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# **Attitudes towards immigration: Responses to the increased presence of Polish migrants in the UK post 2004**

## **Abstract**

Based on a large-scale research project conducted in a northern English city, this paper focuses on the attitudes towards, and experienced by, Polish migrants as a result of increased immigration following the 2004 enlargement of the European Union. We pay attention to the ways in which people justify their negative attitudes towards this migrant group through competition for resources, particularly in terms of job security and the receipt of benefit payments. However, we also consider meaningful encounters between these migrants and the 'local' population, and how through these encounters attitudes can sometimes be transformed from negative to positive. Crucially, we demonstrate how Polish migrants themselves respond to these attitudes. In doing so, we show that by drawing upon the very same discourses of job security and social benefits they develop complex understandings of the 'local' population. Through its attention to immigration, the paper contributes to debates about the relationships between different social groups and processes of exclusion, highlighting the importance of encounters on the process of attitude formation. By giving voice to representatives of both the 'local' population and migrants, it further provides a rare perspective on social responses to immigration-driven diversity in European societies.

**Keywords:** Immigration, attitudes, encounter, Polish, Eastern European, UK

## **Introduction**

In the United Kingdom (UK), debates surrounding immigration have grown considerably following the 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU) to the East. Importantly, many of these debates have been recently politicized, and radicalized, against the backdrop of the global economic crisis of 2007-2008, the 2014 European Parliament and local elections, as well as the dispute over EU membership (resulting in the national referendum on 23 June 2016 and an overall vote to leave the EU) (e.g.

Duffy and Frere-Smith, 2014; MIC Interim Report, 2014). In December 2014, the then UK Prime minister, David Cameron, announced plans to ban EU migrants from receiving state benefits, including tax credits and social housing for a minimum of four years in an attempt to reduce migration flows. Even more extreme anti-immigration attitudes dominated the UK's EU referendum 'Leave' campaign in 2016 (and seem to have impacted on the overall result, see Meleady et al. 2017). While social commentators and academics have been increasingly involved in understanding public attitudes towards immigration in the UK, and Western societies more broadly (Billiet et al., 2014; Janmaat and Keating, 2017; Schmuck and Matthes, 2015; Yilmaz, 2012; Zamora-Kapoor and Vereja, 2014; Hellwig and Sinno, 2016), this issue requires further attention in this unprecedented context.

In 2004, Poland and seven other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries joined the EU. These countries are referred to as the Accession 8 (A8) and also include Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia<sup>1</sup>. Previous accessions had caused EU member states (the EU-15) considerable concern about the impact of complete liberalisation on their labour markets, and the Accession Treaties gave the EU-15 the option to delay implementation of free movement of workers for up to seven years. The UK was one of only three countries (along with Ireland and Sweden) to allow migrants from the A8 countries to enter their labour markets without restriction. This caused the UK to become a popular destination for migrants from Poland and other 'new' member states. Additionally, a long-sustained period of economic growth (which has now ended) and a favourable disparity in wage earning potential between Poland and the UK, helped to make the UK an attractive proposition for Polish migrants looking to exercise their new right as EU citizens (Cook et al., 2011). As a result, it is estimated that there was around one million Polish nationals in the UK as of 2017 (ONS, 2018). However, this figure is open to debate due to the complexity of measuring EU migration (Glennie and Pennington, 2013).

Much of this migration has been transnational in nature and has involved migrants maintaining close ties with their country of origin, in particular family and wider social networks (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc, 1992, Ryan 2011). Whilst patterns of circular migration and transnational formations are no new phenomena, the

contemporary ease of communication and transportation have changed the extent and magnitude of these flows (Ruspini, 2011). This has consequently changed the dynamic of encounters between the long-settled and migrant populations. Indeed, Arun et al. (2019: 2) place migrant transnationalism “in the context of wider economic and political processes, in particular neo-liberalization”. They argue that “this wider context is intensifying the precarity of contemporary migrant experience”. As such, immigration in Europe has been met with some resistance, and tension between members of host population and migrants is not uncommon (Billet et al., 2014; Siebers and Dennissen, 2014; Zamora-Kapoor and Vereja, 2014).

Here we draw upon original empirical research conducted as part of an ERC-funded study<sup>2</sup> about lived processes of social differentiation to examine people in the UK’s attitudes towards Polish migrants, along with the experiences of those migrants themselves. In order to unpack these attitudes and migrant responses, we interviewed 30 UK-born or long-settled informants, 14 post-2004 migrants from Poland and 19 significant others of those migrants living in Poland. In a discussion on immigration from A8 countries to the UK, Polish migrants arguably have been dominant – the most numerous, and certainly the most visible in the public arena (ONS, 2018). Indeed, Poland remains the most common non-UK country of birth while Polish has been the most common non-British nationality in the UK since 2007 (ONS, 2018). Polish language has also become the second most spoken language in England and Wales after English (ONS 2013). It is therefore crucial to look at this migrant population as one of the most prominent new national minorities in the UK.

