A few people are leaving [Britain], but there are also a lot who are arriving. There are more families now. Not just men on their own. At first the men migrated alone and left their wives and children in Poland. They either kept house or worked. But now everyone wants to be together. A family is a family, it should stick together. (Sylwia, UK, 2009)

I took a risk, but, you know, I could always have gone back. (Izabela, UK, 2008, on moving to the UK with her family)

Introduction

This paper is based on a project which explores migration by whole families from Poland. Migration by Polish families to the UK, and to EU countries in general, is an increasingly popular migration strategy. Numbers appear to have grown quickly in recent years and there were perhaps 170,000 Polish-born children in the UK in 2007.  

If one parent has a good job offer, or has already found a good job in Western Europe, it’s worthwhile for the whole family to try emigrating

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1 27 February 2008, E-mail communication regarding unpublished IPPR research from Dr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, Director of Research Strategy, Institute for Public Policy Research (London).
My project is based mostly on interviews with Polish mothers without higher education (100 interviews as of 1 May 2009) and an opinion poll which I commissioned in Poland in March 2008. I interviewed women in both Poland and the UK. Looking in particular at smaller towns and villages (the main places of origin of current Polish migrants) my project asks why some working-class Polish families migrate abroad, and how they make decisions about how long to stay there. This conference paper discusses some identity issues involved with making such migration decisions. In particular, I consider migrants as members of transnational networks (Poland spread across national borders); local communities with their own migration cultures (Poland as disparate localities); and evolving gender roles.

My research subjects are labour migrants and I employ a livelihood strategy approach to understand their decision-making. Olwig and Sørensen suggest that, although ‘a basic assumption in migration studies is that the search for a better livelihood is a main cause of migratory movements (. . .) such studies rarely take in-depth research into specific livelihoods as their point of departure’. The ‘livelihood’ concept attempts to encompass the totality of the migrant experience, understanding the multiple connections between the migrant and society. Making a living is not just

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2 This survey, conducted on my behalf by BD Center Consulting, is the source for all the charts in this paper. 1101 inhabitants were interviewed by telephone in Podkarpackie Region (except the regional capital and only city, Rzeszów).

3 I conducted 18 pilot interviews in Poland in 2007. 9 were in ‘Poland A’, small towns and villages in Wielkopolska, on average a rich region with low levels of international migration. 9 were in ‘Poland B’, the small towns of Elk and Suwałki in the poor, north-eastern corner of Poland, which has above average levels of international migration. I then decided to concentrate the main part of the research in Poland B and to that end made research visits in March-April 2008 (Grajewo, 33 interviews); September 2008 (Sanok, 21 interviews); and March 2009 (Grajewo, 10 interviews). Since November 2006 I have also been interviewing mothers in the west of England: Bristol, a large city; Bath, a medium-sized town (pop. 80,000); and the smaller towns of Trowbridge and Frome. To date I have done 18 interviews and hope to conduct a further 10-20. All the translations are my own. Where I use the words ‘migrate’ and ‘migration’ in quotations from the interviews, the Polish words used by my interviewees were usually the more colloquial wyjeżdzać/wyjechać, or the plural noun wyjazdy. Other sources are participant observation as a volunteer English teacher in a Polish toddlers’ group and Saturday school; and interviews with key informants in job centres, recruitment agencies, schools, etc. Because there were fewer UK than Polish interviews, I have anonymised the current place of residence of women interviewed in England. The research has been funded by the British Academy since 2008.


acquiring money and other tangible resources, exploiting one’s existing material, social and human capital, but also acting out expectations of what is considered appropriate, based on knowledge of the surrounding social environment.

Adopting and then employing a new livelihood strategy\(^7\) in a foreign country involves a migrant making a sequence of decisions about what feelers to put out to the receiving country and what ties to make there, at the same time letting go of certain support lines to the sending country. ‘Sending’ and ‘receiving’ are good metaphors if it is understood that reception is a gradual process which can also be reversed – the migrant can voluntarily send him or herself \textit{back}, when ties to the home country are sufficiently strong. The situation is much more complicated when whole families are involved,\(^8\) and decisions about ties to make and break, new identities to forge and old ones to retrieve are negotiated or fought out within the household. Some aspects of this process are the topic of my paper.

\textbf{The migrant as invitee: adhering to convention}

With the abolition of the command economy and the introduction of democratisation, the need to ‘beat the system’ should be reduced and trust should increase in formal agencies. Hence one would expect increasing use in Poland of job centres, recruitment agencies, etc., and decreased reliance on informal networks of family and friends. In fact, it seems that this development proceeds more rapidly in places without strong migration traditions.\(^9\) Grajewo and Sanok, the two main fieldwork sites in Poland, are small towns with long and strong migration traditions and many residents have fixed ideas about how migration should be done. One aspect of the these traditions seems to be a strong belief in only using family and friendship ties to migrate abroad. Although

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\(^7\) ‘Strategy’ may be quite a grand term for an often haphazard process, but it captures the idea that the migrant has a certain amount of agency and is not just the passive victim of economic circumstances.


