



Responding to Changes: Experiences of Older Migrants Leaving Poland

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of political changes on an older Polish generation, which has led to their migratory journey to the UK. The study was conducted with 35 participants throughout the UK using an oral history approach. Thirty were over the age of 45 when they migrated, and the others were all aged over 45 when they were interviewed in 2010 and 2011. As the paper shows, employment opportunities and the feeling of being unwanted in their homeland play a significant role in decisions of older people to migrate. The emotional effect of leaving their homeland may, however, have wider implications. Satisfaction with their current circumstances in the UK may be due to their age and past experiences but a majority were not happy and this may impact on their psychological well-being. More research into the effect on mental health of economic migrating when older is recommended.

Keywords: EU enlargement; older migration; transition; mental health; psychological wellbeing; Polish workers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The migration of older people for economic reasons is becoming a global issue as the world population ages, encouraging more older people to move countries in search of work opportunities. Whilst there have been numerous studies on younger migrants, the older age

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group has not been widely investigated, and the issues relating to them are not yet fully understood. There has been little research on older migrants moving for economic reasons. Previous studies have focused on younger migrants, on migrants growing old in a new country [1,2,3,4,5,6] or on older generations retiring or joining family members [7,8,9,10,11,12]. This study looks at those aged 45 or over who have migrated from Poland to the UK in search of opportunities not available to them in their own country. Poland has been undergoing many changes as it moved from a socialist state to a capitalist economy, and then acceded to the European Union in 2004. Polish people over the age of 45 have lived through these transitions and their stories illuminate the experiences of this particular age group.

Polish migrants were chosen for this study as they represent the largest ethnic group coming to the UK after 2004. Research and statistics show that about seven per cent of all migrants from the eight countries which were admitted to the EU in 2004 were aged over 45 [13,14,15]. Estimates of more than one million migrants from these countries are said to have come to the UK after 2004 [16,17] by 2008 the UK was the top destination for Polish migrants, replacing traditional destinations such as Germany, the USA and Canada. The scale of the migration flow was far higher than expected but the UK was one of only three EU countries which placed no restrictions on immigration from these Eastern European countries; theories of migration suggest that the pull factors are intensified when labour markets are attractive in the receiving country [18] and in 2004 the UK offered immediate access to plentiful employment. Immigration from the Eastern European countries was relatively static from 1997 to 2004 but from 2004 numbers rose sharply, peaking in 2006 with over 200,000 new arrivals [18].

One of the challenges of migration is that it involves change. Accepting change becomes more difficult as people grow older [19,20], and older migrants are likely to encounter more difficulties [21,22]. Migration itself can increase the risk of mental illness [23,24,25] and this may be intensified by the age at which migration occurs. This is why it is important to have more understanding of the issues faced by these older migrants. The experiences of an older age group add a new dimension to the migration debate.

2. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative oral history approach was taken for this study as it was seeking to explore experiences of older migrants. Oral history is where a recollection of events is gathered from individuals, often through face-to-face interviewing and records personal interpretations of the causes and effects of these events [26]. Although it may seem arbitrary, the age of 45 plus was chosen as this is an age group determined by UK government statistics and there were consequently official records available for quantifying any data collected. It is also an age when people are entering a mid-life stage in the life course, where they are re-evaluating their lives and re-appraising their identity [27]. Additionally, it is a time when one would expect life patterns to be more entrenched and families to be more settled.

This was a hidden minority; the older age group did not mix with younger Polish migrants, they did not inhabit the same neighbourhoods as their compatriots, and they were difficult to locate. Snowballing techniques were limited as there was little social interaction between Poles in this age category. The participants were identified through online social networks, personal contacts, English language classes, companies and using market research methods in town centres. Thirty five participants from all over the UK were interviewed over

a period of almost two years. The interviews were taped and transcribed and checked twice by Polish translators to ensure accuracy. Most of the interviews were carried out in Polish although some attempts were made in English; however, there was always the option to speak in the native language. In general, the interviews lasted about one hour, although one lasted three hours and two participants were interviewed for a second time to elicit more information.

