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'By Education I'm Catholic'. The Gender, Religion and Nationality Nexus in the Migration Experience of Polish Men to the UK

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To date, the literature on gender and migration continues a longstanding bias towards female over male experiences. Similarly, research on Polish post-EU accession emigration has not sufficiently addressed the male experiences of migration. Drawing on 20 interviews with migrant men, this paper contributes to the existing research on the variety of masculinity practices and gendered migration from the Central and Eastern Europe. In so doing, it focuses on the relationship between masculinity, religion and migration in the context of migration from Poland to the UK. While religion is also rarely addressed in discussions on the post-EU accession migration of Poles, it proves to be important in shaping world views and influencing migrants' positionalities in the new social context. Indeed, in migrants' narratives, gender, religion and the nation intertwine with one another. Analysis shows how certain aspects of men's social identities that were originally assets turn into burdens and how the men reach to religion, while distance from the institutional Church, to renegotiate their new positionality in order to avoid denigration or to support social recognition – which is especially important in the social reality shaped by Brexit.

Keywords: gender; intersectionality; masculinity; nation; Polish migration; religion

Introduction

While Poles are frequently referred to as unanimously Catholic, there is an important and ongoing change in their religious practice and belonging to the Roman Catholic Church (c.f. Ramet 2017). Adam (aged 35), whose quote is in the title, says about his relation with religion and church:

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By education I am Catholic. It wasn't my choice, I was baptised, I took my first Communion and I had a church wedding, no special reason for that. But when it comes to my relationship with Catholicism I avoid it like the plague, I despise hypocrisy.

This caught my attention, as it relates to the generational experience of attending religious lessons, which were introduced as a voluntary school subject at Polish schools in the early 1990s. Thus, Adam meant that he was, quite literally, educated in Catholicism. On a more abstract level, what Adam said refers broadly to his relationship with religion and religious institutions. He, like many others, has been socialised to conform to religious requirements and to attend to certain rituals – e.g. christenings, communion, weddings, etc. At the time of the interview Adam, however, distances himself from the institutional church, both in Poland and in the UK where he now lives.

With this in mind, it is interesting to see what unveiled in our conversation – the socio-cultural context of his upbringing and the strong influence of Catholic teachings on, for example, gender relations plays a significant role in how he interprets and narrates his migratory experience. Adam and my other interviewees, both believers and non-believers, all referred to Roman Catholicism to different extents and in various contexts and, in so doing, as I came to realise, re-negotiated their new position in an attempt to avoid denigration or to support social recognition of migration to the UK.

Arguably, Polish migration to the UK in the post-2004 European Union enlargement has brought about a revival of Catholic parishes in the UK but, as claimed by Gallagher and Trzebiatowska (2017), only very limited scholarly attention has been given to the religious life of these migrants. Similarly, the nexus of gender, religion and the nation has not been a central topic of interest in studies on Polish post-accession emigration. However, given the role of the Roman-Catholic Church on shaping gender ideals in Poland (Leszczyńska and Zielińska 2017), it opens new possibilities for interpretation of the processes by which migrants adapt to and negotiate their new positioning in the British social context.

Poles constitute the second most-religious migrant group in the UK and Ireland (Gallagher and Trzebiatowska 2017: 433). As argued by Joshi (2016: 125), Christianity – and thus Catholicity, being the dominant religion in many of the EU member-states – enjoys cultural and social (at times also political) hegemony in those Western countries receiving migrants. Joshi also draws attention to the normative power of whiteness within Christianity in the West, with race becoming a proxy for religion (2016: 128). This intersection of religion and whiteness becomes important for my interviewees in constructing deservingness and belonging in the British context, against non-whites and non-Christians. Referring to religion, for both believers and non-believers, is a way of negotiating belonging and social recognition, which is especially important in the reality of the post-Brexit vote.

In what follows, I discuss when and how religion offers meanings which are added to the lived experiences of migration for Polish migrant men. I focus on a number of aspects of the Polish-Catholic identity as markers of belonging and tools for negotiating inequalities and marginalisation. In order to better understand the entanglements of masculinity, nation and religion and their interplay in the migratory context, I refer to intersectionality and its application in migration and masculinity studies (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays and Tomlinson 2013; Christensen and Jensen 2014; Crenshaw 1989; Lutz 2014). I also discuss the role of religion in Polish society, as it has an impact on the positionality of men, both in the country of origin and, arguably, in the new post-migration socio-cultural context. I also apply the transnational perspective on migration, as it shows that migrants maintain ties and attachment to the country and society of origin, yet simultaneously form new attachments to the place of emigration. As such, migrants' sense of belonging evolves, while the country of origin remains a reference point with regard to their new social positioning or gender relations in the country of destination, for example.

