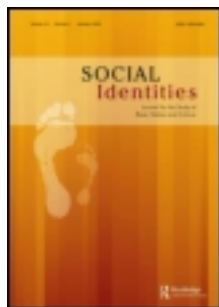


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Derek McGhee<sup>a</sup>, Sue Heath<sup>b</sup> & Paulina Trevena<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> ESRC Centre for Population Change, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

<sup>b</sup> Morgan Centre, Manchester University, Manchester, UK

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## Dignity, happiness and being able to live a ‘normal life’ in the UK – an examination of post-accession Polish migrants’ transnational autobiographical fields

Derek McGhee<sup>a\*</sup>, Sue Heath<sup>b</sup> and Paulina Trevena<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>ESRC Centre for Population Change, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; <sup>b</sup>Morgan Centre, Manchester University, Manchester, UK

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This article examines data from a qualitative study of post-accession Polish migrants living in the UK. We examine themes from our interviews such as ‘dignity’, ‘normality’, ‘happiness’ and the ‘affordability’ and ‘ease’ of life in the UK (compared to Poland). We focus on the autobiographical or intra-personal discursive practices that define what Habib calls migrants’ continuing relationship with their ‘homeland’. We draw on Emirbayer and Mische’s analysis of the relationship between ‘agency’ and what they call ‘embedded temporalities’ to examine the interaction between our participants’ recollections of life in Poland and their evaluation of their present lives in the UK in order to examine the impact of these on their future plans (to stay in the UK or return to Poland). We locate this analysis in what we call a transnational autobiographical field which is a modification of what Levitt and Glick Schiller call a transnational social field. Rather than examine, for example, how decisions to migrate, settle and re-migrate are embedded in inter or trans-personal social relations and networks, in this article we examine the self-dynamics associated with our participants’ articulation of their intra-personal and autobiographical embedded temporalities. Our argument is that articulations of individuals’ pasts, presents and anticipated futures are also significant factors shaping their migration, settlement, and re-migration decisions.

**Keywords:** Poland; temporality; autobiography; intra-personal; normality; everyday consumption; transnationalism

### Introduction

The EU enlargement of 2004 was a highly consequential one for the United Kingdom. The opening of its labour market to nationals of ‘Accession Eight’ (A8) countries resulted in one of the largest and most intensive migration flows in contemporary European history, dramatically changing the ‘scale, composition and characteristics of immigration to the UK’ (Pollard, Lattore, & Sriskandarajah, 2008, p. 7). Notably, the overwhelming majority of the new migrants had arrived from Poland. The Polish community thus appears to be the fastest-growing migrant community in present-day Britain, with Poles having become the single largest foreign national group resident in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

Our research is part of the recent wave of papers that explores the day-to-day lived experiences of post-accession migrants in the UK. In our research we

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\*Corresponding author. Email: D.P.McGhee@soton.ac.uk

foreground what Favell calls ‘the human face of migration’ (2008, p. 702) and what Burrell and Rabikowska describe as ‘the personal experiences’ of migration in research on A8 countries (2009, p. 12). The focus of our article is on how Polish migrants in the UK talk about their lives in Poland relative to their lives in the UK. We focus on how they ‘illustrate’ these comparisons and we reflect on the impact of these comparisons on what they have to say about their future plans, in terms of remaining in the UK or returning to Poland. The distinctive contribution this article makes is to explore the significance these comparisons, which we will describe here as intra-personal or autobiographical temporal comparisons, have on our participants’ actions. This focus on intra-personal temporal comparisons as introduced here has the potential to contribute to the opening up of the marginalized aspects of migrant experiences and research on migrants’ actions in so-called ‘transnational social field’ (where ‘action’ is more often than not conceptualized as being embedded in interpersonal relationships and networks). In this article we extend this conceptualization to also include an appreciation of how migrants’ actions can also be shaped through the interaction between individuals’ past, present and future temporalities (and selves). We will demonstrate this novel way of conceptualizing migrants’ agency through exploring the combined impact of our participants’ iterative recollections of the past (in Poland) and practical evaluations of their present (in the UK) to examine how both of these impact on their future settlement or re-migration plans.

This research is timely as there have been a number of media reports that suggest that Poles are leaving the UK to return to Poland in the context of the economic downturn (for example, Mostous & Seib, 2008; Pidd, 2011; Gentleman, 2011). Although this research was conducted during the economic downturn we note that few of our interviewees have plans for returning to Poland precisely because they find life ‘easier’ and affordable in the UK. Furthermore, most tell us they live a more ‘dignified’ and a generally happier life in the UK (even in the context of the economic downturn) compared with their recollections of life in Poland. We will examine these themes, discourse and the interaction between past recollections of life in Poland and current practical evaluations of their lives in the UK in the three empirical sections which will be preceded by a section setting out our argument, a section outlining our fieldwork, followed by a section on the background conditions in Poland prior to and after the accession in 2004. Before moving onto our data analysis sections we will introduce a section that contextualizing our research in a recent group of literatures examining the lives of Polish migrants in the UK post-2004 and literatures which explore discourses of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’ in migrants to the West (including the UK) from post-communist societies (such as Poland).