All interviewees gave their informed consent and were able to withdraw that consent at any time. One participant was interviewed and then decided against allowing her data to be used, therefore the taped interview was erased. The participants have been given pseudonyms and their names and contact numbers were itemised on a separate sheet of paper. Personal details were not kept on tapes and transcripts, in order to maintain confidentiality.

Interview questions were open-ended and participants were encouraged to talk freely about their experiences. The interview tapes and transcripts were subjected to inductive thematic analysis in order to sort into categories. Inductive thematic analysis is a strategy which allows themes or patterns linked to the data to evolve [28] and the interview transcripts were read and re-read to identify keywords or concepts arising from the interviews. The data were then put into a timeline reflecting the leaving of Poland, lifestyle in the UK and future intentions. Each of these categories was further divided into evolving themes such as influences, attitudes, responsibilities, families, and communication. One of the patterns identified in this way related to the theme of transition and this paper explores both the changes within Poland leading eventually to the migration decision, and the adjustments being made to cope with change.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Living in Political Transition

Poland had been under socialist rule since 1945 but in 1990 reforms were set in place to transform the country into a market economy. It seemed to many that this would be a time of new opportunities and people who had previously emigrated for political reasons started returning home from abroad. Michalina (56) was full of hope and left Ireland to go back to Warsaw in 1992. Within three weeks she had employment using her knowledge of English and her experience of working in the UK. Big international companies were moving into Poland and she had offers from brands such as Rothmans, Proctor & Gamble and Nestle.

I had these offers from all the big international companies and nobody in Poland could speak English and they all wanted to set up there. I was given a top job as a finance controller at Rothmans. I found out later they were only moving there after leaving Western countries because of cigarettes and smoking so they came to Poland instead.

Michalina's comment about nobody being able to speak English in Poland is not entirely accurate; it is more likely that she gained employment because of her recent experience in an English-speaking environment and because of her confidence in using the language. As she suggests, many international companies were competing for English language speakers, and there may not have been enough jobseekers with language skills to fill all the vacancies.

Jerzy (58) was also excited by the opportunities:

After we were married in 1975 we were given one room to live, there were not enough houses for everyone at that time, but I worked for the community and I got put at the top of the housing list. In 4 years we were given a flat, when most people waited for 20 years. But in 1990 we were given a year to buy the flat from the government and we did.

There was a similar opportunity for Julia (45):

My husband was a national forestry worker and it was government work so we had an apartment from the government. But my husband died 19 years ago and I kept working while my mother-in-law stayed with the three children and looked after them while I was working. Because there was reorganisation after communism we were allowed to buy the apartment at 5% of its market value and I still own it today in Poland.

However, the market economy changed the labour market significantly, with the impact reaching into the mid 2000s; records show that there was very low labour activity for older people [29]. Much of this was due to the right to early retirement where people were able to retire in their 50s [30] However, it was yet another transitional period which was very difficult for some people as there was a drastic reduction in the money supply and high interest rates, and further reductions in food subsidies [31]. Ownership was to be transferred from state to private enterprise but there was no model or experience to draw upon for this move to entrepreneurship. Michalina explains:

Women suddenly had nothing, they had grown up having their own money, but there was no childcare, the state had provided that. There was mass suicide, enormous problems. In whole areas of Poland especially the eastern part under the influence of Russia, there was no employment. Millions of people were unemployed and drinking heavily. There was no protection. It slowly became apparent, but too late, the damage was done, everything was divided. Euphoria and hope and great co-operation had been there, sharing, working together, believing in the country. Now it had been stolen.

This description of a country unravelling reflects the anguish that many felt about sudden change in their lives. Whereas they had been protected under socialism, individuals were now expected to be responsible for their own livelihoods. The eastern part of Poland was particularly affected as it was more rural and had relied on state agriculture; rates of unemployment rose significantly once those resources disappeared [32]. Transition from one political system to another causes upheaval and it is usually ordinary people who are unprepared for these changes. Their whole way of life is turned upside down and their own country becomes an unknown territory. People had expected a better future but the reality was worse than they anticipated; consequently, they felt let down and, as Michalina states, they felt as though their future had been stolen from them. De Boer-Ashworth [33] recognises the economic hardships experienced by the population and asserts that this resulted in disenchantment with the political process, whilst Yeager [34] suggests that, although poverty rates increased, there was no great poverty or starvation and Poland did provide social benefits. The experiences of those living through the transition period are, of course, taken from a different perspective.

