A QUESTION OF CLASS? POLISH GRADUATES WORKING IN LOW-SKILLED JOBS IN LONDON

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing trend of (temporary?) emigration of young, university-educated Poles. This phenomenon may be ascribed to the deep economic, political and social changes taking place in Poland after the fall of the Communist system in 1989 which resulted inter alia in an unprecedented educational boom and a simultaneous rapid increase in unemployment levels, particularly among young people (Fihel et al. 2008a). At the same time, the opening of borders entailed a growing popularity of foreign travel and international migrations. Under the circumstances, many graduates of Polish higher education institutions decided to seek work abroad and while the United Kingdom had become one of their favourite destinations already in the 1990s, it had gained even more popularity upon Poland’s European Union accession in May 2004. Nevertheless, even though the UK has for years particularly attracted educated migrants from Poland (Fihel et al. 2008, Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski 2009: 112), the definite majority of Poles working there are employed considerably below their qualifications level, typically carrying out elementary occupations regardless of their educational attainment (Drinkwater et al. 2006: 18).

University graduates are persons of high cultural capital1 (c.f. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In Poland they are attributed a certain degree of prestige, if only due to their achieved level of education (Domański 1999: 86). Having a higher degree ‘allows’ them to apply for positions ascribed with fairly high social status in their home country (Domański and Mach 2008: 283), yet due to the difficult situation in the Polish labour market graduates often find such positions are not attainable in practice. Moreover, the level of earnings in Poland, even when carrying out higher status jobs, is often too low to secure an independent living. The decision to migrate to the United Kingdom, in turn, is usually bound with a ‘cost’ in the

---

1 Cultural capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu refers to the agent’s knowledge, skills, competencies and predispositions that enable them to partake in social reality and understand the surrounding world (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).
form of undertaking work decidedly below their level of qualifications.\textsuperscript{2} Though this phenomenon has by now been widely acknowledged (Anderson et al. 2006, Drinkwater et al. 2006, Currie 2007, Pollard et al. 2008, Home Office 2009), the problem of overeducation of the ‘new’ Polish migrants to the UK has been framed predominantly in terms of issues of brain drain, brain overflow and/or brain waste (Kaczmarczyk and Okolski 2005, Kaczmarczyk 2006) while little attention has been given to the social aspects of this situation, including the issue of class.

In migration research, class per se is rarely applied as an analytical category. Rather, analyses tend to focus on more clear-cut and broader categories such as ethnicity, race or gender (Bottomley 1998). Literatures on integration do touch upon the problem of class, though indirectly, under the heading of economic, social or cultural integration (c.f. Biernath 2008). Moreover, the problem of class is more readily addressed in studies of well-established immigrant groups while newcomers are typically analysed in their entirety as national groups, even if they are in fact a highly heterogeneous community (as is the case with the ‘new’ Polish migration to the UK). I believe that for highly educated migrants working in low-skilled jobs class is an issue which is not so much voiced or analysed, as experienced and felt. Hence, in this paper I shall consider the complexity of the social standing of these migrants in view of ‘objective’ factors on the one hand, and their own subjective perceptions on the other. How do they see their working environment? How do the graduates view their class position in relation to their occupational and social standing in the UK? These are the questions I would like to attempt to answer here.

This paper consists of three parts. Firstly, some basic information about the study the analysis is based on will be provided. In the second part, the issue of class and status will be analysed. I shall start from a brief discussion of the problem of the intelligentsia. Next, I will look at the traditional sociological indicators of status and try to apply them in the context of social positioning of the graduates in both the sending and receiving society. In the third part I will discuss the interdependence between work roles and class identity, and see how the situation of migration and working in low-status jobs affects the graduates’ perception of their own class belonging.

THE STUDY

The analysis presented here is based on a qualitative case study carried out on highly educated migrants working in the secondary sector of the London

\textsuperscript{2} However, many of those graduates beginning their ‘professional careers’ in the UK labour market from low-skilled positions manage to attain higher positions with time. For an analysis of factors impacting on this process see Trevena (forthcoming).
Divided by class...

economy. Since the aim of the study was to consider the individual perspective of the migrants, the methodology adopted was based on Florian Znaniecki’s concept of the ‘humanistic coefficient’ (1922) as well as elements of grounded theory (Konecki 2000), as given hypotheses were not formed prior to the research but in the course of gathering empirical material. Qualitative research techniques were applied: semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation.

The target group were graduates of Polish higher education institutions aged 25-35, who had been living in London for at least twelve months and were or had previously been working in the secondary sector of the UK economy for the same minimum period of time. Only persons in the ‘mating’ stage of life were considered, i.e. single and with no dependants (Giza-Poleszczuk 2000: 62). It was assumed that such persons would take migration decisions in a highly independent manner, i.e. not within a family context but for individual reasons (c.f. Düvell 2004: 7).

The research in London was carried out in two rounds over a period of over three years: the first round in Summer 2004 and the second in Winter 2007/8. Altogether 42 interviews were conducted with 28 migrants, of which 21 interviews were completed in 2004 and another 21 between December 2007 and February 2009 (19 in Winter 2007/8 in London and two in Poland with return migrants, one in October 2008 and one in February 2009). The research included a panel sample of 14 respondents who took part in both rounds.

During the first round of research 21 respondents were interviewed, thirteen women and eight men, aged between 25 and 33. The majority had master’s degrees, one person had a bachelor’s degree and one had not formally finished her studies (she had a certificate of completion but no degree). All were graduates of accredited Polish institutions of higher education, and had graduated between 1996 and 2002. Out of the 21 graduates, thirteen had majored in Arts and Humanities (Psychology, Political Science, History, Language Studies, Philosophy, Library Studies), seven in the Sciences (Environmental Studies, Nutrition Studies, Biology, Engineering, IT) and one person in Business Studies. Roughly half of the respondents had one to three years’ experience of full-time work in Poland (10 out of 21), the others had no professional experience in their home country (though some had done odd jobs), and had migrated to London directly upon finishing their studies.

