

Migrating skills, skilled migrants and migration skills: The influence of contexts on the validation of migrants' skills

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Abstract

Notions of skill are geographically and historically specific; migration regimes, professional regulations and national policies influence possibilities of effective validation of migrant knowledge abroad. Migration scholars convincingly demonstrate how migrants actively circumvent national requirements to fit into the dominant culture of the society of residence while preserving their own identities. Yet, without exception, social inequalities research exclusively addresses the integration of migrants into the receiving context, taking skills as a fixed attribute migrants simply 'bring with them'. I argue that the context of origin of migrants for skill acquisition and validation during the migration process needs to be considered as well. The way skills are defined, acquired and valorised in the country of origin has an influence on how migrants mobilise them in the receiving society and on how they perceive their chances for negotiating strong positions in the labour market of the host country. The article draws on a study of Polish migrants to the UK with secondary and tertiary educational certificates who work in routine or semi-routine occupations.

Keywords: skills; highly skilled migration; deskilling; Polish immigrants; United Kingdom

Introduction

Highly skilled migrants are considered a prototype of a socially mobile group because they possess "transnationally valid forms of cultural capital" (Weiß, 2005: 716), meaning that their skills can be utilised in any suited labour market. First, it is because nation-states have been reducing barriers to the movement of these wanted professionals who now are capable of choosing optimal environments. Second, the majority of professionals who move within the networks of corporations and international organisations are liberated from nation-state commitments (Nowicka, 2006). The European Union, through instruments such as recognition of educational and professional credentials has also been creating a framework for the free movement of (technical) skills.

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However, for most of the well-educated migrants deskilling is a common experience (SOPEMI, 2006). Many of the new Eastern European workers in paid employment in the UK are university graduates in low-wage jobs (Milewski and Ruszczak-Żbikowska, 2008). This raises the question of the specific workings of migration with regard to the possibilities of utilizing skills acquired abroad.

There are several significant gaps in the migration research on skilled workers, the most common criticism being that it is gender-blind, that it neglects the aspects of family migration and deskilling among women (Kofman, 2007) and that it is usually limited to a few sectors of the economy: banking and finance, technologically intense sectors such as information and communication (Beaverstock, 2012), international organisations (Nowicka, 2006), medical services (Raghuram and Kofman, 2002; Kingma, 2006) and science and education (Ackers and Gill 2008). Problematic is to view deskilling through the lens of deficiencies (Thränhardt, 2005), and it is not clear how the general tendency towards a degradation of work (Doussard, 2011) influences the deskilling of migrants and in what respects deskilling of migrants differs from erosion of skills among workers affected by unemployment (Possarides, 1992).

From this wide range of problems facing the research on the social mobility of international migrants, I pick one issue which I think is of key importance. The research exclusively addresses the problem of deskilling – and, more broadly, of the integration of migrants – in the receiving context, taking skills as a fixed attribute of migrants. Drawing on studies on migrant subjectivity and on the research on migrant transnationalism, I argue that the context of origin of migrants for skill acquisition and validation during the migration process needs to be considered as well. The way skills are defined, acquired and valorised in the country of origin has an influence on how migrants mobilise them in the receiving society and on how they perceive their chances for negotiating strong positions on the labour market of the immigration country.

The case of the recent migration of Polish labour to the UK, which I discuss in this article, is instructive because of the volume and constitution of the migration flow and the patterns of labour market integration of the workers, which I consider to be relevant to an expanding European Union in which new members gain access to the labour markets of the 'old' EU.

I begin by presenting the path the research has taken, from understanding skilled migrants as people with a particular type of education and occupation to considering migrants as agents capable of developing new skills upon arrival in a host country. The latter perspective increasingly considers migration as a process. I take here epistemological take on transnationalism, meaning that I consider the space of origin of migrants to be just as relevant as their space of destination. I also acknowledge transnationalism as a type of consciousness (Vertovec, 2009: 5ff.); elsewhere I have shown how Poles in the UK use a

double frame of reference when subjectively positioning themselves in the UK and in Poland (Nowicka, 2012).