\(^9\) ‘In some regions migration capital has been amassed over decades, in others (such as Warsaw) migration capital is acquired quickly, thanks to easy access to knowledge and information’ (E. Jaźwińska Jaźwińska, ‘Migracje niepełne ludności Polski: zróżnicowanie międzyregionalne’ in E. Jaźwińska and M. Okólski, (eds.), \textit{Ludzie na hustawce: Migracje między periferiami Polski i zachodu} (Warsaw: Scholar, 2001), p. 124. A Polish government survey suggests that use of recruitment agencies for migration more than doubled over the years 2004-6 for Poland as a whole, but regions varied greatly: registered take-up was lowest of all in Podlasie, where Grajewo is located. (‘Za granicę przez agencje’, \textit{Biuletyn Migracyjny} 13, p. 4 (Warsaw, Warsaw University Centre of Migration Research, 2007), at http://www.biuletynmigracyjny.uw.edu.pl, accessed January 2008. By contrast, some of my UK interviewees were not from locations with exceptionally high migration and their husbands had come to work as bus drivers \textit{via} an agency recruiting for First Bus. For more discussion, see Anne White and Louise Ryan, ‘Polish “Temporary” Migration: the Formation and Significance of Social Networks’, \textit{Europe-Asia Studies}, 60, 9 (2008).
of course there are exceptions, the ‘use’ of ties is often coupled with the convention that the potential migrant waits to be invited. Their ‘strategy’ involves taking up such an opportunity.10

Usually one person collects someone else. Mostly a woman invites her best woman friend, or a man his male friend. That’s how the chain is formed as one person ‘pulls in’ the next. Later perhaps the brother will invite his sister, or a sister her brother.

In Grajewo, for example, Dorota described her friend in London’s telephone calls:

‘Dorota, I’m alive. I know what I’m working for. And I have free weekends’ (….) She says, ‘It’s another world (…)’ She says to me, ‘Pack up and come!’ (….) Here in Poland she never had a holiday, but she went to England and she took her children to Majorca for two weeks. She said, ‘Dorota, it was super!’

If families migrate, therefore, it is often because they are invited to do so.

Marianna: My sister came to the UK first and she helped me come here. She knew how hard it was in Poland and she thought it would be better in England.
Anne: Could you say that she persuaded you?
Marianna: Yes, I agree, you could say that.
Anne: It was her idea first?
Marianna: Yes, she suggested the idea, and I thought about it, [and asked…] my daughter if she would like to go, and she had no objections.

The downside of this convention is that if you want to migrate with your family but are not invited by anyone it can be difficult to create a successful migration strategy. Celina, for example, was frustrated because she wanted to take her two daughters abroad, most of her friends had already gone, yet no one would invite her.

It’s really strange (…) that people don’t know how to help each other, or don’t want to help. Some people go abroad, for example my friends, and sometimes you say, ‘When you get there, look out for something for me’. Then suddenly the link between us breaks (…) I used to ask sometimes, and it turned out to be a non-starter, they didn’t want to hear what I was saying, so I came to feel that it wasn’t worth asking, humiliating myself or something.11

A further aspect of the networking process is that potential migrants do not necessarily take on trust the stories of those who invite them: ease of travel in the 21st century facilitates inspection visits, where the invitee can acquire a sense of whether they could envisage themselves living abroad. It seems that wives almost always pay such visits if their husband migrates first. Hanna, for example, reported:

10 For example, Felicja in Sanok (2008) described how, in the summer, ‘Young people tell each other their stories, persuading their friends to join them, saying “Come and earn some money, you can buy a car”, that’s what they say, sitting outside the block of flats. They sit on the benches and have these conversations. One persuades the other.’
11 Celina, Grajewo 2009.
'I came for a visit, for two weeks, I liked it and I found work and stayed a month (....) I got to know my way round and discovered the town was perfectly all right (....) We could move here with the children and feel safe.'

Where the person is Poland is invited by someone to join them abroad, there is often an element of sustained persuasion, as the example of Dorota’s telephone conversations implies. Spouses in particular often have to do a great deal of persuading: my research in Poland suggests that alongside the visible phenomenon of mass family reunification there is a kind of ‘black matter’ of failed attempts at reunification where the spouse left in Poland cannot see him or herself as a migrant, sometimes as the result of a ‘failed’ inspection visit. Janina, for example, had worked in Italy when her children were small and:

We were thinking about whether to be together as a family. To emigrate to Italy and be there with the children. But my husband didn’t want to very much. He somehow couldn’t see himself living there. It was different to go for a short period. After that, he could return home, where he felt safe, he was the master, he was where he belonged. [Being in] Italy did not really suit him. (Janina, Sanok, 2008.)

