented migration with policies designed to reduce the movement of people through securitization of borders, soft bordering initiatives, such as involving citizens and civil servants in immigration checks (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018), and by regularizing the status of those unlawfully resident (Chamie, 2020). Social workers play a vital role in both the enactment of soft-bordering policies and distribution of state welfare to undocumented migrants in need. Yet, social work practice with undocumented migrants is both under-theorised and under-researched.

In this article, we contribute to the nascent literature about social work practice with undocumented migrants. First, we describe the UK context and locate the current study within existing social work literature about practice with undocumented migrants. Next, we explore social workers’ accounts of their practice with undocumented migrants using our approach to narrative analysis. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings, pointing to the insights about the relationship between social workers and their undocumented clients.

## The UK context

In England social work is a protected occupation: registered social workers (with a specialist regulator, Social Work England) are employed by regional government agencies (known as local authorities), health services, NGOs or private and independent businesses. Two key pieces of legislation (Children Act 1989; Care Act 2014) define social workers’ responsibilities for children and adults. Undocumented migrants in the UK, numbering approximately 800,000 to 1.2 million (Connor and Passel, 2019), are eligible for services under these Acts if they have relevant care and support needs. However, many migrants with an irregular status are ineligible for state financial support (a condition known as “no recourse to public funds” or “NRPF”; see UKVO, 2016b). With limited statutory guidance, social workers are left to interpret how services, designed for UK subjects, might fit the needs of undocumented migrants.

# Social work and undocumented migration

The nascent literature about undocumented migrants falls in four broad domains: policy impact, access to services, ethics, and professional practice.

#### Policy impact

It is well established in the existing literature about social work and undocumented migration that professional practice takes place in the context of contradictory laws and policies (see Bracci and Valzania, 2015, in Italy; Briskman and Zion, 2014, in Australia; Nordling, 2017, in Sweden; Jolly, 2018, in the UK). In many national contexts, undocumented migrants are excluded from welfare by immigration laws, yet eligible for support from social service organisations because of other social statuses, such as being: a child or unaccompanied minor; in poverty or destitute (Jolly, 2018; Farmer 2017 and Nordling, 2017); subject to domestic abuse (Bhuyan, 2012); or homeless (Cuadra, 2015). In England, undocumented migrants are excluded from most mainstream benefits, from social housing and they are unable to legally work or rent accommodation, but they are entitled to primary healthcare and compulsory education (Jolly, 2018).

#### Access to services

Studies that have examined undocumented migrants’ experiences of social service organisations have presented a largely negative view of professional practice. Undocumented migrants have been: offered insufficient levels of support to meet need; wrongly refused support; and sometimes threatened with the removal of their children by child welfare agencies (Jolly, 2018; Farmer, 2017). Consequently, children and families have been left in: poverty (Jolly, 2018); inappropriate accommodation (Price and Spencer, 2015); and at risk of exploitation (Dexter, Capron and Gregg, 2016). Factors that have been found to affect access to services include; migrants’ linguistic ability; availability of language services, migrant knowledge and experience of social care systems; and social worker knowledge of migrant’s rights (Ayón, 2009; Bhuyan, 2012; Bracci and Valzania, 2015). Such limited and poor-quality provision has been described as “statutory neglect” in the UK context (Jolly, 2018, p.190).

#### Ethics

It is evident from the literature that practice with undocumented migrants presents ethical challenges for social workers due to conflicts of loyalty between employer or state and the undocumented migrant (Briskman and Zion, 2014). For example, to report undocumented migrants to immigration authorities may contradict professional values (Furman, 2012). To ignore migration law may be beneficial to individual undocumented service users but may compromise service delivery or place social workers at risk of unemployment (Furman, 2012; Bhuyan, 2012). To address these challenges, social workers have been found to adopt discretionary practices. Nordling (2017) and Jönsson (2014) framed social workers’ discretion as a powerful mode of practice, capable of disrupting normative categories of citizen/noncitizen. However, while discretionary practices may benefit individuals, they do not challenge the exclusionary laws which create undocumented migrants’ vulnerability (Bhuyan, 2012).