In the empirical part of the article, I analytically distinguish between three aspects. First, I tentatively use the term ‘skilled migrants’ as a category used in literature for people who have obtained their higher education degree and/or their particular occupational status in Poland. I then question the notion of skills in this context as a category used to distinguish skilled from supposedly non-skilled migrants through an analysis of the context in which these migrants in Poland have acquired their skills which considers both the structural conditions and the migrants’ self-perceptions. Second, I use the concept of ‘migrating skills’ to determine which skills are more readily transferable in the transnational context. Third, I discuss ‘migration skills’, by which I mean the migrants’ strategies to validate their skills between the countries. The latter two concepts will then again help me to demonstrate the complexity of a process of skill validation in relation to the historical socio-economic context and migrant transnationalism.

From migration structures to migrant subjectivities

Whenever migration scholars speak of ‘skilled’ or ‘highly skilled’ migrants, and of ‘deskilling’ of migrants, they mean foreign-born workers with post-secondary or university training who are more or less successful in the labour markets of the immigration countries. There is no consensus among social scientists about the definition of ‘skills’ and the term is often used synonymously with ‘ability’, ‘competence’, ‘talent’, ‘human capital’ or ‘cultural capital’ (Green, 2011). In empirical work, researchers often use proxies based on education and occupation, categorising education by years of schooling rather than by grades (OECD, 2001).

For years, the research has oscillated between two extreme views of migrants, conceiving of highly skilled workers as “free movers” (Favell, 2003) who typically make individual decisions on migration to improve their professional career and regarding other migrants as economically desperate and impoverished individuals exploited by powers of the capitalist neoliberal economy (Kofman, 2007). The interest in skills of international migrants links also to migrant remittances as a source of economic growth in countries which send migrants (de Haas, 2010). Migration and development discourses are focused primarily on codified or generalised forms of knowledge, and consider formal conditions of their utilization.

Another line of research has been interested in the narratives migrants construct of the notion of the self in relation to the conditions and representations of their statuses, roles and positions (Erel, 2009). In the context of skilled migration, works grounded in Pierre Bourdieu’s theory shed light on how migrants actively validate their ‘cultural capital’ abroad, thereby using their ethnic belonging, such as “being from Turkey” (Erel, 2010), “being Filipino” (Kelly and Lusic, 2006) or “being from the former Yugoslavia” (Bau-

der, 2005), via social networks and through inter-ethnic relations, as resource in the respective fields (labour market, political organizations) in their countries of residence (also Nohl et al., 2010). This new approach to skilled migration is thus relational, shifting as it does between migrant agency and structures of opportunity (Bauder, 2003).

Notwithstanding their merits, these studies insufficiently considered both transnational orientations of migrants and the shifting conditions in countries of origin of migrants, which impact on how migrants validate their skills abroad. In this respect I attempt to contribute to the existing scholarship. Further, they give insufficient consideration to variation in strategies and actions that individuals follow in their daily lives to activate their resources or create new ones (Lareau and Horvat, 1999: 38). Devine (2004) shows that the process of validation of cultural capital is never straightforward, and it requires effort, and Dumais (2002) argues that we ought to analytically distinguish and empirically consider skills and orientations that are a part of individual habitus (and thus also relational to the field) to understand such variations in strategies to validate cultural capital. In the following, I focus exactly on such daily strategies and orientations as expressed in migrants' narratives. I own the relational view to Bourdieu in the sense that I consider how such strategies and orientations are embedded in dynamic fields yet I diverge from his theory of practice in multiple ways.¹

Polish post-accession workers in the UK

In May 2004, in the wake of the European Union enlargement to the East, the United Kingdom opened its labour market to citizens of the new EU member states. The rapid influx of workers, particularly from Poland, exceeded all expectations. Since then, an estimated 610,000 Polish workers have registered as being employed in the UK (Home Office, 2009). The data used for this article include the biographies of 44 of such post-2004 Polish immigrants to the UK, whom I interviewed in 2010 and 2011,² using narrative interviews. I

¹ This is not the place for a detailed discussion. It is worth noting, however, that a complex analysis of a person's cultural capital in migration would require at least a clear definition of what constitutes cultural capital and the reconstruction of the code that prevails in the environment of the person concerned (Lamont and Lareau 1988, 157); for transnationally orientated migrants, this would be in the countries of origin and residence and, potentially, in a transnational social field. Further possible questions include how the disaggregated dimensions of cultural capital affect and are dependent on class positions and thus lead to social selection, and whether migrants achieve the 'natural familiarity' of codes of those born to the social class to which they aspire, and if so, how they do it. My research project did not include an investigation of cultural capital of migrants in all its dimensions but the collected material enables me to scrutinize migrants' skills and orientations which shape the daily strategies of validating resources at the British labour market.