### **Our argument**

In this paper we focus on certain practices that define our interviewees’ continuing relationship to their ‘homeland’ (Habib, 2004) and which also inform us about their relationship with their ‘hostland’ (Fortier, 2000). In a sense, what we examine here is what Robin Cohen, following Soysal (2000), calls the new topographies of practices (2008, p. 11) that emerge in mobile and migrant groups when borders between countries become more permeable, for example, between Poland and the UK since the 2004 accession. Our analysis of our interview data connects Cohen’s observations on the effects of the discrepancies between ‘the favoured’ lifestyles in what he calls

'diaspora' and the less secure ones at 'home' (2008, p. 166) to the examination of our participants' intra-personal or autobiographical comparisons of their current lives in the UK, previous lives in Poland which both impact on their future plans either to stay in the UK or return to Poland. The examination of these discursive practices necessitates a modification of Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) and Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc's (1995) conceptualisation of 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' in transnational social fields. According to Glick Schiller et al., the individuals and groups they refer to as transmigrants:

take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connects them simultaneously to two or more nation states. (1995, p. 50)

Whilst agreeing with this statement, we also agree with sociologists such as David Rose who point to the central importance of our relationship with our former and anticipated selves rather than just our relationships (and 'social' comparisons) with other people in our networks. According to Rose, 'people may be more likely to compare themselves with their own situation at an earlier time than with that of others in the same point in time' (2006, pp. 7–8). In this article, therefore, our focus is not on 'social' or trans-personal comparisons, nor are we focusing on the relationship between the latter and the relationship between relative deprivation comparisons and migration decisions pioneered by Oded Stark (1991). Furthermore, in terms of 'transnationalism' our focus is on the subjective, autobiographical dimension which links individuals to their lives across temporalities and borders rather than the objective measurement of 'transnationalism' in terms of duality, intensity, regularity and multiplication of activities between two or more countries as stipulated by Portes, Guarnizo and Lanbolt (1999). Our approach also gives a slightly different emphasis to what Glick Schiller et al. describe as 'an essential element of transnationalism', namely 'the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies' (1995, p. 50). We take these types of involvements as a given in this article and instead focus on the neglected dimension of intra-personal-autobiographical, temporal 'self-involvements' which appear to dominate our participants' justifications for migrating from Poland and settling in the UK which in turn inform their decisions to return (or not) to Poland.

The focus here, as suggested by David Rose, is the discursive practices employed by our participants whereby they compare their current selves with their own situation at an earlier time in their lives. In this instance this comparison involves 'border crossing' as well as the 'temporal comparison' between their current lives in the UK and their previous lives in Poland. Thus the 'transnational' practice that we will be examining here is the articulation of a sense of duality with regards in our participants' presentation of actions, decisions, active comparisons (and justifications for staying in the UK) in the context of intra-personal embedded temporalities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). In a similar vein to Rose above, Emirbayer and Mische proclaim that embeddedness within relationships and networks is not the only point of origin of 'agential possibilities' (p. 974). They stipulate that:

while trans-personal contexts do both constrain and enable the dialogical process, such contexts cannot themselves serve as a point of origin of agential possibilities, which must

reside one level down (so to speak) at the level of self-dynamics. (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 974)

Emirbayer and Mische draw our attention to the interaction and combination of iterative (past), practical-evaluative (present) and projective (future) dimensions in individuals' agency (p. 974). It is the interaction of these three dimensions in our participants' interviews which will be the focus of this article. In order to examine the relationship between our participants' pasts, presents and anticipated futures in an approach inspired by Emirbayer and Mische's, we also draw on Heinz's concept of 'biographical action' which integrates these temporal elements and examines their relationship to the coordinating efforts of individuals who are negotiating or reflecting on 'turning points' and transitions in their biographies (1996, p. 56).

Thus, in summary, in the empirical data sections that follow we examine the transnational or spatial dimension of our participants' embedded multi-level temporalities, in terms of how they narrate their previous lives in Poland, and how these recollections are employed to contrast with their current lives in the UK which in turn both impact on their narratives with regards to decisions to settle in the UK or return to Poland in the future. Before that, however, we will provide details of our fieldwork, some background on social conditions in Poland before and after EU Accession and contextualise our research in recent literatures.