#### Professional Practice

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is ample evidence that undocumented migrants were afraid to approach or trust social workers due to fear of detention and deportation (Križ and Skivenes, 2012; Slaytor and Križ, 2015). Migrants’ ‘home country’ experiences of coercive state control inhibited relationships with professionals in ‘host countries’; similarly, cultural differences in help-seeking prevented undocumented migrants from accessing support (Earner, 2007). There is evidence that social worker attitudes to migration affect working relationships with undocumented migrants. Bhuyan, Park and Randle (2012) found that good knowledge of immigration law predicted more favourable responses to undocumented migrants. Social workers whose role perception was bounded by national laws and resources were less favourably inclined toward undocumented migrants, compared with those with expansive views of social work grounded on human rights and social justice, who tended to exceed their professional mandate (Cuadra and Staaf, 2014; Nordling, 2017). Social worker attitudes to deservingness also shape perceptions. For example, Mexican migrants in the US with good knowledge of social care systems were perceived as “working the system” (Ayon, 2009, p.613); while positive constructions of deservingness, often of children, led to more favourable professional responses (Nordling, 2017). It is noteworthy that several authors have framed the face-to-face social worker/undocumented migrant encounter as a site for structural change. For Briskman and Zion (2014) this was political change through social workers bearing witness to the suffering of undocumented migrants. However, no study has, to date, examined the relationship between social workers and undocumented migrants in depth.

The social work literature has tended to focus on practice with undocumented individuals or families, while studies from the broader migration literature have emphasised that migration is rarely a solo project: other key actors, such as migrant brokers and smugglers (Sanchez, 2017), employers and migrants’ social contacts (Bloch and McKay, 2015), play an important role in undocumented migrants’ everyday lives, about which the social work literature is largely silent. In this article, we have sought to address these gaps in the literature through examination of: relationships between social workers and undocumented migrants; other key actors in migrants’ networks; and emotional dimensions of ethical challenges involved in practice with undocumented migrants. We suggest that this study offers methodological uniqueness. We have adopted close narrative analysis, an approach not yet deployed in existing literature, that provides a method to weave together subjective experiences within the structural conditions in which practice occurs.

## Research aims

The overarching aim of this article is to explore social workers’ relationships with and constructions of undocumented migrants by examining three questions: how do social workers construct;

1. the character of undocumented migrants?
2. the ‘off stage’ characters in undocumented migrants’ lives (e.g. smugglers, employers, and family members)?
3. their practice with undocumented migrants?

# Methods

## Capturing character through narrative analysis

Social workers tell stories about the individuals with whom they work and the circumstances they encounter (Hall, 1997). These stories are powerful as they convince different audiences about realities of service users’ lives and appropriate professional responses (Baldwin, 2013; Hall, 1997). The human relationships constructed through story telling provide a central focus of narrative enquiry (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). Given our aim to explore the relationships involved in social work with undocumented migrants, we have selected narrative analysis to examine the construction of character in social workers’ accounts of practice.

We have focused on three key characters in these narratives; i) the main character (undocumented migrants); ii) the off-stage characters (those involved in undocumented migrant’s social networks); and iii) the helping character (social workers). To describe the relationships between these characters, we use the analogy of actors on the stage. The undocumented characters were the protagonists of each account and were positioned centre stage. The off-stage characters were a cast of secondary actors whose actions took place beyond the reach of the social workers’ narratives. The helping characters in the accounts were social workers. We have avoided privileging the social worker voice as narrative author and, instead, we have examined the social worker as a character constructed through the texts. Finally, we position ourselves, the social science readers of the accounts, as the audience, with a role in construction and interpretation of character. Following from literary theory - Barthes’ (1977) notion of the “death of the author”, and, subsequent, “the birth of the reader” - we suggest that our reading of the social work accounts is an interpretative act (p.148). Again, following Barthes’ argument that “the Text is plural” and irreducible to a single meaning, we acknowledge the scope for alternative interpretations by subsequent readers and this has guided our decision to present lengthy extracts of narrative in this article (1977, p.5).

## The site of the study

The study took place in England and most participants were employed by either government agencies (n=9) or NGOs (n=4) in the North-West and Midlands (see table 1). Most interviews took place at participants’ place of work, one interview took place at the first author’s university office and one interview was conducted via telephone. Participants were employed in different service areas (7 specialist migration-related roles; 6 statutory child welfare and adult enablement roles).