² This project has been implemented at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen. It explored how Poles perceive and encounter socio-cultural diversity in the UK. However, deskilling turned out to be a very prominent issue in all of the interviews. The interviews were conducted by me and two contracted interviewers.

analysed the transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews using the explorative method described by Strauss (1987) and Glaser (1978). The analysis was performed in several stages, in which the phenomena were first identified and labelled and then classified (open coding; cf. Strauss and Corbin 1996: 44f.). These steps revealed reasons for migration, educational choices and employment trajectories. The descriptive concepts were then grouped into abstract categories which, in turn, were compared with each other and with the literature (Ibid.: 188f.), allowing me to distinguish between three processes in which 'skills' takes on new meanings.

I interviewed 25 women and 19 men; 19 respondents were living in London at the time of the interviews, 25 in different localities in the Midlands. London has 23 per cent of the UK total Polish-born residents (ONS, 2011), and it draws many highly qualified career-oriented young people. The Midlands was chosen as this region hosts many industries providing employment to about 30,000 Polish immigrants (Green et al., 2007). An estimated 20 per cent of all post-accession migrants have university degrees; 33 per cent have secondary and secondary vocational training (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk, 2009). Among the respondents, three persons had secondary vocational training, nine obtained general secondary certificates, and 19 completed higher education. Nine people studied either in Poland or in the UK while jobbing (for at least three months) in the UK. At the time of migration, 26 interviewees worked deskilled, and at the time of the interviews, this was still the case for 19 of them (students excluded).

Poles in the UK tend to undertake employment in low-skilled and low-paid jobs even if they have a high level of education (Clark and Drinkwater, 2008). Clark and Drinkwater (2008) and Drinkwater et al. (2009), focusing on earnings equations, argue that Polish workers are at a particular disadvantage because they have lower rates of return to their human capital than other recent immigrants, particularly after controlling for personal and job-related characteristics. This may indicate that these migrants suffer from a significant mismatch in terms of their skills and earnings.

Validation of skills in a transnational perspective on migration

Scholars have increasingly recognised that some migrants maintain close ties to their home country and they do so in various ways (Basch et al., 1994; Vertovec, 2009). The variability of such connections, their intensity and durability (even over generations) has led some scholars to develop concepts of multi-layered and multi-sited transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000; Pries, 2001) or fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). Migrants who are embedded in transnational social fields direct their activities towards both the society of destination and the society of origin, and with a tendency to judge their social positions based on the rules of both societies (Kelly and Lusia, 2006; Nowicka, 2012). It is against this background that the constitution and valuation of skills need to be considered as part of an individual social trajectory (Erel, 2010).

The selected socio-economic conditions in Poland, where the migrants receive their education and have their first labour market experiences, form the first setting in which migrants negotiate the value of their skills. The way in which skills are negotiated in this context has an influence on how migrants bargain their skills in the process of migration. On arriving at their destination, they negotiate the skills they believe are of value to potential employers. Thus, both the opportunity structures and the migrants' subjective perception of their own resources determine exactly how their skills are validated. I consider thus both to ask which strategies migrants develop when confronted with devaluation of skills.

Skilled migrants: Acquisition and valuation of skills prior to migration

The majority of interviewees gave insufficient income and/or a lack of career development perspectives as reasons for leaving Poland. Some had found employment in their profession in Poland but had considered the pay unsatisfactory, the prospects for on-the-job advancement insufficient and the overall chances to improve their situation through changing jobs or sectors of economy poor. Some were employment under their educational credentials, competences and aspirations prior to migration. Other graduates did not even try to enter the Polish labour market, assuming that their skills would not be valued properly in economic terms. Neither of the two groups was willing to move to large Polish urban centres to seek employment there and easily and quickly decided to give the UK a try, often encouraged by their friends who already had jobs 'on the Isles'. While financial reasons clearly dominated in the narratives, a sense of curiosity and adventure, and the wish to gain independence from the family also played a role. Some of the young graduates were in a phase of personal orientation (or disorientation) and were drawn by stories about easy access to jobs in the UK. This combination of pulling and pushing factors created a powerful motivation to migrate (Traser, 2006).