The article aims to explore attitudes towards Polish migrants formed through direct and indirect contact, and how migrants themselves respond to these attitudes and discrimination. Firstly, it addresses the question: what discourses and discursive strategies do ‘local’ and migrant populations employ as they speak of each other? Secondly, it looks at how the host population’s and migrant attitudes are interlinked. Finally, it investigates the consequences of the production of these attitudes (here assuming the form of transnational circulation of prejudice). In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing cross-disciplinary debates on migrant-host relations, and transnationalism, and makes important connections with previous studies into encounters and identities (Cook et al., 2011; Ehrkamp, 2005). Although other studies

have focussed on prejudice towards immigration (Siebers and Dennissen, 2014; Yilmaz, 2012) and migrant experiences of discrimination (e.g. Fox et al. 2012; McDowell et al., 2009), this article offers a significant input to these debates by giving voice to representatives of both groups simultaneously. While increasing attention has been paid to how ideas travel through the agency of migrants (Levitt 1998; Boccagni and Decimo, 2013), the article advances our knowledge by showing how anti-immigration prejudice towards a national minority (the Polish) is transmitted to its country of origin (Poland).

In what follows, we consider the significance of direct and indirect contact for the formation of attitudes towards immigration, and discuss aspects of Polish migration to the UK. Then, we shed light onto the methodology underpinning this article. Finally, we explore our findings by discussing: 1) how participants justify and express their prejudices; 2) the circulation of prejudice and the relationship that this creates; and 3) how meaningful direct contact creates positive encounters or the transformation of attitudes.

### **Significance of contact for attitude formation and Polish migration to the UK**

Various studies have increasingly showed that accelerated migratory movements result in the development of stereotypes and negative attitudes towards migrants, including those to the UK (Esses et al., 1998; Ceyhan and Tsoukala, 2002; Kaufman and Harris, 2015). Such attitudes are likely to be formed through direct and indirect contact. Direct contact occurs through encounters in sites such as the workplace and the neighbourhood (Cook et al., 2011). Indirect contact occurs through the influence of the media, politicians and general approaches of governments (Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes, 2014; Schmuck and Matthes, 2015).

Direct contact is an important factor in shaping views and attitudes that migrants and ‘host’ populations have about each other. Through direct contact negative views and stereotypes can be broken down. This is demonstrated by the ‘contact hypothesis’ (Allport, 1954) the premise of which is that prejudice is a direct result of generalisations and oversimplifications made about social groups based on incomplete

or mistaken information. Under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is therefore one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice and promote social integration because it allows stereotypes of ‘others’ to be challenged and enables an understanding of others’ lifestyles and points of view to be developed. There is a large body of scholarship which has revised and furthered Allport’s original claim (see Pettigrew, 1998). Following on from this, Author 3 (2008), considers what type of encounters produce ‘meaningful contact’. For Author 3 (2008), meaningful contact is “contact that actually changes values and translates beyond the specifics of the individual moment into a more general positive respect for – rather than merely tolerance of – others”. This is in contrast to (direct) contact that may be fleeting or insignificant.

Alongside direct interaction, indirect contact and stereotypes have been suggested to play a key role in forming attitudes towards migrants as well as (migrant) attitudes towards the host population (Côté and Erickson, 2009; Figgou et al., 2011). Stereotypes about both can also be mutually reinforcing and frequently appear together (Augoustinos and Walker, 1998). The media is often referred to as a major social institution and means of indirect contact, which affects people’s perceptions (Brewer et al., 2003; Slater, 2007) including attitudes towards immigration (Siebers and Dennissen, 2014; van Dijk, 1993). Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes (2014: 189), for instance, have evidenced that while the media usually avoid the openly essentialist rhetoric, ‘negative constructions of racialized migrant Others persist in new forms’. As such, they continue to shape people’s understandings of difference.

It is important to explore whether, and how, the attitudes formed in both these ways are linked to the lived experiences of migrants themselves. Various authors speak of favourable attitudes towards, as well as discrimination of migrants (Duffy and Frere-Smith, 2014), but in general less attention has been paid to how migrants themselves respond to these attitudes (although see notable exceptions Fox and Mogilnicka, 2017; Nowicka, 2018; Morosanu and Fox, 2013). ‘Local’ attitudes towards immigration and migrant responses to these also tend to be investigated in isolation from each other and an integrated approach is needed to explore how they are necessarily interrelated. In this paper, we address these limitations by looking at the long-settled UK

population's attitudes towards Polish migration and Polish migrants' responses to these.

The body of research on Polish migration to the UK suggests that although some Polish migrants receive a favourable reception by UK society, many are likely to experience discrimination, precarity and stereotyping (Cook et al., 2011; McDowell et al., 2009; McGinnity and Gijsberts, 2016; Morosanu and Fox, 2013; Temple, 2011; White, 2011; Duda-Mikulin, 2018). This is unsurprising from the migration studies standpoint as many previous migrations to the UK, including the sizable 1950-70s Indian, Pakistani and Caribbean ones, were met with a mix of positive and negative societal responses (e.g. Brown, 2006; Collins, 2001; Kalra, 2000). The UK is not, of course, unique in this respect as migration research to other national contexts broadly confirms that (e.g. Matejskova and Leitner, 2011; Wise, 2010). Against the backdrop of Polish migration to the UK, a few recent studies have attempted to explore how Poles make sense of these experiences and discourses (Rzepnikowska, 2018) and respond to racism specifically (Fox and Mogilnicka, 2018), but – to reiterate our critique above - a holistic consideration of Polish-‘host’ encounters is crucial to explore how attitudes towards Polish migrants and their responses to these are closely interlinked.

