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Deskilling in migration in transnational perspective. The case of recent Polish migration to the UK.

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Introduction

In May 2004, as a consequence of the EU enlargement to the East, Great Britain opened its labour market to citizens of the new EU members. The rapid influx of workers, in particular from Poland, exceeded all expectations. While the number of new resident registrations in Great Britain went down and stagnated after the crisis in 2008, a significant number of Polish workers – estimated at more than 500,000 – remained in the UK (ONS 2011b). The post-accession migration from Eastern Europe is usually considered a positive example as it brought profit for national economies, in particular the British one (Kahanec and Zimmermann 2008). New immigrants to the UK find employment easily, and employment rates are higher among them than among British-born Whites (Demireva 2011). However, many of the workers in paid employment in the UK are high-quality migrants in low-wage jobs (Anderson et al. 2006; Milewski and Ruszczak-Żbikowska 2008). While it is assumed that these over-qualified workers benefit from higher wages in the UK compared with their home country and from the opportunity to learn English abroad, there is no research into the implications of this downward mobility for migrants' identity (Botterill 2008), and consequently their aspirations and factual chances for improving their social position.

The social mobility-migration nexus has so far been a subject of scholarly interest in regard to at least seven aspects, and Düvell (2006, 158ff) provides us a useful overview. First, research has shown that downward social mobility often acts as a trigger for international migration. Second, a number of effects of migration on social mobility have been identified: migration can lead to downward social mobility when migrants' skills and qualifications are not accepted in the host labour market; this can also relate to the second generation when migrants are marginalized and discriminated structurally. The opposite processes are also true: migration can lead to intergenerational upward mobility in the host country or – due to economic remittances – in the migrant-sending communities. Yet, when remittances are low, migration may also lead to the downward mobility of migrants' families back home.

Given that migration impacts the social mobility of migrants and their families both in the country of origin and destination, some authors postulate a transnational perspective which would display the whole complexity of the issue in question (Düvell 2006). Scholars investigating transnational forms of migration describe disparate class positions that migrants take in the country of origin and destination, in particular in respect to economic remittances and consumption patterns resulting in new possibilities for gaining prestige (Pries 1996; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Nieswand 2011). They were also interested in how social, economic and cultural forms of capital are evaluated, validated and transferred across nation-state borders (Kelly and Lusia 2006) and how migrants accumulate new capital in the process of migration (Erel 2010). Yet the problem is of a deeper, methodological nature: transnational social mobility necessitates new analytical tools that enable us to investigate both the socio-spatial and temporal conditions of socio-economic status as well as its transformations in migration (Weiss 2005; Nowicka and Zielińska 2007; Nowicka forthcoming b).

While elsewhere I make a theoretical point and suggest how Pierre Bourdieu's notion of capital can be useful in researching such transnational social positions (Nowicka forthcoming b), this contribution has an empirical character. My aim is to demonstrate the importance of looking at migrants' social positions, specifically the problem of deskilling of migrants in the labour market of the destination country, through the transnational lens of the process of migration. Migration thereby needs to be understood as a long-term process rather than a simple change of residence from one country to another, whether it is a frequent change, as in the case of commuting, or incomplete forms of movement across borders.

By putting migration at the centre of analysis, I gain a view that includes both the conditions of the country of origin and the destination country of migrants. But my analysis goes beyond a simple comparison of the two systems. It is not that one system produces migrants (by producing factors pushing them to leave), while the other incorporates them (by pulling them and creating conditions for their receipt). Rather, in the process of migration, the two sets of structuring factors produce a unique accumulation of socio-cultural conditions that establish the opportunities for migrants' positionalities. I will thus argue that the key to understanding why migrants tend to stay in low-skilled jobs that are at odds with their qualifications and aspirations is an analysis of these migration-specific transnational spaces of reference and agency.

In the following I progress by: 1) depicting the situation of Polish migrants in UK in light of the existing studies and by presenting my sample; 2) describing the ways Poles see

themselves as affected by ‘Polish fate’ and confronting these with our knowledge of the educational and labour market systems in Poland and the UK; 3) showing how migrants judge conditions of and their positions by using the rules of the country of origin and destination simultaneously; 4) considering these conditions to which the migrants referred during in-depth interviews; 5) pointing to the ambivalent effects of such migration-specific transnational spaces of reference and agency.

New Poles in Great Britain

The data for this paper are biographies of 44 Polish post-2004 immigrants to Great Britain interviewed between November 2010 and August 2011¹. I interviewed² 25 women and 19 men; they ranged in age from 21 to 43; the average was 28 years of age. Nineteen respondents lived in London at the time of interview, 23 in the Midlands region, and two in the area of Oxford. This corresponds to the statistical information we have on Poles in the UK: the Polish-born population in the UK is estimated at 532,000 people, widely spread across the UK. London has 122,000 Polish-born residents, 23 per cent of the UK total (ONS 2011b). The inflow from Poland is dominated by young and very young people; of those who applied to the Workers Registration Scheme between May 2004 and March 2009, over 80 per cent were younger than 34 (Home Office 2009). I interviewed single persons as well as five couples; one interview included two, and another one five flat mates. Singles were slightly underrepresented in the sample: 10 respondents lived on their own, while the rest were married or living in a civil partnership or cohabitating, in comparison to 58 per cent identified as such by labour force statistics (Pollard, Latorre, and Sriskandarajah 2008).

According to Polish statistical sources, some 20 per cent of all post-accession migrants have university degrees; 33 per cent have secondary and secondary vocational training (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2009). The British Labour Force Survey shows that 84.6 per cent of Poles in the UK aged 16 to 64 are in employment, compared with a rate of 70.4 per cent for the UK as

¹ This project is financed by and is being conducted at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen.