Polish men in the UK – transnational gendered subjects

A while ago, migration researchers, in response to criticism about their gender blindness (Morokvasic 1984, 2014), began turning their attention to gender issues in migration as playing a pivotal role in peoples' lives. However, the subsequent development of migration research centred on female migration and for a long time, men's experiences of migration were underexplored (Charsley and Wray 2015). Similarly, critical studies on men and masculinity in Poland do not have a long history and the field is in need of further studies (Kluczyńska and Wojnicka 2015). To date, in the migration scholarship in Poland, male migrants have been placed predominantly within the economic discourse of a male migrant breadwinner (c.f. Bell and Pustułka 2017), although some research has also addressed male obligations within transnational families and negotiations of gender relations (Kilkey, Plomien and Perrons 2014; Pustułka, Struzik and Ślusarczyk 2015).

Masculinities are understood as configurations of practices realised in social actions which differ in their historical, geographical, cultural and social contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Wojnicka and Ciaputa 2011). As such, differences in the perception of gender and gender relations in Poland and the UK represent an important dimension of the Polish (male) migrant experience of life in the UK. However, to explain the dynamics of social positioning in the migratory context, other categories should be included in the analysis. Intersectionality has been applied not only in women's studies but also across several other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (cf. Carbado *et al.* 2013; Lutz 2014; Lutz, Vivar and Supik 2011). The most important aspect of intersectional analysis was its acknowledgement of differences between women (for the origins and the development of the concept see, *inter alia*, Crenshaw 1989; Davis 2008; Lutz 2014; McCall 2005; Walby, Armstrong and Strid 2012). Analogously, intersectionality can acknowledge the differences between men and can add to our understanding of their positionalities in migration processes (Christensen and Jensen 2014; Sinatti 2014). This includes changes to these positionalities resulting from the intersection of race/ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, nationality and a number of other categories (cf. Davis 2014: 23).

Gender and gender hierarchies are continuously produced and reproduced (Fouron and Glick Schiller 2001) through interactions with other socially constructed categories such as race/ethnicity, class, sexuality and body (Christensen and Jensen 2014). Depending on the context, these intersections can support, challenge or even subvert the dominant position and male privilege of some men. The intersectional approach can be of help in determining whether and 'how being a man can be a category of disempowerment and lack of privilege rather than a privileged position' (Jensen 2010: 70). In this study, the Polish migrants' belonging and other masculinities were identified as important areas of social change and negotiation for male positionality following migration. In this context, intersectionality also serves as a heuristic device allowing detection of the overlapping visible and invisible strands of inequality (Davis 2008; Lutz 2014, 2015).

Applying the concept of transnationality to migration studies, Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992) discussed the fluid relationship between the two spaces – communities of origin and those of destination. Anthias (2002: 500) emphasises that 'the migrant is dynamically placed in three locales and their intersection: the society of migration, the homeland and the migrant group'. The host society and the migrant group are the fields of my empirical enquiry, while the homeland is an important point of reference for migrants. In this transnational social space (Faist 2004), gender ideologies travel across borders and are manifested – and sometimes contested – in social relations. Migrants navigate between various societal expectations arising from (at least) two social spaces (Donato, Gabaccia, Holdaway, Manalansan IV and Pessar 2006). This means that functioning in different, often conflicting social hierarchies may cause tensions, as migrants continuously turn to and evaluate their experience with the community of origin or the members of such.

Gender, nation and religion in Poland

Catholicism and its role in Polish society has been the subject of many studies. In the Polish religious landscape's recent history, the 1989 socio-political and economic transformation marked an important moment for the Roman Catholic Church, as it went from being, to certain extent, politically suppressed under the communist regime, to being capable of influencing public and political life (Ramet 2006). That said, the Church's intervention caused a backlash which coincided with the differentiation of society due to the transformation process. The privatisation of religion, referred to by Davie (2002, cited in Mandes and Rogaczewska 2013: 259,) as 'believing without belonging', has been described as one of the results of such a backlash. However, it has also been argued that 'belonging without believing' has become a feature of Polish Catholicism (Mandes and Rogaczewska 2013: 260).