The respondents interviewed in 2004 had migrated to London between 1998 and 2003, and had been staying there for a period of between one and eight...
years. At the time of being interviewed, thirteen were still carrying out such work (working in catering, construction, as shop assistants or doing domestic work), while seven were doing lower- or middle-level white-collar work (receptionist, internet content administrator, psychiatric nurse, reflexologist, engineer, journalist, secretary), and one was working according to his qualifications (IT specialist).

During the second round of research, fourteen of the earlier respondents were interviewed, and an additional small-scale sample of one pre-accession and six post-accession migrants was drawn, consisting of four women and three men aged between 25 and 33. The post-accession sample included four persons with master’s degrees (three full-time MAs, two in History, one in Sociology, and one part-time MA in Law and Administration), and three with bachelor’s degrees who had completed part-time studies\(^6\) (one in Sociology, one in Marketing and Management, and one in Automatics).

The post-accession migrants had been in London for a period of between one and three-plus years. At the time of being interviewed, two were doing menial jobs (renovation worker, waitress), and four were employed in lower-level white-collar jobs (customer assistant in a bank, receptionist, supervisor in a hotel, archivist).

The main motives for migrating in the case of the studied group were the situation on the Polish labour market (poor prospects of finding satisfactory work and low earnings) coupled with a desire to improve language skills (these two motives being predominant among pre-accession migrants). Other popular motives were searching for new opportunities and/or higher earnings (especially

---

\(^6\) The fact that so many respondents within this sample have completed part-time studies can be treated as a sign of the times: almost 68% of the increase in the number of students, from 404,000 in 1990 to 1,584,000 in 2001 was constituted by part-time students, while only 32% by full-time students, marking a new and reverse trend in higher education in Poland (Kabaj 2002: 30).
true for post-accession migrants), the need for change and adventure, and finally personal reasons, such as running away from a relationship.

THE NEW INTELLIGENTSIA?

Before moving to a discussion of the graduates’ position in the social stratification systems of the sending and receiving country, I would like to touch upon a concept I will be referring to in the forthcoming discussion, namely that of the intelligentsia.

The fact that, as earlier mentioned, university graduates enjoy a certain degree of prestige in Poland, if only due to their level of education per se (Domański 1999: 86), may arguably be seen as a legacy of the strong intelligentsia tradition in Polish culture. The term ‘intelligentsia’ is a long-standing one in Polish sociological thought spanning a period of around 150 years, yet its precise definition, as well as the very existence of this social class, has been repeatedly debated (c.f. Domański and Mach 2008, Chojnowski and Palska 2008, Gawin 2008, Snopek 2008, Suchocka 2007). Traditionally, an intelligentsia status has been associated with having higher educational qualifications yet also fulfilling certain roles in the society. Historically, the intelligentsia came into being in the nineteenth century, which was a time of great political turmoil as the Polish state was under partition. Under the circumstances, the fight for preserving the nation was dependent on charismatic leaders, and such was the role to be fulfilled by the intelligentsia, originally defined as:

‘Those who have received a versatile and careful education at institutions of higher education and lead the nation as scientists, civil servants, teachers, clergymen, industrialists, who lead the nation for the reason of their higher enlightenment.’

Karol Libelt (1844; 1967:61)

Therefore, education, patriotism and carrying out a ‘social mission’ by taking on leadership were seen as the major constituents of the ‘intelligentsia ethos’ at the time. Significantly, financial status had no bearing on belonging to the

---

7 Stein Rokkan (1974) and Józef Chałasiński (1946) (both cited in Chojnowski and Palska 2008: 25) have argued that the very origination of the intelligentsia was simply a consequence of failed systemic (economic and political) reforms in Poland: on the one hand the economy was not able to absorb all well-educated individuals, on the other the failure of the nation state (which was under partition at the time) and political turmoil resulted in the degradation of the gentry and ‘knocking them off their perch’.

---
intelligentsia, and the class included both high and low earners⁸ (Chojnowski and Palska 2008).

Subsequently, with the historical changes the state was undergoing, the concept and role, and in consequence the defining factors of the intelligentsia would also be changing. In modern sociological theory, ‘intelligentsia’ remains a highly elusive term (Palska 1994: 16-17), and one heatedly debated in view of the rapid changes brought about by the introduction of democracy and a free market economy after 1989. It has been argued that:

_The intelligentsia (…) understood as a group of people of high cultural capital, characterised by a particular ethos of national mission does not exist (…). The remains of this stratum have divulged into so-called people’s intelligentsia, meaning the category of ‘educees’ [wykształcone]. Similarly as in other countries there are intellectuals⁹ in Poland, their role, however, seems to be currently decreasing._

Bohdan Jęlowiecki (2000: 97)

Although opinions as to the validity of this thesis vary widely, there is common agreement that the new conditions in Poland – marked by a massive increase of university graduates over the last twenty years¹⁰ and a rapid change in the structure and needs of the labour market – have significantly impacted on the current standing and perceptions of the intelligentsia. Therefore, ascribing intelligentsia status is nowadays a rather complex issue. While more structurally orientated scholars argue that it is possible to ascertain it on the basis of objective factors, such as education, occupational position, and income (Domański and Mach 2008), others contend that in present times it is rather ‘soft’ factors such as self-identity, habitus, or cultural participation that should be seen as indicators of belonging to the intelligentsia (Suchocka 2007).