## Participants

A convenience sample of 13 participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Principal Social Workers (experienced practitioners with strategic responsibilities) attached to teaching partnerships in England circulated invitations to participate in the study to practitioners in government agencies (nine social workers responded). The first author recruited four participants from NGOs with expertise in practice with migrant groups. Participants were selected if they were: (i) registered social workers, and; (ii) able to discuss an experience of practice with an undocumented individual or family. Participants had varied experience in practice with undocumented migrants (from the expert to the novice). As detailed in table 1, 11 participants identified as “White British” and two participants identified as “Chinese” and “African”. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, selected by participants. Given our analytical approach, we decided that 13 participants were sufficient to reach conceptual depth (Nelson, 2017).

## Interviews

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews which lasted, on average, 50 minutes (shortest 32, longest 107 minutes). Participants were asked to “tell the story of a case involving practice with an undocumented individual / family”. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## Analysis

We conducted analysis in three steps, as follows.

Step 1: The first author listened to audio recordings of interviews in full and conducted readings of interview transcripts to develop data familiarity. We then identified the storied parts of the interviews and, following the approaches of Gee (1991), Mishler (1991) and Riessman (1993), created a condensed representation of each narrative in verse, organised into a series of stanzas. To create each verse, we distilled social workers’ statements into single line clauses with the aim of capturing the essence of the spoken word. We then arranged these clauses, whilst listening to the audio recordings of social workers’ accounts, into stanzas to create a narrative which represents our analytic view of social workers’ construction of character. This approach has allowed us to present a large amount of information in a limited number of words, which maintains the rhythm of the original speech.

Step 2: We conducted detailed analysis of the stanzas through a series of questions adapted from Riessman (2008): i) who were the principal characters in each narrative and what ‘character work’ was conducted to create these characters? ii) how do characters interact?; iii) what is the moral of the story and what moral claims are made?

Step 3: We generated themes by comparing how narratives revealed constructions of character.

## Ethical considerations

Scholarly examination of undocumented migration risks revealing the identity of migrants and their “illegal” status, which has serious implications for individuals who actively conceal their status to avoid enforcement action. Elsewhere, we have written about the ethical barriers involved in research with undocumented migrants who are, by necessity, a hidden social group (Machin and Shardlow, 2018). The ‘rich description’ involved in narrative research and the focus on character in this article increased this risk. To mitigate this risk, we asked social work participants not to reveal the names of the undocumented migrants with whom they worked. Pseudonyms (selected by interviewees) were used for all participants and for the undocumented clients discussed during interviews and written consent to participate was acquired. Following the transcription of interviews, the first author removed information which could identify social work participants and their clients from the data set. These procedures to ensure anonymity of both social workers and their undocumented clients were approved in advance by Keele University.

# Findings

Our analysis of the depiction of character in social workers’ accounts of practice with undocumented migrants has been organised around the construction of three key characters:

i) the main character;

ii) the off-stage characters; and

iii) the helping character.

Although all 13 practice narratives informed our analysis, we have selected three extended extracts that typify how each character was constructed and allow readers of the article to engage with our close analysis of language, context, and structure.

## The construction of the main character

Undocumented migrants were the main characters in social workers’ practice accounts: these characters were constructed through narrators’ descriptive clauses, the sequencing of events and the spaces in which the narratives were set. The following extract from an interview with Doris, a white British woman, an experienced service manager employed by a NGO, contained a typical construction of an undocumented client. Doris’ orientation to the narrative began with a description of how her agency initially encountered an undocumented Chinese woman and her children.

Extract 1

she was literally dumped on our doorstep

herself and her two little children

I think there was a babe in arms who was probably less than a year

and a toddler of between two and three

her and her children and her black bin bags of stuff arrived outside our door

we discovered that she was the wife of a Chinese man who had made an asylum claim

she had absolutely no idea what the status of that asylum claim was

he disappeared

I have no idea what happened

I’m not sure we ever discovered all of that

they’d been living in a flat and she could no longer pay for it because she had nothing

