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## TRAVELLING HOME: PERSONAL MOBILITY AND “NEW” POLISH MIGRANTS IN ENGLAND

### INTRODUCTION

Mobility is everywhere. It is something that we do and something we experience in day to day life, from walking and dancing to travelling and migrating. Perhaps it is this ever-presence of mobility that has led a number of scholars from different academic fields to conclude that mobility is central to human life. For John Urry (2000, 2007) mobilities create society, for Tim Cresswell (2006) life increasingly occurs “on the move”. There is now a widespread interest in movement and mobility that has resulted in the emergence of a major trend in social sciences that has been termed a “mobility turn” (Urry, 2007) or “mobilities perspective” (Sheller and Urry, 2006). But how has this affected migration studies?

Migrant mobility has long been established as a site of exciting scholarly work. The current developments in the field have contributed to a new and richer understanding of movement of people. However, human mobility raises questions, especially in relation to its flexibility and fluidity. Why certain groups of migrants move and remain mobile and others stay put? Under what conditions and when people become mobile? What is more, in the era of globalisation, mobility is seen as an integral part of a global economy and understood as a unified human condition (Cresswell, 2006). Hence, much of the past research neglects the lived experience that often instigates the movement of people in the first place. Numerous ethnographic studies and interviews with migrants around the world suggest that being mobile remains materially and emotionally significant for people on the move. There is no denying that mobility can transform many aspects of social and economic life of mobile migrants (i.e. Cyrus, 2008; Diminescu, 2003; Morokvasic, 2004). The question then is not whether being mobile matters to migrants but how? What is the meaning of mobility at the level of individual’s life?

In this paper I attempt to engage with these questions by looking specifically at one aspect of mobility: migrant visits home. Freedom of circulation within the European Union made the borders inside the EU space less important to those who have the right of free movement. More recently, the expansion of the EU

in 2004 and the availability of cheaper, more frequent and more accessible air travel connections, has allowed for new forms of mobility, based on more frequent return visits for Eastern Europeans, who have gone to work and live in Britain. In recent years, the “visiting friends and family” (VFR) mobility type has been the fastest growing segment of inbound air traffic in the UK, accounting for almost half of all trips within European Union (CAA Passenger Survey, 2005).

My research is an attempt to make sense of migration and mobility in the context of people’s lives and notions of travelling home. I analyse the ways in which visiting country of origin is experienced by “new” Polish migrants in England, and how is migration narrated in relation to individual mobility. I approach this set of issues through the lens of ‘mobilities perspective’ (Urry, 2007; Sheller and Urry, 2006). While the discourse of human mobility and movement has been central to the already vast literature on globalization, and rather than thinking of mobility as constituted only through the processes of physical movement, the mobilities perspective considers how mobility is made meaningful (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007). Given that migration is a diversified phenomenon, a new mobilities paradigm reflects on “how social life gains expression through the movement of people” (Garcera and Fumaz, 2007: 5). Furthermore, it attends to the institutional infrastructure of movement and the economic and political conditions that encourage or hinder the movement of people.

Recognising that international mobility is becoming both more commonplace and complex, this paper emphasise people’s accounts and meanings attached to mobility and migration, as well as the contextual factors, opportunities and constrains through and within which this mobility is experienced. Given the widespread use of various communications, such as cheap phone calls and the Internet, the questions of why do migrants physically travel and how their journey home is experienced continue to be significant. My aim, however, is not to undertake a systematic examination of these experiences. Rather, through the examples, I wish to develop a series of arguments about the interweaving of mobility and visits home that allow the processes of migration to gain new meanings.

Finally, there is a need for research that accounts for Polish migrants’ continuing involvement with homelands and the role that being mobile plays in their migration processes and experiences. People seem to be finding increasingly creative ways of living in more than one place at the time, and this raises some interesting questions, especially while some migrants seem to be returning home and others are successful in managing their “new fluid living patterns” (O’Reilly, 2007).