In this paper, I shall however leave aside these theoretical arguments relating to the issue of the intelligentsia; these refer to the particular context of the Polish society yet not the British one. Instead, I shall attempt to analyse the issue of

---

⁸ This disassociation of social prestige and financial status has arguably remained a feature of the intelligentsia up to the present, yet definitely throughout the Communist period (Domański 1999: 85-93). Domański (1999) has even argued that if the Polish intelligentsia had been able to achieve the higher financial status it had been inspiring towards during the Communist period, it would have in consequence transformed into the middle class, as known in Western societies.

⁹ A linguistic note: the meaning of the word ‘intellectual’ in English is equivalent to the Polish term ‘inteligent’.

¹⁰ Over the years 1990-2001, the number of higher education institutions increased from 112 to 310, and the number of students from 404,000 to 1,584,000 (Kabaj 2002:30). Currently, there are almost 2,000,000 students in Poland (GUS 2008).
migration and class looking at ‘both ends’ of the migration experience by comparing ‘objective factors’ vs. perceptions of own status.

HIGHLY-EDUCATED MIGRANTS IN LOW-SKILLED JOBS

Apparently, the situation where highly-educated migrants carry out low-skilled work is a case of downward mobility. As mentioned before, university graduates enjoy a certain degree of prestige in Poland (Domański 1999: 86) where their cultural capital allows them to apply for positions ascribed with fairly high social status (though this might not be reflected in the level of earnings) (Domański and Mach 2008: 283). In the receiving country, on the other hand, the situation of the studied group of graduates is directly opposite: their educational credentials are typically not recognized and hence lower level positions are accessible to them rather than higher ones. By taking on such positions, the graduates locate themselves in the lower echelons of the British labour market and, consequently, also in the British society. Yet may we conclusively state that the graduates’ experience indeed presents a fall in social status? In order to ascertain how international mobility has affected the status of educated migrants from Poland, we should analyse their position both prior to migration, i.e. in the sending country as well as in the receiving country.

The graduates’ status within the sending society

In empirical (survey) research on social stratification, three major factors are differentiated as indicators of status: occupation, level of education and level of income (Domański 2004: 149). However, determining the social position of the researched group of graduates according to these indicators proves to be problematic.

In terms of their occupational position in the home country upon graduation, we can differentiate three groups within the sample: those working in graduate positions (6 out of 27), those working below their level of qualifications (4/27), and those who had not at all entered the labour market (17/27). This last group includes both persons who attempted to look for work in the home country but could not find a satisfactory position (3/17), as well as persons who had not at all looked for work but had decided to migrate directly upon graduation (14/17). Therefore, considering the occupations of the graduates in the home country, we

---

11 The analysis contained in this part is based in part on an earlier paper (Trevena 2010b). ‘Degradacja? Koncepcje socjologiczne, percepcja społeczna, a postrzeganie własnego położenia przez wykształconych migrantów pracujących za granicą poniżej kwalifikacji’.
could only ascribe a small minority (6/27) to the intelligentsia\textsuperscript{12} (with a certain reservation, however, as to the break in continuity of employment, as three out of six persons within this group had lost their positions prior to migrating). The remaining sub-group of graduates who had been working in Poland could be classified as lower-grade white-collar workers\textsuperscript{13} or low-skilled or non-skilled workers\textsuperscript{14} (c.f. Goldthorpe 1987, Domaniński 2007). Still, the definite majority of graduates within the group researched (17/27) had not worked prior to migration, and hence in fact had no occupational status in Poland. Therefore, in their case we cannot use occupation as an indicator of their social status.\textsuperscript{15}

The next indicator, level of earnings, seems to complicate the picture further rather than clarify it. As has been mentioned above, the majority of graduates within the group researched had not entered the national labour market after finishing their studies, and hence was not earning in their home country. Thus, similarly as in the case of occupation, we cannot relate to income as an indicator of their social status. Furthermore, the group of migrants who had been working in Poland prior to migration had relatively low earnings, insufficient to maintain themselves independently. Therefore, according to their level of earnings they would be located in lower rather than higher social positions.

The one single indicator which we can apply to the whole group under research is the level of education: all respondents had completed tertiary education. As mentioned earlier, having a higher education diploma constitutes a ‘pass’ to ‘intelligentsia occupations’\textsuperscript{16} and higher level positions in the labour market. However, the reality of the national labour market places a great number of Polish graduates in a rather unfavourable situation; the educational boom of the 1990s resulted in a surplus of persons with tertiary level education and furthermore entailed a devaluation of diplomas as the result of the sharp increase in student numbers on the one hand, and the fall in quality of education on the other. In consequence, securing higher education credentials nowadays does not, as in the beginning of the ‘golden nineties’, guarantee receiving a ‘good’ position (c.f. Łukasiuk 2007: 318-322). Therefore, as Domaniński and Mach (2008: 281) have noted, there has been a considerable outflow of Poles with higher education credentials to ‘non-graduate’ occupations within the last decade. Sociologists

\textsuperscript{12} These were positions such as teacher, journalist, and editor.

\textsuperscript{13} E.g. real estate agent, assistant secretary.

\textsuperscript{14} E.g. waiter, shop assistant.

\textsuperscript{15} The problem of ascribing occupation to people who are not in employment at the time of being interviewed is a largely conceptual one: depending on the aims of the research it is solved in various ways. However, in the cases described above typically no occupational status would be ascribed and they would be classified as ‘not studying and not working’ (c.f. Domaniński, Sawiński and Stomczyński 2007: 38-41).