**Migrating as a family: breaking with convention**

So off he went, and after about four months, six at most, not longer than six months, his wife followed after. Everyone in the village thought they were mad, that they simply wouldn’t be able to cope (…) They reproached them and said that he should have gone on his own, or perhaps she could have left the children with the grandmother.  

Although there are many cases where one spouse goes to the West intending to come back soon, but then has a change of heart and tries to persuade the family to reunite abroad, it seems to be increasingly common for Polish families to plan from the beginning that they will probably reunite as quickly as possible. The adoption of whole family migration as a livelihood strategy has to be understood as a break with standard practice. Among poorly qualified Polish labour migrants, migration by just one spouse, without children, was definitely the norm in the 1990s and to a large extent is still the norm today. The self-sacrificing parent is a characteristic local migrant identity in places such as Grajewo and Sanok.

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It’s simply an act of self-sacrifice. My brother has worked 17 yrs abroad and he had a good profession here. He was a surveyor (...) But he went abroad in order to provide for his son.\footnote{Anita, Grajewo, 2008.}

It was a good idea for me to go and work abroad a bit, to help my children. We have a daughter (...) in her final year at Warsaw University, she’s doing English and will be a translator. And the money I earned in America went to help her (...) I thought to myself on occasion: my life is slipping away and here I am abroad all alone and they are in Poland alone without me.\footnote{Beata, Grajewo, 2008.}

However, in postcommunist societies younger people – those whose entire adult lives have taken place since 1989 - often have rather different ideas to those of their parents, and changing attitudes play their role in facilitating migration with children. It seems, for example, that increasingly Polish marriages are ‘partner-like’ rather than patriarchal in character\footnote{Małgorzata Fuszara, \textit{Kobiety w polityce} (Warszawa: Trio, 2005).} and this induces a sense that spouses should take an equal part in migration.

Salient attitudes include the confidence of younger people that they can cope with migration,\footnote{For example, a 2008 survey showed that 58% of Polish young people were sufficiently confident in a foreign language to converse with a foreigner (80% in English, 20% in German). \textit{Młodzież 2008}, Diagnozy i Opinie CBOS (Warsaw: CBOS, 2009), pp. 126-7.} and the belief in experimentation: it is worth ‘having a go’ because you can ‘always come back’. Renata, aged 38, stated ‘I simply wanted to see if it was possible to live a different way.’ Bożena, aged 31, explained: ‘We became convinced it would be worth having a go, just to see, perhaps we could at least improve our work situation.’\footnote{Interviewed in the UK, 2007.} Hence, although some interviewees in Poland described themselves as being ‘timid’ or ‘afraid to migrate with children’, in fact (judging from my opinion poll) most people, especially younger ones, have a more confident attitude.
People in localities with high levels of migration by a single spouse are also well aware that when one spouse migrated, despite the discourse of self-sacrifice, marriages were in jeopardy. Several interviewees had lost their own husbands in this way.

I know from my own experience, since my ex-husband used to work abroad a lot. He went on his own, when the children were small (…) He made several attempts to persuade me to join him (…) because he liked it there. And I think that in situations like that if the second party decides to go, lets themselves be persuaded, then the whole family will go. And if not, it can turn out badly, because from what I see people often set up new families. (Anna, Grajewo 2008)

In Podkarpacie there was widespread agreement that family break-up was a consequence of parental migration.¹⁹

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¹⁹ The effect of parental migration on children is (in Poland) an even more debated issue and probably an equally important factor in promoting whole-family migration. Unfortunately it is too complex a topic to discuss in this paper. See my forthcoming book; with reference to non-Polish migration cultures, see e.g. (on transnational mothering): Sylwia Urbańska, ‘Transnarodowość jako perspektywa ujęcia macierzyństwa w warunkach migracji’ in K. Slany (ed.), *Migracje kobiet: Perspektywa wielowymiarowa* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2009); (on transnational fathering): R. Salazar Parreñas, ‘Transnational Fathering: Gendered Conflicts, Distant Disciplining and Emotional Gaps’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34, 7 (2008).
Connected to such worries, a further important reason for the growing popularity of migration with children is support for a more ‘hedonistic’ model, one which avoids the emotional costs of single-parent migration. Younger Poles are often unwilling to live abroad without their partners, and childless Poles who work abroad often invite their boy- or girlfriends to join them. Among my interviewees, mothers who had migrated to be with their husbands were ready to acknowledge the importance of emotions, their own, their husband’s and their children’s, in contributing to their decision and did not feel compelled to adopt a rhetoric of self-sacrifice. Bożena (aged 31), for example, explaining why she and her children had joined her husband in the UK, stated that:

The main reason was because he missed us so much. There he was on his own, and we have been married for 13, nearly 14 years, and had always been together.

