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'Not Fit for Migration with Teenage Children': Polish Transnational Immigrant Families in Ireland

Beata Sokolowska

Introduction

Examining the intergenerational relationships of transnational families in general and Polish separated/reunited families in Ireland in particular, is important for a number of reasons. First, Poles have formed a visible community in Ireland—about 116,000 Poles (Census 2016) with Polish shops, a Polish and Irish annual festival, and the Polish language identified as the most popular language in Ireland after English (Census 2016). Second, up-to-date research describes the migratory inflow of Poles to Ireland through the prism of a younger cohort of generally well-educated people (Bobek 2011; Mühlau 2012; Salamonska 2013), and little is therefore known about Polish transnational families in Ireland. Third, easy access to modern technologies means that immigrants can maintain important relationships with extended families in real time, so they are

B. Sokolowska (✉)
Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

not detached from heritage and kin; consequently, they are not pressured to acculturate speedily. Finally, many Polish parents uproot their children unexpectedly and settle in Ireland.

Drawing on a qualitative panel study with parents and their teenage children (LASPIT[1]), this sociological inquiry into the intergenerational dynamics of Polish transnational families examines how the migratory decisions and reunifications with loved ones left behind were enacted, and how they were re-defined and re-organized once impinged by unforeseen factors. The research initially involved a literature review, followed by the employment of qualitative, multi-actor longitudinal (panel) study with reflexivity as a research method.

This chapter brings to light exclusive data highlighting sacrifices from the parents' perspective, painting a disturbing picture of the issue of uprooting and drawing attention to the precarious circumstances of single mothers. Apart from explaining why parents in the LASPIT sample were, in my view, not 'fit' for migration with their teenage children, it also examines how increased accessibility to technology facilitates transnational families in maintaining their ties and how migration sometimes provides a unique opportunity for dissolving family ties.

The next section introduces the LASPIT research and situates the study within the economic context of contemporary global migration, providing a sociological perspective on Polish transnational families in Ireland. The 'Theoretical Background' section offers a broad contemporary perspective on migration phenomenology in the literature. The 'Methodology' section provides an outline of the research methodology underpinning this chapter, followed by the LASPIT findings describing intergenerational relations dynamics posed by the migratory experience. The final section concludes by reflecting on thought-provoking insights into Polish transnational families' lives and identifies the study's implications.

The chapter centres on Polish émigré parents' perspectives, as those of teenagers are captured in another publication (see Sokolowska 2016). While they have an Irish context, the findings are likely to be of interest to other countries because of the multifaceted social interconnectedness of transnational families' experiences in the context of globalization.

Theoretical Background

Migration from Poland after the 2004 EU enlargement has been heralded as one of the most spectacular and unprecedented population movements in contemporary European history, because over a relatively short period, the UK and Ireland attracted tens of thousands of Poles. Legal access to employment within the EU, flexibility, and mobility (Fitzgerald 2013; Wickham 2013), a strong reliance on modern information technology (IT), and cheap transport have characterized this.

It is argued that immigrants entering a new social space have neither the knowledge nor competences of natives (Bourdieu 1996; Lefebvre 1991), yet are positioned on the existing social hierarchy occupied by other migrant cultures (Reed-Danahay 2010; Wickham 2013). While immigrants move through geographical space and the symbolic space characterized by the clear distinction of 'before' and 'after' (Saldana 2003), they carry their cultural, shared repertoire of meanings, creating their distinctive cultural intimacy (Reed-Danahay 2010).

Concomitantly, acculturating immigrants learn their new cultural repertoire within relational and hierarchical social realms (King-O'Riain 2006). This learning process involves both immigrants and natives in a relational process that is not necessarily linear or rational (Bragg and Manchester 2011), offering intercultural dialogue between different cultures. Such a conceptualization of interculturalism provides a useful framework for exploring the intercultural adaptation of Polish transnational families.