no money coming in, no idea, she didn’t know what to do at all

spoke no English

and her children didn’t either

and she just got dumped

I’m not sure we even knew who dumped her

it may have been the landlord of the property they were living in

the flat above a shop or restaurant or something

and he just dropped her there

In Doris’ account the main character, the undocumented Chinese woman, was characterized through a brief description of her circumstances. Having been “dumped” at the door of Doris’ agency, the narrator described her destitution. Through force of utterance, Doris emphasised the lack of economic and social resources available to the woman in a series of descriptive clauses where “no” and “nothing” were repeated several times: “she had nothing, no money coming in, no idea, she didn’t know what to do at all, spoke no English, and her children didn’t either”. The use of dramatic language in the extract, such as “dumped” (repeated three times) and “dropped” (repeated twice), and the circularity of the extract where the words “dumped” and “dropped” both began and ended the description of the main character, created a sense of desperation, and suggested that no one was willing to take responsibility for the undocumented woman and her children. Doris noted that the woman’s possessions were in bin bags, an image that suggested little dignity. Similar images were used in other practice accounts to describe the desperate circumstances of undocumented clients. For example, Robert, an experienced local government social worker, described the sum of an undocumented client’s belongings after ten years in the UK as “just a tiny little toiletries bag and a few papers”.

Doris’ description suggested that the undocumented woman had limited agency. Her immigration status was dependent on her husband’s asylum claim, and his disappearance had left the woman and her children destitute. She was constructed as a woman with limited understanding of her own status in the emphatic clause, “she had absolutely no idea what the status of that [her husband’s] asylum claim was”. By emphasizing that the client had two young children, one of whom was a “babe in arms”, Doris created the image of a woman who, quite literally, had her hands full, and would therefore have limited resources to resolve her own status issues.

Doris’ construction of the undocumented woman’s character implied that the relationship between the social worker and the client was limited. Doris used language that indicated her uncertainty about the details of the case, such as “I think”, “I have no idea”, “I’m not sure”, “it may have been”. Similar expressions of uncertainty were found in other practice accounts. In extract 1, the space where the initial encounter was set, the doorway of Doris’ agency, created a sense of liminality. The undocumented woman was situated in an in-between space, where the networks and resources that had sustained her life prior to the referral were no longer available. Interestingly, in Doris’ full account, all subsequent scenes took place in or on the threshold of social work offices. Possibly, these liminal spaces made it difficult for Doris to develop a meaningful relationship with the woman and to become familiar with her everyday experiences.

## The construction of the off-stage characters

Social workers’ practice narratives included a cast of secondary characters whose actions affected the construction of the main characters. These characters, including undocumented migrants’ spouses, parents, siblings, and the people involved in facilitating migration journeys, were located firmly in the background of the practice accounts. They were constructed through the retelling of action that occurred outside of the social workers’ narratives. These “off-stage” actors and their actions appeared to have considerable power over the undocumented migrants at the centre of the narratives.

The following extract, which is taken from Winston’s account of practice with two undocumented Vietnamese young people, conveys the power imbalance between off stage actors and main characters. Winston, a female, White British, experienced social worker in a specialist team working with unaccompanied minors, began working with the two young people when they were discovered during a police raid on a nail bar where they lived and worked. As the relationship between Winston and the young people developed, several background characters came into the frame.

Extract 2

they’d travelled from Vietnam

a long journey in the back of lorries

they said they were squashed down by boxes

hidden underneath items

the girl said to me

they’d gone into this house that was in the middle of nowhere

she said that there were lots of older men there

that she was raped on several occasions

…

she met this boyfriend who offered her the opportunity to work

he gave her money

to get on a train

she was picked up at a station

she was taken to the nail bar

it was already prearranged for her

The extract provided a window into networks that facilitate and sustain undocumented migration. The account revealed that organised networks, operating outside of the frame of the social worker’s gaze, brought these young people from Vietnam to the UK and arranged their work in exploitative labour systems. This network involved abuse, such as the young woman’s sexual abuse during her journey to the UK. Other practice narratives referred to the routine sexual abuse of women, both during migration journeys and, also, after their arrival in the UK.