The narratives expressed in the interviews with Poles in the UK reflect the change in the institutional higher education system in Poland, the transition towards general skills and the socio-historical shifts in the ways in which skills are produced and reproduced as desirable (i.e. market-oriented) and less desirable. One narrative is particularly prominent in the interviews, that of devaluation of skills obtained by education in Poland.

When narrating about their educational and employment paths in Poland, the interviewees claim that knowledge gained at Polish universities was too theoretical to guarantee labour market entry as a professional. They feel that Polish universities did not prepare them well for future occupational challenges (SGH and Deloitte, 2011). However, they also considered wages offered by employers to be too low for their skills. This apparent paradox is part of the discourse of individuals who seek to be paid 'normal' wages for 'normal' work, meaning a job which involves regular working hours, a reasonable workload and work which fits their qualifications (Galasińska and Kozłowska,

2009). This finding is also consistent with those of the most recent studies on human capital in Poland, which show that young Poles have somewhat unrealistic (not fitting the labour market conditions) expectations of what constitutes satisfactory wages (PAED, 2011).

At the same time, though, the respondents stressed that they had studied their particular subject because it interested them and not because they thought it would give them any economic advantage in the labour market. Parallel, some stated that the quality of teaching offered by Polish institutions of higher education was poor, while also admitting that they had put little effort into learning. This is what one of them, Adam, stated when I asked him about his educational path in Poland:

A small university, you know, I forgot its exact name. A shame. Could you erase it? There were different courses, you know. Sociology, administration, and so on. Full-time and extramural courses, you know. [...].

Like many students and graduates in the humanities and social sciences, in business administration, economy and management (SGH and Deloitte, 2011), Adam believed that neither the skills acquired in extramural courses nor the degree he would eventually receive would help him find employment. Plainly speaking, Adam considered himself educated but not skilled. To change this situation and to finance his education, Adam, like many of the interviewees, had improved his skills by working while studying (PAED, 2011).

These often contradictory and simultaneous discursive strategies of the respondents reflect the tremendous expansion and commercialisation of Poland's higher education system over the last 20 years (GUS, 2011; MNiSW, 2010) and its ambivalent consequences: inflation of degrees, delinking of higher education from the labour market and the consequent convergence of the employment structures of graduates of secondary and tertiary education institutions.

The narratives on useless higher education provide evidence of the tension between classical educational ideals and the labour market orientation which the respondents felt and which is inherent in the current Polish higher education system. In the course of the social transformation of its economy into a market economy and its early involvement in the Bologna process (UNDP, 2007), Poland introduced first-cycle study courses. To a large extent, these courses are offered in the form of extramural and part-time programmes by public and non-public institutions, mostly in the social sciences and humanities, in psychology, business administration, management and marketing. They require neither expensive laboratories nor numerous lecturers who supervise students during empirical exercises (Pomianek and Rozmus, 2010). Thus, first-cycle studies can be considered a continuation of general secondary education rather than of vocational training (IBNGR, 2009).

Polish students are integrated into the labour market at an early age and have their first employment experiences during their studies (SGH and

Deloitte, 2011). Unemployment rates among these individuals are low because many of them continue to work in the same company or sector after graduation (Sztanderska, 2008). The structure of employment of individuals with a higher or secondary education in Poland is similar. However, as result of economic restructuring and changes in the labour supply, graduates now work in a wider range of jobs than in the past (HESCU, 2004). Further, in Poland, the vocational specificity of the education systems is located primarily at the secondary level. Tertiary education is less vocation-specific, a trend seen throughout Europe (Saar et al., 2008). It provides graduates with general skills, which may at first put them at a disadvantage relative to school-leavers when they try to find their first job, but it may also improve their chances of staying in employment later (Wolbers, 2007), a fact often neglected by graduates entering the labour market, including my informants' subjective perceptions.