Against the backdrop of socioeconomic deprivation that exists in many of the inner-city areas, where the majority of Polish migrants reside, other studies have also identified that established community members often perceive new migrants as a source of increased competition for scarce jobs and welfare services who may undermine their own already precarious ability to prosper (Dwyer, 2000; Waite, 2009). As Favell notes, ‘where there is conflict with the “natives” over jobs and resources the reaction gets expressed in populist and xenophobic terms’ (2008: 711). However, this neglects that Polish migrants often work in jobs that the ‘host’ population do not wish to do and that part of that population are actually self-employed and consequently ‘job-makers’ (Author 1, 2012).

One of the reasons behind this competition could be that, unlike Asian and African-Caribbean migrants, these East European migrants are ‘white’ (Roediger, 2005; McDowell, 2007). McDowell et al. (2009) explain that this gives “them a clear

advantage in labour markets distinguished by racialized and ethnic disadvantage” (2009: p.5). McDowell et al. also argue that EU migrants are desirable employees as they are “white skinned, often single, relatively young and typically much better educated than their competitors for basic entry-level jobs” (2009: p.19). However, it is important to stress that Polish nationals in the UK are not a monolithic cohort – their experiences have been shown to be heavily gendered (Duda-Mikulín, 2019; Triandafyllidou, 2006), classed and stratified in terms of economic and cultural capital as well as employment sector (McDowell et al., 2009; Ryan, 2018).

Importantly, given the translational nature of Polish migration to the UK, there is a need for recognition that attitudes that Polish migrants are exposed to or develop through encounters with the ‘host’ society travel across national borders (Author 2). The body of work on transnationalism suggests that migrants maintain close ties with their countries of origin, including long-distance relationships with family members and friends (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc, 1992; Metykova 2010). This allows, and often mobilises, exchange of information and ideas. Levitt (1998) famously argued that migrants affect their origin communities through so-called ‘social remittances’ – the ideas, practices, discourses and behaviour that travel from host to home societies. This was further evidenced by a number of studies including with Polish migrants (e.g. Elrick, 2008; Kubal, 2015). While stereotypes and attitudes have been given less attention in these debates, a few authors (Author 2; Nowicka, 2018) suggest that Poles share their experiences of discrimination and solidarity in the UK with those ‘left behind’ in Poland. This may have unintended consequences as non-migrants may internalize both positive and negative attitudes.

## **Study Outline**

This article combines the findings of two interlinked research projects conducted as part of an ERC-funded programme [*title anonymized for blind review purposes*]. Both projects had a multi-stage design embracing different types of interviews. One of the projects also included different types of research participants. Hence, case study approach was adopted to explore sets of closely related narratives.



Firstly, the article draws upon 30 case studies with UK-born or long-settled participants recruited from a northern English city. Here, each case was developed around one participant and involved: 1) a life history interview; 2) a semi-structured interview about attitudes towards difference; and 3) an interview reflecting on the emerging findings. All were conducted over a period of one year between mid-2011 and mid-2012 (90 interviews in total). The informants were recruited from a wider pool of respondents to a prior survey about attitudes towards difference, which was conducted as a Computer-Assisted Person Interview with 1522 people in their homes<sup>4</sup>. The research participants included those from a range of social backgrounds (in terms of socio-economic status, occupation, gender, ethnicity, religion/belief, sexual orientation and (dis)ability) whose personal circumstances and lifestyles afford them a range of opportunities for/experiences of encountering 'difference'. This was a critical consideration when recruiting participants since perceptions towards immigrants vary across education levels, social-economic classes and age (Card et al., 2015). It also varies according to geographical setting (urban/rural areas), but this is beyond the scope of the paper.

Secondly, 14 case studies were conducted with Polish migrants to the same northern English city and their family members and/or friends (i.e. significant others) in Poland. Here, each case study involved two types of participants: a migrant and up to three of their significant others, and comprised a life-history and follow-up interview with the migrant (32 interviews in total) and a single interview with significant others (19 interviews in total). All interviews were conducted over the same period of time between mid-2011 and mid-2012. The interviews with migrants explored values and attitudes towards difference prior to and post migration to the UK. The migrants were recruited through gatekeepers, networking and snowballing within the city's Polish community. While this sample was primarily diversified in terms of gender, age (between 20-50, which is representative of Polish arrivals to the UK) and the length of stay in the UK, it also involved respondents of various social positionings. However, it should be acknowledged that different perceptions are formed depending on the type of migrant group (e.g. highly-skilled, low-skilled or refugees, see Mayda, 2006) and that this is a relatively small sample in which all of these types could not be significantly represented. The migrant participants assisted in recruitment of their

non-migrant significant others in Poland. The interviews with non-migrants focused on their own values and attitudes towards difference as well as the role of migrants in shaping them.

The interview material was coded in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo and narrative analysis was subsequently employed to explore relationships, interconnections and socially constructed understandings that commonly occur within spoken accounts. For the purposes of anonymity and interviewee protection, all of the names attributed to speakers are pseudonyms.