### **Our research**

The analysis presented in this article is based on an Economic and Social Research Council funded Centre for Population Change project entitled 'International labour mobility and its impact on family and household formation among Polish migrants living in England and Scotland'. The main aim of our project was to explore the impact of family and household-related factors on the migration and settlement decisions of post-accession Polish migrants living in the United Kingdom. This article is based on biographical interviews conducted in Southampton (20 interviews and three pilot interviews), a city in the South coast of England, and in Glasgow (20 interviews), a city on the west coast of Scotland. The interviews explored a range of themes, including participants' migration biographies and their post-migration experiences of employment, education (for those with school-age children), housing and household formation; the nature of their family and friendship networks both in the UK and in Poland; their means of maintaining contact with non-migrant friends and family members; and their plans for the future with respect to family and household formation and possible remigration.

The target group was adult Poles who had arrived in the UK following Poland's EU accession in May 2004. We aimed to achieve a diversified sample in terms of family circumstances and household characteristics. We thus applied purposive sampling, aiming at a 50/50 gender split, and 60/40 split of persons who have/do not have children. Moreover, participants were targeted according to household type, e.g. couples with and without children, living with relatives with and without children, living with friends with and without children, one-person households, and single-parent households. Study participants were recruited using a range of methods including advertisements on websites for Poles living in the UK, in local Polish shops

and community places (including libraries and Polish clubs), through formal networks and organisations, through personal networks, and snowballing.

### **Background – Poland before and after accession 2004**

In terms of the national economic picture in Poland in the run up to accession, national opinion polls in Poland provide some general information on conditions. For example, in an opinion poll conducted on the eve of accession in 2004, respondents were asked to compare their social standing in 2004 with their position in 1994. This poll found that 38% of respondents felt that their status and standard of living had actually dropped, 46% believed that their status and standard of living had not changed and only 17% believed that their standard of living and status had improved (White, 2011, p. 27). In early 2004, about one fifth of the Polish workforce was unemployed; some locations, including many small towns and villages, experienced higher unemployment rates, of over 20% (p. 225). It is in these locations in particular that, according to White, ‘even employed people often found it hard to make a living because there were few opportunities to supplement basic wages with overtime, second jobs and other additional earnings’ (p. 226).

White argues that people migrated largely to cover everyday expenses and to secure what they thought was a ‘decent’ or ‘normal’ standard of living (2011, p. 226). Further, despite Poles expressing considerably greater satisfaction with their standard of living in the national opinion polls five years after accession in 2009, she argues that these figures suggest that the transition to a market economy has created ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in terms of regional economic disparities, and urban and rural disparities within the regions (pp. 27–28). According to White, small and medium size towns across Poland, especially those dependent on just one or two major factories, have proven to be the most vulnerable to unemployment (p. 28). The participants in our research have on the whole all migrated from small (under 70,000 residents) medium (70,000–150,000 residents) and large towns (150,000–500,000 thousand residents) from all over Poland and come with diverse employment biographies and educational qualifications. (Table 1 provides a summary of key biographical information relating to each of the sample members referred to in this paper.)

### **Contextualizing our research**

In general terms this article can be contextualized within the recent body of research that explores the experiences of post-accession Polish migrants *outside of* their occupational or labour market roles<sup>1</sup> (for example, Burrell & Rabikowska, 2009; Burrell, 2010; Eade, Drinkwater, & Garapiach, 2006; Garapiach, 2008; Garapiach, Drinkwater, & Eade, 2009; Garapiach & Eade, 2009; Rabikowska, 2010; Ryan, Sales, & Tilki, 2009a, 2009b; Spencer, Ruhs, Anderson, & Rogaly, 2007; White, 2009, 2011, White & Ryan, 2008, etc.). In specific terms, our research contributes to a sub-set of literature that focuses on the discourses of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’ with regards to material deprivations and material aspirations of the citizens in post-communist societies (Rausing, 2002; Kennedy, 1994; White, 2011) and literature that explores these themes in the context of migration from these societies to ‘the West’, including the UK (for example, Morawska, 2001; Galasińska, 2009, 2010; Galasińska & Kozłowska, 2009; Rabikowska, 2010).<sup>2</sup> The ‘longing for normality’ (Rabikowska, 2010; Rausing,

Table 1. Biographical details of participants quoted in this article in alphabetical order.