\textsuperscript{16} Domaniński and Mach (2008) use the terms ‘intelligentsia occupations’ or ‘intelligentsia positions’ as basically equivalent to ‘professional occupations/positions’.
Divided by class...

(c.f. Domaniński and Mach 2008, Palska 2008) and the media alike (e.g. ‘Wprost’, February 2008) draw attention to the significance of the phenomenon of diploma devaluation, which is especially true for part-time studies and/or studies at (many) private institutions of higher education. We may thus conclude that in the times of educational boom, when gaining higher education has become rather widespread while its quality is often questioned, possessing a university diploma alone is a more and more arguable source of prestige. Hence, the sheer fact of having higher education can no longer be treated as an indicator of belonging to the intelligentsia; as Henryk Domaniński (2000: 60) argues, in present times it is work roles that are crucial in ascribing status.

Considering all the above, the problem of ascertaining the social status of the graduates within the sending society arises. In the case of the overwhelming majority who had not entered the Polish labour market prior to migration, we cannot refer to two of the crucial indicators, namely occupational position and level of earnings. On the other hand, the group of graduates who had worked before leaving Poland was located at the lower level of the income ladder, even if their occupational position was fairly high. As follows, it is difficult to ascribe status to the graduates within their home society, at least according to the categories traditionally used in ‘objective’ (survey) research (Domaniński 2007: 39). Concluding, the position of the graduates within the stratification system of the sending society was a highly ambiguous one.

The graduates’ status within the receiving society

The status of the graduates within the receiving society seems much more cut. Upon migration, the graduates would start their ‘professional careers’ from the most accessible positions, i.e. low-skilled jobs in the hotel and catering sector (waiter/waitress, barperson), construction sector (builder’s help), services sector (shop assistant) or carrying out domestic work (cleaning, taking care of children). Therefore, as they were carrying out simple, menial jobs, the graduates would take the lowest positions on the occupational ladder in the British labour market. As to their level of earnings, this is also – from the point of view of the receiving society – low. As one of the interviewees observed:

_We [Polish migrants] are living at a totally different level, at a different standard [than the host society]. We don’t buy as much as they [the British] do, we don’t throw away as much as they do. And that’s why it’s easier for us to live here. But if we switched to their way of thinking, it would appear that we can’t afford anything._

Therefore, their low level of earnings classifies the educated migrants at the lowest level within the social stratification system of the receiving society.

The educational credentials of the graduates would typically appear non-transferable to the British context. Polish diplomas are generally not recognised by British employers nor are they regarded as credible (Currie 2007). Moreover, it should be underlined that the possibility of making use of one’s diploma in another country is largely dependent on having good knowledge of the target language. Meanwhile, almost half of the sample had no more than rudimentary language skills upon arrival (13/27). Therefore, the fact that the migrants had higher education levels had no impact on their labour market position in the UK, and in consequence, no impact on their social status within the host society.

Within the British society, Polish graduates who have low occupational positions and low earnings, also take low social positions. Despite their high educational attainment, their credentials are difficult to make use of in the receiving country: as they are generally not recognised, they are also not valued by members of the host society. Therefore, we may conclude that the graduates locate themselves in the lowest echelons of the British society.

Downward mobility?

In the above section the position of the graduates has been considered from the angle of indicators of status used in quantitative sociological research. According to these, as far as the graduates’ position within the structure of the Polish society was rather ambiguous, by carrying out low-skilled and low-paid jobs in Britain they undoubtedly take positions at the bottom of the social ladder. Can we consider this phenomenon simply as a case of social downgrading, however? The issue is not as obvious as it may seem.

Though having higher education credentials allows the graduates to apply for higher positions in the Polish labour market, as earlier mentioned, the majority of the study participants were facing the problem of finding satisfactory work in Poland or even any work at all. One of the major reasons behind their migration was the situation in the home country’s labour market, commonly perceived as difficult (particular conditions faced by given interviewees being dependent on the situation within their local labour markets). A respondent who graduated in 1998 recollected her position in the following way:

*Life after graduation was a big disappointment to me. My first job right after finishing my studies was working in a curtains’ shop. That was really depressing. Then I moved into the real estate branch which I found so boring*
that I had had enough. Looking for work was... At that time when you opened the paper there were no offers for biologists.

Łucja (2004)

Six years onwards, the situation in the home labour market was equally bad:

I was depressed with the situation with work. In 2004 things were quite difficult. My friends who had finished full-time studies had enormous problems with entering the labour market. At the time one could find work only through having the right contacts.

Jagna (2007/8)

Another problem, mentioned by those graduates who had been working in Poland prior to migration, was their poor financial standing. As Grażyna, who had a rather high and responsible position as editor in a health magazine recalled:

I couldn’t put up with this any more in Poland (...). Honestly, I couldn’t stand the fact that despite that I was working I wasn’t able to rent a place unless I would devote my whole salary to making ends meet. And I decided I don’t want to live this way.


Meanwhile, the financial situation of the graduates in Poland stands in sharp contrast with how they are living in Britain. Though their earnings are rather low by the standards of the receiving society, they are sufficient in the eyes of the graduates who underline they earn enough to maintain themselves and cater for their own needs:

Living here [in London] and paying for everything you can still afford more. You can afford to go out, to buy yourself something, to go on holidays, to attend some course or something. The standard of living is higher here.