It is important to note that the interviews with UK-born or long-settled participants were conducted in English by both British and non-British interviewers, while interviews with Polish migrants and their significant others were conducted in Polish by a Polish interviewer and then translated into English. Hence, the article draws upon a complex cross-cultural methodology recognizing complicated positionalities of the researcher vis-à-vis research participant (Rose, 1997) and intricacies of data translation process (Author 2). The quotations that come from the narratives of UK-born or long-settled respondents are verbatim, whereas the quotations from interviews with Polish migrants and their significant others come from translated transcripts.

The city which was chosen as a research site is considered diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion and class. It has a proportion of minority ethnic population close to the national average of 14% (ONS, 2011b). While there is a history of migration from Poland dating back to the Second World War, the city's Polish community expanded significantly following the 2004 accession of Poland to the EU. Although the city is regarded as relatively prosperous, and is an important finance and business centre, areas of exclusion and deprivation remain.

### **Prejudice and discrimination: a sense of identity and entitlement**

Throughout the interviews with UK-born and/or long-settled informants prejudice and discrimination was often mobilised through engaging with discourses of identity and entitlement. One of the ways in which prejudice towards Polish migrants was

articulated was through a sense of the nation being threatened. Informants reported being opposed to immigration because it was thought to change or – to quote some of the participants – ‘spoil’ or ‘kill’ the country. They rationalised that it is due to a perceived threat of competition for work which has strongly influenced their negative attitudes (Esses et al., 1998) towards immigration. Needless to say, this talk, as illustrated by Joseph and Michael below, was largely founded on indirect, rather than direct contact.

*I mean I've nowt against Polish and everything like that. I mean the rules are the rules. They're allowed in and the government's let them in. It's the government's fault and our people can't get jobs. The English people I mean can't get jobs. I think they've spoiled Britain. It used to be a good place. (Joseph, 65-69, white-British).*

*I'm prejudiced against Poles at the moment because they're coming and taking all our jobs and the Government's now coming up that I think it's £28,000 or £30,000 a year they've got to be earning after 12 months or they get sent back home.... Coming here and working that's all right, but if they're coming to this country and just taking the money and sending it home, then I think that's wrong and that makes me prejudiced against them, especially when we've got our own people struggling (Michael, 55-59, white-British).*

Such attitudes are perhaps not surprising in a context where the political and media debates concerning Polish migrants to the UK have focused on concerns about an arrival of foreign workers ‘taking (local) jobs’ (Whitehead, 2009) whilst working in low-paid industries (Portes and French, 2005; McDowell et al., 2009). In this way, Arun et al. (20019) illustrate that contemporary socio-political and geographic contexts interlink individual experiences of migration.

The interviews with Polish migrants suggest that such prejudices are likely to be explicitly expressed in everyday encounters (direct fleeting contact) between the long-settled and migrant populations. A number of migrant participants recalled either

witnessing prejudice-driven incidents or being a victim of discrimination due to their nationality. Iga's account below is representative of these narratives.

*People talk about us – Poles. They are not happy that many Poles came here [to the UK]. I had such a situation here in [name of city]. Two boys were coming back from Poland with their luggage and everything, and there were two drunk English women who shouted while passing them: 'Yeah, you Poles come here, take our homes and our land!' [edit] I was really upset. And I felt that whatever they said wasn't fair. (Iga, 30-34, female Polish migrant)*

In the interviews, Polish migrants frequently responded emotionally to the experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Interestingly, likewise in the case of UK-born or long-settled participants, they referred to a sense of unfairness. While the former associated unfairness with not being recognized as deserving citizens, the latter seemed to experience a similar emotion through being stigmatized as those who allegedly 'threaten' the nation and the wellbeing of its citizens.

Negative attitudes were also situated within the transnational nature of Polish migration. This was illustrated through migrant workers sending money they earn in the UK back to relatives in Poland, thus removing it from the UK economy (cf. Taylor, 1999). Whilst Eastern European migrants were often acknowledged as hardworking, the source of conflict comes from them 'taking' the money and sending it home. Interestingly, negative feelings towards Polish migrants were also acknowledged as being rooted in the UK government's actions (as reflected in the example below). In this way, these migrants were falsely, and indirectly, blamed for the financial crisis. As such, they were made financial scapegoats.

*One of my biggest arguments is with the migrant workers, because the money doesn't seem to stay in the country... Maybe we wouldn't be in such a financial crisis if it was coming back into the system... Maybe my anger's been vented in the wrong direction, maybe it's the Government that need to take a look at doing things and getting things right, for everybody (Craig, 30-34, White-British).*

Crucially, the construction of Poles as ‘job-takers’ was one of the leading themes in the interviews with Polish migrants. This is reflected in the quote below in which Filip recalls a conversation with his former colleague.

*I worked with a Scottish person and he told me once: ‘You’re taking our jobs.’ I replied: ‘Well, do you feel like working for £6 per hour?’ And he says: ‘No.’ I ask: ‘So, why are you bothered I’ve taken this job?’ He goes on: ‘Well, I’m bothered... because, if you haven’t taken it, I would get it for £7 per hour. (Filip, 25-29, male Polish migrant)*

This conversation draws upon the negative stereotype of Polish low-paid workers ‘taking British jobs’ (Whitehead, 2009) and that Poles reduce the amount that UK workers are paid because they provide a surplus of labour. Many other migrant respondents engaged with this stereotype and strove to rationalize it. This was particularly striking in the narratives highlighting the alleged ‘laziness’ of British people. Such narratives were produced in response to what Polish participants viewed as ‘accusations’ of being responsible for the unemployment of British nationals. A telling example of such rationalizing narrative is the quote below in which Ela implies that British people are more willing to rely on social benefits than work for relatively small wages.

