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# How and why people use transnational migration networks in small-town Poland

Anne White

# Polish Families and Migration since EU Accession

- British Academy-funded research
- Book to be published by Policy Press, November 2010
  - ✱ 115 interviews with Polish mothers
    - ✱ 82 in Poland (Grajewo, Sanok, Ełk, etc.)
    - ✱ 33 in UK (Bath, Bristol, Trowbridge, Frome)
  - ✱ Participant observation as English teacher at Polish toddlers' group and Saturday School
  - ✱ Own opinion poll in Podkarpacie
  - ✱ Polish media and statistical sources

# The project's research questions with regard to Poland

- ✿ Why do people migrate to the West from Poland, especially from small towns and villages?
- ✿ Why do parents increasingly migrate with their children?

The research focuses on working-class families, defined as families where parents are in manual occupations and do not have university degrees.

## Questions addressed in this presentation concerning migration cultures and migrant selectivity

- ✱ What is the role of local migration cultures in shaping migrant strategies, with particular reference to conventions about the use of social networks?
- ✱ Who migrates and who stays at home? Are the people who migrate also those who have the 'best' networks?



Grajewo,  
Podlasie  
pop. 22,000

Sanok,  
Podkarpacie  
pop. 37,000

Interview locations in Poland





Sanok





Grajewo



# Migration 'cultures'

- ☀ Term often used (e.g. by Faist) to refer to expectation that people will migrate from a certain area
- ☀ Can also mean norms and beliefs concerning why, how and where people should migrate (e.g. Morawska, Horváth, Elrick)

# Studying migration cultures: analysing how people talk about migration

- ✿ For example: chain migration is often described in terms of existing migrants 'collecting' Poland-based friends, rather than people in Poland 'making use of' networks, even when would-be migrants actually initiate the process. *What does this conventional phraseology imply about the working of the network?*

# Poland's diverse migration cultures

- ✦ Contrast between, for example, Sanok and Grajewo, with long traditions of migration to North America

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- ✦ Wielkopolska, where there seems to be an emerging culture of international migration, especially among young people, but there are still middle-aged people without friends and family abroad and lacking a sense of how to 'do' migration.



# Sanok and Grajewo: migration cultures

- The apparent paradox: migration is both ‘forced’ and a response to opportunity.
- Typical statements:
  - ☀ ‘the situation forced me’
  - ☀ ‘he was tempted’ (usually wife re. husband)
  - ☀ ‘you have to give it a go’
- Resolution of the paradox: Life in small town is viewed as routinely precarious, so migration should be attempted whenever possible.

# The opportunity (1)

For many, the opportunity has to be an *invitation from someone trusted*: how far it's possible to fish for an invitation depends on the quality of relations within the network.

It's really strange here in Poland that people don't know how to help each other, or don't want to help. Some people go abroad, for example my friends, and sometimes you say, 'When you get there, look out for something for me'. Then suddenly the link between us breaks, as if they didn't want me to have a better life, just for them to have it better.... I used to ask sometimes, and it turned out to be a non-starter, they didn't want to hear what I was saying, so I came to feel that it wasn't worth asking, humiliating myself or something.

(Celina, Grajewo)

## The opportunity (2)

- ✿ 'Inviting' is sometimes 'cajoling and nagging'
- ✿ Interviews in Poland show the scale of failed family reunions, where the husband tries and fails to persuade his wife and children to join him abroad.
- ✿ The same invitation to migrate can be viewed differently by different people: it is both opportunity and compulsion.



## The opportunity (3)

- ✱ For seasoned migrants, English-speakers and younger people the opportunity is sometimes an *invitation from a mere acquaintance* or even (much more rarely) *an Internet advertisement* **BUT**
- ✱ Even these categories often back off from migrating unless to a trusted friend/relation: 'You must go to someone you know' [even if they use an agency when they arrive abroad]
- ✱ Polish government survey shows diversity across Polish regions in use of recruitment agencies to find work abroad.

# Different ways of doing things in low migration areas?

- ✱ Though most of my UK sample's husbands came 'to someone', a few - chiefly bus drivers, often from low migration areas – responded to advertisements and 3 came completely 'into the unknown'
- ✱ The latter is not a completely irrational course of action because of the abundance of ethnic Polish networks in the UK - despite the received wisdom that Poles do not help each other: 'Poles behave like wolves to fellow Poles'.
- ✱ Piotr's story (cf. Gill, 'Pathologies', 2010)

# Conclusions: migrant selectivity, cultures and networks

- ✱ Even in places with strong migration cultures and dense transnational networks some people 'lack the opportunity to migrate' because they are not invited abroad by a close friend/relative and no other option is acceptable.
- ✱ Invitees resist invitations – even from husbands - more often than one might expect: those who resist tend to have strong local ties (extended family, job); be scared of the Language Barrier; lack good migration experiences.
- ✱ Migrants from new sending regions are less suspicious and less inhibited about using agencies or going 'into the unknown' .
- ✱ Fellow Poles in the UK are often more helpful than they are credited with being: UK-based Polish networks have a role to play in enabling migration even from new sending areas.