Contemporary researchers have renewed their interest in the sociocultural adaptation broadened by the interculturalism of globalization (Alam 2013; Sakamoto 2007). For this reason, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological paradigm, which acknowledges the dynamics of processes within nested contexts studied in natural settings, adequately catered for the needs of the LASPIT research. Given this, the study encompasses the following elements: process (acculturation, defined as second-culture acquisition—see Rudmin 2009); persons (Polish parents and their teenage children); context (intercultural Ireland); and time (the retrospective and temporal dimensions of experience). This allows for the examination of migratory arrangements from gender perspectives, the psychological impact of

migratory decisions, separation from loved ones, family reunifications, and challenges around settling down with teenage children.

As intercultural adaptation is based on the cultural identity concept at a higher level of social, psychological, and cultural integration (Adler 2002), it encompasses active engagement in various social activities in the host country. Therefore, serious questions require answers, such as how the migratory decisions, childcare provisions, and reunification with loved ones are enacted and affect family dynamics.

Why do Polish immigrant families in Ireland constitute an interesting case study for transnational migratory research? First, Ireland and particularly the Greater Dublin area became destinations for Polish immigrants after the 2004 EU enlargement (Bobek 2011; Wickham 2013). Second, empirical evidence suggests that while the members of each household take migratory decisions individually, migratory strategies for the family as a unit are exercised collectively, with particular focus on child welfare (Burrell 2009; Kempny 2010; White 2011). Third, every household has its combination of assets and liabilities and goes through its own process of discussing and formulating a migration strategy (White 2009; Sokolowska 2014). The typical post-accession migration scenario of Polish families starts with the emigration journey undertaken by one member. While before the EU enlargement the outflow from Poland was disproportionately male (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2009), this new migration is not exclusive to one gender (Czarnecka 2012; Mühlau 2012; Slany 2008). Fourth, migratory arrangements for families with children involve more planning arrangements than those of single grown-up free-movers, particularly for single-mothers.

Migration also creates changes within the structure of the family, influencing gender roles and family dynamics (Urbańska 2009). Therefore, I have hypothesized that, prior to becoming transnational migrants, Polish parents carefully planned, re-thought various aspects of leaving behind loved ones, and sought information concerning settling abroad with their teenage children. The LASPIT dataset, however, points out that migratory plans and strategies are changeable and often unplanned.

On top of this, my sample comprised an atypical cohort of Polish parents[2] aged mid-40s to mid-50s, with different levels of social, economic, and cultural capital, and who, as inexperienced migrants often unfamiliar

with Irish culture, availed of the 2004 EU enlargement and became transnational migrants. Given that they grew up under the Communist regime, which significantly affected their English language competency, the majority had no or very basic English upon arrival in Ireland.

As will be illustrated in this chapter, their age, low English-language competency, and lack of partaking in the intercultural adaptation of linguistically and culturally different contexts positioned the vast majority as not 'fit' for migration with teenage children. I will explain why Polish émigré parents have not fully embraced 'the new' and 'chosen' to stay in their 'comfort zones', meaning at the practical level the cultivation of Polishness[3] in all dimensions, posing serious implications for a child's agency.

Methodology

This sociological enquiry into the intergenerational relationships of Polish transnational separated/reunited families draws on the qualitative data and participant observation in natural settings obtained during exploratory longitudinal research in Ireland. Based on a qualitative multi-actor design, it comprised 87 qualitative interviews with 34 Polish immigrant teenagers and their parent(s) over 2 years.

Qualitative research gains insights into respondents' perceptions and attitudes, helping the researcher to enter the private worlds of interviewees in a way they feel comfortable with (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Moreover, each interview constituted an individual case study, recognized as a serious research method that 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' (Yin 1984), treating 'the object (case) as a whole' (Verschuren 2013).