*We [Polish people] take the jobs English people don’t want. They get benefits. And they just don’t want to work for a minimum wage, somewhere in a factory where you really need to work hard... With one break only, for which you’re not paid. What for? If they can get £100 less from the benefits and don’t have to work. (Ela, 30-34, female Polish migrant)*

It appears that the production of the UK society as ‘lazy’ is linked here to what Ela views as groundless reliance of British people on social support. This strongly resonates with historic narratives of the undeserving working class noted by Authors 3 and 1 (2014). In attempting to rationalize the stereotype of ‘job-takers’ Ela employs the rhetoric of classism and applies it to the whole UK society. This demonstrates that

migrants are not only passive recipients of prejudice and discrimination. They are also likely to respond to prejudice by producing or recycling prejudiced understandings of host communities.

As well as posing a threat to the nation and the competition for resources, prejudice towards Polish migrants was also rooted in the idea of migration causing a loss of the sense of neighbourhood and community. This resonates with earlier work (see Caglar, 1995; Ehrkamp, 2005) on Turkish migrants in Germany who faced social exclusion and hostile attitudes from German residents. Cook et al. (2011) explain resistance to EU migration in terms of the consequences for the neighbourhood. This is due to population churn (Pollard et al., 2008) in many of the diverse urban communities where new migrants live. As such, migrant residents in these areas may not have a particular loyalty to communities causing a barrier between Polish migrants and established population. In our research, Sarah describes her neighbourhood's resistance to Polish migration in terms of building houses for migrants who she believes do not belong to the community.

*There's a discussion based around immigration with my home town at the moment because the Government or the council have said that we've got to build 400 more houses in the town but people are saying who are these houses for. Because there is an area in the town where there's some Polish people that live there. The people in the town are saying that they don't want foreign people living in these houses. (Sarah, 25-29, White-British).*

Sophie (below) explains the visibility of migration in her neighbourhood and the noticeable changes this has brought about. This is signified by British-run shops being replaced with Polish delicatessens in order to serve the new migrant community. However, the presence of Polish or other ethnic businesses does not always result in segregation and the development of prejudice. Indeed, Author 1's (2015) research into Polish businesses in the UK found that many businesses achieved 'break-out' from a solely Polish clientele and staff base. Therefore, for Sophie her prejudice seems to stem from her opposition to visible changes to the community caused by migration, rather than direct contact with those from Poland.

*At one point there were lots of little corner shops and then suddenly shops were getting taken over and turned into Polish market shops or whatever. I think as people started to see those changes as well, it was a little bit like, we're losing our neighbourhood here, it's turning into something that's not about us (Sophie, 30-34, White-British).*

As some UK-born or long-settled informants spoke of Polish migrants having a negative impact on local communities, a few Polish respondents recalled experiencing discrimination in their neighbourhoods. Marek, for example, found himself, as he put it, 'an outsider' in a White working-class neighbourhood where his company rented a flat for him and his spouse. The recurrent instances of minor vandalism and a growing sense of insecurity made the couple move to a different part of the city.

*There was a situation with council-flat people. They knew we were Polish and they were a pain in the neck for us. There were always some minor tensions. [edit] Various incidents with my car, for example. I guess they did that because we were foreigners. We weren't English – so to speak. We were outsiders. [edit] The most unpleasant part was the fact that you weren't able to explain and make the people stop doing this. [edit] And, for this reason we didn't stay there... I was worried about my wife. It just wasn't a nice living. [People] Throwing eggs on our windows, for example. (Marek, 30-34, male, Polish migrant)*

In Marek's case, visibility (ascribed 'otherness') and fleeting contact resulted in blatant discrimination. Importantly, however, this was not a shared experience. While a few other migrant participants spoke of experiencing verbal abuse (e.g. name calling, xenophobic remarks), none of them was actually forced to take radical action such as moving away from their home.

Many of the negative attitudes towards Polish migrants can be attributed to a perceived threat of competition for economic resources, particularly in the form of job security and the receipt of benefits. Participants justify their prejudice through a sense

of unfairness and a lack of justice due to a reported loss of income supposedly being part of the cause of the financial crisis and driving down wages for British people. The government is acknowledged as having made decisions which the host population are 'unhappy' with. However, their negative attitudes are still targeted at the migrants themselves. Although many of these attitudes remain silenced, some of them are explicitly expressed, and may evoke resentment among migrants. Importantly, such negative attitudes tend to be based on indirect contact and stereotyping, rather than direct contact. However, fleeting direct contact is still likely to lead to hostility and discrimination, which may significantly affect the everyday lives of Polish migrants (as in the case of Marek and his wife above). In order to rationalize the sense of unfairness arising from being exposed to prejudice and negative stereotyping, migrants are likely to employ coping techniques such as producing or recycling counter-prejudice about the host population. This results in an emergence of a complex relation between prejudice towards immigration and migrant prejudice towards the host society. This intricate relationship is further complicated by the fact that migrants are also likely to develop prejudice towards 'those who do not work' and employ the rhetoric of undeserving working class (Authors 3 and 1).