Marzena (aged 35):

We had to decide, one way or the other. Because you can’t live your life at a distance. I was miserable, and obviously the children, well, children need their father, don’t they? So we decided we would join him here in England.

**Reunited at last?**

Arrival of the whole nuclear family in the receiving country is not a ‘happy end’ to the story; even if the family is close emotionally, forging a livelihood in the new environment puts family unity under pressure. Where grandparents remain in Poland and there is no other source of free child care, Polish parents in England frequently negotiate their time with one another, working complementary shifts. Husbands, who had often fulfilled an entirely traditional breadwinner role while maintaining their wives and children in Poland, now take on new identities as equal parents.

We try to cope. I work mornings, my husband works in the afternoon and evening (...) We meet each other in passing. (Patrycja)

My husband is sometimes annoyed with me because on Saturdays and Sundays [his days off] I have my night shifts and [during the day] I have lots of clients [coming to my house so I can cut their hair]. I’m on my feet all day and at 7.30 pm I have to set off to work.

Furthermore, it can happen that not only are couples apart, but also new faultlines are opening up within the family: just as before migration, there are often differences of opinion between spouses about whether to stay or go. Typically, one partner adheres
to the mentality ‘you know, I could always go back’, still seeing him- or herself as a temporary migrant, while the other spouse is beginning to feel more tied to England. Sometimes it is the husband who reinforces his position as provider within the household by adapting most successfully to the English context, as in many cultures where family reunification leads to ‘trailing’ wives becoming marginalised. However, for Polish women in England it can often turn out that the wife integrates more successfully than the husband, even if he came to the UK first, as the following example illustrates. The spouse with the identity as the better linguist has a considerable advantage.

I would like to stay here in England, because I have a job, and perhaps I could go to college, so I’d have really perfect English, but my husband doesn’t want to stay (...) He’s sorry he’s here on his own, I mean he has us [me and the children], but still it’s bad. He wants to be at home with his family (...)

Always if there is some problem or we need to go to the bank or to some offices it’s me who goes and organises everything. But in Poland it was the other way round. In Poland he used to arrange everything. But here, I speak better English than he does. (...) He really is finding it very hard to learn the language. Some people find languages hard. That’s another reason why he doesn’t want to stay in England: the language barrier. (Ilona, UK, 2008)

Conclusions

Migration as a livelihood strategy can only be understood by exploring migrant identities and local migration cultures. Many Polish migrants come from locations where there is a strong culture of migrating to be with family and friends. Their identity as someone who has been invited by a family member or close friend is important during the process of migration – often including a pre-visit to ‘inspect’ - and when they arrive in England to live and work. Best friends and sisters often have a special role

20 Of course, the belief that one can ‘always go back’ is to some extent illusory. For discussion of the actual constraints, see Anne White, ‘Family migration from small-town Poland: a livelihood strategy approach’ in Kathy Burrell (ed.) Polish Migration to the UK in the’ New’ European Union: After 2004 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).


22 I am not aware of other research on this topic, with reference to Poland. However, for discussion of how Polish women increase in confidence and change their opinion about gender roles as the result of migration see Angela Coyle, ‘Resistance, Regulation and Rights: The Changing Status of Polish Women’s Migration and Work in the “New” Europe’, European Journal of Women’s Studies, 14, 1 (2007) and Barbara Cieślińska, ‘The experience of labour migrations in the life of women from Podlasie, Poland’, paper presented to CEEIBAS/University of Bath workshop on ‘Temporary Migration and Community Cohesion: the Nature and Impact of Migration from East-Central to Western Europe’, Bath, January 2008.
in encouraging women to migrate with their children. However, often it is the husband who – having initially migrated alone for what was seen as a short visit, a self-sacrificing act for the good of his family – tries to persuade his wife and children to join him abroad.

Nonetheless, in keeping with the ‘partner-like’ model of Polish marriages which is becoming increasingly prevalent, spouses more and more often see themselves as a strong family unit which can and should migrate together. Changing gender roles are not the only cause of this new family livelihood strategy, which is also an attempt to ward off family break-up and simply to make migration a less uncomfortable experience, as well as reflecting the fact that young Poles often feel fairly confident about migration and also secure in the ‘knowledge’ that they can always go back.

Networks criss-crossing between Poland and England go on working even after migrants arrive in the UK, making return a constant possibility but also leading to emotional tugs of war, for example between the mother in Poland and the wife in England. Despite the strong belief that ‘families should stick together’, disagreement about future strategies may surface, with one spouse maintaining the identity of the ‘temporary’ migrant while the other begins to form stronger ties in the receiving country and increasingly to function in English. This disharmony may be exacerbated in situations where spouses little time together because they work complementary shifts in order to perform their own child care.