The social role of religion has been acknowledged already in the work of pioneering sociologists and anthropologists. To date, religion's relation with nationalism is a much-discussed phenomenon, with modernisationist claims that nationalism has replaced religion (c.f. Brubaker 2012: 22). Brubaker reviews approaches to religion and nationalism, considering them as analogous processes (as a mode of identification, social organisation, and a way of framing political claims) and religion as an explanation for nationalism (c.f. Zubrzycki 2014) and as being part of nationalism; finally he considers nationalism to be manifested in a religious way or, in other words, religious nationalism as a distinct form of nationalism.

These ways, neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, help to conceptualise the relationship between nationalism and religion. The latter contributed to the origin and development of the former – e.g. through the political appropriation of religious symbols and through narratives as appropriated by and adapted to the specific Polish historical and geo-political context. The alliance with the Catholic Church substituted for the non-existing Polish state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which helped to maintain a sense of national identity under a foreign rule (Davies 2005). As in religious nationalism, which joins state, territory and culture primarily by focusing on family, gender and sexuality, two processes took place: the ethnicisation (or 'indigenisation', cf. Zubrzycki 2014: 63) of religion and the deification (sacralisation) of the ethnos (Zenderowski 2011, 2017), both of which affected femininity and masculinity ideals.

In the Polish context, the ideal of femininity is loaded with national and religious meanings (Dąbrowska 2011) inspired by the cult of the Virgin Mary, a central aspect of Catholicism in Poland. Sacrifice and caring abilities remained central to womanhood within Polish Catholicism (Kałwa 2003), while conservative religious views on gender and family became essential to nationalistic ideologies. Religious vocabulary, such as the 'Polish Golgotha', strengthened this sacred dimension of the nation (Zenderowski 2011: 52). As such, it also served to uphold the vision of the traditional Polish family with its gendered division of labour by reinforcing traditional femininities (care, motherhood and sacrifice) and masculinities (associated with strength, authority and power) as a hegemonic cultural model. Interestingly, the role of men and masculinity in general was not given a great deal of attention in the discourse on gender within the Catholic Church in Poland. As Adamiak and Sobkowiak argue (2011), there was a certain assumption that male roles need not be questioned, as if they were obvious through the hegemony of masculinity within the religious teachings of Roman Catholic Church. This also points to the conclusion that the Church regulates and controls the life of its subordinates (Szwed and Zielińska 2017: 121). On the other hand, however, following the post-socialist transformation with its growing insecurities in socio-economic life and the dismantlement of the welfare state, the discursive strategies employed by clergymen in recent decades have focused on preserving the patriarchal order and resisting changes related to new fatherhood ideals and gender mainstreaming in public life (Arcimowicz 2016).

The Polish Roman Catholic Church successfully intervened politically several times in the spheres related to gender relations and family life – e.g. on the introduction of religious education in public schools whilst

effectively keeping sex education off the curriculum – and the limitation of access to abortion in 1993 (which had been free since 1956). These interventions coincided with a wave of negation of state-socialism heritage in public life. The Church built on traditional views of what is considered as normal (especially in gender terms). The role of men was thus consistently built around fatherhood ideals (in reference to God) and work, where the wise, responsible father enjoys a certain authority within the household. The re-traditionalisation of gender relations in the post-1989 reality (Szwed and Zielińska 2017; Watson 1993), with its vision of the ‘traditional Polish family’, was a promise of normalcy in a society affected by the pace of social and political changes. As, ultimately, the nation is the ‘family of families’ (Szwed and Zielińska 2017: 124), such a promise extended to the state level.

Although the Church in Poland openly supported the fast-approaching EU accession, many also warned against secularisation and Europeanisation, fearing that these would undermine the ‘Polish Christian identity’ and values (Szumigalska 2015). While, on the one hand, there existed a desire to protect these values (including ‘traditional Polish families’ and national sovereignty) against the outside world, there was also a sense of mission, of a ‘great apostolic assignment’ (Casanova 2006: 67). First, it exploited the image of Poland as part of the Christian family of nations returning to its righteous place in Europe. Second, it was Poland’s duty to remind Europe about its Christian roots and to re-evangelise the EU (Philpott and Shah 2006: 53). How much of a live issue this still is today was illustrated in the words of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in an interview with TV Trwam¹ in December 2017, in which he expressed his vision of a re-Christianisation of Europe by Poland. When an alleged EU ‘anti-family policy’ was ‘discovered’ in the convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, this led the Polish Church to declare war on ‘gender ideology’, a war which went into full swing when the then-liberal government began work on introducing the convention in 2012 (Arcimowicz 2016). Presenting itself as the voice of the (Catholic) nation, the defender of Polishness and a symbol of stability and normalcy, the Church called for the protection of Polish society against the influences of the EU and its regulations.