### **Sympathies and ambivalences: circulating and ceasing prejudices**

Despite some negative perceptions towards Polish migrants, there were also cases where meaningful contact occurred and previously prejudiced attitudes were transformed. In particular, there were attempts to understand why prejudice might have come about and a sense of sympathy for the recipients of prejudice. For instance, Rachel had an awareness that prejudice might be directed towards Poles as they are a relatively recently arrived migrant group and may be experiencing a similar reaction to earlier waves of migration from different, and now more established, ethnic groups.

*I think that Polish get quite a hard time of it now so maybe they get a lot of the prejudice but then they didn't have a lot of Eastern Europeans 10, 20 years ago. So maybe they've taken over from black Caribbean people as in the way*



*that people are negative about them because maybe we've got used to black Caribbean people. (Rachel, 35-39, White-British)*

Likewise, migrant participants attempted to make sense of a perceived rise in prejudice towards Polish nationals in the UK. While a few Polish respondents, like Rachel above, linked this tendency to the unprecedented scale of migration post 2004, a number of informants drew attention to the role of the media in 'fueling' unfavourable attitudes.

*People look for a scapegoat. Somebody to blame for the bad [economic] situation, right? [edit] There were more articles about immigrants in the press at some point [after 2004]. There was a witch-hunt for Poles. I remember a cartoon from a newspaper. There was a globe... the South Pole, the North Pole and lots of tiny needles in Great Britain and a sign: 'Many other Poles'....And, then a huge article about the immigrants taking jobs from people. And, you know, it affected people's thinking. The media play a big role in it. (Lena, 25-29, Polish female migrant)*

Unlike many of the UK-born and/or long-settled informants who expressed prejudice towards Polish migrants based on opinions, those who held positive attitudes argued that they were based on meaningful contact with individual migrants. Indeed, for Ueffing et al. (2015) perceptions change over time and are altered by the environment, specifically by the immigration policy framework established in the host country. In our research, such contact often occurred in the workplace, suggesting its importance as a site of encounter with difference. A strong work ethic of Polish migrants was widely cited by research participants as a reason for positive attitudes towards this group. This hardworking nature was used to express a need for equality for migrant workers.

*It's better for them to get them to come from Poland because they'll work... They're hard-working. Where my mother-in-law lives, her house backs onto the fields and they'll work from the crack of dawn till last thing at night Monday to Saturday, six days a week. And it's back-breaking work and they*

*never complain. But certain pubs in the area won't have them in (Andrea, 40-44, White-British).*

Against this backdrop, many Polish respondents referred to, and identified with, the stereotype of hard-working Polish migrants (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2005; van Riemsdijk, 2010). In addition, they spoke of the instances when UK-born or long-settled people assumed 'Polish hard-working-ness'. Filip, for example recalled an occasion when he felt he needed to stand up for British society while encountering a British person claiming the diligence of Poles and the laziness of Britons.

*We met with a person who was selling a car. He was British. (...) He said that British people don't want to work and Poles do. It turned out that he recruited people, Polish people, to work in the UK. He said British people were lazy... I can understand that he's in this business - he recruits Polish people and finds interesting jobs for them in the UK. And, he obviously needs to sell them and their skills as an amazing product. Yet... I was shocked that British people can speak of other British people in that way. (Filip, 25-29, Polish male migrant).*

Although Filip seems to express a balanced view on the capacities to work of both Polish and British people, a few migrant participants in this study shared the opinion of the car seller above and juxtaposed the alleged 'hard-working-ness of Poles' with the supposed 'laziness of Britons'. This binary relationship is implied below in the narrative of Piotr who stubbornly argued that Polish workers are capable of processing more tasks in a given time.

*It's obvious that when a Pole gets familiar with the job, he'll [sic] do not 5, which is a norm, not 10, but 15 boxes in a time assigned to 5.*

*Interviewer: What makes you think that Polish people work faster and more efficiently?*

*Because, I am like this! When I started working in a hotel ten years ago, the standard was 16 rooms to be cleaned in a given time. After six months I was able to clean 25 rooms over the same time. [edit] And, many Poles used to work like this. (Piotr, 40-44, Polish male migrant)*

Importantly, the narratives which draw upon the stereotype of a ‘hard-working Pole’ and imply the ‘laziness of Britons’ echo the production of the UK society as ‘lazy’ explored earlier in this article. As such, they are intricately tied to the other prevailing stereotype - of Poles as ‘job-takers’. The empirical material collected among Polish migrants suggests that these stereotypes are likely to be mutually reinforcing and frequently appear together (Augoustinos and Walker, 1998). The discourse of ‘hard-working Poles’ is therefore a complex one. While the stereotype it builds upon may be, and often is, a proxy for positive attitudes, it is also likely to mobilise negative counter-discourses.

These negative discourses circulated not only among the UK-based Polish migrants. Many of migrant participants maintained close contact with their family members and friends in Poland and discussed their views of UK society with them. This is unsurprising given that migrants and non-migrants ‘left behind’ in home societies are likely to negotiate ideas, attitudes, identities and behaviours (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Boccagni and Decimo, 2013). Below, Alina – a sister of migrant Natalia, Ewa – a good friend of migrant Lena, and Asia – a friend of migrant Julia reflect on the experiences of their migrant significant others in the UK.