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the qualitative data collected for a PhD thesis with young Polish migrants, who arrived in England after the Enlargement of the European Union in 2004. Of the 27 interviews, 21 were with women and 6 with men. All of the interviewees had spent on average 3 to 5 years working and living in England prior to the interview. The study utilised the life story approach (Arkinson, 1998) with respect to migration. The emphasis was on eliciting personal narratives and asking the interviewees to tell their migration stories in their own words. A number of questions related to the topics of lived experience of migration, migration strategies, mobility, contact with Poland and gender were also asked. All of the interviews were conducted in Polish, with the exception of one. The selection method was based on the snowball principle and purposeful sampling. Interviews were undertaken with people found through one of the providers of adult education in the West Midlands (England) that offered ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses, and those who were willing to share their migration stories. Due to limited number of males in the sample, I tried to maximize the variance by purposively seeking male participants through further snowballing of contacts.

### SETTING THE SCENE: FROM A COACH TRIP TO LOW-COST AIR TRAVEL

As Burrell (2008) argues, the post-2004 Polish migration to the UK presents an interesting account of migrants' mobility as it is emblematic of changing understandings of “east” and “west” within the Europe. Prior to 1989, going abroad for many Poles represented a final decision, with long-term consequences and no possibility of return. But the political and socio-economic changes in Eastern and Central Europe at the beginning of the 1990s resulted in liberalisation of rules for international travel. Along with these changes, the mechanisms and patterns of mobility changed (Więckowski, 2008). As some of the research suggests (i.e., Wallace, 2002; Cyrus, 2008), the post-1989 period brought about an increase in short-term and circular mobility, particularly to Germany.

With Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, mobility and travel have been transformed yet again. Prior to the advent of low-cost air carriers, for many Poles the coach was the only accessible mean of transportation abroad. The visa restrictions in the UK also meant that some were not able to enter or re-enter Britain. The introduction of cheap air-travel, and more importantly, freedom of movement in the EU, revolutionised the way Polish migrants in England now travel.

Several participants mentioned the importance and increased use of low-cost airlines as means of transportation home:

*'I can't imagine travelling to Poland on the coach! 28 hours! Never!'*  
(Tomek)<sup>1</sup>

*'Ryanair, Wizzair, even Easyjet, if you search well, you can fly home for less than 60 pounds'* (Marcin)

Tomek's and Marcin's comments also exemplify a larger trend in Eastern European air travel and migrant mobility. As Dobruszkes (2009) suggests, the rise in the number of low-cost airlines and the west-east air routes could be as a response to the post-2004 migration need for mobility. Undoubtedly, for new Polish migrants in England, the journey home is eased by the existence of reasonably priced airlines and regular air routes.

Furthermore, as the following testimonies illustrate, even though initially for some of my participants the price of the plane ticket had been a major consideration when making decision whether to travel home or not, with more disposable incomes and longer time spent working and living in England, the price became less important:

*'I used to look for a cheapest ticket possible. Now I earn more money, the price is still important, but I can afford to fly whenever I want to. The only problem is taking time off from work'* (Anna)

*'If I want to go home, I usually will. It doesn't matter that the plane ticket is more expensive (...) Low-coast airline tickets are not that expensive anyway'*  
(Witek)

Most of the interviewees did not have a strong preference for which airline they traveled with and in most cases, it was the convenience, the geographical proximity and accessibility of the airport that played a role, both in England and Poland:

*'I travel with Ryanair, because it is the only airline that travels to Rzeszow'*  
(Iza)

*'I often have to travel to London Luton Airport because there are no flights to Warsaw from Birmingham Airport'* (Ryszard)

*'East Midlands (Airport)<sup>2</sup> has really good flight connections to where I live, but it is a nightmare to get to. I don't think you can get there by public transport, only if you have a car'* (Basia)