There is no doubt that the period of transition from socialism to post-socialism in Poland has been difficult for many. Burrell [35] points out that post-socialist transformation has been a long and yet unfinished process of change, and Michalina agrees: "Changes occurred from

the mid-1990s and they are still going on". In 2001 Stenning [36] carried out interviews of working class residents of a district of Krakow and she identified feelings of dislocation, insecurity and immobility: she argues that these were mainly because of comparisons made between communist control and capitalism, to the detriment of capitalism. People find it hard to accept change and the loss of something familiar turns it into an imagined ideal which may or may not have been accurate. This has been witnessed in many cases where the past becomes a lost paradise and where memories are selective in focusing on aspects which are not viewed in context. Yet the perceptions of ordinary people are just as valid as those of more objective historians, and it cannot be denied that the transition period had a considerable impact on the general Polish population.

There had been a decided increase in unemployment rates in Poland since 1990 [37] and by 2003 around twenty per cent of the working population were out of work compared to just seven per cent in the Czech Republic [38], therefore this would statistically have affected a lot of older workers. In more rural areas unemployment rates were even higher. It is important to acknowledge that transition came at a time when these older migrants were younger adults and that everything they had known was taken away from them. They no longer had a future set out for them, it had become very uncertain. Under socialism they had been protected and now they were on their own, responsible for their own survival. Their lives changed in such a way that they were left confused, and it was harder for them to adapt to such changing circumstances. The jobs they had thought were secure had suddenly disappeared, they no longer knew what they would be doing in the future, and they were worried about how they were going to provide for their young families.

It has been particularly difficult for older people; the past has been lost to them and the future is uncertain. They are unable to place themselves back in their familiar, safe socialist environment, but they cannot see a way forward for them in the new capitalist world, which seems to be rejecting them. For some, there was a brief time in the 1990s when they had hopes and aspirations, but these were not sustained. As Marek (49) said: "We lost hope. We decided to leave Poland because I didn't believe that something is going, that everything is going to develop".

3.2 The Age Factor

The OECD Economic Survey [39] reported that older people can benefit from training as it has been shown to reduce unemployment among this age group. The issue they have is that older people tend to feel that learning is for younger people, not for them. There is a lack of self-motivation as older people often do not see any sense in training and refer to financial and time constraints [39]. A comparative study carried out by Wooden [40] shows that for 1994 – 1995 Poland had the lowest rate of participation in job-related training by employed adults over the age of 45, with just 14%. This compares with 41% in the UK and an average of 30% across the other countries. Moreover, as Fisk et al. (2009) identify, many employers perceive that older people are unable or unwilling to learn and so they do not offer them the opportunity, thus reinforcing in these older employees' minds that they are not able to be retrained.

Work has been foremost in the minds of these older people coming to Britain, but not all the migrants are thinking of leaving Poland permanently, and some may be coming to the UK on short visits to be with family. However, there has to be a reason for leaving and Segal et al. [41] suggest that the push factor is a combination of internal conditions in the homeland along with personal circumstances. The rates of unemployment in Poland combined with the

weaker skills of older people no doubt had an impact on the job losses experienced by most of the older migrants.

It seems that a combination of age and lack of skills is likely to have been the primary cause of people losing jobs. Michalina (56) reports that her employers told her she would lose her job: "I was told the reason is because I don't have a degree and eventually they started downgrading me, you know suggesting that I'm not clever enough to do those jobs". She also believes it was a political decision: "Basically when you're an aged woman you have no right to exist in Poland".

Krystyna lost her job in 2002, when she was forty years old: "I stayed home because I could not find work. People who advertised job offers, they didn't want to employ me because I was old". This was despite her having a Master's degree in Science and experience as an engineer: "I worked with a company that deals with traffic lights at crossroads but my occupation was difficult, it was a man's occupation. In Poland this company did not want women on their staff. It was a big problem for me".

