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Acculturation Strategies and Work Engagement among Polish Migrant Workers in Great Britain

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Abstract

The topic of interest explored in this paper concerns the acculturation strategies employed by Polish migrant workers in the United Kingdom. The aim of the present study, conducted on 166 participants residing in Great Britain, was to identify the relationship between the recognised acculturation strategies and work engagement. The socio-professional status of Polish migrant workers is also presented in this article.

Keywords: Polish migrant workers, acculturation strategies, work engagement

Introduction

Cultural diversity is currently such a common phenomenon that it would be difficult to find a society where one culture, one language and only one identity characterise the whole population (Berry et al., 2006). Migration of people is not only characteristic of the globalised world. Human mobility conquering new lands is a commonly occurring phenomenon observed in a recorded history of mankind. However, the rapid growth of global integration has led to accelerated migration on an unprecedented scale, mainly through the flow of information, ideas, cultural patterns, institutions or modernisation of the means of transport.

Poland "still remains a country more people emigrate from, temporarily or permanently, than immigrate to" (Bera, 2008, p.29), migration has intensified

particularly after changes in the political system. This was associated primarily with the economic causes, but also with the liberalisation of passport policies and the emerging possibilities of living abroad. In 2004, after Polish accession to the European Union (EU), there was an even greater increase in emigration for employment purposes, especially to Great Britain and Northern Ireland – countries that fully opened their borders and labour markets to new members of the EU.

This paper presents the results of a study conducted on a group of Polish migrant workers residing in the United Kingdom. The aim of the presented research was to recognise the acculturation strategies employed by the migrant workers from Poland and to identify the correlation between the assessed strategies and the specific professional activities of the subjects. Another important endeavour of the study was to present selected aspects of life and work of Polish migrant workers living in Great Britain.

The Concept and Nature of Acculturation

Prolonged contact of people belonging to different cultural contexts is now very common, and many reasons for this occurrence have been recognized. Berry (1997) identifies three main factors as the reasons why people with different cultural backgrounds – different cultural groups – currently occupy the same space: voluntariness, mobility and permanence.

Due to changes in a familiar cultural context, prolonged contact with the unknown culture and the necessity to adapt to prevailing rules, many individuals develop a sense of inadequacy, disorientation, fear and confusion, often called a “culture shock” or “transition shock” (Kim, 2002).

Berry (2001), however, introduces the concept of “acculturative stress”. He states that the word “shock” has only negative connotations, which highlights mainly negative effects of the process. On the contrary, acculturation, in his understanding, may result in both good and bad adaptation of the individual. The individual deals with emerging problems by engaging in specific coping strategies, which in Berry’s acculturation model have been called acculturation strategies. The term “acculturative” emphasizes that the source of stressors lies in the interaction, contact between cultures, in contrast to the term “culture”, which could suggest a relationship with only one single culture.

In principle, each culture could equally affect another culture. However, it usually happens in practice that one culture is predominant in its influence on

another culture. Researchers have developed many models of acculturation, which can be categorized in two main groups: unidimensional models and multidimensional models. Acculturation in terms of the unidimensional models, also called unidirectional models, is a linear process, which involves a move from one cultural context to another one, with the understanding that over time it will result in assimilation (Flannery et al., 2001).

Bidimensional models of acculturation, including Berry's model as a prominent example, assume that this process runs in parallel relationship with both new and old cultural contexts. The existence of these two dimensions resulted in determining four possible types of acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. Belonging to one culture does not exclude being connected to another culture. Some individuals after being exposed to a new culture can benefit from the repertoire of behaviours characteristic of both of the cultures, which would explain the phenomenon of cultural diversity of modern societies.

Acculturation Strategies

When an individual is interested in cultivation of the culture of the country of origin and seeking daily interactions with representatives of a new culture, we are dealing with the strategy of integration. An individual choosing this strategy highly values both the original culture and the culture of the host country.

We can talk about assimilation when individuals are not interested in maintaining their own cultural identity, but they want to fully connect to the dominant culture of the host country through everyday interactions with its representatives. People employing this strategy wish to be fully absorbed by the culture of the host country.

The opposite of this strategy is the strategy of separation, in which individuals consider preservation of their original cultural identity as essential and wish to avoid interactions with people of another culture.