Notwithstanding the problems, individuals with a higher education are in great demand in Poland and graduates get something of value in return for their investment in their higher education, in form for relatively low unemployment, and high earnings (GUS, 2012; OECD, 2010). The high propensity to emigrate among young graduates in Poland can be thus better explained by regional disparities. On average, 80% of graduates with a higher education degree in Poland find employment, while in the Podlaskie Voivodship only 51% of graduates find a job. While graduates from management programs usually have more problems finding appropriate employment than graduates from other fields, they do comparatively well in Podlaskie (Głuszyński et al. 2011) and comparatively less well in Wielkopolska (PUP, 2009).

The ideal of traditional non-pragmatic education is quite alive in the narratives I collected. Positively assessing the practical skills taught in British schools and universities, later in the interviews the informants proudly stressed that Polish schools produced intelligent graduates, “philosophers” and “scientists”. They also stated that, unlike many if not most of their British neighbours and co-workers in the UK, they were knowledgeable in the areas of art, politics, geography and literature. The narratives thus showed that Poles feel that they cannot use the kind of skills they have acquired in the British labour market, locating them instead in the private sphere not related to employment experiences, strategies and opportunities.

So, while Polish universities, as the interviewees see it, provide their graduates with general skills, these skills are considered to be of little value in the market economy but remain strong markers of social class. The narratives of the young Polish emigrants show a great ambivalence as far as the process of acquisition and validation of education and skills is concerned, the personal strategies of graduates ranging from complementing educational attainments with market oriented skills and the discursive devaluation of higher education which yet progresses parallel to their quests for appropriate remuneration and professional recognition. The latter is a powerful motivation for international migration. However, as I will elaborate in the following sections, migrating leads these young graduates to develop new strategies rather than merely

managing to validate the skills they considered to be valued insufficiently in the Polish labour market.

Migrating skills

Most of the interviewees who graduated from universities in Poland got their first job in the UK in hospitality or catering and in factories or warehouses. This raises the question of transferability of skills between the nation-states for young graduates and the successful labour market participants from Poland.

Generally speaking, the interviewees confirmed that their Polish credentials had been formally recognised in the UK³. However, some of the engineers I interviewed told me their educational credentials were fully recognised, but their professional experience in Poland was not, resulting in them being placed in a lower position in the company. The interviewees also stated that the agencies in Poland and the UK which place Poles in jobs in the UK did not ask for proof of qualification and that the interviewees concerned had not tried to find employment in better positions before they contacted a recruitment agency. This finding is consistent with those of studies which have shown that employment agencies recruiting Poles for work in the UK are primarily interested in filling positions which they perceive as non-skill-related vacancies that are difficult to fill because of the pay, flexibility and conditions (Stenning and Dawley, 2009). Polish workers appear to perceive agency work as an entry point to the UK employment market and, thus, as a transition period in their lives (Hussein et al., 2010). The agencies recognise the ‘work first’ motivation of migrants who look for immediate income and admit that they have “people applying for cleaning jobs with two degrees in economics” (Stenning and Dawley, 2009: 286).

Similarly, those among the interviewees who relied on personal networks and word of mouth to find jobs were primarily interested in bridging the expected transition period. One of them, Zofia, said, “*So I started to look for a job. Like all Poles, I first worked in a bar.*” Another interviewee, Teresa, added: “*I assumed that all who come here from Poland would start working in the simplest jobs; as a barman or as a waiter, for example.*” The interviewees discursively positioned themselves within the assumed collective of Polish migrants who usually try to find jobs in semi-manual or manual occupations because they think that their skills do not meet the demands and the structure of the UK labour market. One of the interviewees, Janek, explained:

I thought I completed the studies: there comes an educated Pole! [...] my technical knowledge isn't good for much. Leadership is what's most important [...] People with-

³ NARIC, the national agency responsible for providing information and advice on how qualifications and skills from other countries compare with the UK's national qualification frameworks, issues statements on comparability and reports on individual career paths and English language assessment which, along with transcripts of grades obtained during the periods of qualification, that can be submitted to UK employers.

out education achieve great success here [...] In Poland, every other person has a master's degree. But can these people be successful in the job? I know many cases from my university where people went abroad and didn't make it. Even in Poland they didn't succeed in professional life. Books at home, learning at home, learning by heart, straight A's, but in professional life they are not successful.