Hanna (2004)

As can be concluded from the above quote, the level of earnings received from carrying out low-skilled jobs is sufficient for the graduates to maintain themselves independently (providing they live in shared accommodation, however) and allows them to lead the lifestyle they could not afford in Poland, making use of culture (theatre, cinema, exhibitions), entertainment (clubbing, pubs, restaurants) as well as going travelling. Hence, it should be underlined that the educated migrants share a feeling of economic advancement.
Still, despite this subjective feeling of ‘wealth’, according to the ‘objective’ indicators of social status university graduates carrying out low-skilled jobs take low occupational and economic positions in the receiving country, and hence also have low social status. However, relating the social status of the migrants to that they had in their home country, their overall situation may be considered as a case of ‘contradictory class mobility’ (c.f. Parre 2001, Currie 2007) rather than simply downward mobility.

WORK ROLES AND CLASS IDENTITY

As demonstrated in the discussion above, in view of ‘objective’ indicators of class, the status of the graduates is highly ambiguous. This ambiguity relates to both their position prior to migration as well as following it. In Poland, only a few of the graduates were working in positions consonant with their qualifications and aspirations, i.e. ‘intelligentsia positions’ (c.f. Domański and Mach 2008); in Britain, none of them do.17 Thus, we could say that the graduates under study have been deprived of the opportunity to take up occupational positions most of them would have wished for.

It is commonly agreed that work is an important part of our lives, inter alia being a source of self-esteem. Erik Erikson (1963:262) maintains that identity formation is based on the individual’s drive to combine earlier acquired social roles and skills with the ideal prototypes of their times, and that failure in achieving integrity of the individual with his social roles may lead to a state of identity ‘diffusion’. The key reason behind such ‘diffusion’ is the individual’s inability to accept his/her professional role. Robert Park (1931 in Bokszański 1989:68), in turn, observes that the self-concepts created by individuals seem to depend on their profession and the roles carried out in society, as well as the esteem and status that is attributed to them by the society as a consequence of these roles. Meanwhile, we may assume that for the graduates – who carry out low-skilled and hence low-status work in the UK – treating such work as a source of esteem would be difficult.

Nevertheless, though work and the professional roles we carry out are said to be one of the basic factors defining our social identity and hence also class identity (Domański 2007), it has also been pointed out that in the contemporary world the meaning of work for ascribing class status is decreasing (Giddens 2006:

17 I am here concentrating on the situation of carrying out work below one’s qualifications which is typical for the initial stage of migration. As has been mentioned before, the majority of the graduates would move up the occupational ladder over time, though in the case of the pre-accession migrants this would typically take a few years’ time. For a detailed analysis of the process see Trevena (forthcoming).
Nowadays, with the dynamically changing labour markets, changes in occupational standing occur much more frequently than ever before. Therefore, it has been posited that class affiliation is demonstrated through habitus, lifestyle choices and consumption patterns rather than professional status (c.f. Bourdieu 1986, Savage et al. 1992).

Considering the above, we shall now turn to an analysis of class affiliation in terms of less clear-cut, ‘soft’ indicators such as lifestyle choices, values and class awareness (c.f. Suchocka 2007) – examined within the context of work. Firstly, we shall discuss the clash of habitus between the graduates and their co-workers. Secondly, we will consider the problem of work roles and self-perception vs. social perception. Finally, we shall present the graduates’ own perception of their class positioning.

**The clash of habitus: co-workers and customers**

Because of carrying out low skilled work, the graduates often work in positions typically designated for persons without any particular qualifications (e.g. builder’s help, barperson, waiter/waitress, sandwich maker, cleaner). In consequence, their colleagues (both Britons and other immigrants) are often persons of much lower levels of education and cultural capital than theirs. This situation promotes deep frustration for the migrants since not only is the nature of the work per se ‘stupefying’ but the same regards their daily work environment:

> **Those people I work with are disastrous. The intellectual level of these people is petrifying, truly petrifying. If someone reads, say, the Sun, and believes everything that they write there and has no critical thoughts about this type of press (…), then what can I say?**

Łucja (2004)

In consequence of such lack of ‘common ground’, educated migrants working with people of much lower cultural capital rarely establish any deeper (or even satisfactory) relations with their co-workers, and are hence fairly isolated at work. Especially as they find the necessity of making never ending small talk and

---

18 Habitus, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, consists of the social agents’ dispositions acquired in the process of socialisation. It is influenced by both collective and individual conditioning: on the one hand it is formed by the powers shaping the society we grow up in, on the other by what we learn within the family and through individual experiences in the course of our lifetimes. Habitus accounts for the constancy of dispositions, tastes and preferences. Though a durable structure, it is not a fossilized one but is constantly affected by experiences in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:133).
spending many hours per day with ‘ignorant’ persons – be it their co-workers or customers – simply very tiring. As a psychologist working as a barmaid put it:

_I love my pub and I love our locals, we have the same drunks [coming] every single day. (...) They are simple people, very simple people, and I like them a lot and I respect them, but sometimes I simply get a little annoyed that I have to spend time with such simple people on a daily basis. What I miss in London is being around people at a certain level._

_Ola (2004)_

The problem of having to readjust to the much lower intellectual level of their working environment appears especially difficult for those carrying out work which they find physically over-demanding. While others can receive their very much needed ‘intellectual input’ outside the workplace, this is much harder to achieve for graduates who are totally worn out by work:

_There’s no one you can talk to (...) at work; in the case of the majority their knowledge of the world is very limited and you simply regress (...). Intellectually, I have reached the absolute pits. You know, if you don’t have conversations at a certain level then you start forgetting certain words, certain meanings. And I don’t have the energy to read after work and as far as TV goes, you know what sort of programmes they have, it’s worse than in Poland. And so you just regress, regress, regress…_

_Rafał (2004)_

Such feeling of intellectual regression is most often mentioned by those carrying out heavy physical work, e.g. on building sites. Others also feel that they have no opportunity for ‘intellectual development’ at work but if they are working in an English-speaking environment, especially along Britons (and not only other immigrants), this is to some degree compensated by the opportunity to improve their English language skills:

_Despite [working in a clothes shop], I’m still developing somehow, at least in terms of language, I’m learning new vocabulary._

_Łucja (2004)_

However, at some point the graduates reach the stage where they feel they are no longer acquiring any new capital in their workplace. If they also find their working environment hard to bear, they typically chose to change jobs at this point:
I quit my job at the pub (...) because I couldn’t put up with it any longer (...). I just couldn’t put up with this place any more, those customers, and all those people who were working with me. Some hopeless guys. And I knew that nothing will change, that they’ll all stay there. So I came to the conclusion that I won’t get anything more out of this place.