The most extreme acculturation strategy is the strategy of marginalisation, which occurs when an individual has little possibility of or interest in maintaining their native culture (often as a result of enforced culture renunciation or considering it as of too little value) and does not express any interest in participating in the life of the inhabitants in the country of settlement, or in the case when they did not manage to establish contact with the hosts. This situation often results in a sense of alienation, "often leading to mental disorders and predisposing criminogenic behaviours" (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2000).

Acculturation studies (Berry, 1997) suggest that acculturation strategies have a substantial relationship with processes of adaptation. Integration usually affects adaptation most favourably, marginalisation is the least favourable, whereas assimilation and separation are somewhere in between. As noted by Berry (1997, p.24) “this pattern has been found in virtually every study, and is present for all types of acculturating groups”.

Problem

Analysis of the literature on acculturation research indicates that the adopted strategy in this area significantly affects the lives of immigrants in the country in which they choose to settle. Because a chosen strategy highlights the individual's attitude toward the new as well as the native culture, it affects their functioning in many areas of life in the host country, particularly in the area of professional activity.

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the acculturation strategy pursued by migrant workers and their work engagement.

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant positive correlation between the strategies of integration and assimilation chosen by the immigrants and engagement in their work.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant negative correlation between separation and marginalisation strategies and work engagement.

An important objective of this study was also an attempt to present selected contexts of the socio-economic situation of the subjects, which appears to be essential for a better understanding and interpretation of the nature of their working life.

In this paper, the concept of work engagement proposed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) was utilised. They define it as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind, characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Vigor is characterised by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, as well as the readiness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties in detaching oneself from work“ (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003, pp.4–5). Utrecht Work Engagement Scale –

UWES (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003; Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007a, b) was used in this research.

Method

Participants

The study involved Polish migrant workers residing in Great Britain. In total there were 216 participants, of whom 59% were female. Data were collected via the Internet, by means of social networking sites (www.nasza-klasa.pl and www.facebook.com), email and postal mail.

The majority of the respondents (57.6%) fit within the age range 25–30 years, 16.9% are aged 18–24 years and 18.9% in the range of 31–40 years. The smallest age group (6.6%) included persons over 50 years of age.

Measures

1. Personal Questionnaire

In order to understand and present the quality of living and working of Polish immigrants in Britain, a personal questionnaire was constructed. It is composed of three parts: 1. Personal data, 2. Move from Poland to Great Britain, and 3. Life and work in Britain.

2. Acculturation Strategy Questionnaire

The Acculturation Strategy Questionnaire is a measure created by the authors of this article. It contains 21 closed-ended questions covering various areas of life concerning both attitudes (e.g. I would like my neighbours to be...) and behaviours of immigrants (e.g. I obtain information about what is happening in the world from...) toward the dominant society. The task of the subjects is to complete the presented sentences with one of four possible answers, of which each corresponds to a strategy of acculturation (integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation).

3. Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), by Bakker and Schaufeli, is a self-report questionnaire, containing a total of 17 items. The task of the subjects is to respond to 17 presented statements using a seven-point Likert scale (from 0 – “never”, to 6 – “always / every day”). The indicator of work engagement is the average of the points that the subject allocated to each statement. The UWES

measure is based on three dimensions of commitment to work – vigor, dedication and absorption. Factor analysis of the questionnaire revealed that the three-factor structure is superior to the one-factor model, however all the three dimensions are closely linked. The scale shows cross-national invariance, good internal consistency and stability across time (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003).

Results

Socio-demographic Portrait of a Polish Migrant Worker

A total of 216 people participated in this study. The vast majority (96.6%) of the subjects have Polish citizenship, and only 3.4% of the respondents have dual Polish-British nationality.

In terms of marital status, unmarried persons predominate in the study group (47.8%), followed by married women and married men (30.7%), and a smaller group of people cohabiting (21.5%). Among those who declared having a life partner, the largest group (80.8%) is in a relationship with a person of Polish descent, 12% of the respondents have a British partner and 7.2% other nationalities.

Most participants (73.2%) declared to have a learned profession. The most numerous professional groups in the study population consist of specialists in education (21.3%), economists and management specialists (18.7%), health professionals (15.6%), office staff and sales representatives (15.8), whereas very few operators and assemblers of machinery and equipment, personal and protection services, and other industrial workers and craftsmen (1.6%) took part in the study.

Most respondents (66.5%) worked in Poland before moving to Britain, but it is important to note that a large group (56.7%) did not work in their learned profession.