Name	Age	Migrated from	Living in	Arrival	Family	Current Occupation in UK	Former Occupation in Poland	Education
Joasia	29	Medium-size town (70–150k pop.) in Southern Poland	Soton	2005	Unmarried	Student welfare officer	Teacher of English	Postgraduate qualifications
Barbara	49	large town (150–500k pop.) in Northern Poland	Soton	2005	Married, grown-up children	Fruit packer	Area manager	General secondary (A-levels)
Czesław	35	Village (under 70k pop.) in Northern Poland	Glasw	2007	Married, 4 children	Part-time cleaner	Carpenter	FE vocational
Dariusz	35	Medium-size town in Southern Poland	Soton	2006	Divorced, lives with daughter	Works in a recycling factory	Worked in the now bankrupt family business	FE vocational
Dorota	32	Small town (under 70k pop.) in South-West Poland	Glasw	2007	Married, 1 child	Cleaner	Assistant manager of a large shop	FE economics
Ewa	34	City (over 500k pop.) in Central Poland	Soton	2004	Single	Works in a coffee shop	Shop assistant	FE general
Ewelina	30	Medium-size town in Central Poland	Glasw	2005	Married British man. 1 child	Physiotherapist	Assistant nurse (part-time)	Qualified Physiotherapist
Henryk	45	Medium-size town in North-West Poland	Glasw	2006	Married	Cleaner	Carer in animal shelter	FE vocational
Jadzia	32	Medium-size town in North-West Poland	Glasw	2006	Married	Sorter in a laundry	Factory worker	FE vocational
Justyna	30	Small town in South-East Poland	Soton	2007	Married, 2 children	Full time home maker	Shop assistant	MSc in Physical Education
Kasia	26	Village in South-East Poland	Soton	2007	Single	Teaching assistant	Had not worked (came to the UK directly after graduating from university)	BA in English



Table 1 (*Continued*)

Name	Age	Migrated from	Living in	Arrival	Family	Current Occupation in UK	Former Occupation in Poland	Education
Krystyna	48	Large town in Northern Poland	Soton	2004	Married, 3 children	'Polish shop' owner	Manager in insurance company	General secondary (A-levels)
Konstanty	30	Large town in Northern Poland	Soton	2004	Married, 1 child	Demand planner for an American finance company	Had not worked (came to the UK directly after graduating from university)	MSc in Economics
Malina	26	Small town in West-Central Poland	Soton	2005	Unmarried	In full-time HE	Shop assistant	Matriculated, and trained chef
Ola	27	Large town in Eastern Poland	Glasw	2005	Married, 1 child	Full time homemaker	Social worker	General secondary (A-levels)
Ryszard	52	Medium-size town in Southern Poland	Glasw	2008	Married, 3 children	Self-employed	Self-employed, small construction company	FE in Physical Education
Sebastian	25	Large town in Eastern Poland	Soton	2007	Single	Unemployed	Not in employment	FE technical, qualified car mechanic
Sylwester	40	Large town in Western Poland	Glasw	2004	Married, 2 children	Factory operative	Postman	FE technical qualified electrician
Stanislaw	35	Small town in South-West Poland	Soton	2008	Married, 1 child	Car valet	Carpenter	FE technical
Urszula	34	Village in Central-West Poland	Glasw	2007	Married, 2 children	Cleaner	Factory worker	General secondary (A-levels)

2002; Kennedy, 1994) is a common theme in the sociologies of post-communist societies, and this is often articulated in conjunction with ‘the myth of the West’.

These observations on post-communist societies, when they are applied in subsequent literature with regards to the accounts of Eastern European citizens whilst living abroad, reveal a relationship between ‘the post-communist subject’s yearning for ‘normality’ and their desire to be ‘normal’ (Galasińska & Kozłowska, 2009, p. 87).<sup>3</sup>

Our research complements and develops these literatures through exploring our interviewees’ accounts of material deprivation in Poland, which they compare with their material gratification (and general experiences of living an ‘easier’ life) in the UK. The common ground between our study and these broader literatures is the significance of a sense of material deprivation with regards to citizens of post-communist societies, such as Poland, not being able to afford everyday consumer items and products (for example, certain foods, furniture and clothes) in Poland which is contrasted against the material gratification they currently experience in the UK. In the next section, we suggest that these comparisons between their lives in the UK and their lives in Poland should be conceptualized in terms of intra-personal or autobiographical temporal comparisons.

### *Living from ‘the 1st to the 1st’ – recollections of privations in Poland*

This part examines particular discursive practices wherein our interviewees articulate the discrepancies between what Robin Cohen calls their favoured lifestyles in what he calls ‘diaspora’ and the less secure lifestyles at ‘home’ (2008, p. 166). Our participants had much to say about their everyday lives in Poland.

In her interview Dariusz told us ‘in Poland we would live from pay day to pay day so to speak, you wouldn’t be able to put any money aside and here you can . . .’ For Justyna trying to make ends meet and live on ‘Polish wages’ necessitated the adoption of a perpetual balance sheet mentality which strictly regulated household income and spending: ‘in Poland you live differently, more with a pen and paper in hand . . . you have to consider the fact that your budget is tight’. Czeslaw referred to his life in Poland in terms of ‘scrimping every grosz (Polish equivalent of a penny)’. Our interviewees were at great pains to present their experiences of material deprivations as the norm, a situation that afflicts all ordinary Poles. For example, Jadzia told us people in Poland ‘live from the 1st to the 1st [i.e. from one pay day to the next] they have no time for anything and no money for anything. They cannot afford anything and only complain all the time’. Kasia referred to her previous life in Poland as being a ‘constant struggle to make ends meet’. For Urszula, the poverty in Poland leads to a culture of living in debt, regardless of how hard people work and how frugal they are:

Money isn’t most important, sure, but it is very important. If you work very hard for most of your life and what you get hardly sees you through half the month, and the rest you need to borrow . . . it would be different if one didn’t work, took things for granted, went on holidays, and partied all the time. Being here is a real blessing. We can have a decent life here.