² The interviews were conducted by me and two contracted interviewers. In the following, for the reason of readability, I use the first form “I” or “me” when referring to the process of data collection. I would like to explicitly acknowledge the help of the interviewers in the Midlands and London for their effort to recruit informants, and would like to thank them for good cooperation.

a whole. The unemployment rate among Polish-born people aged 16 and over is only 5.5 per cent, compared with a UK unemployment rate of 7.8 per cent (ONS 2011b). Among my informants, three persons had secondary vocational training, nine had obtained general secondary certificates, and 19 had completed higher education. Nine people had studied either in Poland or in the UK while jobbing (for at least 3 months) in the UK. At the time of migration, 26 interviewees worked deskilled, and at the time of the interviews, 19 of them still worked below their skill level. Table 1 demonstrates the sectors of the interviewees' employment at the time of the interview as well as their highest education level achieved. Students are excluded both from the table and the analysis.

Education	Deskilled	Matched
Vocational (3)	Adela (shop manager), Barbara (shop manager), Luiza (manual worker)	
General secondary (9)	Emilia (part time community servant), Bolek (driver), Karola (shop support), Edyta (cleaner), Jakub (driver), Tomek (manual worker), Olek (manual worker), Olaf (hospitality), Regina (unemployed)	Anita (deputy shop manager)
Higher completed (19)	Lena (elderly care), Mirek (packer), Adam (hospitality), Iza (packer), Ola (teaching assistant), Szymon (manual worker), Wojtek (manual worker), Bianka (manual worker), Weronika (manual worker), Marlina (contracted teacher), Zofia (team manager), Kamil (engineer), Klaudia (engineer), Sebastian (engineer), Daniel (engineer), Maria (teacher)	Helena (self-employed), Emil (senior admin position), Teresa (managerial position), Ula (teacher assistant), Janek (manager), Bartek (banker)

My contribution is prompted by the narratives of a lack of plans for the future and melancholic stories of living day-to-day which I found while interviewing Polish migrants in Leicester, Nottingham, Northampton, Coventry and Loughborough. These narratives I could then contrast with stories of relative professional success among most of the London respondents. In particular, the first group spoke openly about de-skilling and missing perspectives for career advancement. However, the new Londoners also spoke about jobs

not corresponding to their skills and/or profession. Iza³ (28 years old, master's degree in humanities, has worked as a packer in a warehouse for three years) told me:

So, for today, I am trained for most of the positions and what, boring. Because this is a vacuous packing; we laugh that this kind of job as we do a trained monkey could do. Because we have products at the shelves, we simply have their locations written on a paper, and this is the whole order.

Weronika (29 years old, bachelor's degree in economics, has worked as a packer for five years) added: "This job de-brains you."

These narratives point to the problem of many of the new Polish immigrants to the UK, namely deskilling. Research has shown that Poles in the UK tend to undertake employment in low-skilled and low paid jobs despite possessing high levels of education (Drinkwater et al. 2006; Currie 2007). However, our knowledge of the exact patterns of employment and social mobility of the A8⁴ migrants, and in particular of the Poles in the UK, is very limited. The quantitative data relies on two sources: the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS)⁵. LFS samples a relatively small proportion of the population and it is likely to underestimate the amount of A8 migrants in the UK, especially those who have been in the country for less than six months and those living in communal establishments. The WRS reports those in dependent employment but does not measure change over time; there is also no obligation to de-register. The WRS contains only very basic information on personal and workplace characteristics, and it does not allow for comparisons with other national groups. The LFS provides little information on highest qualifications attained as, in the case of the A8 nationals, the qualifications were obtained outside the UK and do not map onto the UK qualifications specified in the LFS, and therefore simply fall into the 'other' category in the survey. The education variable is therefore constructed based on the answers to the question regarding at what age the respondent left full-time education, which the majority of immigrants answer.

³ All the names of the respondents have been changed to ensure anonymity.

⁴ The A8 countries were eight of the ten countries that joined the European Union in 2004, namely: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

⁵ The Accession State Worker Registration Scheme was a temporary measure used in the period from 2004 to 2011. It attempted to help the UK government keep track of the way that the UK labour market was affected by workers from the A8 countries.

According to Drinkwater et al. (2009) who base their findings on the LFS, Poles have by far the highest employment rates of those groups arriving post-enlargement, followed by migrants from English-speaking countries. In terms of occupation, post-enlargement A8 migrants have mainly found employment in semi-routine and routine occupations (about 3/4 of all employed), in contrast to other Europeans and nationals of English-speaking countries. Looking at the transitions from unemployment to employment and the opposite, Demireva and Kesler (2011) show that A8 nationals, among them Poles, in general seem not to be penalized when it comes to transitions both from unemployment and from employment, once a set of individual and labour market characteristics is controlled. Only A8 women have a significantly higher risk of remaining unemployed, while A8 men even have an advantaged position compared to natives regarding the probability of remaining in employment.

Clark and Drinkwater (2008) and Drinkwater et al. (2009), focusing on earnings equations, also argued that Polish workers (and A8 workers in general) are at a particular disadvantage, as they have had lower rates of return for their human capital than other recent immigrants, particularly after controlling for personal and job-related characteristics. Anderson et al. (2006) report that the average hourly earnings of recent migrants from Central and Eastern Europe were £5.94. These earnings figures only just exceed the national minimum wage, which was set at £5.35 in October 2006. This may indicate that A8 migrants are suffering from a significant mismatch in terms of their skills and earnings, but Clark and Drinkwater (2008) also emphasize the impact that different migration strategies and variations in English-language proficiency are likely to have on earnings. Migrants who do not expect to stay in the UK, for example, might be reluctant to invest in human capital in the UK and choose to work in occupations which do not require a high level of English proficiency and yet offer relatively high wages compared to those seen in Poland.