As can be seen from the above quotes, educated migrants find the situation of having to readjust to colleagues of much lower cultural capital rather challenging in the long run. Nevertheless, the clash of habitus between them relates to more than only intellectual differences. The graduates’ co-workers typically have a disparate outlook on life and a distinctive value system, which poses an additional difficulty in mutual relations. Some educated Poles are truly shocked by these differences:

A customer left a book behind one day [in our shop]. And I can see one of my colleagues taking this book and throwing it into the bin. So I ask: ‘What are you doing?!’ ‘Well, what do we need this for?’ ‘Well, maybe I could take that?’ And that was a great book about the history of London, of the city centre. But for them a book is simply trash. This was shocking for me.

Łucja (2004)

Łucja (quoted above) also had to deal with colleagues whose behaviour she regarded as against work ethic and generally immoral:

This is the meaning of life for them to spread gossip about somebody, to stab you in the back. Everyone has slept with everyone else, each of them gossips about all the others. They all have partners. A real nightmare. It’s better not to know about it all. (...) [And] we [Poles] are the best workers there, one of the few that don’t cheat or steal like all the others.

Łucja (2004)

As exemplified by Łucja’s case, differences between the educated migrants and their working environment may be indeed stark, not only in terms of intellectual differences but great disparity in value systems. Therefore, being able to work with (at least some) people they have common ground with is seen as a significant asset by educated migrants, while lack of mutual understanding in the workplace leads to a feeling of lack of acceptance, isolation and mental weariness. Therefore, carrying out menial work is much easier for persons working with individuals of similar cultural capital and habitus to them, especially students or other graduates who have other aspirations beyond earning money:
I work in a restaurant. 90% of my colleagues there work only to earn money while 10% also study. (...) And we understand one another very well because we know that we’ll be attending lectures and studying and just need to earn some extra money. I won’t be working 100 hours per week because I need time to study (...). Obviously, one wants to have time for one’s hobby, for studying and for work.

Maciej (2004)

Summing up, the educated migrants’ attitude towards life, their value system and general lifestyle appear very different to that of their (uneducated) co-workers. Many of them remark that their colleagues do not seem to have any interests apart from shopping and television, have very poor knowledge of the outside world and are not interested in further development, while ‘seeing the world’, pursuing one’s hobbies, gaining new knowledge and self-development are crucial elements of the graduates’ lifestyle and identity. Therefore, we may posit that in terms of consumption and lifestyle choices, the difference between working-class persons and the educated migrants is notable.

**Middle class? Working class? The graduates’ perception of own status**

Graduates working in menial jobs are in a ‘schizophrenic’ situation where they are aware of their potential yet cannot realise it through work roles. Meanwhile, research on attitudes of the Polish society towards work shows that Poles see work not only as a means of fulfilling broadly understood individual needs (material needs, need for security but also of self-fulfillment and group membership), but also as a focal point of all elements that constitute one’s identity (Sikorska 2002). Professional standing is thus perceived as the fundamental pivot defining social identity both at individual and group level (Hawrylik 2000). Considering this great meaning of work for defining social identity, how do the Polish graduates who live in London and carry out low-skilled work there perceive their social position within the receiving society? Let us now move to an analysis of this question.

According to the educated migrants, their work roles are perceived very differently by the sending and by the receiving society. Those graduates who had not entered the labour market prior to migration would often declare that in Poland, ‘never ever, in their whole lives’ would they have taken up the type of work they have been carrying out in the UK. This unwillingness to take up menial work in the home country is based on socio-psychological factors: according to the respondents, physical work is generally disrespected in Poland:
Here you really (...) carry out such jobs which are considered third class or even lower in Poland. I’m afraid this is a notion transferred from Poland – that people doing menial jobs are worse.


In Poland, if you are working at lower positions you are treated like dirt by those at a higher level than you, you are treated really badly. I experienced this when I was working at a supermarket. People who are a little higher up than you look at you with contempt.

Piotr (2004)

Furthermore, the migrants draw attention to the single-track perception of professional success in Poland, where physical work is not seen in terms of a possible career option – unlike in Britain:

In Poland professional career is regarded in terms... that it has to be some office job. An intellectual job, god forbid some physical work as this is seen as an antithesis of career. Meanwhile, here there seems to be an alternative. That you can have a career in such types of jobs which we [Polish society] really depreciate.

Milena (2007/8)

Therefore, to Poles working in the UK, the traditional Polish attitude towards the concept of career seems conservative, even parochial. The educated migrants tend to take on a different attitude to work than that of the wider Polish society. In their opinion, work is generally respected in the receiving society, regardless of its nature:

Here if you go to clean someone’s house, say, everybody respects you because you do work. Work is respected here, you know?