Czeslaw told of his inability to make ends meet and of living in debt in Poland:

In Poland you only earn so much but spend twice as much. You have to find a way, get an odd job here or there. I have no idea how I would be living in Poland. The way things

were going my debts would be bigger and not smaller. I wouldn't have managed to pay them off because I wouldn't have won the lottery. And only such an unexpected inflow of money would have saved me from this but there was no chance of that.

For Krystyna the contrast between the UK and Poland could not be more different. In Poland, no matter how hard she and her husband worked, her perception was that they and other hard working 'ordinary families' like them could barely make ends meet: 'In Poland my husband was working very hard, and earning ridiculous money, which was not enough for anything'. Stanislaw tells a similar story:

in Poland we always would have these conversations, we can't buy this now, we don't have enough money. We'll pay this bill next month because we can't pay it now. Here we don't have this problem.

Henryk, who works part-time in the UK, compares his life 'here' and 'there' in terms of being able to afford to socialise with friends with ease:

in Poland I couldn't afford to meet with friends so often, to invite them over and put something on the table. I wouldn't be able to afford that. And here even with the hours I'm working, I can.

Barbara in turn refers to the relationship between poverty, alienation and competition in Poland:

in Poland, because there is poverty, because the situation is difficult and people are afraid to lose their jobs there's also this situation of isolation, people are more closed, there's this chase for money.

Sylwester extends this theme, when he reflects on why he would find it difficult to return to Poland, the primary reason being that he would not be able to afford the lifestyle he has grown accustomed to in the UK 'I can't afford Poland now, I just can't afford it. When you go there on holiday you spend so much money . . . it's too expensive for me. I wouldn't be able to afford to go on a trip abroad if I was living in Poland, and here I can'. Our interviewees seem to be developing a new, or more accurately, revised perspective of what 'normality' is or should be as a result of their experiences of living in the UK. As such, our data presented above, and the data to be analysed in the next section, lead us to observations made by Rabikowska when she says that migrants from post-communist societies like Poland develop new versions of 'normality' as a consequence of migrating to the West (2010, p. 288) which leads to the development of personal 'benchmarks' with regards to what they view to be acceptable 'standards of living'. The interaction of these spatial and temporal comparisons of individuals' previous and current experiences are significant components of what Emirbayer and Mische calls 'agential possibilities' (1998, p. 974) which with regards to our research, impacts on our participants' plans for settling in the UK or some day returning to Poland.

### ***The affordability of life in the UK – evaluating the present***

In this section we will examine our participants 'practical evaluations' of their current lives in the UK. The focus here is on their current experiences of living in the

UK which are articulated in terms of the affordability of everyday consumer goods. As such, their use of terms such as dignity and happiness when describing their lives in the UK should be understood as an example of what Heinz calls 'situational evaluations' (1996, p. 56) and Emirbayer and Mische call 'practical evaluations corresponding to the present' (1998, p. 70).

In response to the question: 'what does being here in the UK give you' Malina answered, 'financial security'. She elaborated:

Here, even if you're earning minimal pay, you're still much better off than in Poland. This is something which is surely the main reason why most Poles are here. This is why they came here. Not to have to live from the first to the first, to struggle to make ends meet.

Continuing on from the previous section, our interviewees elaborated on the affordability of life in the UK even on 'modest incomes'. For example, Ewelina told us that 'even if you work for minimum wages here, you can support yourself so much easier than if you had to do it in Poland'. Jadzia lists what she can afford on her and her boyfriend's wages in Scotland:

You earn £6.30 per hour. You have £212 per week. Two people, that's £424. The flat costs us £230 per month, add the bills to this we also have our phones and internet... and just the sheer fact that we can travel to Poland in January, June and August, not to mention our tickets to Canada which we bought in cash, no one lent us money for that... and look at this flat, these floors, these mirrors. Financially we are much better off here.

Our interviewees with young families emphasized different aspects of the affordability theme. For example, Dorota – a young mother living and working in England with her husband – talks about the different quality of life she and her family experienced in Poland compared with their lives in the UK:

Now we live modestly but I no longer worry that I cannot buy my child a toy or warm boots because winter is coming, as it used to be in Poland that I knew that I would have to buy him new shoes and a new coat every year because winter is coming and these would be such amounts of money that we would have to deny ourselves of something. But here I have no problems with this, I can find something cheaper, and here this everyday life is totally different. We're managing by ourselves without any problems. And in Poland we were alone and we were living in poverty. That's the way things were.