Most of the respondents (69.5%) declared that they had emigrated 2 years before. The fewest number of the participants (4.6%) had lived abroad for less than 6 months.

The most commonly stated reasons that had made the subjects leave the country were: willingness to gain new experiences, curiosity or a desire to develop, a desire to get a better job and the need for a higher salary. It is important to notice that the major role in making the decision about emigration was played by the “pull” and not the “push” factors. Dissatisfaction with the situation in Poland is shown in only 1.9% of all the responses.

The majority (88%) of the subjects that had emigrated with the intent to stay in the UK permanently still maintained their decision, while only 12% had changed their minds and intended to return to Poland. Among those who had originally declared a desire to stay in the UK temporarily, a half (51.1%) still upheld this decision, while 28.7% said they thought about residing in Britain permanently. The decision to settle permanently in Britain, despite earlier intentions to return or no definite plans, can be caused by many different factors, such as starting a family or professional success in current employment.

However, regardless of the declarations of plans to remain in Britain permanently, the majority of the respondents (44.7%) stated they did not intend to apply for British citizenship, a third of the respondents (33.9%) had not yet taken a decision on the matter, and 21.4% of the people wanted to become citizens of the United Kingdom.

Almost all the respondents (97.6%) admitted that they kept in touch (via telephone, letter, email, etc.) with relatives in Poland, and the majority (97.2%) regularly visited the country. Nearly half of the respondents (48.2%) did so with the frequency of 1 to 6 months, 39.3% with the frequency of 6 to 12 months, and 10.8% not more frequently than once every two years or longer. Only 1.7% of the participants said they visited their relatives more frequently than once a month.

Most respondents (49.3%) made the decision to emigrate on their own, 35.8% decided to go to the UK in the company of friends, 12.1% of the people emigrated with their families, while 2.8% of the respondents travelled with other Poles who were to be employed in the same place.

Most subjects had some knowledge of the English language upon departure – 37.9% of the respondents claimed that their level of English was intermediate, 29.8% basic and 23.8% considered their English language skills as advanced. Only 8.5% of the respondents said they had decided to emigrate without any knowledge of English. Currently, 66.9% speak English at an advanced level, 31.7% at an intermediate level, and only 1.4% of the respondents still do not speak the language at all.

The vast majority of the Polish migrants participating in the study (88.6%) support themselves by working. Only 6% said that they were financially supported by their partners and 4.8% had been granted a University scholarship. Only 2.4% of the respondents receive social welfare.

The financial situation of the respondents in most cases is considered by them as good or average. The economic circumstances are related to housing conditions. Most respondents (45.2%) rent an apartment, a little fewer rent a house (23.2%) or

only a room (31.6%). None of the subjects is homeless or resides in an institution (e.g., nursing home, homeless shelter, church, etc.).

The majority of the participants in our study are currently employed (89.8%), some of the respondents (22.3%) are studying, and 5% are looking for a job (unemployed, or those who intend to change their current employer). Only 2% of our subjects are not working or looking for jobs, because they are taking care of the household or looking after children. The largest group of the studied Poles are employed in services, the security sector and simple jobs (11.4% in each sector). The smallest group consists of precision manufacturing workers and other industrial workers and craftsmen.

Almost all the respondent Poles (94.9%) have a National Insurance Number, which means that they can be legally employed in the United Kingdom, 78.6% are also registered with a local family doctor, which may indicate that they are getting used to life in Britain.

Verification of Hypotheses

The most strongly represented strategy in the sample of the Polish migrant workers was the strategy of integration ($M=0.63$, $SD=0.15$), then the strategies of assimilation ($M=0.15$, $SD=0.12$) and separation ($M=0.19$, $SD=0.14$), while the strategy of marginalisation was practically not recognized ($M=0.09$, $SD=0.06$).

The surveyed Poles are engaged in their work at the average level. The UWES average (on a 7-point scale) for all the employed subjects was $M=3.74$, $SD=1.22$.

Analysis of the correlation coefficient of *r*-Pearson (two-tailed significance) showed that there was no statistically significant association between work engagement and the strategy of integration and marginalisation. Statistically significant, although rather weak, are the relationships between work engagement and the strategy of separation and assimilation. In the case of the latter, there is a positive correlation, at $r = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$, whereas for the strategy of separation, a negative correlation of $r = - 0.31$, $p < 0.01$ was found.

