

‘My Mum didn’t really wanna stay in Poland
and my Dad didn’t wanna come to England’:

the changing pattern of family migration from Poland to the UK

Dr Sara Young, UCL Institute of Education

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Abstract

Following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, the demographic of Polish migration to the UK changed. While previous migrants were predominantly young, single males, post-2004 migration comprised Polish families, often coming with children. Yet where once the father was seen as responsible for making the initial move to migrate, it is increasingly the mother who is taking this step, with the father remaining in Poland. This was a pattern which emerged from my doctoral study investigating the experiences of Polish-born adolescents living in the UK, where several of the young people interviewed had divorced parents, and in the case of two of them, their fathers had remained in Poland. This paper examines the narratives of these two adolescents and explores the challenges highlighted by their stories. One is the limited amount of time the children can spend with their fathers, and the subsequent impact on their relationship, something which may be further impacted by possible Brexit regulations on mobility. A second issue is that while English is becoming the adolescents' main language, neither fathers speak the language. This further affects interaction between these children and their fathers. I suggest that such issues may influence the way these adolescents negotiate their relationship not only with their fathers, but with Poland. This paper thus argues that the experiences of separated families need to be explored further in discussions on changing patterns in contemporary migration.

Introduction

- **Post-2004:** Polish accession to the European Union (EU) -> increased migration from Poland, especially of families & their children (Ryan et al. 2009; White 2017).
- Resulted in increased number of 'geographically dispersed relatives' (Ryan et al. 2009: 64).
However: formerly, fathers initiated migration (Lopez Rodriguez 2010); now it is increasingly the mothers who do this (Ryan 2008; White 2017).
- Little work done on issue of permanent separation amongst migrating families; aim: to raise some questions that emerged from my doctoral study of Polish-born adolescents living in the UK:
 - i) **How is this pattern manifesting itself?**
 - ii) **What are the effects of this?**
- Paper presents two stories of adolescents now living with in the UK, with divorced parents, and whose fathers have remained in Poland.

Transnational practices

- Defined as the way that individuals endeavour to maintain their identity across different countries and cultures (Vertovec 2009).
- Studies on the transnational habits of Polish migrants: communication with friends & family in Poland occurs through cheap phone calls/ texts/ Skype (Bell & Erdal 2015; Erdal & Lewicki 2016).
- However: how far are transnational activities available to children & adolescents?
- Visits to Poland restricted by:
 - i) school requirements; ii) parents' financial constraints (White 2017).
- Other forms of transnational practices may be affected by **language attrition** (loss of Polish).

Younger migrants may not have very much language in the first place; Schmid (2012: np) suggests that 'native language proficiency does stabilize around puberty'.

Participants & location

- **Study:** investigated the construction of ethno-linguistic identity amongst Polish-born adolescents living in the UK.
- Located in two semi-rural small Polish communities in South-East England: Fieldstone & Steadton (locations & participants anonymised).
 - Two settings:
 - i) **Grovesham School (Fieldstone)** – mainstream secondary school.
20 Polish pupils out of a total of 1300 pupils. 9 participants: 6 boys, 3 girls.
 - i) **St. Ferdinand's Polish School (Steadton)** – Saturday school.
2 participants: girls. They attend secondary schools with few Polish pupils.
 - Participants all Polish-born; studying for Polish GCSE/ AS level.

Methodology

- **Narrative inquiry:** which encourages the participants to tell their stories (e.g. Ochs & Capps 1996; Bamberg 2005).
- Series of interviews: group interviews as ice breakers (Robson & McCartan 2016: 299), especially for sensitive issues (Eder & Fingerson 2002) -> pairs -> individual interviews.
- Two stories presented here:
 - **i) Marek:** 14-year-old (group -> individual interviews).
 - **ii) Anna:** 15-year-old (pair interviews).

Marek: migration story

Mother: nurse in the UK.

Father: factory worker in Poland.

- Age 5: left Poland.
- Age 5-6: lived in America.
- Age 6-7: lived in Sweden.
- Age 7-8: lived in East England.
- Age 8: moved to Fieldstone.

■ His reaction to the constant moving:

Marek: Most of my life I spend in a car! Pretty much. Travelling with my Mum most of my life. Quite a lot of my life. [...] And sometimes I just got fed up and I'm like, Mum, when will we settle? I don't want to move all the time!