A qualitative longitudinal panel research was employed to construct 'contextualized snapshots of processes and people' (Farrell 2006) and the LASPIT was enmeshed in the transnationalism of Polish families and their attitudes, motives, and choices framing their migratory experience. Through attention to context and time (Henwood and Lang 2003; Holland et al. 2006), it brought the interplay of the ways in which migration is constructed across diverse time points to the fore (Millar 2007).

The research incorporates a combination of open and standardized data collections, developed using qualitative approaches (namely face-to-face qualitative interviews). It also incorporates intercultural angle to micro-level analysis, which reflects acculturation multidimensionality.

Consequently, this chapter captures multifarious perspectives about the experiences of selected Polish families in Ireland, bringing to light the life portraits of transnational families, giving voice to 'the uniqueness and complexity of each evolving immigrant's story, aspects that tend to become muted in the more typical aggregated quantitative analysis' (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008).

Main Findings

While discussing their migratory decisions, Polish émigré parents in the Grater Dublin Area explicitly referred to their economic vulnerability and personal situation in their local contexts, outlining the complex and multidimensional rationale behind the migratory decision in the family context. The cost of living and problems with permanent and well-paid employment in Poland were the factors mentioned most often that prompted the migratory decisions:

> Insecurity and day-to-day struggle take up all your energy… You worry constantly… how long you can live like this? (Monika, aged 36)[4]

Polish parents in my sample made suitable arrangements for their loved ones in Poland and joined the influx to Ireland. Many spent their first nights at Dublin airport before moving into cramped shared rooms, usually with one mattress and the golden rule that if anyone wanted to roll over everybody had to do it simultaneously: 'we were like sardines in a tin' (Malwina, aged 42). No proficiency in English resulted in downward mobility: 'I knew that without the language, it'll be difficult… I overestimated myself' (Daniel, aged 42). The degradation in social status in Ireland was a bitter discovery for many well-educated parents in the LASPIT sample. For example, Anna holds two Master's degrees: one in Mathematics and one in Physics. Working as a Mathematician in the

Polish secondary school, she enjoyed the high social status but relatively low income:

> [*In Ireland*]… I found a job as a cleaner […] I would love to teach again but first I've to acquire English. (Anna, aged 49)

The findings indicate that emotional, not economic, reasons triggered family reunification. All interviewees asserted that they were missing each other and the separation was often unbearable for them and their children:

> I left my daughter in the care of my relatives but at that time… I… I'd not realised, I was not aware how difficult it was to be separated. (Gertruda, aged 52)

Moreover, migratory separation seems to induce greater involvement in daily household chores and problem solving:

> My reaction to the fact that he went first [*to Ireland*] was OK, so now I'm the one who orders and gives commands!… I had to re-furnish my life. I suddenly had so many duties, so many things to worry about that I was too tired to go anywhere during the weekend or in the evening. (Mieczysława, aged 45)

Mieczysława illustrates the emotional and practical challenges of migratory separation. Many parents only realized how hard it is to be parted when one spouse migrated first. The psychological effect, the loneliness, and odd feelings that, despite the remittances, 'there is so much on your plate' (Jolanta, aged 52) often overshadowed the positive aspects of migratory decisions.

To reiterate, Polish parents along with thousands of other Poles availed of migratory routes and sacrificed a lot to change their lives, and most importantly those of their children. Furthermore, post-accession migration from Poland triggered the movement of pioneering females who made suitable arrangements allowing later family reunification in the host country (see Table 13.1).

Table 13.1 Visible feminization of the new migration in the LASPIT sample[a]