Janta et al. (2011), researching Polish workers in the hospitality sector, report that Poles take such employment, which is often obviously below their qualifications, for reasons such as improving (or implementing) English skills, and also in order to enter the labour market at the earliest opportunity, either because they do not have the competence to look for more advanced jobs or because they do not have the financial resources to look for appropriate employment longer. The fewest of them, indeed, have qualifications in hospitality. Janta et al. (2011) also investigated the migrants' satisfaction with employment in the hospitality sector. Many Polish immigrants consider jobs in hospitality to be a good start, as it gives them contact with people, financial benefits, and some flexibility in their work, but their aspirations change over time. The mismatch of aspirations and qualifications and the realities of the positions in hospitality impacts negatively on their well-being. However, Janta

et al. (2011) do not provide us with any further information on whether those workers who are dissatisfied with their positions manage to change jobs or sectors.

Travena (2010) explicitly addresses the question why Polish migrants tend to gravitate towards low-skilled jobs and argues that a combination of factors at the macro, meso and micro levels decide the individual career paths of Poles in the UK. Yet Travena's analysis of structural conditions in Poland (pushing migrants to leave) and in the UK (pulling Poles to seek jobs) is not convincing; she misses a comparative approach at the macro level in both countries. Instead, she considers the micro level factors to be a mode of explanation for the deskilling of Poles in the UK. She distinguishes three types of migrants: drifters, career seekers, and target earners, and ascribes a great role to the personal motivation and individual character qualities of migrants in shaping their employment trajectories. Finally, she fails to interlink the three levels of analysis and provide us with a convincing explanation for the lasting deskilling of Polish migrants in the UK.

'Polish fate'

Travena's empirical observations largely correspond to my own results, though I take a different line of interpretation. I noticed that my informants struggled in their narrations to present migration and living in the UK as a success story while often openly admitting that they were working below their own qualifications and aspirations. I analysed these discursive struggles elsewhere, looking at how Poles in the UK manoeuvre around the notion of failure (Nowicka forthcoming a; Nowicka 2013). One aspect of these narrations is relevant for the argument I want to make in this contribution: the Poles I interviewed often point towards specific Polish collective experiences as 'objective' reasons for their own downward mobility. These are: 1) financial necessity and few prospects for development in Poland, pushing them towards life and work in the UK; 2) lack of adequate skills as a result of a qualitatively poor educational system in Poland, preventing them from finding decent employment in the UK; and 3) being suspended in migration. I discuss the first two aspects jointly in the two subsequent subsections, and the last – to which I refer relate as a 'culture of suspension', in the final section, in relation to the way initially temporary migration becomes a permanent state.

Upon departure: why do so many graduates leave Poland?

Let me illustrate my point first with two examples: Adam studied at a technical university in a regional town in Poland. He obtained a B.A. degree and returned to his home town, where he worked in his profession for about one and a half years. However, he saw no further possibilities for professional development, and, seeking change and adventure and financial independence from his family, he decided to move to London. A friend of his helped him to find accommodation and his first job in London. Adam worked part time in a restaurant and soon took a second job in a catering company. After six months he returned to study in Poland, in his home town. He took extramural courses and soon returned to England to work in a restaurant while studying for exams, for which he travelled to Poland. He then moved twice within the UK, first following a friend and later his sibling. Each time he found a new job in catering services, and for two years he had different office clerk jobs with a county council until his position became redundant. Subsequently, Adam returned to work in a catering service. In the meantime he completed his MA in Poland and signed up for a graduate course at a university in England.

Iza studied humanities in Poland in one of the regional towns. She did not consider employment in her profession in Poland. She assumed that the profile of her education would not allow her to apply for a job that would provide decent earnings. Instead, she took a summer job in a supermarket and, together with her unemployed boyfriend, left for England. There she contacted a recruitment agency and was offered a job in a warehouse as a picker and packer. After few a months she was offered a permanent contract with this company, received training to perform different tasks, and continues working as picker and packer to this day.

These two trajectories are representative for most of the people I interviewed. Adam is an example of the young, educated Poles who are able to find employment in their profession after graduating from university but who earn little and do not see good prospects for career advancement in Poland. They are also not ready to move to large urban centres in Poland to seek employment there and easily and quickly decide to give England a try, often encouraged by their friends who already have jobs 'on the islands'. Iza represents those who do not even try to enter the Polish labour market as they assume their qualifications will not match the requirements of employers. They presume they would only find jobs that do not correspond to their qualifications and are below their expectations regarding wages and possibilities of advancement.

But do Polish graduates from higher education suffer from high unemployment and low wages? Indeed, they are doing comparatively well on the labour market in Poland, both in comparison to other educational groups as well as internationally. The unemployment rate among this group is rising, but slowly, reaching 5.5 per cent in Q3 in 2011 (GUS 2012), as is the trend across the EU (Eurostat 2012). It is much lower than in the UK (OECD 2010), where, according to the Labour Force Survey, 20 per cent of all graduates were out of work in 2010, the highest proportion since 1995 (ONS 2011a).

The difference between unemployment among graduates with at least tertiary and with lower secondary education is particularly large in Poland (GUS 2011), but the same trend holds true for other East European transition countries: the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, and Estonia (OECD 2010). In comparison, graduates in the UK aged 21-24 with degrees were less likely to be out of a job (11.6 per cent) than their peers without degrees (14.6 per cent).