The experiences of others, however, show that men were equally targeted, although they may have found it easier to pick up short-term, low-paid alternative work. Marek describes how there were a lot of jobs available but the main problem was the low wages. It is ironic in Marek's case that he had originally trained to be a specialist in medical electronics, and was therefore highly skilled, but the very low wages in the Polish Health Service made him change career and become a lorry driver. He was able to work his way up into a management position but then lost his job:

A lot of conflicts between politicians made the situation in the job market very difficult for workers, for employees generally. I used to work for a big international company as a regional transport manager responsible for a fleet of about 100 vehicles plus drivers. I lost my job in one day. The management team had been changed. New people came to the company. One of the managers had been promoted to director and his first decision was to remove me. As an explanation he said it's not personal against you, we just need your position for another person, a friend.

Zygmunt (59), who has been here for eight years, says: "I couldn't get a job back home that would support me and my family. I was over fifty years old and I could not get a proper job again, just short term."

The values that people had grown up with were changing, but the sharp increase in unemployment from 3% in 1990 to 20% in 2003 [42] meant that many older people felt they were being marginalised. During these transition years education suddenly became important, with four hundred new universities being established to meet demand [43], and Michalina explains:

I was brought up under communism, we had no competing values. And suddenly in 2007 it became very difficult to find a job, only cleaning jobs were available. All avenues in Poland were shut, I was squeezed out. Regulations started to appear, qualifications were required. They wanted certificates and older people did not have these.

Employers suddenly had a choice of young graduates to fill any available vacancies. Older people who had not had the opportunity of university were at a disadvantage when it came to a competitive job market. Mass migration to the UK after 2004 did find employers

complaining about labour shortages in Poland but the employment rates of those aged over fifty five is the lowest in Europe [44]. The employment rate of female workers aged over fifty five is just nineteen per cent, compared to well over sixty per cent in the Scandinavian countries [44]. There is some justification, therefore, for older people feeling that they were particularly targeted when it came to a lack of employment opportunities in Poland.

3.3 Reluctance to Migrate

Migration does not always provide the solution. Zachariasz (45) had to leave his country because he had no choice, he had to find work, but he admits that he has not been able to settle in the new country: "I feel very bad about moving from my country to this one. But what could I do? I could not find work". It is the same with Teresa (50), who had no wish to migrate but had to do so for economic reasons: "I could not find work and had to come here to the UK. I have not settled well in this country".

These were very reluctant migrants, not wanting to leave their country but aware that, by staying in Poland, they were unlikely to be able to find work to support themselves and their families. Gold and Amthor [22] suggest that such older migrants and those with fewer skills and resources are also more likely to encounter difficulties. Hunt [27] suggests that the time of mid-life, possibly between forty and fifty years old, is when people become aware that the next phase of their life may well be more difficult than the first and they may choose to change career or try something new. This may well be why some of those who chose not to migrate when younger, decided upon it at a later stage in their lives, although it does not always work out well for everyone. Agata (45) has still not found that changing direction has improved her life: "I found it very hard leaving my country to come here. I do not think I am well settled here. My life has changed but I would not say I am happy with my life but it is better than living in Poland".

There is no doubt that many people find the transition from their homeland of Poland to the UK a traumatic experience. When asked how she felt about moving from her country to a new one, Teresa (50) responded with one word: "Shocking." This shock at having to leave Poland at their age results in these older migrants looking back with nostalgia. Yeo [45] suggests that migrants tend to edit their memories and linger on the more comforting aspects of people and places familiar to them, often expressing their longing in terms of landscape. Michal (48) reminisces: "What I remember most about Poland is beautiful times, beautiful gardens, a beautiful world but no job".

Some qualify their reasons for leaving by proclaiming that they had no control over the decision, that it was out of their hands; they had to leave as they had no choice. Yet there was always an element of choice in making the decision to migrate. Jakub (45) says: "I was forced to come to the UK because of money. Leaving Poland was very difficult but I had to do it." Jakub says that he came to the UK because of money and he has noticed in Poland: "Loads of private sector companies now, lots of difficult situations and private companies". It is these private companies which appear to represent a problem for the older migrants as they are seen as the catalyst for changing their lives. In Jakub's mind the "difficult situations and private companies" are entwined and become a negative force for him.