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Marital status upon migration	Controls household decisions	Migratory initiator
Jolanta	F	52	Tertiary	Divorced	Yes	Yes
Tekla	F	50	Secondary	Married	No	Yes
Monika	F	36	Tertiary	Separated	Yes	Yes
Gienia	F	40	Secondary	Single	Yes	Yes
Żaneta	F	38	Tertiary	Married	Yes	No
Elwira	F	38	Tertiary	Married	No	No
Gertruda	F	52	Secondary	Single	Yes	Yes
Karina	F	38	Tertiary	Married	Yes	No
Beata	F	35	Tertiary	Married	Yes	Yes
Anna	F	42	Tertiary	Separated	Yes	Yes
Rozalia	F	39	Tertiary	Married	No	No
Antonia	F	45	Tertiary	Married	No	No
Franciszka	F	42	Secondary	Married	Yes	No
Ksenia	F	44	Tertiary	Married	Yes	No
Łucja	F	39	Tertiary	Married	No	Yes
Alicja	F	35	Tertiary	Married	No	Yes
Malwina	F	42	Tertiary	Married	Yes	Yes
Milena	F	42	Secondary	Married	No	Yes
Mieczysława	F	45	Tertiary	Married	No	Yes
Jadwiga	F	40	Secondary	Married	No	No
Elżbieta	F	50	Tertiary	Married	Yes	Yes
Bożena	F	40	Secondary	Married	No	Yes
Salomea	F	40	Tertiary	Married	No	No
Zofia	F	39	Tertiary	Single	Yes	Yes

Source: LASPIT

[a]The LASPIT sample comprises men and women. However as presented in the table above, the number of women who initiated migration was bigger than those who followed their husbands to Ireland

My sample is not representative—its findings are inclusive of transnational families but confined to Polish respondents interviewed during the course of the study. However, visible female migration has emerged even in such a small sample:

My husband decided to stay but I liked to move on and change the way we lived in Poland. It was difficult at the beginning but it's the past now. (Elżbieta, aged 50)

Female outward migration changed the delicate balance of Polish households characterized by patriarchy, where traditional gender roles make the woman responsible for the household's good domestic atmosphere (Nagel 2003; Siara 2009), notwithstanding full-time employment (Titkow 2007). These multitasking roles are very demanding in Poland, where the linguistic barrier is non-existent and mothers are generally employed according to experience and qualifications. In the transnational context, performing motherhood at a distance with children in Poland positions émigré mothers on challenging pathways, causing disjunction and incompatibility for mother-role performances between the country of origin and the destination (Pustulka 2012).

Despite Polish cultural norms and pejorative social perceptions, the data from my study (see Table 13.1) also imply that females often initiated migratory movements that sometimes provided unique opportunities to dissolve family ties. Alicja, aged 35, split up with her husband, and being left 'high and dry' she felt she could use the distance as the perfect excuse for being uncontactable. Monika, aged 36, a separated mother of two boys, used a similar strategy, her operationalizing transnationalism framed by dissolving unwanted contacts and maintaining only those with her family and closest friends. Anna, aged 42, escaped an abusive marriage. Her approach was also very selective, keeping in touch with her children and extended family only. Likewise, Elżbieta, aged 50, used migration to 'move on' without her husband. All these made informed decisions, 'seizing the migratory opportunity' allowing them to start afresh. This new migratory model bears many consequences, particularly for single mothers who opted to move abroad.

Single mothers constitute a special case here. White (2009) argues that their migration constitutes a somewhat separate category, as they have only one disposable income and rely on themselves alone in any strategic decision making. All single parents interviewed reported that child welfare was paramount prior to migration, during emigration, and after reunification. All indicated that leaving their offspring behind was one of the most difficult decisions of their lives: 'It was very, very hard…' (Łucja, aged 39).

Many lone parents recalled that they felt pangs of conscience and were aware that their decision to leave their children behind was often judged

harshly, as Polish society does not look favourably on 'Euro-orphans'[5] (Conolly 2015; Kawecki et al. 2012; Pustulka 2012).

Prior to migration, all single mothers interviewed ensured that their offspring had good quality childcare while planning for short-term separation. The data show that the separation period was longer than initially envisaged. Let us examine Zofia's case.

Zofia, aged 39, arrived in the summer, planning to reunite with her daughter in the autumn:

> It was my plan but the reality was different. I didn't get a job… so my daughter […] arrived in Ireland next summer […] I couldn't get a job because I had no previous working experience in Ireland.