In Poland, males with higher education earn 80 per cent more than those with upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education. This is more than in Germany (72 per cent) and the UK (75 per cent). Women profit less from higher education, earning on average 20 per cent less than their male colleagues. Poles investing in higher education can expect particularly high salaries, reaching 100,000 USD measured in NPV (Net Present Value), which is more than in Germany or the UK (OECD 2010).

Importantly, in Poland unemployment among graduates with higher education is unequally distributed across the fields of study: more than a third of all unemployed studied economy and administration, and a further 30 per cent pedagogy, social sciences and humanities (Czarnik et al. 2011). These are the fields that draw the majority of students: 40 per cent of enrolments are in social sciences, trade, law, economics, administration and management, which is above the EU27 average of 34 per cent (MNiSW 2010; GUS 2010). Given the cumulated number of students and graduates in relation to population, these fields are overrepresented.

This situation is due to the expansion of non-public institutions and public extramural programs. The Higher Education Act, introduced in 1990, enabled the creation of non-state higher education institutions. Since then, the number of non-public higher education institutions increased dramatically from 18 out of 124 in 1992, to 80 out of 179 in 1995 and 338 out of 470 in 2011, enrolling around 30 per cent of all students in Poland (GUS 2011; MNiSW 2010). The number of total enrolments increased accordingly. During the 1990/91 academic year there were 403,000 students. In 2000, their number increased to 1.5 million

and since 2005 it has stabilized at around 1.9 million. The gross enrolment ratio measuring the universality of higher education is steadily increasing in Poland, from 12.9 per cent in the 1990/91 academic year to 53.7 per cent in 2009/10 (GUS 2010). The OECD provides comparable data: it estimates that in Poland, some 70 per cent or more young adults enter tertiary-type A-programs (university or comparable level), while the UK average is less than 60 per cent and the German average is less than 40 per cent (OECD 2010).

The expansion of higher education is generally a story of success. Yet experts point to several problems, one of them being the structure of programs and degrees. Since the period of 1991-1994, the structure of studies has shifted from unified master's programs (lasting five years) to a three-cycle structure (except for the fields of human and animal medicine, psychology, arts, and law), consisting of the following segments: the first cycle (which usually takes three years, ending with a licencjat degree); the second cycle (which usually lasts 1.5 to 2 years, ending with a magister degree); and Ph.D. studies. First-cycle studies were introduced primarily in order to meet the demands of the labour market and accommodate the growing demand for higher education. They are offered to a large extent as extramural or part-time programs by the public and non-public institutions. They require neither expensive labs nor numerous lecturers supervising students during the empirical exercises (Pomianek and Rozmus 2010). In turn, first-cycle studies can be considered a continuation of general secondary education rather than vocational training, notwithstanding their title and administrative status in Poland (IBNGR 2009).

The interviews I conducted in England confirm this picture of the Polish higher education landscape. Some graduates in management and business administration courses, like Mirek, a graduate from an extramural program at a regional university, had severe problems finding employment corresponding to his degree in north-eastern Poland, where there was little demand for more young managers without experience. The overall situation on the labour market of graduates of particular courses differs greatly between the regions. While on average 80 per cent of all graduates with a higher education degree in Poland find employment, in the region of Podlaskie this rate is just 51 per cent; while graduates from management programs have on average more problems finding adequate employment than graduates in other fields, they do comparatively well in Podlaskie (Głuszyński et al. 2011) and comparatively badly in the region of Wielkopolska (PUP 2009).

Lena, one of the interviewees, a graduate in pedagogy, has never managed to find employment as a teacher in these times of decreasing birth rates and declining school enrolments. She jobbed in hospitality to earn her living before moving to England. Szymon completed a BA program in cultural studies at a non-public university and now works in the

UK as a factory worker. Such examples could be multiplied. Adam's case is, however, particularly interesting. I asked him about his education path in Poland. He replied:

A small university, you know, I forgot its exact name. A shame. Could you erase it? There were different courses, you know. Sociology, administration and so on. Full time and extramural courses, you know. We at the extra mural courses we had professors coming to the town...

Adam is not an exception. Fifty-two per cent of all students in Poland do not study full time; 81 per cent of all students in non-public schools attend part-time, extramural or evening courses. In public schools some 35 per cent of all enrolled are part-time students. This ratio is a consequence of the legislation which forbids public schools from offering more part-time than full-time courses. 58 per cent (over a million) of all students, like Adam or Mirek, need to pay for their education despite public education generally being free in Poland (Czerniachowicz 2008; IBNGR 2009). Part-time students finance their education working part- or full-time. Eighty per cent of students work during their studies, or gather experience by doing internships (SGH/Deloitte 2011). For many of them, therefore, their studies are a side-occupation. Little pressure is put on them by the schools, which contributes considerably to the decreasing quality of this form of study.

Moreover, the dynamic increase in the number of students was achieved at the expense of investing in the quality of teaching, which is related to a poor ratio of academic staff to students, in particular in courses with a large number of students. While on average one professor lectures 83 students (which is the EU average), over 500 students come for one senior lecturer (habilitated) in psychology and pedagogy, and 250 in social sciences, trade and law, the fields in which half of all students are enrolled. Sixty-six per cent of all professors are employed at more than one institution, which is a situation described by Adam; the low basic income in the academic sectors forces many academic staff to obtain multiple positions. Yet this popular practice hinders innovation and the quality of teaching (IBNGR 2009). Furthermore, 30 per cent of all professors are older than 70 years of age and the academic staff are getting older in general; due to baby bust, migration and the transfer of university graduates from academia to the private sector in the early 1990s, this gap can be only partially filled.