Winston constructed the two young people, in particular, the young woman, as passive in relation to the off-stage actors who were active and held considerable power over her. This was evident in the description of two significant journeys: one long and dangerous journey from Vietnam to the UK and one “pre-arranged” train journey that moved the young woman from London to the North of England for “work” purposes (she described evidence that the young woman had been subject to repeated sexual exploitation in the flat above the nail bar). Winston constructed the young woman as without agency; these journeys happened *to* the young woman, over which she appeared to have little control. Embedded in the structure of the narrative about these two journeys, Winston used a series of passive sentences that described how the young woman was moved, first across international borders, and then within the UK. She was “squashed down by boxes”, “hidden” in the lorry, “taken” and “picked up” along the way. However, the agentic, background characters, namely the traffickers - older males who sexually abused her during the journey and the boyfriend who arranged her employment - were only briefly sketched in Winston’s account. The spaces in which these scenes took place, the back of a lorry and an unknown house in an unknown country, conjure images of darkness and danger. These were unknown places without discernible characteristics that could bring the spaces to light or the abusers to account.

## The construction of the helping character

The social worker played the role of the helping character in the practice accounts, constructed through the moral claims made about the main characters. Almost always, depictions of character in narratives involve moral formulations, which relate to the narrator’s presentation of self (Riessman, 2000). Social workers made a series of moral claims about the undocumented migrants with whom they worked: these claims were located on a continuum between migrants constructed either as wholly blameless or wholly culpable for their migration status. Such moral claims were rarely fixed, as the constructions of undocumented migrants shifted within practice narratives.

The next extract conveyed an explicit example of a narrator who blamed their undocumented client for their status. Such an explicit attribution of blame was rare in the study. However, the extract demonstrated the emotional complexity that this moral claim created for the social worker, also found more implicitly in other narratives. The extract is taken from a government social worker’s account of work with an Indian undocumented woman, waiting to be deported. This was the social worker’s only experience of practice with an undocumented migrant.

Extract 3

the decision was already made from the Home Office that this lady’s going to be deported

before I even got involved in the case

she’d been living here for 16 years

for the past six years

she hadn’t been following the protocols

signing at the police station

so it was very difficult

…

on a work level

without sounding awful [pause]

it is her own fault

but then the personal side of me

she hasn’t got a bank

she’s got no money

she can’t even go to the shop for a loaf of bread

she can’t buy make up

have some shoes

all them little things

even though I know on the legal side she hasn’t obliged

on the personal side

I find that really difficult

I feel awful for her

she’s in that situation because she chose to be

I do feel sympathetic towards her

I found that very very difficult

…

but the difficulty is

it has come out that she hasn’t got any care needs

I find that difficult

she’s still in that situation

I’m going to close the case

it’s not going to go away

…

I’ve learnt a lot from the case

it does make you see things differently

you hear about cases and you hear situations

but until you’ve done one yourself

it’s hard to explain

you do feel more for people

**…**

she doesn’t understand that it’s her own fault

I don’t want to say that but it’s true

she could have easily just gone to the [police] station and just signed

she’d have her status

“you have caused it yourself”

The social worker began the narrative by absolving herself of responsibility, both for the client’s migration status and the Home Office’s decision to deport her, which predated the social worker’s involvement. By removing herself from the decision, she created opportunity within the narrative to attribute blame elsewhere – to the undocumented woman. The connection between the undocumented client’s lack of compliance with a weekly requirement to sign in at a police station and the decision to deport her seemed overly simplistic. Nonetheless, the social worker returned repeatedly to this attribution of blame and to confirm her lack of involvement. Debbie demonstrated awareness that her moral claims about the woman may be poorly received – “without sounding awful [pause], it is her own fault”. The pause suggested that Debbie considered her audience’s likely response before the attribution of blame. Awareness of the performative nature of the interviews and an interest in presenting a positive self was common when social workers made moral judgements about undocumented clients in their narratives.