Ania referred to similar themes when she describes what she believes to be the primary motivation for Poles migrating to the UK: that is, the hope of having 'a normal home and a normal job'. Perhaps the most powerful statement came from Urszula who informed us that 'I got to know life here and I realised that one can live with dignity'. She elaborated on this point:

here you can really do OK on the money you earn. You can eat, pay your bills and get yourself something to wear, buy furniture. In Poland I couldn't afford to buy fruit, sweets or better quality cured meat. I was very limited as to what clothes I could afford to get for my daughter. A lot of things here cost very little, like swimming pool or cinema. I couldn't afford anything in Poland.

Despite, on the whole, living modestly – a common theme in the fieldwork of Galasińska and Kozłowska (2009) too the vast majority of our interviewees referred to the UK in terms of being a ‘different world’ associated with the relative ‘easiness of life’ and the fact that they were able to live comfortably on their wages. As noted above, many of our interviewees with families also referred to the better ‘welfare’ protections for families in the UK compared to Poland with regards to, for example, child benefit payments (see below). However, that being said, these considerations were secondary to their articulation of the primary difference in experience with regards to the general affordability of life. This was summed up by Krystyna: in the UK, ‘ordinary work’ allows families ‘to live normally’. For Ewa the financial constraints which people live under in Poland results in a monotonous life which she describes in the following terms ‘you can’t go anywhere, on a trip or something, because everyone’s just counting pennies, trying to make ends meet . . . and here I can say it’s different’. It is through achieving a particular standard of living associated with being able to afford to live beyond ‘subsistence’ – for example, to take occasional trips, to be able to afford small luxuries and ‘little extras’ in terms of food, clothes and other household items – that our interviewees are provided with a sense of ‘dignified normality’. In many ways, there is a sense of our interviewees presenting the achievement of what they view as ‘normality’ through consumption, or more accurately through their articulation of what Bauman (2007) calls consumer identities in consumerist cultures.

In most instances, it is the ability to afford to buy everyday consumer goods and necessities in the UK (which they could not afford in Poland) that is the key reference point in our participants’ accounts. For Galasińska and Kozłowska, this use of the ‘everyday human activities’ relating to food, clothing, entertainment and travel are key in post-accession Poles’ ‘negative’ comparison between their lives in the UK and Poland (2009, p. 96). These discourses are an attempt to articulate, through the register of everyday consumption, the achievement of ‘creating a normal reality’ and thus becoming ‘normal’ in the sense of moving beyond experiencing what they perceive to be some or all of the indicators of material deprivation. This process can be understood as their articulation of a transition from the indignity of being ‘thwarted citizens’ (rather than Bauman’s (2007) terms ‘flawed citizens’ or ‘failed consumers’) in Poland to becoming dignified through becoming active consumers with surplus income (and increased opportunities for buying cheaper products) in the UK. In a sense, in their interviews our participants are performing what Fortier calls the ‘everyday work’ (using ‘everyday’ consumer products) of translating (2003, p. 120) between ‘opposed worlds’, in this case through contrasting their experiences of material deprivation and material gratification, across temporalities and countries in this particular transnational field.

As well as achieving a sense of dignified normality, we note the articulation of the link between happiness and shopping in our interviews (Miller, 1998). This is expressed most explicitly by Stanislaw:

People living here are happy. This smile you see on their faces, they are happy because life is good for them here, you can see this. It’s not like in Poland where people worry about financial problems above all, that’s why we’re all here . . . here a woman goes shopping and this actually relates to happiness, shopping relates to happiness. In Poland we are used to thinking in another way about shopping, we think about shopping as

buying food. Here people also buy food of course . . . But the most important thing is to buy something to make yourself feel good. And here you can see people make life more pleasant in this way.

As well as celebrating the ability of Poles in the UK to find happiness through being able to adapt their consumption patterns beyond basic food and rent, Stanislaw also articulated considerable anger that Poles like himself and his wife Dorota were not able to experience the dignified normality of being 'normal' consumers at home in Poland:

Dorota is much happier being able to buy herself cosmetics which are really cheap here or things for our child. I'm also happy that we can buy things for him here and not that he has to wear things received from an older friend, as things were in Poland. . . . this is upsetting for me as a Pole. Why aren't things this way in Poland? We've had twenty years of democracy. We should already have this. But we still have to seek happiness abroad.

Stanislaw's angry statement here provides an opportunity to explore the interaction between his present life in the UK and the iteration of the 'shared discourse' across our participants with regard to their recollections of their previous lives in Poland. This statement lays bare Stanislaw's disappointment in relation to the lack of social progress in Poland in recent decades which he uses to justify his and other migrants' agency, that is, migrating to 'seek happiness abroad'.