Piotr (2004)

The graduates, who are physically ‘outside’ Polish society19, attempt to consider their social status in ‘local’ and not ‘Polish’ terms. However, their perception of ‘local’ terms seems to be somewhat distorted: their specific occupational and financial position largely impacts on their social circles, hence the migrants have predominantly contact with given segments of the host society. Moreover, as they

---

19I am here referring to a simplified definition of the concept of ‘society’ where it is understood as ‘a commonsense category (...) equivalent to the boundaries of nation-states’ (The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 1994:395). Applying such an understanding of the term is consonant with the interviewees’ perception of Polish (and British) society.
do not identify themselves as members of this society, they are to a large extent free from its estimates as they are not pressurized to fulfill any higher expectations within it: all that is expected of them is to do their work well and respect public order. Hence, on the one hand, the British society (or rather the multicultural community of London) is indeed much more tolerant than the Polish society, yet on the other it should be stressed that the graduates’ interpretation of ‘what is expected’ does not exactly reflect the actual rules applied to ‘true members’ of that society.

On the other hand, even though in general the graduates agree that the attitude towards physical work in England is far more favourable than in Poland, this perception might relate predominantly to their employers and fellow employees. As for the ‘outside world’, including customers in some cases, the graduates feel their work roles are frequently perceived as demeaning:

> For them you are just a girlie who makes coffee. They’re convinced that if you work there you are either stupid or lazy, [but] you are definitely not someone who has graduated from university and wants to achieve something in life. Apart from being a manager of such a coffee stand, that is.

Hanna (2004)

Summing up, the educated migrants generally distance themselves from the negative perceptions of physical work held by the Polish society and attempt to take on the positive view of such work voiced by their (British) colleagues and employers. Nevertheless, they are aware of the fact that the wider society typically categorizes them as unintelligent or lacking ambition on the basis of their work roles, and such perception is difficult for them to accept.

Notwithstanding, the graduates themselves do not necessarily perceive their low occupational position in Britain as indicative of status – for at least two reasons. Firstly, the receiving society is perceived as a more open and tolerant one and – paradoxically – is not seen as preoccupied by status:20

> I think that Britain is such a country that you are free to do what you want, what you like. It doesn’t mean that you are better or worse.

Maciej (2007/8)

Secondly, the graduates underline that their low occupational position is a natural consequence of their international mobility under the circumstances. They are fully aware of the fact that they have found themselves in a completely new

---

20 Such attitude seems to be overall shared by the contemporary wave of Polish migrants to the UK (c.f. Jordan 2002, Garapich 2006).
social reality where the norms and rules of social life are different than those followed in their home country and accept that adapting to these must take time. Hence, they perceive the period of working considerably below qualifications as characteristic for the initial stages of migration when the newly arrived needs to find his/her way within another system: 21

*Practically speaking, everybody who has migrated has been through the same. That they were working below their abilities in the beginning. You have to make your way in [to the system] somehow, don’t you?*

Mariusz (2007/8)

Consequently, many of the educated migrants perceive their low occupational position as a temporary stage they are going or have gone through rather than a case of downfall. Moreover, significantly, due to living in a global city and multi-cultural environment constituting of people who speak over 300 different languages (Vertovec 2006), the graduates have a rather weak sense of living within the British society:

*It's hard to define British society in London. There are so many people living here, from so many different countries, that I simply feel one of them. I don’t feel as if this city ‘belonged’ to the British.*

Wiktor (2007/8)

*I somehow feel separate from this society. I feel part of the international London community.*

Paweł (2007/8)

Therefore, the graduates tend to identify with the multicultural, largely immigrant community of the metropolis rather than the receiving society.

Thinking along British class divisions is an even more complex (and obviously artificial) exercise for the educated migrants. The majority find it impossible to place themselves anywhere in within the structure of the receiving society:

*I don’t know, I simply am [here].*

Beata (2007/8)

- Working class. No, middle... Well no, I’m not middle class.

21 This view is consonant with research carried out on immigrants’ labour market incorporation. See for example Chiswick 1978, Borjas 1982.
So?

I don’t know, I wouldn’t be able to place myself, I haven’t the faintest idea. Maybe because I’m Polish and not English, I don’t think in terms of class, I’d say. I don’t pay attention to such things at all and I wouldn’t be able to say if I’m middle class because I don’t even have such a concept. I’m a Pole working in England (…), that’s how I’d put it.

Ewelina (2007/8)

Some of the migrants, however, would define their position in Britain by referring to their perceived class position in Poland and/or their social background there:

[Where do I see myself] in terms of class? I think this comes from the environment I come from in Poland. This is why it’s easier for me to associate with the middle class here, despite the differences.

Joanna (2007/8)

This, however, would be more typical for those graduates who had started from the lowest occupational positions but had moved a little higher over time. Significantly, educated migrants who would still be carrying out physical work at the time of being interviewed, would typically associate their class standing with their current occupational position:

I’m in a state of social personality split. Because when I think I’m an educated person... But this doesn’t mean anything in the UK. After all, looking from the perspective of what job you’re doing, you are at the lowest level of the social ladder.

Jagna (2007/8)

At the same time, those migrants who were carrying out the most physically demanding manual jobs (typically men working on building sites), would voice associating with the working class more than any other members of the studied group:

I feel part of the lower classes, of the working class. Because I feel taken advantage of — like every ordinary worker, I feel taken advantage of.

Rafał (2004)

I think I can classify myself as working class.

Piotr (2004)
As follows, carrying out heavy physical work (which is so wearing that it leaves little space for ‘pursuing one’s true identity’ outside working hours) is most difficult to distance oneself from. In contrast, persons carrying out lighter menial work typically avoid identifying with their work roles and treat their social identity as separate from these:

As for today, working in a shop is a matter of my own choice. I think about myself in this way that I am aware of what I’m doing and what kind of work that is and I do not get involved in it emotionally.