<sup>1</sup> The names of all participants have been changed

<sup>2</sup> Author's annotation

The examples listed in this section demonstrate, as Dobruszkes (2009) suggests with regards to new west-east European low-cost services, that some Polish migrants in England have taken advantage of the new freedom of border crossing and embraced the more flexible migration trajectories that this freedom permits. The post-2004 regular return visits home are just one aspects of this new acquired liberty. In case of the participants in this study, the idea of frequent visits home was a reoccurring theme in the interviews. Travelling home and visiting friends and family was emotionally and symbolically significant for Polish migrants. More importantly however, visits like these, gave rise to a new form of mobility based on more regular return visits home. Hence, I am using migrants’ visits home in this paper as a contextual case study for exploring wider themes around mobility and migration and offer a starting point from which to think about mobility of “new” Polish migrants in England.

#### THE RHETORICS OF TRAVELLING HOME

Migration, alongside the physical action of moving countries, is also a metaphorical and emotional journey to be travelled. In the same vein, the journey home is not just about getting from the host country to homeland. For migrants, there are distinct social practices and experiences embedded in travelling home. How might we then understand these apparent journeys home? For that matter, how can we understand the motivations, dynamics or emotions of travelling home? In this section, I explore the rhetorics of migrants’ journeys home - the rationale and the emotive elements of travelling.

##### **The rationale for travelling**

At first glance, the majority of respondents travelled back home to see their families and friends:

*‘I travel (to Poland)<sup>3</sup> because of my parents. You know, it’s important to visit the family’ (Tomasz)*

The patterns of mobility displayed by many Poles in England are intertwined with networks of kinship and appear to be playing a central role in facilitating and supporting the movement of Polish migrants home. Of course, this has been a widely recognised aspect of migration. The importance of family and kinship relations for international mobility has been well documented in a number of

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<sup>3</sup> Author’s annotation

research studies (i.e. Levitt, 2001; Sassen, 1996; Vertovec, 2002). For new Polish migrants in England, family networks in the home country indeed appear to be acting as a facilitator of their visits home. In some cases even, the act of travelling home is concentrated around sustaining these very networks:

*'It's definitely my parents who I go to visit, it's important to them that I stay in touch and visit as often as I can' (Dominka)*

The visits home are regarded as significant and demonstrate important aspects about kinship practices ordered through migration and mobility, in particular the centrality of family networks to these new patterns of mobility. Some of the interviewees suggested that if not for their families in Poland, their visits home would have not been as frequent:

*'I don't think I would fly home so often if not for my mum' (Ania)*

*'If my family lived here with me, I would probably visit Poland once a year or not all' (Witek)*

This raises interesting questions with regards to the form and dynamics of the relations through which patterns of mobility are nurtured and maintained (Vertovec, 2001). Conradson and Latham (2005) have begun to answer these kinds of questions, but in relation to young New Zealanders in London. They argue that New Zealanders' social networks assume great importance not simply because they exist, but rather because they offer a meaning for mobility. In general, migration implies absence from home. As a consequence, many of the migrants' most emotionally significant relationships are conducted across the national borders. The ability to visit home therefore assumes enhanced status. For Polish migrants in this study, mobility has a meaning because of the existence of family members and social relationships in Poland. As many of the respondents demonstrated, regular contact with relatives and friends gave form to much of the mobility they displayed. The return visits home serve to nurture and cultivate these relationships. What is more, mobility as a social movement functions not only to bring together people that live across the borders, but can also play a role in emotional terms. Migrants often rely on their networks at home for emotional and moral support. In this way, mobility and visits home have a powerful significance, expressing something crucial about kinship practices across distances, in particular about enabling migrants to access the help and support.