This echoes many other narratives delineating the lack of language fluency and working experience as the main barriers to occupational mobility in Ireland. Despite various obstacles, Polish émigré parents moved 'heaven and earth' to be reunited because the price paid for the separation was often unbearable. Zofia admitted:

> It was very stressful to be so far away and without a job… The isolation, the distance… I was missing my daughter so much… I often cried at night.

Furthermore, it came to light that many parents in my sample were also caring for ageing parents. This double role was very demanding in Poland. In the transnational context, and despite access to technology, it was simply not possible to perform both duties due to the geographical distance. Zofia stated:

> As soon as my daughter finishes her education here, I'll return to Poland. I've a flat there and my Mother who requires more help with every year… I cry a lot because I feel so guilty about it… She is my Mother. On the other hand, I have my daughter and all this [*migration*] is for her. I want for her a much better life so she doesn't have to struggle as I did… but I'm torn… torn emotionally between her and my Mother.

Zofia has been torn by her duties and responsibilities towards her elderly mother and towards her daughter who has nobody else. Zofia also touches

on the issue of return migration. It is clear that, because of the parental concerns of re-uprooting already once-uprooted children, the option of returning to Poland is simply 'not on the cards' until completing secondary and/or tertiary education.

The emotional cost of uprooting teenage children took parents by surprise and exacerbated family reunification. More importantly, the LASPIT findings showed that Polish immigrant teenagers in Ireland lost precious friendships in Poland and were not always welcomed in Ireland, some even being marginalized and bullied. On top of this, they arrived with no or only basic English and had to follow the Irish curriculum focused on the Junior and Leaving Certificate exams. In this crucial time, they could not count on their parents who did not have enough English to help with their homework and no time as they were often between shifts or two low-paid jobs. Largely, those teenage children were left 'high and dry' in the 'sink or swim' competitive secondary-schooling context (Sokolowska 2016).

Zofia's narrative also highlights the importance of maintaining family ties that facilitate the cultivation of Polishness and form part of the 'comfort zone.' Arguably, the strength of those ties and communication channels depends on each family. Poles are traditionally known for maintaining strong ties and thus it is imperative to keep in touch with their homeland via modern technologies:

> Cheap calls to Poland are great. My daughter uses the computer, but you know I am too old for this stuff. (Kajetan, aged 52)

Tymoteusz, aged 49, also emphasized the importance of maintaining family ties: 'I sometimes called home and naturally we always met for Christmas, but the internet was my main means of keeping in touch.' The internet, social media, and Skype form part of the Polish transnational immigrants' everyday life experiences:

> My husband arrived first… We used Skype on a daily basis… I was grateful for our daily contacts but it also made me sad. Every time it was time to say 'good night' I was almost crying. This is why we joined my husband a few months later. (Milena, aged 42)

Drawing on Polish émigré parents' narratives, it is clear that many spouses did not initially plan on moving to Ireland, but as the separation took its toll arrangements were questioned, leading to prioritizing family reunification. Thus, it is argued that modern technologies are very helpful in maintaining transnational family ties, yet are not able to bridge the emotional gap derived from the geographical distance.

Overall, Polish émigré parents put a lot of effort into performing parenthood at a distance via modern communication technologies. Sadly, very few 'émigré parents to be' used the internet to find out about the implications of uprooting and settling abroad with teenage children.

The exploration of the interaction between members of different generations in the context of Polish transnational families (based on the LASPIT sample) reveals that, despite being first-generation immigrants, Polish immigrant teenagers acquired the language and familiarized themselves with the mainstream culture. By contrast, their parents 'chose' to stay in their 'comfort zones', which at the practical level means the cultivation of Polishness in all its dimensions (Sokolowska 2014).