In the second verse, the focus shifted from attributing blame to empathy for the undocumented client, due to her destitute circumstances. The social worker moved between blame and empathy throughout the verse. Debbie dealt with this tension by describing her personal and her professional self as two separate identities. Her professional identity accepted that the undocumented woman would be deported because of her lack of compliance with the conditions of her status. However, personally, she wished to use her own resources to meet her client’s pressing material needs. This division between the personal and the professional to resolve tension between blame and empathy was a common strategy used in other practice narratives. Debbie’s emotional response to the undocumented woman’s circumstances was expressed through repetition of the evaluative clauses “I found that very difficult” and “I found that really hard”. Almost mirroring a poetic refrain, Debbie repeated these two sentences 23 times, punctuating her full narrative with this expression of her emotional experience. The attribution of blame was further complicated by the final two verses where Debbie suggested that working with an undocumented migrant makes you “see things differently” and “feel more for people”. There is a sense that Debbie’s preconceived ideas about undocumented migrants were abstract, whereas encountering an undocumented migrant face-to-face and developing a relationship had complicated her conceptions. However, the final line returned to the attribution of blame, this time directed at the undocumented client as though Debbie were invoking a conversation with her: “you have caused it yourself”. By using the linguistic device of reported speech and enacting a conversation with the undocumented client, Debbie again resolved the emotional tension arising from her personal empathy for the woman and her repeated attribution of blame.

# Discussion

In the following section we examine: how the construction of character in these accounts relates to professional practice; gaps in the construction of character; and alternative characterisations. We suggest what these gaps may imply for professional practice.

## The main character and alternative readings

Undocumented migrants were weakly drawn in social workers’ narratives. In literary criticism, a distinction is made between “flat” and “round” characters (Chatman, 1978). A flat character is described in little detail, with one or two key traits that sum up their entire characterization. By contrast, a round character is complex, ambiguous, and described in life-like terms that create a sense of familiarity. We suggest that social workers’ characterization of undocumented migrants was mostly flat, with just one or two discerning features, usually relating to destitution and desperate need for help. Despite their position centre stage in the narratives, undocumented migrants rarely drove the plot forward and, instead, the plot was based on the actions of off-stage characters and the helping character.

This flat characterization suggests that there was little sense of a developed relationship between social workers and undocumented service users. The invocation of liminal spaces, such as doorways in Doris’ account and, in the other accounts, ambulances and police custody suites, strengthens the sense that the relationship between social workers and undocumented migrants lacked familiarity. These spaces were also associated with emergency circumstances and short-term interventions. Social workers were largely unable to access the homes where undocumented service users had been living prior to the referral to social services. The ‘home visit’, recognized in the broader professional literature as a site where social work is constructed and relationships are forged (Ferguson, 2018), was mentioned in just one of the 13 narratives, echoing previous studies which have suggested that there were barriers to relationship building between social workers and undocumented migrants (Ayón, 2009; Križ and Skivenes, 2012; Slayter and Križ, 2015).

Gaps in the construction of undocumented migrants open opportunities for exploration of alternative readings. In Doris’ narrative, the undocumented woman was presented as lacking agency. Information about her pre-migratory experiences, journey to and arrival in the UK and how she had lived under the radar of state services prior to her husband’s disappearance, were missing from the account. The wider literature about undocumented migration, whilst not denying the harms of undocumented status, has suggested a complex picture of agency. Elsewhere, undocumented migrants have been characterized as actors with agency in migration decisions, skilled at navigating social networks to maximise support and to conceal their status (Bloch et al., 2014).

## The off-stage character and alternative readings

We suggest that the off-stage characters in social worker’s narratives were nameless and faceless flat characterisations with little to no description. Their actions took place outside of the frame of social worker’s accounts, in dark, indiscernible spaces. However, the off-stage characters exerted power over undocumented migrants which had significant impact on narrative plots. These characters arranged migration journeys, facilitated ‘illegal’ work, and caused destitution (as in Doris’ account of the undocumented woman’s husband, whose disappearance left his family homeless). In Winston’s narrative, and in other accounts, the off-stage characters could be exploitative and abusive, inflicting great harm on the undocumented migrants at the narrative centre. Social workers were unable to access or to disrupt these characters’ powerful networks. Migrants’ fears of revealing their networks to professionals was an additional barrier to building trusting relationships with social workers. Instead, practitioners were involved in addressing problems that these characters created for undocumented migrants.

The wider literature about undocumented migration, again, reveals gaps in social workers’ constructions of the off-stage characters. There is evidence that undocumented migrants are often involved in reciprocal relationships with those who facilitate migration and exploitative employment (Bloch et al., 2015). Moral codes, quite separate from formal definitions of abuse and exploitation, operate within these networks (Hiah and Staring, 2016). Ethnic, cultural, familial and social ties bind people together in ways that are not well understood by social workers (Bloch and McKay, 2015).