Methodology

This paper draws on findings from the fieldwork which I conducted in Brighton and Hove and the area of East Sussex in Great Britain during the summer of 2016. I chose this location for two reasons – first because the place was known to me, as I had studied and worked there for nearly three years and, second, because this allowed me to get to know many Polish migrants in this very diverse, liberal, LGBTQ-friendly and multicultural location, which was a novelty for many Polish migrants, including myself. Therefore it was a perfect setting in which I could observe how people react when confronted with different perspectives related to, for example, gender practices. The move to a much different social and cultural context reveals how people adapt to, resist and/or question the gender relations of both a host country and a country of origin. Given the limited period of fieldwork (a total of seven weeks) and the nature of the research, which required a certain knowledge of the research site as well as building a rapport with my participants, this choice of location was only sensible.

I reached my participants, using the snowballing technique, through an informal network of people. I also posted a note on a social media website for Polish residents in Brighton and Hove, resulting in numerous responses and a pool of interviewees that expanded beyond my initial network. My interviewees were aged 25 and older (to mid-40s), had spent at least their early adulthood in Poland and had been living in the UK for a minimum of one year, with the majority having moved there in the first few years following the EU Eastern enlargement in 2004. Some were married to Polish women and two were in inter-ethnic relationships. Prior to that, during a first field visit, I also collected additional data, which included interviews with five Poles who

worked in East Sussex – social workers, interpreters and volunteers – supporting Polish migrants in their contacts with institutions in the UK – schools, hospitals, kindergartens, social services, the police, etc. They informed me about the life of Poles in the area and the most common problems encountered.

Within the group of research participants – white Polish men living in Brighton and Hove – I aimed for diversity in terms of age, education, class, job, family status and migration experience. Although I only interviewed men, this strategy helped me to ensure the collection of diverse biographical narratives, which makes it possible to control the accuracy of the findings (Lofland, Snow, Anderson and Lofland 2009).

I used a biographical approach which is concerned with people's stories and experiences of everyday life and conducted 20 narrative interviews with Polish men living in the research area (Chase 2009; Kaźmierska 2013). The interviews were accompanied by elements of participant observation, as I lived with other Poles and took part in their social activities. I wanted my interviewees to reflect on their own upbringing and the cultural and social specificities of their social background and to relate these to their new surroundings. The interviews were conversational, which allowed them to freely construct their life stories and granted a better insight into their worlds and the subjective perspectives and experiences that form their social reality (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Throughout the interview (and later in the analysis) I noted where, how and why gender, ethnicity, class and religion were reflected in the narratives of the interviewees and asked follow-up questions in order to get more in-depth information on the issues which were particularly interesting to me. The intersections reveal which categories are useful to migrants or, conversely, which become a burden. This works differently for individuals, who are disadvantaged along some axes and simultaneously advantaged along others; therefore they actively negotiate and develop strategies of resistance (Lutz 2014).

As a result, the interviews were long (ranging from two to five hours) and rich in data. I transcribed and analysed the interviews and field notes by means of open coding in order to generate initial categories (complemented by memos) and then main concepts, which were created by cross-case analysis of the transcripts (I used MAXQDA software for the analysis). Altogether, the initial field visits, participant observation, field diary and the interviews, as well as their simultaneous transcription, allowed for the triangulation of methods and the data gathered, which is considered to be not only a validation strategy but also a better way of gaining a deeper understanding of the issues being researched (Bailey 2008; Byrne 2001; Denzin 1973; Flick 2010). For the purpose of this publication I also translated selected quotations.

The researcher's positionality in cross-gender research

Researchers who share the ethnicity and nationality of the group under study usually hold 'insider' status in that group. Multiple times I was told by the interviewees that they felt obliged to help a fellow Pole, which indicates that ethnicity can be used as a resource. However, against the naturalising notion of nation/state/society and methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), migration researchers suggest going beyond ethnicity (Amelina and Faist 2012; Glick Schiller and Caglar 2009). It is understood that migrants cannot all be contained as 'insiders' under the homogenising ethnic or national label. Instead, such factors as gender, age, family or professional status show how identities are re-constructed in the migration process, leading to shifting positionalities of researchers and migrants in the research setting (Ryan 2015).