Yet, because part-time students work during their studies, they are integrated into the labour market more quickly (though in occupations not related to their educational profile) and the unemployment rates among them are low (Sztanderska 2008a). However, students are convinced of the opposite – they believe graduating from full-time courses from a public, renowned institution gives them better employment chances (PUP 2009). Self-organized

internships with companies have a positive effect on the labour market integration of graduates, while programs organised by schools in cooperation with the private sector have no such effects (Sztanderska 2008b).

The research from Poland gives a differentiated picture of the higher education system and the entry of graduates into the labour market. The Poles I interviewed complained about the poor quality of university education and the difficulties they experience or presume to experience when entering the labour market in Poland. While the unemployment rates among university graduates are low in domestic and international comparison, there are serious sectoral and regional differences that may affect graduates in the social sciences and business management in some areas of Poland more than other groups, contributing to the rather negative perception of the labour market as displayed by my informants. The tremendous expansion of higher education in Poland is accompanied by a decrease in the quality of teaching, inflation of higher education degrees, and the equalization of first-cycle studies with general education. These developments lead to the ambivalent attitude of my informants to higher education in Poland: while all see the necessity of 'getting a degree' in order not to lose a competitive advantage when 'all others' also have a degree, they are aware of the decreasing value of this kind of education and are ready to complement it with practical experience gathered on the job parallel to one's studies, the issue to which I dedicate more attention in the following section. The large proportion of students works then in accordance with their general secondary education, and often continues doing so after graduating from a university. In turn, their conviction that a university degree is necessary but of little practical use is being confirmed. For me this link between education and employment is important insofar as it is part of people's habitus when they leave Poland and arrive in the UK.

Upon arrival: why do all Poles start low?

Many of the interviewed Poles told me they got their first job in hospitality or catering, and some in factories or warehouses. Zofia said: "So I started to look for a job. As all Poles I started to work in a bar first." And Teresa added: "I assumed that all who come here from Poland start from simplest jobs such as barman, waiter, for example." The informants position themselves discursively within the assumed collective of Polish migrants for whom it is usual to seek jobs

in semi-manual or manual occupations. The reason they give for this is that their skills do not match the demands and the structure of the British labour market. Janek explained:

I thought I completed the studies: there comes an educated Pole! I wanted to achieve much fast. Then life showed me that education is not all and here people manage well without schools, by getting experienced (...) my technical knowledge does not mean much. Leadership is the most important (...) Here people without education achieve great successes (...) In Poland every second person has a master's degree. But can these people be successful on the job? I know many cases from my university when people went abroad and they did not manage. Even in Poland they did not succeed in professional life. Books at home, learning at home, learning by heart, A grades, but in professional life they are not successful.

Janek's narrative corresponds to the perception held by graduates in the humanities, social sciences, business administration, economy and management, of a bad situation on the labour market in Poland. In comparison to students in the sciences, these graduates are less satisfied with their choice of academic field, and they are more likely to switch to another subject after their first-cycle studies (yet to a similar field). Anticipating problems in finding employment, they try to work against it: they more frequently study two courses (which are usually similar, however), are more likely to complement their competences, more frequently work during their studies (yet in jobs not aligned with their educational profile), have lower aspirations concerning earnings, and generally assess their competencies lower than other graduates (Czarnik et al. 2011).

This does not necessarily fit the perceptions of employers in Poland. The employers' surveys show that Polish companies often encounter problems in finding adequate candidates despite an overabundance of labour in some occupations. A dominant reason for this was the mismatch between salaries offered by employers and the expectations of candidates, and the lack of candidates' willingness to work in less comfortable conditions (shift work, physically demanding jobs) (Czarnik et al. 2011). A regional survey in the Podlaskie Voivodship revealed that the local employers estimated that the majority of their employees work at the level of their qualifications; a mismatch was noticed, however, among graduates of courses in economics, management and business administration. According to them, over 33 per cent of management, 22 per cent of marketing, and 19 per cent of economics graduates perform tasks for which they are overqualified (Głuszyński et al. 2011). The regional studies of employers' preferences also show their differentiated opinions on graduates from different Polish higher education institutions. For example, employers in Podlaskie consider the regional schools in general to be of significantly lower quality, and thus producing less qualified graduates, compared to top-ranked schools in Warsaw or Krakow (WPROST 2010). The students share this opinion; yet they opt for local schools due

to the higher costs associated with mobility (renting accommodation in an urban centre, higher costs of living, etc.).

This phenomenon is referred to as ‘overeducation’, meaning employment of people with qualifications higher than required by a particular job description (UNDP 2007). In particular in services and sales, and clerical support, employers wish to accept secondary rather than higher education. Not all highly educated candidates are rejected in such cases, and experts frequently observe employment of ‘over educated’ candidates (Czarnik et al. 2011). Qualitative focused studies show that graduates are ready to undertake under-qualified employment. They are driven by the willingness to work legally, gain financial independence from their family, and secure retirement benefits for the future. At the same time, they complain that employers often reject the over-qualified candidates, fearing that they will switch jobs as soon as possible (PUP 2009).

‘Overeducation’ needs to be carefully considered: on the one hand, the majority of students work before graduation and continue to perform the same jobs after obtaining a higher education degree. In turn, the structure of employment of people with higher education and with secondary education in Poland is similar (IBNGR 2009). People with higher education find employment mostly in non-market services (almost 46 per cent), market services (20 per cent), industry (11 per cent), and construction (9 per cent). These are also branches that have witnessed the highest increase in employment of highly qualified workers in conjunction with the restructuring of the Polish economy; this employment structure is also due to the overall increase in qualifications in the population. Thirty-six per cent of highly educated Poles find employment in the public sector (UNDP 2007).