He has been working in the UK for four years as a truck driver, a job he did in Poland as well. As he admits, he came to Britain for the money. This is his own choice, and he has left all his family behind in Poland, despite the fact that he did have a good job there. The ambition of making more money has long been a factor in migration, but he was not

compelled to leave Poland. Jakub also admits that he has now adapted to life in England, and he may indeed find it difficult settling back in Poland in the future, as there will have been changes there in the meantime.

Personal circumstances differ, as to be expected, but they often involve money, and migration then becomes a matter of choice. As Krystyna (49) confesses: "In Poland life is very expensive and we haven't got enough money for our life. We have all the time problems with paying bills because when we have to pay all the bills, we have no money for the rest of life. We have a big problem."

3.4 Emotional Challenges

It is not easy moving away from family, friends, and everything familiar to start up again in a foreign country, especially one where there are cultural differences. Even though there may be other migrants from a similar background, as well as social networks, or even family members waiting in the new country, it can still be a time of personal turbulence. In their study of Indo-Asian immigrants to the UK, Ghosh and Khan [46] find that migrants have to make many adjustments to their lifestyle and that even though these may appear to be quite trivial, they can lead to increased stress, particularly for older people. They suggest that the ability to deal with change decreases with age and that it becomes much harder for older migrants to modify their cultural habits which have been consolidated over many years. Brygida (42), who came to Britain and was then joined by her husband and children, admits: "It was a stressful time for us."

Moving house is considered to be one of the most stressful events for people but migration to another country presents far more problems. Benson and This tlethwaite [23] consider living in a new culture means having to learn to deal with two identities and they suggest that the many changes and challenges to be faced in a new environment are likely to increase the risk of mental illness. In her study of Polish migrants to Melbourne, Leuner [24] concurs that migration is a challenging and complex process and one of the major problems associated with it is emotional.

Abi-Hashem [47] looks at how Iraqi migrants are faced with psychosocial challenges in having to confront life in a completely different environment; they may miss home and therefore closely follow what is happening there through the media, but in an attempt to distance themselves from a rather painful past, they may become highly critical of their own country. This theme is picked up by Diller [48] who finds that there are quite complex mixtures of feelings about leaving a homeland: these may combine love, anger, disappointment and guilt alongside admiration, frustration and even anger towards the new host country. Ahearn [26] agrees, saying that without sufficient and appropriate social and emotional support, many find the migration experience unsatisfactory and are unhappy, even resenting their lives in the new country and pining for their homeland. Andrzej (55) has a nostalgic view of Poland but he is very disappointed in the way he feels his country has let him down by not providing employment for him:

What I remember most about life in Poland is a great country with vivid seasons, beautiful architecture and infrastructure. I did not have a job and that is why I had to come to this country. I feel as if my country has let me down, it did not give me a chance, therefore I had to look for an opportunity elsewhere and I am very sad about that. my thoughts are always in Poland.

Andrzej had been in the UK for one year. He is a rather introspective man, with a passion for painting and walking down by the river, but he is also articulate and can express the feelings he has about being placed in a position where he has had to leave his country. Not all are able to do this and may not even realise the impact the move from their homeland has had on them. Benson and This tlethwaite [23] suggest that migrants may suffer from culture shock, which could include symptoms such as paranoia, anxiety and an idealisation of the home culture. When they find that reality does not live up to their expectations, then this can lead to ill health. Marcin (46) has been living in England for five years. He says he is unemployed and on Jobseekers' Allowance at the moment but he recalls that he had a good job back in Poland and says: "I remember a good life in Poland. Life here is completely different. My English is not good enough to deal with living here."

Marcin has found that the move to this country has not met his expectations, and he is thinking back to times which he has idealised. If his life was so good and he had a good job, then he would not have needed to migrate to the UK, but he will not admit to this. He is unable to say whether or not he will stay here. In this he is similar to other migrants, such as those seeking a better lifestyle in places like Spain, where Benson and O'Reilly [49] find that retirees often long for elements of their past life and some are already looking for other places where they might go, as the reality of this good life they had envisaged has not materialised. Migration is aspirational but the moving from one culture to another, this change in environment, can lead to disappointment. It is more intense for older migrants as they have more memories than younger people, they can indeed go back to times when they remember they were happy, even although these may have been well in the past, and do not represent the current situation in the home country, which has led to their migration. Making adjustments to their lifestyle takes longer for the older migrants. These difficulties in adjusting to a changing environment are not so evident in younger migrants, who find it much quicker to adapt [50].