As a woman seeking to interview men about their experience of migration and posting about it on social media – and apart from those men who were interested in helping me with my project – I also received unwanted attention in the form of explicitly sexualised comments suggesting that I was disguising myself as a researcher but was, in fact, interested in sexual encounters. I find this important to note for two reasons. The first is that female researchers rarely receive instructions on how to deal with sexual advances and harassment when conducting field research. The second is that I had to manage and at times emphasise the boundary

between myself and my interviewees, which made me even more aware of the gender differences and variations in our situatedness (Davis 2014). Interviews, like other social interactions, are gendered; thus gender affects the fieldwork and research process and one has to be aware and sensitive to how this is manifested in the research setting (for a detailed analysis of this issue see, for example, Kilkey, Perrons, Plomien, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ramirez 2013).

The interviews often took place in pubs or cafés; for safety reasons I deliberately opted for meetings in public spaces – especially with those interviewees whom I knew very little about – as many of them took place in the evenings, after work or in remote areas near to the place where they lived. I made sure that interviewees knew upfront that our meeting would not incur any costs on their part. In two instances we met in the public park and on Hove Lawns. As the meetings were quite long, we then moved to a nearby pub or café but only after I had reassured them that it was only reasonable that I cover the costs, since it was I who insisted on meeting. Financial matters were important here (as these interviewees had insecure jobs) but they also intersect with gender issues and how these are manifested and played out at meetings. Importantly it was not only them but also other interviewees who remarked that it was unusual to have their beverages paid for by a woman; in these instances, I managed to negotiate the issue and to move it onto a professional footing, insisting that it was a modest reward for their assistance. The fact that the meetings were quite long meant that some of them were able to offer me a beverage in return, which sometimes led to joking reference to the norms to which they were accustomed in Poland.

I attempted to build a rapport with my interviewees by stressing my experience of migration, working in service industries and living in Brighton; these topics usually served as good conversation openers. However, there were several occasions on which interviewees apologised for their language, when a swear word slipped into the conversation. I managed to discuss personal issues in considerable depths and also received a lot of data on, for example, other women, gays or hetero- and homosexuality in general (often seen through a traditional gender perspective). This, I assumed, could be attributed to the fact that their views were not questioned or argued against, as they may perhaps be in other situations. Instead I asked additional questions, so that they would not feel challenged (which perhaps then strengthened their opinions about the supposedly conciliatory nature of women). However, as in other interview situations, one has to be aware of the social desirability bias. All these factors made me reflect on the data I receive as a female researcher, how gender influences the research situation and possibly also the nature of the findings and their interpretation.

The gender, nationality, age and migrant status (and other categories which the limited space in this paper does not allow me to account for) play out differently in the research setting. Interviews often challenged, for example, the traditional view of the insider–outsider binary. Depending on the situation, I needed to emphasise my agency as a researcher over the importance of the shared experience of being a migrant myself (or some other category of analysis such as class or family status, etc.) or, *vice versa*, while also negotiating my gendered positionality in fieldwork relations. Therefore, in line with the intersectional approach of this study, ‘the “I” as well as the research “object” must be understood as situated not only in one-dimensional categorisations in terms of gender, or race, or class or nationality or sexuality or dis/ability or age or other social categorisations, but in a multiplicity of intersecting power relations’ (Lykke 2014: 3).

Hierarchies within – challenged or strengthened? The role of religiously mobilised nationalism

In the past, migration from Polish territories was a widespread phenomenon. Over time, this phenomenon gained certain cultural meanings and ideology. This ideology was based on the dichotomy between political refugees – the ‘right sort’ of migrant – and the economic migrants who were seen as egoistic and less patriotic (Garapich 2007). How migration was perceived in moral terms is evident in the writings of Catholic hierarchs

in Poland during the 1980s, with explicit reference to the Christian moral code of love, rights and responsibility to one's nation, based on which people ought to rethink their emigration decisions (Erdmans 1992).

An interesting challenge to this discourse comes from some of the post-accession migrants I had a chance to talk to. Maciej (aged 45) left Poland in 2006 and wanted to be involved with the Polish diaspora (*Polonia*), primarily consisting of political refugees following the end of WWII. He and a few friends began to participate in the life of a Polish parish in Brighton and then moved on to organising regular events outside the church – mostly related to national celebrations, many of which commemorate the heroes of WWII, Polish combatants or historic events such as National Independence Day.