## The helping character and alternative readings

The helping character, social workers, were constructed through their own moral claims about undocumented migrants. We found that social workers’ moral formulations about undocumented migrants were complex and that these claims shifted between positions of blame and sympathy. Although undocumented migrants were characterized as lacking power and agency in relation to both off-stage characters and, also, immigration systems, most social workers appeared to have accepted broader discourses that position undocumented migrants as individually responsible for their “illegal” immigration status. The disjuncture between the attribution of blame and personal sympathy for undocumented migrants created emotional conflict for social workers, illustrated through Debbie’s reoccurring refrain, “I found that very difficult”.

Several studies have found that social workers face ethical dilemmas in their practice with undocumented migrants when their commitment to social work values, such as respect for persons and social justice, conflicts with the exclusionary immigration laws within which they work (Briskman and Zion, 2014; Furman et al., 2007). Our interpretation of Debbie’s separation between her professional and personal self, with different moral responsibilities towards her client and her agency, embodies this moral conflict and resonates with the work of Nordling (2017) and Cuadra and Staaf (2014) who also found this tendency amongst the social workers in their studies.

Yet, we are less convinced by the suggestion that the face-to-face encounter between social workers and their clients brings opportunities for structural change (as suggested by Briskman and Zion, 2014) as the personal and the professional self were not given equal weight in the narratives. Rather, the professional self, and the agency mandates, were mostly prioritised. Instead, we suggest that social workers, like Debbie, are aware of their preferred course of action, but feel powerless because of the structures (legal, policy, agency) within which they work. We find the term “moral distress”, borrowed from the nursing literature, a useful way of conceptualizing the experience (Weinberg, 2009). Moral distress refers to the emotional and psychological effect of being blocked from pursuing what one believes to be the correct course of action by structural constraints, which may be political and systemic. We suggest that Debbie was experiencing moral distress because of her perceived inability to act to improve the circumstances of the undocumented woman with whom she was working. Debbie was powerless to affect the decision to deport the woman and her intervention was ending because the woman no longer met eligibility criteria for the service. Yet Debbie’s narrative illustrated the emotional dimensions of closing the case without effecting any further change.

# Limitations

The modest sample size limits the generation of a representative understanding of social work practice with undocumented migrants. Yet, the in-depth interviews offer rich material which contribute to a more nuanced understanding of practice with undocumented migrants. This study relates specifically to the English context, but, given the global dimensions of undocumented migration and the harms that lack of regular immigration status causes, the findings about the limited intimacy in the social worker-service user relationship and the moral distress experienced by social workers in practice with undocumented migrants may apply in other jurisdictions.

# Conclusions

The aim of this article was to examine social workers’ relationships with and constructions of undocumented migrants. We have argued that social workers’ flat constructions of undocumented migrants suggested that working relationships with undocumented clients were difficult to establish. This is partly explained by the illusive yet important presence of ‘off stage’ characters in undocumented clients’ lives; the relatives, contacts, employers and migration facilitators who controlled many aspects of migrants’ lives and discouraged trust with professionals. Social workers were unable to identify or influence these characters, although they recognised their importance. Finally, we have argued that social workers’ moral formulations about undocumented migrants are emotionally and ethically complex: Practice with undocumented migrants had a deep personal impact on social workers which we have conceptualised as a form of ‘moral distress’.

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# Table 1

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudonym | Gender/age /ethnicity | Employer/Practice type | Years in practice |
| Robert | M/53/White British | NHS Trust/Adults | 21 |
| Stephen | M/46/Chinese | NGO/Community work | 6 |
| Rebwar | M/45/Black African | NGO/Advice and support | 6 |
| Tom | M/27/White British | NGO/Advice and support | 3 |
| Bob | M/53/White British | Government/ Children | 10 |
| Simon | M/37/White British | Government/ Children | 4 |
| Marie | F/32/White British | Government/ Children | 1 |
| Doris | F/62/White British | NGO/Advice and support | 39 |
| Debbie | F/27/White British | Government/Adults | 7 |
| Sarah | F/46/White British | Government/Adults | 12 |
| DJA | F/ 50/White British | Government/Children | 2 |
| Winston | F/51/ White British | Government/Adults | 5 |
| Jane | F/48/White British | Government/Adults | 5 |