Łucja (2004)

At this point, we would like to come back to the issue of habitus and identity, and analyse its role in ascribing class. As exemplified above, it is mainly those graduates doing the physically most tiring jobs that associate with their co-workers’ occupational status and see themselves as part of the (British) working class. Others, however, seek different reference points to define their social identity. While some refer to their immigrant status (‘I’m simply a Pole working in England’), others define their social identity in the UK through their (perceived) social status in Poland (‘I’m middle class though not in the British sense’). In other words, the majority of the educated migrants do not seek to define their social status in Britain through their occupational status nor their financial status (both of which are low when judged by objective criteria). Rather, they apply another reference point, namely cultural capital and self-identity:

I don’t earn as much as the middle class. So I’m rather not middle class… Though I associate being middle class also with educational level and interests. So perhaps I would classify myself as middle class but then… half of the people [living] here could also associate with such a label. If I were to compare to [the context of] Poland then [I could associate with] the intelligentsia.

Monika (2007/8)

As follows from the above discussion, the graduates under study take various attitudes towards their own class affiliation. While some feel ‘classless’ and unable to place themselves within the social structure of both sending and receiving society, others – through reference to their social background in their home country or to their educational credentials and general cultural capital – have the feeling of belonging to the intelligentsia. Others apply comparable (to some degree) class terms such as middle class, and still others define their class position through

22 Some theorists, such as Henryk Domański, argue that the intelligentsia is essentially part of the ‘new’ middle class in Poland (Domański 1999: 210-213, Domański 2002: 12).
their occupational status in Britain and hence describe it as ‘working class’. Therefore, there is no one feeling of class belonging among educated migrants working in low-skilled jobs: they take on a highly individualised stance towards class, frequently underlining the fact that this is an artificial concept which has little meaning for them.

CONCLUSIONS

While literature on highly-skilled migration suggests that educated persons typically achieve upward mobility through migration (Iredale 2001, Mahroum 2001), Polish graduates undertaking low-skilled work in London present a different case, moving (relatively) up in terms of finances yet (relatively) down in terms of occupational and social status. Therefore, through taking on such work roles in the country of migration they find themselves in a highly ‘schizophrenic’ situation: despite their high cultural and human capital, they find themselves at the bottom of the occupational and hence also social ladder. Nevertheless, according to ‘hard’ indicators applied in social stratification research (educational attainment, occupational position, financial standing,) their social position prior to leaving Poland was also highly ambiguous. Though their educational credentials may be seen as a source of prestige, none of the graduates could be ascribed high social status on the basis of level of earnings. Furthermore, with reference to their occupational status, only a small number could be associated with higher, ‘intelligentsia positions’ (though also with certain reservations). Considering these particular circumstances, in view of ‘objective’ indicators of class, the graduates’ position in the receiving country can be seen as a case of ‘contradictory class mobility’ rather than simply downward mobility.

Through analysis of the same issue in the light of ‘soft’ indicators of class, such as lifestyle, values or class awareness, the graduates’ class belonging becomes an even more complicated issue. If we compare their habitus with that of persons typically constituting their working environment (uneducated persons), it becomes apparent that the disparities between them may largely be ascribed to class differences. The educated migrants demonstrate an – in essence – intelligentsia habitus, where self-development, knowledge and work ethic are core values to their very identity. At the same time, though aware of the generally disdainful attitude towards physical work (especially within the sending society), the majority of graduates do not see their low occupational position in the UK as indicative of status. They point to the fact that, considering the circumstances, it may be seen as a natural stage in their migration experience rather than a status quo. Moreover, they do not perceive themselves as part of the British society but rather as members of the international London community, where origin and class
do not matter. Class is a rather abstract concept for these educated persons, out of whom many are unable to place themselves within the structure of the receiving society. Interestingly, those who have the strongest feeling of class belonging – as defined through their current occupations – are graduates carrying out manual work which requires great physical effort and allows for little activity outside working hours. Hence, those working e.g. on building sites typically define themselves as working class. Others find the situation far from straightforward and either refer to their social background in Poland and on this basis ascribe ‘something like middle-class’ status to themselves, or seek affiliation through their educational attainment and cultural capital, defining themselves as part of the intelligentsia. However, within the context of the receiving society, the graduates are aware of the fact that, due to their low earnings and low occupational status, they could not ‘objectively’ see themselves as belonging to the middle class.

Concluding, the situation of university-educated migrants who carry out low-skilled and low-paid work abroad is a highly intangible one in terms of class analysis. While ‘hard’ indicators of class point to their low social position, we may wonder whether applying such ‘objective criteria’ is well-founded in the case of persons whose international mobility involves moving to a global city, where they become part of a multicultural and multinational immigrant community rather than of the British society. Under the circumstances, defining their class belonging becomes a difficult and rather artificial exercise for the graduates. Consequently, the only valid path to analyse class would seem to be through a consideration of lifestyle orientations and shared values. If we examine these, we could tentatively ascribe class status to the graduates: through reference to the Polish social stratification system – of the intelligentsia; or within the context of the receiving society – as either an ‘impoverished’ or ‘prospective’ middle class. We could therefore put forward the idea that the case of Polish graduates working in low-skilled jobs in London is one of ‘middle class deprivation’, where persons who display a largely middle class value system and have cultural capital applicable to higher occupational positions are unable to reach this ‘deserved status’ under their particular life circumstances. Notably, this phenomenon is by no means limited to the case under study, i.e. Polish graduates working in low-skilled jobs in London, but is a global phenomenon relating to many highly educated persons in the modern world – be it immigrants or not – who are trapped in the situation of having the potential yet not having the opportunities to achieve higher social positions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