However, for new Polish migrants in England, the connection with Poland organised through mobility can operate on many other levels. Some of the

informants made it explicit that amongst the reasons for travelling home are also the desires to display new social status and show off the “achievements” of migration. This point came out very clearly in Marek’s narrative, as he was open to admit:

*‘Travelling home is all about money and how well you are doing in England’  
(Marek)*

Kasia’s comment very much echoes Marek’s statement about the journey home as a “successful” migrant:

*‘It’s nice to be able to come back home knowing that you are doing well in England’ (Kasia)*

Return visits home for these Poles reflect thus, to some extent, their strategies to seek a social status at home. For Marek and Kasia, being mobile is about being able to display their “wealth” accumulated in England. There are of course, differences between migrants’ wealth and standard of living in England, as well as between the meanings and values attributed to this processes of showing off the “success”. For some Poles, travelling home is about optimisation of the resources and money they earned in England. For instance, some of the respondents waited until the visits home to go to dentists, doctors or hairdressers, which is all cheaper than in England. Here, mobility is central to Polish migrants in the context of the economic power it can embody. It opens up the possibilities to decide how to manage the resources and migration experience. More importantly, however, the existence of low-cost air services has allowed migrants to travel more frequently and this movement of people is becoming increasingly important. It is not just a movement for family or kinship motivations. Polish migrants no longer see their migration choices as limited and are increasingly becoming the active agents in their migration journey.

### **The emotive elements of travelling**

A number of interesting points emerged from the discussion of emotive elements of travelling home. The first is the feeling of nostalgia that often accompanies Polish migrants on their journeys back to Poland:

*‘I don’t know...there is something about knowing you are flying back to Poland. When the plane touches the runway, you know you are home, somewhere you know well’ (Natalia)*

Migration raises challenges and questions of home and belonging. In the act of migration, as Ahmed et al. (2003) argue, home is formed in relation to movement. The construction of home therefore, is both re-made and remembered through mobility and migration. In this way, Ahmed et al. (2003) challenge the dominant tendencies to associate home with stasis and fixity, and mobility with detachment (p.1). The idea of home, for migrants like Natalia, exerts a powerful influence. In her comment, the journey home becomes idealised, revolving around deeper considerations for Poland as home. Riccio (2002) in particular argued, drawing on the example of Senegalese migrants in Italy, that the perception of the country of origin as “home” becomes more intense when migrants are highly mobile. Germann Molz (2008) further writes how mobile migrants often “find themselves living their lives at the increasingly complicated intersection between home and mobility, negotiating movement through a prism of attachment and affect while negotiating belonging through various intersecting mobilities of people, technologies, cultures, images and objects” (p. 326). In explaining her feelings while travelling to Poland, Natalia emphasizes familiarity and comfort that the idea of home conveys. For Natalia, home is not only a place, it also a feeling that she experiences while she travels home. It is the memory of place and home, the journey itself, the plane and even the act of landing that are all bound up with the processes of mobility. In this way, “home” and nostalgia for home are inseparable from migration and mobility.

The second point, exemplified in Paulina’s narrative, is that of feeling of reflection:

*‘When I travel home, I often think a lot about my decision to migrate. You know, did I make the right decision? It then becomes hard to go back to England. Knowing that in a week time I will have to leave everyone and everything I know behind all over again’ (Paulina)*

For Paulina, travelling home involves deeper consideration for migration processes and life that she left behind in Poland. Visiting home for migrants can often involve complex and sometimes sensitive sets of negotiations and practices. The following comment is especially revealing:

*‘It sometimes feels like you have no home, this travelling, because your one foot is here (in England)<sup>4</sup> and one there, in Poland. And you cannot do anything about it, because you are emotionally connected to Poland’ (Anna)*

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<sup>4</sup> Author’s annotation

For some of my informants, mobility is associated with perpetuating movement and a sense of homelessness, while some see it as normal and taken-for-granted aspect of the act of migrating. Andrzej for example, saw visiting home as unavoidable and inevitable aspect of migration. As he puts it:

*‘I got used to it (travelling to Poland)<sup>5</sup>. It has become part of my life, you know, like going home for Christmas, visiting my family’.*