On the other hand, in particular in comparison with the UK, we see that generally graduates now do a wider range of jobs than in the past, which is partly a result of economic restructuring, technological change, and changes in the labour supply. Further, the vocational specificity of the education system, the structural linkage between the education and the labour market, matters in two ways: it may provide an advantage to school leavers in acquiring their first job in comparison to university graduates, but offers the university graduates better chances for staying in employment later on (Wolbers 2007). The UK system provides graduates with more general qualifications and is therefore more loosely tied to the labour market (Brennan 2008), a development which we can currently also observe in Poland. This is advantageous insofar as there is more flexibility in responding to changing demands on the labour market in the UK than elsewhere. Also, employers in the UK put more emphasis upon on-the-job training and induction within employment than elsewhere in Europe, which is related to the specific ‘vertical differentiation’ of the British system and the

poor ability of employers to assume a common knowledge base among the graduates (Brennan and Little 2009).

Importantly, however, this perception of the Polish labour market goes hand in hand with a low readiness for domestic mobility among the graduates and with a particular perception of the British labour market, as revealed by Janek. Domestic mobility in Poland is low: just two per cent of the working population commute to work in another region, compared to 15 per cent in UK and 10 per cent in Germany. A focused study among university graduates in the Wielkopolska region revealed that young highly educated people are less likely to move to large urban centres in search for adequate employment; rather, they consider international migration. They believe that employers abroad will offer fairer employment conditions – adequate salaries, a justified workload, regular contracts, better social security, and better development perspectives (PUP 2009). My respondents confirmed this, some saying, for example, that if they were to be offered a job in Warsaw, they would rather go to London, which is simply a more attractive city and where they hope for “decent” salaries.

Culture of suspension

This brings me to the next question: why do Poles, when starting low, not progress in their careers? Surveys carried out among British graduates show that while British students might undertake employment that does not correspond to their qualifications immediately after graduating, the picture looks very different seven years later: not only do more graduates find employment in the UK, but they are also satisfied with their jobs and career development (HESCU 2004; High Fliers Research 2012), in contrast to Polish graduates. If this is the case, and if Poles are not moving upwards economically and socially in the migration context, it is urgent that we understand the mechanisms behind this situation.

Allow me to explain the different aspects of the problem which I term the ‘culture of suspension’, illustrating each with a quotation from an interview which is representative for the particular issue. I asked Zofia how she came to start working in the UK. Following the answer to my question, she said without my asking:

So I stayed, unfortunately. I mean fortunately, because when I now compare the standard of living in England and in Poland (...) here I earn money for which I can afford holidays, going out in the evenings, even saving, buy good cosmetics. In Poland I know people who stayed and who (...) you

know, they scrape money together at the end of the month, yeah? And they also do not work in their profession, despite their master's degrees.

Several scholars from Poland and the UK have investigated the motivations for migration among Poles (Drinkwater et al. 2006; Milewski and Ruszczak-Żbikowska 2008). One of the common findings is that the post-2004 migration is driven primarily by economic reasons. Poles emigrate seeking better employment opportunities and better earnings, respectively. Galasińska and Kozłowska (2009) speak in this context of discursive strategies by which Poles construct their imaginaries of 'normal life'. In particular, the migrants seek 'normality' in respect to finding employment and being adequately remunerated for work. The discourse of earning decent money is quite prominent in the interviews I conducted. However, 'decent' or 'better' earnings are always a relative value. Zofia had never worked in Poland. She left the country after graduating as she saw no sense in searching for a job in Poland. Yet she judges her circumstances according to the 'rules of her place of origin' (Kelly and Lusia 2006)⁶. Zofia and other respondents successfully evade the discrepancy between the economic gain and the loss of status by switching between the two reference systems. Eade (2007) speaks here of a transnational character of the living class in respect to Polish migrants in the UK. I count this double frame of reference to the first characteristics of the 'culture of suspension'.

Often, the informants mention that they also now – a few years after their arrival in the UK – do not see any progress in Poland, meaning no better chances for them to earn a living. Wojtek told me:

And people tell me: it will never be like that in Poland. And you get to see things this way as well. And you are not courageous to start anew in Poland. One needs a good incentive to go back. And I am staying here. Honestly, I was five times just about to go back.

Wojtek's statement refers to two things: on the one hand, general conditions in Poland seem not to have improved for young graduates. Some interviewees refer here to the political climate for entrepreneurship in general; some often complain about politicians being too busy

⁶ Interviews with returnees that I conducted in Poland in August 2012 suggest that such comparisons and judgments have a complex temporal structure. Returnees claim that those who stay abroad miss seeing the progress in Poland and the betterment in many areas such as decreasing corruption, better employment opportunities or higher wages. They suggest that many Poles in the UK compare the conditions from the time of their departure from Poland; the extensive exchange between migrants and their families and friends in Poland, however, would suggest that they obtain enough information to judge the current situation. This issue requires further investigation.

with their own affairs to govern the country; others are more specific about regulations being too complex or mortgage rates being too high. Still others refer to the high costs of living. This is one of the reasons why the interviewees are unable to invest in their own house or flat in Poland. Their earnings in England, in combination with unfavourable exchange rates, are too low to save enough money to afford a mortgage loan in Poland. Returning to Poland would therefore mean coming back to their earlier dependency on family, usually parents, with whom they used to share a house or apartment.

