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Anne White

'Families don't return': Post-2004
Polish family migration and
settlement in the UK

Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 9 June 2011



POLISH FAMILIES

**AND MIGRATION
SINCE EU ACCESSION**

Informants (book)

In Poland

- 72 interviewees (82 interviews)
- 1101 participants in opinion poll

In UK

- 30 interviewees (33 interviews)
- Acquaintances at Saturday School and Polish toddlers' group

Key informants: teachers, job centre managers/employees, journalists, a community development worker, local historians, etc.

Current project on return migration: so far 3 interviews in UK and 3 in Poland

Research questions

- Why did so many Poles migrate abroad after 2004?
- Why did so many parents migrate with children?



- How do Polish families make decisions about how long to stay abroad?

The livelihood strategy approach

- Checklist of factors explaining why people choose a certain way to make a living:

understanding how potential migrants perceive the choices available to them within the context of specific households and communities.

- A systematic and comprehensive approach which tries to see migration from the migrant's perspective and pays sufficient attention to non-economic factors.



Grajewo,
pop. 22,000

Sanok,
pop. 37,000

Interview locations in Poland (2007: ○ 2008-9: ●)⁶





How long to stay in the UK?

- Plans are usually open-ended
'For the time being, we've chosen England'
(Anna, UK)
- Plans are shaped within context of constant contact with Poland and thoughts of return
- Return is envisaged as settlement in Poland: it's assumed children cannot be nomads
- Plans depend on much the important family members feel 'at home' (= integrated?) in the UK

Integration into UK society

- Integration as a two-way process:
 - UK society adapts to ensure that migrants have equal access to housing, employment, etc.
 - Migrants acculturate sufficiently to ‘confidently engage’ with British society, but this does not imply assimilation.

(Home Office ‘Indicators of Integration’)

Integration: a few findings (1)

- Attitudes re. livelihoods *brought from Poland* significantly help shape livelihood strategies in UK, e.g.
 - Security of employment is especially prized: integration into the labour market is often identified with employment in public sector/big company.



- Families put down roots in a specific locality and are reluctant to migrate internally within the UK.

Integration findings (2)

- Many interviewees happy with various aspects of lives in the UK, e.g. Polish social lives, purchasing power, but families *experience significant barriers to integration*, with parents perceiving their own integration as *insufficient*: e.g.
 - It's hard to find secure, long-term housing suitable for families.
 - English language acquisition is viewed as 'fundamental', but improving English is not automatic (esp. since parents often cannot access classes) and almost no interviewees could 'confidently engage' with UK society.
 - Parents often felt children were integrating well, which pleased them and was a reason to stay, but also made them more conscious of their own integration problems.

The UK collective 'myth of return'

As the country slides deeper into recession, the building trade contracts and the pound plummets against the zloty, there is little reason for many of the estimated 700,000 Poles who flocked to Britain after their country joined the EU in 2004 to remain.
(Daily Telegraph, 21 February 2009)

The myth of return is often said to characterise individual migrants' experiences, but with regard to the recent economic crisis a *collective* myth of return emerged in the British media and perhaps also among the public. Polish interviewees did not subscribe to this myth...

Interviewees believed few families were returning to Poland

Last year there was lots of information on the [Polish] TV and in newspapers that masses of Poles were returning from England. It's not true... Among my friends, people I know, and my friends' friends, I'm talking about families, no one has returned. No one, absolutely no one. Single people yes, plenty of them have gone. But not families Families stay.

(Dorota, Bristol, 2009)

Obstacles to permanent return

- Thoughts about return constantly shape perceptions about integration ('feeling at home') in the UK.
- Return is very difficult for families.
 - Families usually only consider return to their home town (because of extended family, house) but often they come from localities with weak economies and few livelihood options
 - Parents are reluctant to uproot children twice
 - School-age children are expected to have problems reintegrating into Polish schools

Interviewees stressed the riskiness of return

- Most people with families stay here in England. Their children have started school and somehow they make ends meet ... If you have the responsibility of supporting a family you can't afford to return, just in case [it's impossible to find a decent job in Poland]. (Katarzyna)
- In Poland they lay off workers, too, whole factories are laying off people If the entire family is in England and the child goes to school and [at least] one parent has work on a contract, then they stay put. (Jagoda)
- At the moment the crisis began, that closed the way for him to come back to Poland... Poland is always in crisis, but this was a crisis on top of a crisis. (Martyna)

Assessing the risk of return at first-hand: holidays in Poland

- *My sister was in Poland for Easter, she came to see us, stayed in Grajewo for three days ... but she spent the whole time running about ... and my mother complained they didn't even have time to sit down and chat. (Eliza, Grajewo)*
- *They say 'I would stop to chat, but I'm going to the dentist.' They have those two weeks and spend most of the time at the dentist. (Elwira, Sanok)*
- Holidays in Poland are so stressful that parents see only the bad things in Poland

Interviewees in Poland (Sanok and Grajewo) did not notice a return wave

On the television you hear that lots of people are coming back to Poland... But I can't see it. And there are still people who are going off for the first time. In our region it's not the case that masses of people are coming back. Of course there are situations like everywhere where things didn't work out for someone and they came home. But not on such a mass scale. I don't think so.

(Magda, Sanok, September 2008)

Conclusions

- Poles migrate - and often fail to return - because of perceptions about livelihoods *in their home localities*. 'Crisis' is a local phenomenon.
- Families reunite and stay together largely because of the emotional costs of separation, not for economic gain.
- Families are most likely to stay in the UK, partly because of perceived risks of return, partly because their transnational lives facilitate integration (which should not however be seen as 'successful' in all respects).