In Kaplan’s research, she reflects on her own mobility and travel. Because her family lived in various countries, travel was for Kaplan ‘unavoidable...and always necessary for family, love and friendship as well as work’ (1996, p.9 in Urry, 2006). Mobility as a social and cultural movement home is therefore part of more general processes of social networks that, as I have already argued, is central to the mobility demonstrated by Polish migrants in England. As such, there are complex connections between mobility, social networks and return visits home in sustaining family connections and assisting the new mobility patterns. On the one hand, mobility for new Polish migrants in England represents choices and possibilities to manage the migration experience. It allows the continuous keeping of relationships with their country of origin, the optimisation of the economic resources and the display of new social status. On the other hand, as it emerged from Natalia’s and Paulina’s comment, this new form of mobility can entail difficult negotiations of home, identity and decision to migrate.

#### TRAVEL AS AN OBLIGATION

The return visits home may also be about the obligation. Weddings, funerals and religious occasions are examples of events where Polish migrants may feel obliged to travel home. The narratives and experiences of travel amongst the respondents reveal that travelling home is often enfolded in obligation. Przemek recalls:

*‘In a way, I feel obligated to travel back to Poland. My mum would never forgive me if I just visited once a year’.*

This obligation to travel can include, as mentioned above, familial, legal or economic commitments to attend funerals, birthday parties, christenings and weddings, just as Ania articulates:

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<sup>5</sup> Author’s annotation

*'It is sometimes difficult to go home, you know, because of the work commitments, but I often feel compelled to fly due to circumstances. Like, last year it was my aunt's funeral, this year it was my friend's wedding and in few months I have to go because my sister is having a baby.'*

The practice of travelling for funerals or christenings has a major significance. More than simply continuing and recognising the religious and cultural traditions, mobility as an obligation acts as a motivation for the maintenance of social relations.

What is more, the obligations for Polish migrants to travel home are often a result of the expectations of the migrants' family members to visit:

*'My parents expect me to visit during Christmas. During the five years I have spent in England, they only came to visit once' (Ania)*

This is consistent with studies of migration that suggest that it is the migrant, rather than those in the home country, should visit (i.e. Mason, 2004). Furthermore, as a number of scholars (i.e. Smith, 2001; Ong, 1999) have pointed, social relations ordered through mobility are different to those structured around emplacement. For some Poles in England, social relations constructed through this new form of mobility are also about duties and obligations to see families and friends. Being mobile then can assume different meaning and consequences for different migrants.

### **Constructing Polish migrants' mobility: from migration to mobility?**

Thinking about the ways in which new Polish migrants in England use return visits home and the experience of being migrants as part of their personal mobility, brings us to yet another issue. The existence and possibility of quick and low-cost travel home can potentially enable many migrants to change and transform their migration experience. For some of the respondents, having the option to fly home became an alternative to unsuccessful and unpleasant experience of migration:

*'If migrating to England doesn't work out, I am only a short plane journey away from home. It's great' (Basia)*

For Basia, the experience of mobility is about being able to travel back to Poland whenever the experience of migration becomes difficult. Mobility then may also come to take on a more complex personal significance. What is more, Basia expresses a degree of contentment at being able to quickly and