*I know that Natalia was received in quite a cold way by many [British] people. So, very often she wouldn't be offered a job... because of her nationality. [edit] She moved there [to the UK] when the crisis had started. [edit] Before the crisis it was much easier to find a simple job in Tesco or so because British people didn't find them attractive... And, when Natalia moved there and was looking for a job [British] people were annoyed that 'another Pole is taking my job'... 'We don't have jobs here and some Polish girl shows up and gets it!' (Alina, 20-24, Polish female non-migrant).*

*Interviewer: Do you remember how she [Lena] spoke of British people at that time [when just moved to the UK]?*

*[edit] She said that they [British people] were either truly open or very racist – like: ‘Why are all these Poles coming here!’ (Ewa, 30-34, Polish female non-migrant).*

*We discussed things that were pushing her out of there [the UK]. And, there was an issue of discrimination – British people discriminating against Polish people. I remember she told me that her brother... Somebody had scratched his car and left a card on his car... Because, he had a car with Polish plates... There was either a “go home” message or something similar. (...) She didn’t feel entirely at home there... She could sense a sort of discrimination. (Asia, 25-29, Polish female non-migrant)*

These narratives suggest that attitudes about Polish migrants held by UK-born or long-settled people, and Polish migrant responses to these, travel across national borders to Poland (which is reminiscent of indirect contact). This is in line with recent work on the transnational circulation of ideas (Author 2). Indeed, (Author 2 and Nowicka, 2018) suggest that Poles share their experiences of discrimination and solidarity in the UK with those ‘left behind’ in Poland. This may have unintended consequences as non-migrants may internalize both positive and negative attitudes. In doing so, they are likely to affect how static populations there perceive UK society. Complex interactions between prejudiced attitudes and discourses on both sides are extended here to include a non-UK-based ‘third party’. These shared and competing discursive strategies of British ‘natives’ and Polish migrants actually draw on some of the same discursive resources for different purposes.

Despite the extent to which sentiments and stereotypes were mobilized (and circulated) by research participants, there were also cases of ceasing prejudices. Several UK-born and/or resident respondents spoke of situations where their previously negative attitudes had been transformed due to direct meaningful contact with Polish migrants. One of the ways in which this occurred was through encounters with migrant workers in the workplace. According to Authors 1 and 3 (2016) the workplace has the potential to promote meaningful encounters. Through meeting others from a different group who are of equal status in the workplace, prejudices are

broken down. The following example of banal everyday sociality at work shares many of the characteristics of which Laurier et al. (2002) suggest characterizes everyday public spaces. Interactions with migrant workers often led to our respondents knowing about, caring for, and developing friendships with them, resulting in the erosion of stereotypes. This is illustrated by Thomas through his description of interactions with 'Eastern European' migrants at work. Through the shared space of the workplace Sean and Thomas' prejudices towards Eastern European migrants have been broken down.

*I did think that they [Eastern Europeans] were very standoffish and quite abrupt. Then when I went to work at this food factory and actually met them, I realised that they were fine... I think in the case where just actually having the opportunity to meet some normal Eastern Europeans made me get over thinking that the rest of them were a bit rude. (Thomas, 20-24, White-British).*

*They're [East Europeans] hardworking people. To be honest, I was a bit skeptical and didn't give them the time of day but then George used to work for me and he was from Poland and he was a strong, powerful lad. He'd do anything you asked of. Yes, he was a good worker and he was always on time and he was always in the workplace. He never let us down and he always did a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. If they've got good leadership they're capable of doing really good jobs. If you can get somebody from Poland to do it though, you shouldn't be paying him less, you should be paying him the same (Sean, 55-59, white-British).*

As well as the workplace, the neighbourhood, community and family were prominent spaces that shaped migrants' settlement and integration experiences through direct contact (Burholt 2004; Cook et al., 2011). Respondents gave positive accounts of mundane neighbourhood encounters with Polish migrants and these can be linked to broad notions of newcomer acceptance. Contrary to the opinion of some who believed that Polish migrants were negatively changing their neighbourhood with new shops, others discussed spaces in their neighbourhoods that provided, and framed, encounters between diverse people with common needs or interests. This indicates the inevitable 'throwntogetherness' of places (Massey, 2005), especially where interests are likely to

overlap (Dines and Cattell, 2006).

*I live near lots of Eastern Europeans. I think any kind of ideas I might have had about Eastern Europeans and stuff like that they've all just gone out of the window (Jack, 20-24, white-British).*

Interestingly, migrant participants also recalled instances of their British colleagues, neighbours, friends and family members admitting that they had revised their attitudes towards Polish migrants through direct contact. For instance, Lena, married to a British man, spoke at length of her British mother-in-law:

*Take my husband's mum. [edit] She had had a negative image of foreigners, and then she met me. [edit] She's told me recently... Because, we got married in Poland and she had a chance to experience Polish culture. She said that her perception of Polish people had changed. She always thought that Poles who were coming here [to the UK] took the worst jobs and so on. The stories from newspapers. [edit] But, when she met me and we went to Poland... she saw how Polish people live, celebrate and work... and her perception... She just said: "It opened my eyes. It opened my eyes". (Lena, 25-29, Polish female migrant)*

Indeed, despite strong prejudices directed towards and experienced by Polish migrants, there were cases of meaningful and direct contact and attitude transformation from negative to positive. Rather than stereotyped or assumed ideas through indirect contact, which were often the basis of negative attitudes, positive ones were usually developed through actual interactions in specific sites such as the workplace or family. This suggests that such sites have the potential to break down stereotypes and foster meaningful contact between migrants and the host population (Allport, 1954). It also raises questions whether this could be the case for other minority groups.