Also, some informants mention the low quality of customer service in Poland, particularly in public administration, which is a burden particularly for those who wish to start up a new company, an aspiration of many of my informants. But poor customer service is also characteristic of the private sector in Poland. It creates an atmosphere in which nobody feels welcome. My informants link the issue of 'feeling or being unwanted' to the way employers in Poland approach returnees, fearing that returnees from England have wage expectations that are too high and a divergent work culture that could make them somehow incompatible with the teams of non-migrants (comp. Matejko 2010). On the other hand, my informants often mention 'a gap' in their own CVs. Iza said:

But if I come back, good. And I have this master's degree. And what? I am aware of it. Because wherever I go, every employer will ask me what I've been doing during the few last years. And what will I tell him? That I was packing goods in a warehouse? It is literally a hole in my vita.

Not having gained any work experience corresponding to her university education or relevant for any job to which she aspires (white collar jobs), Iza is aware that her chances on the Polish labour market are decreasing rather than increasing with every year of work in a warehouse in the UK. This relates to her language skills as well: while most of the interviewees say that they chose the UK as a destination because of their pretty fair knowledge of English, and while most of them also intend to improve their English skills through migration (Milewski and Ruszczak-Żbikowska 2008), only few succeed in doing this. Upon arrival, they are forced to experience that 'speaking English' is constructed in the social environment in which it emerges (Blommaert et al. 2005): what they saw as a competence in the English language in Poland (more passive, grammatically correct general proficiency) cannot be fully utilized as a resource in England (as regional dialects, different pronunciations and job-specific vocabularies have a local rather than a transnational character). And the opposite is true as well: while a large number of the interviewees live in a 'Polish bubble', with friends, neighbours and work colleagues predominantly from Poland, and thus have limited possibilities for significant improvement of their daily language skills, many do learn new, region-specific expressions and pronunciations, and profession-related

vocabularies, often building them into their Polish linguistic repertoire. Yet, this kind of new skill can be only partially utilized upon returning to Poland.

Having nothing to return to and not having improved any skills during the stay in England that could be employed upon return to Poland are the additional two characteristics of what I term – following the expression of Wojtek, one of my informants – the ‘culture of suspension’. Wojtek told me that he thinks Poles are suspended in migration, trapped. They earn enough to afford a comfortable life in the UK, yet not enough to save for investing to prepare their own return to Poland. In turn, many of the interviewees stress the temporary character of their stay and employment. Some respondents refer to the particular stage of life in which they are at present, for example, a student who undertakes a temporary job in any position to finance his or her studies (Adam, Laura, Karol) or someone who is just entering the labour market again after maternity leave (Adela) or unemployment (Lena). Others speak of their current employment as temporary – they took it just to pay bills and gain time to search for something better, or because it should bring them the expected promotion on the job (Ola). They argue that their time has not yet come (Goffman 2008).

Instead, they look forward to the future, not losing faith in a positive turn of the situation. Eade (2007) identified a similar hopeful look into the future among Polish immigrants in London and termed it a strategy of intentional unpredictability: keeping all options for the future open and not excluding any possibility. He relates this attitude to the myth of the meritocratic paradise and the belief in individual skills recognition in the UK. Eade’s respondents cherish a set of individualistic, quite egalitarian, market and success-oriented values and aspirations and the conviction that the British free market economy guarantees anybody who works hard and gains experience and knowledge on the job a promotion irrespective of his or her class belonging. However, I claim that this kind of attitude works only in a double system of reference, namely when the respondents judge their own situation and the conditions undermining it simultaneously and continuously using the rules of the country of origin and destination

Conclusions: Transnational spaces of reference and agency

The conventional migration research and theory tells us (Pries 2010) that to understand why young educated Poles leave Poland we need to involve an analysis at the macro, meso and micro levels simultaneously: motivations to migrate are a complex interplay of structural push factors (unemployment, income differentials, career opportunities, etc.), and individual driving

factors such as curiosity or income or status aspirations. Further, people take migratory decisions as social individuals that are embedded in social networks and family relations that may already reach to the place of destination. Push factors – higher wages and better employment possibilities, for example – also play a role, however, migrants may not have complete or correct information about the conditions at the destination.

The mainstream studies on the integration of foreign-born populations into host labour markets primarily consider the levels of education, (mis)match of skills, economic and legal conditions of labour market participation (occupational and industry structure) for migrants, and barriers to the utilization of skills of migrants at their destination, the last spanning from discrimination towards newcomers to a lack of language skills among migrants (Borjas 1987; Dustmann 1997; Chiswick and Miller 2009). Rarely, however, is attention dedicated to both: motivation to migrate and labour market performance of migrants in the destination country. Biographical research must be mentioned in this regard, particularly the work of Nohl et al. (2010), who distinguish between phases of orientation prior to departure and upon arrival as well as establishing at the destination, thus bringing together motivations to migrate and to integrate. In the cases they investigate, they establish that personal motivations for staying in the host country Germany have differential effects on the labour market integration of migrants.

A relatively new strand of research goes beyond this perspective and dedicates more attention to the subjective dimensions of migrants' positionalities. It no longer treats migrants as economically desperate and destitute individuals whose mobility is prompted by economic necessity, but as subjects exercising agency (Andrijasevic and Anderson 2009). Taking this stance, Erel (2010) argues that migration scholarship too often treats cultural resources as a set that migrants simply 'bring with' them from one country to another, which either fit or do not fit the demands in the country of destination. Not only is cultural capital far more differentiated than is assumed by conventional studies but, as Erel argues, migration results in new ways of producing and re-producing cultural capital.