conveniently fly home, as it allows her to take a more relaxed approach to the act of migrating. Conradson and Latham (2005) argue that mobility as a strategy can be empowering, but only if it is under migrants' own control. In Basia's case, being mobile embodies autonomy and freedom to move across the borders and mediates many of the reservations associated with migration. It also reduces pressure to fully assimilate with the host country. Furthermore, this figurative proximity of Poland and England expressed in Basia's comment is very much symbolic of most of the Polish migrants' mobility and migration experience. The voluntary nature of mobility and travel home places Basia and many young Poles in England in a position of privilege and control regarding their own standards and itineraries of mobility. It is not the actual physical movement that Basia is considering, but rather the perception of mobility when desired. Mobility is then not only about the actual physical movement but also about a feeling of being in a privileged position to go home at any time of migration process and most importantly, remain flexible and mobile. In this way, this new mobility pattern is not only a very flexible migration trend but also a distinctive process structured both by the freedom of circulation within the European Union and the expansion of the low-cost air-travel. While it is clear that Poles have always constituted a highly mobile society with a long history of migration (see for example, Sword, 1989; Iglicka, 2001), the meanings of this mobility have transformed with time. While earlier patterns involved traditional understandings of migration as a linear process and permanent settlement in the host country, the nature and the frequency of this new mobility, changed with respect to the past migration waves of Poles to the UK. Mobility, in case of “new” Poles in England, is as much about having control over the migration experiences, as it is about the infrastructure channelling this movement. Indeed, Polish migrants' view and understanding of the nature of their migration is heavily inflected with the feeling of being mobile. Hence, this new mobility needs to be seen in the context of these broader individual, cultural and technological transformations.

What is more, not only is this a very flexible migration trend, it is also difficult to disentangle migration and mobility here. Many Poles came to England after the Enlargement of the EU in 2004 with no intension of settling but stayed longer than they initially planned. Most of them, if not all, go “home” for weddings, funerals, doctors, dentists and hairdressers or just to visit their families. They use the national health services in both countries, they spend holidays in Poland and come back to England to work and study. Their migration trajectories are structured by the national and EU borders, in England they are subject to laws and regulations for EEA migrants. Yet, their lives are closely bound up with Poland. This strategy enables new Polish migrants in England to turn mobility into a way of living and to construct more fluid lifestyles, which fall short of traditional understandings

of migration. In this way, it would appear then that migrants, who live their lives in mobility, understand their migration as mobility. What is more, young Polish migrants have no intention of settlement in one place. They employ, what Garapich (2006) calls “intentional unpredictability” or Moriarty et al., (2010) refer to as “deliberate indeterminacy”, the strategy of not deciding what the next step in the migration trajectories is. Many Poles utilize this approach because they do not see their choice as limited to living in one country. Indeed, some of the participants in the sample mentioned the possibility of further migrations to other countries:

*‘I don’t have set plans for the future. It changes often. Maybe I will migrate to Canada, or Australia. I’ve heard that there is a lot of Poles in Sweden, so maybe I will go there’ (Paweł)*

*‘I don’t know what my plans are. I don’t know whether I want to go back to Poland. Ask me in ten years’ (Monika)*

In case of Poles in England, being mobile allows them to make decisions based on the opportunities they encounter during their migration journey, which for some may embody the possibility of further migrations.

## CONCLUSION

The notion of mobility, developed in this article, incorporates several ideas. Firstly, I have suggested that the ways in which the journey home and the distance between England and Poland are encountered by Polish migrants, are crucial to their understandings of migration. Because of the figurative proximity between Poland and England and “when desired” nature of their movement, Polish migrants are placed in a position of privilege and control regarding their mobility. What is more, in a process a migration, the narratives of physical mobility and travel home concentrated around the ideas of keeping in contact with families and friends, obligation, optimisation of resources, means of displaying social status and wealth accumulated in the process of migration. Secondly, it can be argued that young Polish migrants in England participate in the construction of a new way of living that entails a great deal of mobility and can reasonably be interpreted as a contemporary articulation of new practices of movement in Europe. This is not to suggest that this mobility of new Polish migrants in England is a totally new phenomenon. However, its dynamics and meanings have changed substantially through time. Being mobile allows for some of the Polish migrants to successfully manage their experience of migration. In this context, mobility as migratory is as much about being in control, as it is about the infrastructures of this movement.

The low-cost airlines and freedom of circulation within the EU are central to new Polish migrants’ mobility and return visits home. Without the complex systems of cheap mass air travel, socio-economic conditions and the freedom of movement, Polish migrants’ mobility could have been utterly different.

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