Marek: summer visits to Poland

- Visits his father in Poland every summer. The move back at the end of the holidays is difficult:
 - **Marek:** Honestly, it's just I go to Poland then I, it's – I don't know, I miss Poland and then I get over it and then it's back to normal. It's just, you know – every year's similar. I've learned to deal with it, I'm just like, ok, I'll go and come back and then next year will be the same!
- Similar findings by Slany & Strzemecka (2016: 24): one participant talks about missing her grandmother, explaining '[w]henever I visit Poland, I don't have the heart to leave for Norway'.

Marek: language use in Poland

- Marek explains he is losing his Polish; he has problems understanding jokes:

Marek: [S]ometimes I don't understand the jokes that Polish people say and – I just ask my cousin, *<mock whispering>* 'What does it mean? Tell me!' *<normal voice>* because there are some words like I don't – because I didn't learn anything in Poland. I was in pre-school [...].

- However, his Dad speaks limited English; Marek & his Dad joke about this:

Sara: Does your Dad speak English?

Marek: A little bit, some words. [...] He does speak some words, some sentences and stuff, and I was like, 'Dad, I'll never be able to speak better than you' and – he says, 'Really, there's nothing to admire in my English, seriously! I've learnt from books!'

Anna: migration story

Mother: English-Polish translator (UK); now has Scottish husband, non-Polish speaker, although trying to learn.

Brother: starting university (UK).

Father: sells vinyl records and CDs (Poland).

Non-English speaker.

- Age 5: left Poland.
- Age 5-8: lived in London.
- Age 8: moved near Steadton.

- **Anna:** my Mum studied English in university in Poland and [...] she always wanted to come here. So she came here with some friends for a few weeks. [...] After seeing what England was like, she didn't really wanna stay in Poland [...] she ended up staying about a year here [...]. And then she came back to Poland and my Dad didn't wanna come to England, he wanted to stay in Poland, so then we came to England. [...] I think it [the separation] was partly because she wanted to go to England, he wanted to stay in Poland.

Anna: language use in Poland

- Like Marek, Anna also has problems understanding Polish when in Poland:

Anna: Sometimes I just like stumble and then I can't find the right words and I just have to like to ask my brother 'How do you say this?' 'How do you say this?' and then he just doesn't help me so then it's just really embarrassing. And then it's really hard like trying to talk to people [...]. It's hard to like when I go to Poland, to like make friends and stuff because I just can't really like talk like their way of saying, talking Polish.

- However, Anna needs to speak Polish because of her father:

Anna: Cos my Dad can't speak English so I have to talk to him in Polish [...]. So I think if I didn't – if he could speak English I probably wouldn't know Polish as well so it's kind of like I HAVE to know Polish to be able to speak with him.

Emotional impact

Different for each of them:

- **Marek:** unsettled by his experiences. He is an only child, and has travelled around with his mother, which was difficult. He misses his father, and has a difficult transition from Poland to England each summer. But Marek wants to stay in England; he wants to stop moving around.
- **Anna:** suggests a more settled experience. Her mother has remarried; she encourages Anna and her brother to be high academic achievers. However, even though she is doing AS level Polish, Anna still describes having linguistic problems when she visits Poland.

Discussion

- Divorced parents living in different countries is often part of the experiences of the contemporary Polish adolescent -> Problems of a) infrequent travel; b) growing language difference.

➤ Raises further questions:

- How do the parents & children maintain their relationship? Even with technology (e.g. Skype), if language is an issue, how can they communicate effectively?
- What is the impact of this on parent-child relationships (present & future), and especially during adolescence?
- How does this affect the children's ability to maintain a transnational relationship with Poland? (Especially when invested in new life in the UK.)

Conclusion

- **Patterns of migration:** for some migrant adolescents (not only Polish), having divorced parents living in different countries is part of their migration experience.
- **Effects of this:** impact on children needs to be considered, & more research needed as to the impact of trying to maintain this type of transnational relationship, especially with limits on physical contact.
- **Final thought:** If travel becomes more difficult between Britain & EU following Brexit (Viña 2016), how will this further affect children in the UK, & their parents living in Poland?

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