As Erel (2010) does, I put migration at the centre of analysis. I consider migration as a process that starts when people go abroad for the first time; in the case of some of my interviewees, it might be when they studied in the UK and later came back as workers or when they undertook a holiday job abroad to later work permanently in the UK. From this point in time on, working abroad becomes one of the possible options in case of unemployment or planned workplace change (comp. Kandel and Massey 2002; Horváth 2008). But migration becomes for many a durable phase in life. Few have plans for returning to Poland or for staying in England. They discursively motivate this 'unpredictability strategy'

in terms of awaiting the best possible opportunities. However, as I have shown, the interviewees become 'trapped in migration' for years, never really settling but also not wanting or not being able to return.

The transnational system of reference and agency which is constituted in this long process of migration is multifaceted. It is necessary to distinguish four phases of it: the first is the time prior to the move abroad; the second is the phase of setting out; the third of establishment; and the fourth relates to the undefined future. While in each of these phases migrants constantly judge their own circumstances with rules of the country of origin and settlement, the workings of this double system of comparison are different in each phase.

First, young graduates, having had rather negative experiences on the labour market in Poland, or anticipating these, and driven by the idea of easy entrance and promotion possibilities in the UK, comparatively decent earnings and higher standards of living there, decide to seek employment in the UK. The migrants I interviewed view their experiences and aspirations in relation to their perceptions of selected, particular features of the educational system in Poland: the expansion of higher education, the inflationary character of degrees, the mismatch of employers' demands and skills of students, in particular graduates in the humanities and social sciences who attended extramural courses at non-public institutions. These perceptions correspond more to information transported through local social networks than to the aggregated data we have on labour market entry of graduates from higher education in Poland. They partly reflect local and regional specificities of demand for qualified labour; however, they often clash with the views of employers, who claim highly educated young people harbour unrealistic expectations towards wages and working conditions. These highly educated young graduates claim to be deficient in skills, on the one hand, yet aspire to certain earnings and believe that the UK system acknowledges their skills and willingness to adapt, and that it will ensure a 'decent' income.

Upon arrival in the UK, Poles often undertake employment in low-skilled jobs. They thereby compare themselves not to British graduates, who grew up and completed education in a different national system and are therefore no point of reference for the Poles; rather, they look back to Poland. They do this on the one hand to refer to the theory-based education they received in Poland, due to which they lack practical knowledge that they believe is of key importance to British employers and without which they cannot enter better jobs. On the other hand, they see their relatives and friends in Poland who often work badly paid jobs that do not correspond to their education. At the same time, Polish migrants to the UK believe that due to on-the-job training possibilities in British companies, they will progress in their careers, or, considering the ease of entry into the first job, they will swap jobs to get

promoted. They trust that due to the close supervision typical for British companies, their managers will soon notice their competence and devotion and promote them.

When in the UK, the Polish migrants I interviewed navigate around the relative deprivation in their lives by looking back to Poland again. The relatively decent earnings and in some ways better standard of living in the UK are for them reasons to stay in the jobs despite the stagnation of skilling. The key stabilizing element is the constant comparison between life trajectories of friends and family members in Poland and their own situation in the UK. Discursive strategies of reference to the 'normality' of work and life, to 'collective fate' or the 'necessity of enduring' (comp. Nowicka forthcoming a; 2013) are part of this process. The references to rules and conditions in the space of origin and of destination also have consequences for how migrants conceive of their own future as unpredictable and open.

The fact that migrants are embedded in a transnational space of reference and agency poses at least three questions for future research. First, the notions of skills and deskilling in migration needs to be re-considered as it takes place prior to movement and requires us to consider longer periods of time than simply the first employment upon arrival in the destination country. Also, skills are not a constant value and are context specific; their utilization depends as much on the context as on the subjective perceptions of the context. Second, the way the same condition might impact the migrant trajectories differs when migrants act in a transnational space. For example, the trend to less vocational specificity in Poland influences how Polish graduates judge their own chances on the labour market in Poland; skills which they gain in education do not directly correspond to the particular demands of the labour market, as the educational system equips them with general skills. However, the low vocational specificity of the British system is considered by the same people as enabling them to have fast and easy entry into the labour market while opening up possibilities for their future career. Both differential perceptions lead to different labour market behaviour. However, in the phase of establishment, Poles often interpret the system of close supervision in the workplace in the UK, which stems from the low vocational specificity in the education system, in terms of the 'superiority' of Poles. As British graduates are usually younger and less experienced, and receive close supervision, Poles get, on the other hand, an impression that the British employees are not independent because they are 'unable' to be so – missing some key personal skills, missing appropriate human capital. In turn, the Polish migrants feel superior to them, and start believing in their own skills and competences, which may indeed give them some advantage. However, the data for the UK show that while graduates in their first jobs might be less 'competent', the system of learning on the job leads to a certain equalization of the competence-demand match over time. This

in turn is interpreted by the Poles as a 'glass ceiling', when 'relatively bad' UK graduates achieve higher positions within a few years after graduation, while Poles, entering the UK labour market later, get 'stacked' in their careers.

Finally, studies looking at the balance between demand and supply of the work force in Poland show that the occupations with the largest shortages of staff are health professionals, construction workers, drivers, and mobile plant operators (Czarnik et al. 2011), all of which are the occupations in which Poles find employment abroad. As Poles take their employment decisions while considering opportunities in a transnational space, we might have to deal with the replacement of domestic, sectoral and job-to-job mobility with international migration to Poland. These issues need further investigation to judge the meaning of emerging transnational spaces of reference and action.

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