Wojciech (46) also reflects on what he has left behind: "I always lived in the same place. What I remember most about living there was the trees, the woods, the flowers, the plants. Poland is a beautiful country. I felt terrible when I had to leave my country." Zachariasz is constantly feeling that Poland is calling him back home: "What I most remember about my life in Poland is the lakes. I really enjoyed fishing. It was not hard coming here...but I have not settled here at all. I want to go back."

However, as Boym [51] argues, nostalgia seems to be a longing for a place, when actually it is a yearning for a different time. The act of reminiscing and the experience of nostalgia can, however, facilitate a meaning to one's life, and provide a place where a sense of identity is kept safe [52]. In associating the homeland with a sense of belonging, migrants can claim an identity which stretches back into their personal family history [53]. It is a defence mechanism in times of upheaval [51] and should be regarded as something which protects and gives comfort. The emotional response that nostalgia evokes can give a feeling of self-worth, of value, and of patriotism, especially when there are cultural changes to confront.

Nostalgia for the homeland simplifies the past and does not take into account the fact that homeland cultures are constantly changing. If and when they do return, people will find that nothing is the same; they themselves have changed as well as the place and there is no going back in time [52]. Some of the older migrants do recognise this, and realise that everything has changed; they appreciate that they did indeed have a choice and were able to move countries after 2004, when Poland became part of the European Union. Henryka (68) is one of those who understand that change has taken place and that she has had to

adapt to that change. She has taken a positive approach to it: "I remember fantastic times but now times are very difficult there so I had to come to England. I am very happy as I think it is good that Poland joined the EU. It was hard to leave Poland but I feel OK here".

There are others who are happy that they have made the decision to leave. Piotr (50) says: "What I remember is work, work, work and lack of money. I felt good about moving countries". Casimir (50) is also glad that he has moved countries: "I did not have a good job there. It was not hard coming to the UK. The housing is good and I feel good about moving countries. I am happy with my life in the UK."

4. CONCLUSION

The memories of their past experiences, which have often been challenging in terms of financial well-being, may lead to greater satisfaction with these older migrants' lives in the UK. They have been confused by the impact of transition on their lives and some are still struggling to make sense of it; there is often a feeling of resignation that life is now better for them in the UK. However, it must also be recognised that a significant number are not happy with the change in their circumstances, and would prefer to be back in Poland. Financial well-being is not the only factor contributing to happiness and the emotional determinant, which can weigh heavily on the mental health and psychological well-being of migrants, cannot be ignored. The age of these migrants also needs to be considered as they have encountered quite traumatic changes over their lifetime and there may yet be lasting effects. It would therefore be wise to take into consideration the impact that transitional change and migration may have on older migrants who may not be able to adapt so readily to change.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Further research on older economic migrants would provide more understanding of the impact of significant changes on their mental health. A longitudinal study would be able to monitor mental well-being over a period of time and determine whether economic migration when older may be a factor in contributing to satisfaction or whether it has a negative impact on their psychological well-being.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me something about your early life in Poland?
2. What kind of work did your parents do?
3. What do you remember most about your childhood in Poland?
4. What kind of holidays did you have when you were young?
5. What was it like growing up in Poland when you were young? Did you have lots of freedom to do what you wanted to do?
6. Tell me about what happened after you left school - any qualifications, your job.
7. What kind of house did you live in?
8. Tell me about your family – your husband/wife, your children.
10. When things started to change in Poland in the 1990s, how did it affect you?
11. What differences did you notice?
12. Can you tell me about the work you did, was it well paid, did you enjoy it, were you always employed?
13. Do you have a good job here in the UK?
14. Why did you decide to leave Poland?
15. How do you feel about leaving your own country to come to a new one?
16. How has moving countries affected your family?

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