As well as being able to afford to live on their wages, many of participants who would be categorized as being members of low-income families also commented on the amount of 'free' services in the UK (especially with regards to health and education) compared with Poland. In conjunction with receiving universal child benefit payments and, for low-income families, working tax credit,<sup>4</sup> some of the parents in our sample observed a 'general context' of life being easier for them in the UK. With regards to the latter Henryk reflected on the barriers to returning to Poland:

I would gladly go back to Poland if I could have all I have here guaranteed. If they provided me with appropriate living conditions, work, social security, everything, then yes, but without that I want to stay here . . . I wanted to say what social security is like, for example, we have child tax credit, working tax credit, we have free dental care, free medicine, free optical care, free glasses . . . and in Poland you pay huge amounts of money for medicine.

The contrast between the benefits and free services received by the Polish families in our sample and the situation in Poland is summed up succinctly by Ola who informed us that in Poland 'you pay for everything. You pay for every service'.

### *What does the future hold?*

Our interviewees' comparative assessment of life in the UK and Poland and the new versions of 'normality' that have emerged since being in the UK could result in their permanent return to live in Poland being 'neither possible nor desirable' (Oxford & Long, 2004, p. 1) in the near future. Our interviewees' pejorative attitudes to 'life back in Poland' can be described as a dis-identification in terms of their assessment that they were unable to be 'the person they ought to be' in Poland because of the

privations they experienced there, which is interdependent upon (and constitutive of) their identification with their new ‘dignified’ lives and higher standards of living in the UK. Our participants expressed regret in the interviews about being displaced from familiar places and from family and friends in Poland, yet at the same time they expressed relief at being displaced from the relatively lower standards of living, inadequate welfare provision and the general high costs of living they had experienced in the past in Poland. Their transnational way of belonging in terms of practices that ‘mark belongings’ through signalling or enacting an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a group (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1004) seems to be a matter of articulating a ‘shared discourse’ in terms of material deprivation and being thwarted consumers in Poland, which coincides with the shared discourse justifying their continuing presence in the UK: material gratification.

There is an element of ‘escape’ in the interviews; for example, Czeslaw went to great lengths to tell us that what he described as the ‘poverty and destitute conditions’ that people experienced in Poland were not just the experiences of very poor people; for Czeslaw, ‘they just live the same as ordinary Poles do, it’s tough, it’s tough, it’s just tough’. Sebastian (who was unemployed in Poland and is currently a job seeker in the UK) added to this when he recounts a sense of respectful fatalism in his depiction of life in Poland for what he calls ‘the average working Pole’: ‘I think that in Poland you earn a hump as you grow old, that’s all I think. They work for their whole lives and have nothing. And here I think you can work towards a better life’. It should be noted that the economic downturn in the UK has not changed this view amongst our interviewees. In their view life would be even harder for them in Poland at the moment, regardless of evidence of some economic recovery in Poland. For example, Stanislaw puts thoughts of return and the assumption that Poles are returning in droves in the context of the economic downturn in perspective:

They say Poland has come out of recession successfully, we have had an economic growth of 1% that’s a lot because all over Europe it was – 8%, in England it was around – 8%. And I said, I prefer to live in England in this recession rather than in Poland where there is this positive economic growth. So what that it’s positive if there is poverty there? So what?

It is in the context of this array of complex and contrasting narratives which combine past and present biographical experiences that our interviewees attempt to make plans for the future. For example, Malina evokes this sense of uncertainty when contemplating her future in either the UK or Poland:

It is just a matter of whether we should stay or return. I would like to return some day. But I would also like to return when things are a little better in Poland. And I don’t know if there’s any sense in waiting for that because it might appear that we’ll wait till we die! I don’t know.

In many cases our interviewees have become used to living in the UK; they say life is easier in the UK, that they have achieved a standard of ‘normality’ and ‘happiness’ that they desired but had not been able to achieve in Poland. However, this comes at a price with regard to the realization that the standard of living they enjoy in the UK

makes returning to Poland (permanently) problematic for themselves and their families.

### Conclusion

Like all migrant subjects, recent Polish migrants living in the UK in the post-accession context often live in between two or more 'homes' in a physical and also an emotional-temporal sense. In our interviewees' narratives of 'home', the image of home is indeed 'multilayered' (Bammer, 1992, p. vii). There is a shifting and ambivalent sense of home articulated through their presentation of past, present and imagined future 'homes' in terms of lives and personal experiences in the UK and or Poland.