Additionally, the majority of parents were unable to support their teenage children pedagogically:

> My daughter cried a lot. She cried every day and we cried with her… We cried because we couldn't help her with her homework because we didn't speak English. We cried because she was so sad and so unhappy, and because we felt so helpless and frustrated. (Maciej, aged 47)

Many others were unable to actively participate in parent–teacher meetings and other extra-curricular activities simply because they lacked English:

> My girls will be fine, I kept saying to myself, but you know the reality— without language, I couldn't even help them with homework: they cried, I cried… I can barely speak English now… For this reason, I couldn't attend meetings at my daughters' school. (Bożena, aged 40)

Polish parents often feel conscience-stricken because, in general, they uprooted their children but failed to provide adequate pedagogical support as they may have done in Poland. As a result, the duty to acquire

English and the burden of translating or writing all official correspondence between parents and numerous institutions has been on teenagers. Consequently, the teenagers are now bridging the gap between the Polish and Irish cultures, enabling their parents, who despite some progress in attaining English are often illiterate, to function within the Irish social structures.

Thus, despite various parental sacrifices, in my view Polish teenage children were disadvantaged because they could not count on parental support at this crucial time of their lives. Arguably, this may have an impact on their future opportunities, particularly in terms of accessing higher education in Ireland.

Conclusion

For Poles who considered migration during the 'Celtic Tiger' era, Ireland provided an opportunity to live an economically improved life under the Euro citizen status umbrella. More importantly, transnational migration empowers women because they can literally free themselves from specific gender-related cultural norms (Ahmed 2006). Sadly, female migration with children is still viewed as an unacceptable strategy (Kawecki et al. 2012; Sokolowska 2014; White 2011).

Analyses of case studies and migratory stories through discursive and topical analysis show that the integrity of marriage and family as a unit was tested to the limit by the migratory experience. Maintaining family connectedness has proven to be emotionally challenging for transnational migrants. The absence of loved ones created a void that proved very difficult to fill, even by using modern technologies. Family ties were exacerbated by separation, which was particularly visible in single mothers caring for both their children and ageing parent(s). However, as evidenced, migration sometimes provides a unique opportunity for dissolving family ties.

Critical reflection on the intergenerational dynamic of Polish transnational families reveals an interesting dichotomy. Polish immigrant teenagers, 'forced' to follow their parents and leave their lives behind, acquired English and learned to navigate intercultural Ireland, contrary to their

parents who, despite various sacrifices, stay in their 'comfort zones'. As a result, the roles have reversed as immigrant teenage children took on the burden of some parental duties.

As shown, parents were not able to support their children pedagogically, proving to be the 'birds of passage haunted by the dreams of return' (Portes 2004), torn between their responsibilities towards their children and their ageing parent(s) in Poland, but presently unable to return to Poland due to the emotional cost of uprooting. This situation has a detrimental effect on the entire household, outlining the wider context of social relations and intergenerational dynamics, creating a symbolic 'trap' that paradoxically currently prevents a return migration of Polish émigré parents—*nolens volens* adult EU citizens!

To summarize, the migration and reunification of families represent a complex issue. The migratory experience, separation, maintaining ties with the extended family, and the whole adjustment process constitute a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing far more than simply settling in the host country.

Notes

1. Longitudinal Acculturation Study with Polish Immigrant Teenagers—Parental and Children's Perspectives (LASPIT).
2. Atypical cohort of Polish parents: middle-aged, owning their own property in Poland, having one child or more, well-educated (60 per cent hold a Master's Degree) and often illiterate in English—contrary to a typical younger cohort of 'Polish free movers' with 'no strings attached'.
3. Polish parents in my sample speak Polish and think in Polish. They watch Polish TV, follow Polish news and Polish media, shop in Polish shops and often cook Polish food. They also observe all Polish national holidays.
4. Following common ethical practice, all names were changed to pseudonyms to protect respondents' identities and ensure their anonymity.
5. This term was coined by the Polish media to draw attention to the increased female migration (http://www.independent.ie/world-news/europe/the-euro-orphans-left-behind-by-poles-exodus-31,067,325.html)

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