Janek mentioned what he believes is the inherent difference of the UK educational and labour market systems, which attach great importance to practical skills, on-the-job training, leadership and management talent – none of which, he stated, was a major feature of the Polish system. Other interviewees tried to justify the UK employers by making a slightly different kind of reference to the incomparability of the systems. One of them, Lena, stated that British employers “naturally” did not know the specifics of her course of study and because they could not compare the systems in Poland and the UK they could not fully acknowledge her skills. Similarly, Emilia, another of the interviewees, tried to put herself in the position of the British ‘hosts’, stating:

I don't blame them because I would do the same if there were a Belarusian working with me who completed her studies – I would treat her worse [...] She would always be a stranger. Even if she were better educated and a better worker than me, she would always be a stranger. I think it would be only human to react that way.

The interviewees often abstracted from their own employment situation to talk about national mentality of some sort – British or Polish – which they believed was the reason for the poor labour market positions of Poles in the UK. For example, Bartek and Janek, and Robert and Iza mentioned a Polish habitus which had developed under the communist system, which they believed results in Poles having particularly low self-esteem, making it impossible for them to fully present their skills to the employers, whereas they believe British workers to have greater self-esteem and to be better at negotiating their assignments. The interviewees believed that people are valued and appreciated for their present achievements rather than for what they have achieved in the past (Eade et al. 2006).

The lack of English language skills was often brought up in connection with deskilling during the interviews. The interviewees considered poor English skills to be the one personal quality that kept them from progressing in their career, irrespective of the actual level of proficiency. Those with poor or no knowledge of English often stressed that someone who does not speak English well “deserves” a simple, low-paid job. Even those of the interviewees who were very proficient stated that regional differences and dialects often make communication difficult, with the result that “some doors close”. Blommaert et al. (2005) found for other groups that upon arrival migrants experience that ‘speaking English’ is constructed in the social environment in which it emerges: what they saw as English proficiency in Poland (a more passive, grammatically correct general proficiency) cannot be fully utilised as a resource in the UK (because regional dialects, different pronunciations and job-specific vocabularies have a local rather than transnational character).

The interviews revealed that the post-migration re-evaluation of skills proceeds through a discursive devaluation of skills acquired through higher education in Poland, which is pursued with reference to macro- and micro-conditions. The macro-level references are references to the systemic qualities of educational and labour market systems in Poland and the UK such as their incompatibility and incomparability. Micro-level factors include personal strategies of discursive self-positioning in an imagined collective of Poles which, as I will discuss in the following section, is connected to the strategies of constructing new, legitimate skills in the UK.

Migration skills

It may seem paradoxical that young graduates from Poland who have escaped what they consider to be an ‘abnormal’ labour market situation would undertake employment in the UK in unskilled, low-paid sectors of the economy. Some studies suggest that the transitory nature of such employment plays an important role; other research stresses yet the long-lasting effects the de-skilling among Polish migrants in the UK. Poles have filled a particular niche in the UK’s national and local economies by mobilising a particular form of embodied skills. The interviewees described themselves and other Polish migrants as hard-working, flexible and willing to work long hours. One of them, Jakub, stated: “*Many employers prefer to employ Poles [...] because we work faster, with more precision [...] we don’t complain, we are sick less often.*” Another interviewer, Iza, added:

The British are slow, and they may be able to turn one type of screw, but they don’t know how to turn a cross-recess screw. That’s why there are so many Poles in my company; they’ve accepted that we can do all [those screws] and when they ask us to we do it.

Narratives such as these are symbolic surviving tactics employed within a competitive field (Datta and Brickell 2009). The references to some kind of embodied ‘Polishness’ as an attribute can be constituted and mobilised to make up for (unrecognised) skills (comp. Kelly and Lusia 2006). The interviewees ascribed certain intellectual abilities to Poles who are able to perform more complex tasks than other workers. This particular skill is rendered visible and can be validated only in the process of migration. On the other hand, the interviewees also worked long hours and many of them had two or even three jobs and worked up to 60 hours a week. But for such skills to be validated, a market is needed, not just a rhetoric of superiority and discursive strategies of self-ethnicisation.