As such, our participants' biographical actions are informed and articulated at the interstice (Bhabha, 1994, p. 8) of discursive practices that, in combination, form the 'chordal triad' of biographical action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 70) in terms of their pasts, presents and imagined futures. The result being that our participants are in a sense 'homeless', they have through migration left their 'homeland' and through their iterations of recollected undignified personal experiences in their 'homeland', they have made returning 'home' difficult. Their narratives of where home was, is and might be in the future seems to be a matter of binary oppositions between 'home' and 'anti-home' (Markowitz, 2004, p. 183) that is, home (in Markowitz's interpretation of Lotman) as 'life-giving' or 'life-threatening' (p. 183). This reading should be adapted in the context of our analysis. Home and anti-home, following Cohen, could be projected onto what is 'favoured lifestyle giving' rather than 'favoured lifestyle threatening' in the new topologies of practice (and revisions of 'normality') facilitated by Polish mobilities to and from the UK since 2004. Discrepancies between their comparisons between their personal experiences (in the UK) and their previous experiences (in Poland) in terms of their standard of living and quality of life, as articulated in terms of consumer practices, is very significant to our participants' agency in terms of their decisions to migrate, settle in the UK and return (or not) to Poland.

In this article we have exposed an intimate connection between the discursive practices through which our interviewees' continuing relationship to their 'homeland' can be defined (Habib, 2004). We suggest that there is a connection between a Polish (and wider post-communist) 'yearning for normality' and the articulation of the fulfilment of this yearning which is part of a process of adjustment to living in the UK which takes the form of a 'revision of normality' through the everyday practices of shopping, living, earning and for some low-income families, being adequately supported by the state. Rather than 'social comparisons' with others, these are instances of individual comparisons with their own situation and experiences at an earlier time in their lives, in a different country from the one in which they are currently living.

We suggest that the latter opens up for analysis the impact of particular 'ways of being' in 'transnational fields' in terms of distinctive discursive practices. Morawska has described the discursive practices employed by migrants to articulate their relationship with their homeland as elements of 'symbolic (identificational) engagements' (2003, p. 171). However, what we have exposed is a common discursive practice amongst our participants in terms of an iteration of their 'collective'



experiences of the privations they (and other ‘ordinary Poles’) endured in Poland prior to migration. Furthermore these fragments of their recollections of life in Poland were presented to us at interview not for the purpose of articulating stability in their past as assumed by Emirbayer and Mishe (1998, p. 971). Rather, our participants evoke a shared discourse of instability when they talk about their previous lives/experiences in Poland.

What we have observed is a group of people who have in many respects become used to being able to live in a different way in their new context and whose articulations of their new lives (and associated emergent ‘consumer identities’) are a celebration of what they have achieved through migration. However, we have also examined the potential interaction between their evaluation of their present (in the UK) and their iterations of their past experiences (in Poland) on their future plans. In a sense their iterations of their personal experiences of financial struggle and material deprivations in Poland, which they contrast with their evaluations of their current lives in the UK, make thoughts of returning to Poland seem like an ‘irresponsible choice’. As Bauman notes, in ‘consumerist culture’ (such as the UK) in which our interviewees are delighted to be active participants, the concepts of responsible choice and responsibility *per se* have become internalized in self-dynamics. According to Bauman:

The concepts of responsibility and responsible choice, which resided before in the semantic field of ethical duty and moral concern for the Other, have shifted or have been moved to the realm of self-fulfilment and the calculation of risks. (2007, p. 92)

For Bauman, in consumerist cultures ‘responsible choices’ are first and last those actions ‘serving the interests and satisfying the desires of the self’ (2007, p. 92). In the context of the interaction between the embedded temporalities of our participants’ past and current personal experiences that connect them ‘here’ (in the UK) and ‘there’ (in Poland), the possibilities of them returning to Poland seems unlikely, without, that is, a significant revision of either their iterations of the past experiences in Poland or a considerable change in their practical evaluation of their current situation in the UK taking place.

### Notes

1. It should be noted that 12 of the participants quoted in this article had better standards of employment in Poland (despite low incomes) and were well educated yet were employed in low status jobs in the UK; and 11 participants either improved the standards of their employment or stayed at a similar level with regard to their employment in Poland (see Table 1).
2. We use the term ‘post-communist societies’ with some caution as we are aware that for some critics, for example, King states that the concept ‘post-communism’ is useless because the disparities between post-Soviet countries are so vast (in Rabikowska 2010, p. 290).
3. Kennedy also suggests that the transformation in post-communist societies has inspired a parallel desire to transform the self, that is, ‘they wish to be who they “really” are, or who they ought to be’ (Kennedy, 1994, p. 4).
4. Up to 30 April 2011, Polish (and other A8) migrants were eligible for benefits other than child benefit only after paying national insurance contributions for 12 continuous months under the Accession Workers Registration Scheme. From 1 May 2011, migrants from A8 countries have the same entitlements to benefits as British citizens.

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