Importantly, migrant responses to favourable attitudes are largely complex. Against this backdrop, we speak of 'ambivalences' in migrant narratives. This is exemplified by the stereotype of 'hard-working Poles'. This stereotype evoked diverse reactions

among migrant participants including strong essentialisation of both the host society and Polish migrant community. Indeed, some of our Polish respondents started to conceptualize British and Polish nationals in binary terms with regard to work ethic. Moreover, a number of migrant participants passed these understandings onto their significant others in Poland. This suggests that favourable attitudes expressed by the host population are not unconditionally linked to positive migrant responses. Furthermore, they may mobilize transnational circulation of prejudice, here exemplified by the travelling narratives of victimization – Polish migrants being victims of discrimination in the UK and the alleged racism of British people.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored people in the UK's attitudes towards Polish migrants, along with the experiences of these migrants themselves. It has presented original empirical research, which demonstrates that people justify their negative attitudes towards Polish migration through competition for resources, particularly in terms of job security and income. Whilst Poles were often acknowledged as hardworking, the source of conflict comes from a perception, developed through indirect contact, that they 'take' the money and send it home whilst, at the same time, driving down wages in the UK. Polish migrants were falsely and indirectly blamed for the financial crisis. As such, they were being made financial scapegoats.

Although many of these attitudes tend to be silenced, some of them are explicitly expressed and may evoke resentment among migrants. In this study, some migrants experienced discrimination through direct contact. In order to rationalize the sense of unfairness arising from being exposed to prejudice and negative stereotyping, they employed coping techniques such as producing or recycling counter-prejudice about the host population. Consequently, we noted a complex relationship between prejudice towards immigration and migrant prejudice towards the host society. An often 'unintended' consequence of the production of these attitudes was transnational circulation of prejudice between the UK and Poland (reminiscent of indirect contact). Such narratives are particularly problematic as they have the capacity to normalize prejudiced understandings of societies and peoples among those 'left behind' in

sending countries. Of course, it is important to stress that non-prejudiced narratives travel too (and they did in this study, although they were not discussed in this paper). Despite this prejudice and discrimination, the paper also highlights meaningful encounters between migrants and the host population, and how through direct contact, previously prejudiced attitudes can sometimes be transformed. Such meaningful encounters were often founded on the stereotype of ‘hardworking Poles’ but with attitude transformations of UK informants occurring predominantly (but not exclusively as we have shown) in the workplace. This has important implications for policy and highlights that effort needs to be taken to mobilize shared values around work. However, favourable attitudes can be complex. Indeed, favourable attitudes expressed by the host population are not unconditionally linked to positive migrant responses. They may, in fact, contribute to the transnational circulation of prejudice (Author 2).

Given the extent of stereotyping that we noted among both migrant and British born or long-settled informants, it is crucial to reconsider the role of stereotypes in forming attitudes and responses towards them (Augoustinos and Walker, 1998; Côté and Erickson, 2009; Figgou et al., 2011). Our study illustrates that, despite the fact that a decade and a half has passed since increased numbers of Poles started arriving to the UK, mutual stereotypes continue to shape understandings of both host and migrant communities. Indeed, such stereotyping played a significant role in the Brexit ‘Leave’ campaign in 2016 and could have impacted on the result of the EU referendum (cf. Meleady et al. 2017). While these stereotypes may sometimes assist better understandings of host and migrant populations and facilitate positive encounters, they may as well mobilize essentialist discourses and prevent meaningful contact. They should therefore remain subject to academic scrutiny and policy making.

The article juxtaposes the attitudes of the host community with migrant responses to these attitudes (as well as the responses of their significant others in the sending society). In doing so, it presents a rare perspective on immigration-driven diversity in European cities and contributes to debates on social attitudes towards international mobility within the European Union. In particular, we illustrate that attitudes towards Polish migrants expressed by the representatives of host society and attitudes towards host society expressed by Polish migrants (as well as their significant others in the



sending society) are intricately linked and mutually reinforcing. We suggest that the consequence of prejudiced responses to the increased presence of these migrants in Western European contexts is not only instances of discrimination or hostility, but also the development, and circulation, of prejudiced attitudes towards host societies within, and beyond, migrant populations. Positive encounters are likely to break down such prejudices and challenge stereotypes, but largely when they involve personal, direct and meaningful contact.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Two other CEE countries, Bulgaria and Romania, joined in 2007 and are referred to as the A2.

<sup>2</sup> [details of the study anonymized for blind review purposes]

<sup>3</sup> Many UK-born or long-settled participants in this study often used terms ‘Eastern European’ and ‘Polish’ interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> The survey of social attitudes was conducted between February and April 2012 with an adult population (18+) in Leeds, UK. This asked about the respondents’ encounters with people who are different from themselves in terms of ethnicity, religion, sexuality and disability in many kinds of sites, including the workplace. We applied a random location quota sampling design.

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