All of the interviewees discursively distinguished themselves from other immigrant groups (mostly from Indians and Pakistanis, but also from Black populations), the (white) majority of British society and particularly from ‘those other Poles’, criminals who escaped Poland for fear of prosecution and the lazy unemployed who claim social benefits and give all Poles in the UK and Poland a bad name (Svasek; 2009). By emphasising or even developing

positive stereotypes about themselves, interviewees signal their ability to develop new on-the-job skills which they consider relevant to potential employers.

The discursive devaluation of skill acquisition during the education period in Poland prior and subsequent to the change of residence and the symbolic strategies of self-ethnicisation as superior workers need to be considered as two parallel and complementary mechanisms that are embedded in a particular institutional and transnational context. In the UK context, Polish migrants are able to give new value to the embodied skills; being from Poland can be defined as a skill only in the local context of a particular workplace, sector of economy or regional labour market. So, while the actual skills may be the same in Poland and the UK, it is their local articulation which allows for the validation of these skills. Thus, it is not always useful to call these skills 'transnational skills', transferable by virtue of their recognition and demand, irrespective of spatial reference. Successful validation, in turn, depends strongly on the ability of migrants to produce new validation mechanisms, such as in the form of social networks that can facilitate access to certain jobs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to examine why university graduates from Poland tend to take positions in low-wage and low-skilled sectors in the UK. Drawing on the research on migrant agency and migrant transnationalism, I have considered the context of origin of migrants in the process of validation of skills abroad.

In doing so, I have analytically distinguished between three aspects. The concept of 'skilled migrants' has allowed me to take a critical look at the context of skill acquisition. By considering migrants' subjective perceptions of skills, I have been able to show that Poles discursively devalue skills acquired through education in Poland. The criterion they use to do so is the labour market fit in terms of job type and remuneration. These perceptions are rooted in processes of transition towards a market economy, in which higher education is assigned a new role, while general education and intrinsic motivations to study are persistent values. Legitimate skills are a matter of negotiation between the graduates' aspirations and the employers' demand and graduates present themselves to potential employers as educated but not as skilled. A notion of 'transnational skills' obscures the fact that the validation of skills is a complex process of negotiation between institutional constraints and personal and collective definitions of skills (or the lack thereof).

I have then used the concept of 'migrating skills' to investigate cross-border transferability of skills in more detail. Despite the instruments used for the formal recognition of credentials and professional experience, I have observed that the interviewees adapted their skills to the demand of the British labour market, thereby downgrading their educational attainments from Poland. This process must be seen in the context of discourses of recruitment

agencies and individual employers and in connection with the ‘work first’ motivation of Polish workers and their belief that the UK has a meritocratic system which values present rather than past attainments.

By using the concept of ‘migration skills’ I have shed light on the ability of migrants to validate their skills transnationally. While devaluation of educational credentials gives them fast and easy access to certain types of jobs, the Poles use their general skills acquired through education to present themselves as intelligent and virtuous workers who are superior to others. In doing so, they single their competence to develop new skills which they consider relevant to potential employers.

Validation of skills across national borders is an open process and the outcomes of such validation cannot be taken for granted. A transnational approach which takes into consideration the historical socio-economic context of the place of acquisition of skills by migrants (usually their country, or even region, of origin) and of the destination of migrants allows us to explore the exact mechanisms that underlie this process. Such an approach questions the idea of skills as something that people are equipped with and that they can utilise elsewhere. The research community needs to revise the definition of ‘skilled migrants’ as a social category and re-consider the notion of transnational forms of capital. Further, a detailed examination is required of the institutional framing of skill acquisition and validation processes which undermines the way migrants negotiate the meaning of their skills. Importantly, the term ‘skills’ takes on new meanings, not only in each local and national context, but also in transnational contexts. By comparing the “rules of country of origin” with the “rules of the destination” (Kelly and Lusia, 2006) migrants give new value to the skills they possess, while also developing new means of validating these skills.

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