Analysis of the data did not allow for the acceptance of the hypotheses suggesting the relationship between the acculturation strategies and work engagement. These results suggest that the migrant workers' attitudes to the culture of the country where they live and work do not translate directly into their engagement in work.

Discussion

A great majority of the Polish emigrants participating in this study pursued the strategy of integration. It seems that the very important factor which contributed to this result is the specificity of the sample. The tests were not carried out in Great Britain among randomly selected individuals. The respondents were obtained through the Internet and via a network of acquaintances. It should be assumed that the research sample consists mostly of people whose financial situation allows them to use the Internet at home or an internet café. These are also mostly working people or individuals with a stable economic situation. In their spare time they could (and wanted to) devote their time to participating in the study. Perhaps those who are in a difficult situation, such as the homeless or unemployed looking for work in the UK, would not find the time for the use of social media, which contains information about the study, or to complete a questionnaire. Thus, the participants in our study are mainly those who have been relatively successful in the UK, they have found a job or stabilised their financial situation. Since the integration strategy is considered to be the most beneficial, it can be assumed that the people who are adapted well to the new conditions – have found employment and housing, and did not end up on the street or return to Poland after a defeat – pursue mostly this specific strategy.

Another reason for the domination of the integration strategy may be the fact that while allowing for best adaptation it facilitates the individuals who apply it to remain in the host country, whereas those using other strategies – individuals not fully adapted and not satisfied with the life as immigrant – more often choose to return to the country of origin. One more explanation of this state of affairs may be that the cultural distance between Poland and the UK is not significant. Therefore, the Poles residing in Britain do not find it difficult to adapt to the culture of the dominant society, while preserving the customs, habits, attitudes or behaviours characteristic of Polish culture.

Yet another cause of the predominance of the strategy of integration may be the fact that people who voluntarily choose to emigrate are highly flexible. They can quickly adapt to changing conditions and combine the elements of their own culture with the elements of the culture of the country of settlement. It seems that the strategy of marginalisation or separation could be observed more often in the group of refugees and displaced people, rather than in voluntary emigrants.

The last reason for such a large difference between the strategy of integration and other strategies may be the fact that the policy of Great Britain is in principle a policy promoting multiculturalism. London, where the majority of the respond-

ents reside, is recognized worldwide as a place where many cultures meet. Therefore, while trying to settle in a society in which the ideology of multiculturalism is so highly regarded, individuals will most likely choose the integration strategy as it can provide the best adaptation to the new society.

The analyses did not confirm the assumed relationship between the acculturation strategies of the Polish migrant workers and their work engagement. While interpreting these results it is worth considering two important aspects – the specificity of the professional situation of the Poles and the results of earlier studies, such as the one conducted by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003).

With regards to the first aspect, it appears to be of importance that the majority of the Polish migrant workers carry out jobs not related to their learned profession. They do menial jobs, not very attractive, not very challenging, and not allowing for rapid development or fulfilment. Clear discrepancies between the respondents' learned professions and their occupations in the UK can be seen. This could be the reason why the subjects do not exhibit particular engagement in their current work. This interpretation corresponds to the findings reported by other researchers, who suggest that work engagement is significantly related to labour resources, such as social support from colleagues and superiors, positive feedback on professional achievements, autonomy at work, task variety, possibility of development (Schaufeli, Bakker, 2003), as well as coaching and a positive atmosphere in the workplace (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008, 2009). The more such resources appear in the organisation, the greater the likelihood of work engagement in employees. Bakker and Van Dieren Euwemy, in their longitudinal study, also indicate labour resources as the determinants of work engagement (Schaufeli, Salanova, 2007). Within two years it was observed that the support from co-workers and autonomy at work increased the employees' work engagement the most. The obtained results correspond to the Job Characteristics Theory, developed by Hackman and Oldham, which says that some job characteristics such as task variety, autonomy and performance feedback contribute to the development of internal motivation of employees, which is close to the concept of work engagement (Schaufeli, Salanova, 2007).

As emphasized by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003), in most studies conducted on acculturation, the integration strategy is the most commonly and marginalisation the least commonly chosen strategy, which is consistent with the results of the present research.

Nonetheless, in order to obtain a true picture of the population of Polish migrant workers in the UK it would be necessary to include those whose life abroad was less successful. Without considering the situation of less successful emigrants, the

image of Polish migrant workers and their usage of acculturation strategies is not complete. The present results encourage further exploration of this important and current problem.

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