Maciej views emigration from Poland as a loss for the nation; however, he refuses to feel guilty for leaving the country. He elaborates on the sense of betrayal of the nation by the political elites in the transformation process, blaming them for the ill effects of privatisation through selling off most of the state-owned companies and industries:

This so-called transformation just washed out everything, they [the elites] sold off everything that there was to sell, the workers were forced to go abroad, those who were the best have gone, and the worst have stayed, so how can it be better there?

In short, Maciej blames the elites for the mass emigration, not the workers who were pushed to go, as he perceives it, as having almost no agency of their own. It resembles Blank's (2004: 357) description of a place as powerless in confrontation with external forces – first through the transformation which deprived the country of its former status and, second, through mass emigration, which emptied the place of its people: '[place] was eaten not by one particular other place, but rather by Elsewhere itself'. Maciej sees the country's bad leadership as a betrayal of the nation and economic migration as a reaction to this betrayal, not a betrayal in itself. This may also be viewed as a way of negotiating the hierarchy within the larger Polish community, comprising both *Polonia* and economic migrants, among whom the post-2004 arrivals were the most numerous. Maciej explains that being abroad does not release him from fulfilling his duties to the 'fatherland'; he works to preserve the memory of the Poles who fought in WWII under British command:

Here the needs are greater... to do this kind of work, than in Poland, we are doing something good here, good for Poles, we cannot shut our Polishness away and by doing this we are showing our dignity to the British. (...) As long as they are here [the Polonia] this is my mission and I don't care about my wealth, I have this mission to preserve Polishness here and the memory of them [the combatants].

This generational guard change, taking up the *mission* of preserving Polishness and the memory of WWII combatants, is a way of negotiating belonging within the larger Polish community and reaching out to the symbolic capital that was previously only available to the 'righteous' political migrants. In this manner, he does not challenge the hierarchy between Polish migrants (political and economic); on the contrary, he condemns those who focus only on their own wellbeing or the fulfilment of their personal goals:

Here the climate is a bit different, simply, not everybody wants to be Polish here (...) Polishness and religion are almost inseparable, I don't go to the church for the priest, I go there to be with the community, it has to come together, not only having a Christmas Tree and that's it. If we are to remain Catholic we must remain within the community.

His orientation towards his country of origin intertwines with his religious motivation for belonging to the nation, with Catholicism being a category of national self-identification. His interest in history focuses around battles for independence and the unappreciated, in his view, contribution of Poles to the defeat of Nazi Germany. His mission is to preserve from oblivion the memory of these men and their deeds. This memory is constructed around bravery, heroism and sacrifice on the altar of the fatherland, all of which constructs a very masculine vision of history. Interestingly, this vision of national history is based on recapturing the past greatness of the nation, which is also apparent in other narratives.

Negotiating belonging

The experience of migration shows how different categories (such as masculinity, ethnicity, geo-political location) place men variously within the matrix of social relations in the UK. Gawlewicz (2014) discusses how migrants reproduce the binary between them and the British in relation to the geo-political position, where East is considered backward in comparison to the more civilised and cultured West. This is actively contested, however. As Maciej says:

One heard so much about this West, how great it is, how beautiful. (...) I wanted to see if it is really like that. They talked about respect and that you work eight hours a day and that workers are treated well. (...) but this dreamed of West was... it didn't work like that, food was bad, and expensive, money is not as promised, we all saw it, we thought 'Oh, England', a higher civilisation [ironic] so it was a clash, a very diverse society, we have seen all these districts of London, which were not very good-looking.

Interestingly enough, this quote does not tell us as much about Maciej's actual experience of England as about his imagination of the West, in which is reflected the hidden trauma of Polish transformation. Maciej longs for the decent treatment of the workers who lost much of the protection available to them under the socialist regime. For many, the 'promised world of capitalism' (Burawoy and Verdery 1999: 4) brought insecurity and diminished welfare support. The imagined West included the promise of a better life abroad. However, the 'peculiar ambivalence of privilege' (Wojnicka and Pustulka 2017: 92) in intra-EU migration became clearly visible in the years following the 2004 EU expansion. The shift in the way in which Polish migrants were regarded – from skilful intra-EU migrants with an excellent work ethos, epitomised in the figure of 'the Polish plumber' (Noyes 2019), to undeserving Eastern Europeans 'stealing our jobs' and farming state benefits – showed how labour market positioning intersected with non-Western origin (Lafleur and Mescoli 2018) and caused a parallel shift in the positionality of migrants. This was a disappointment for many; workers felt that their hard work went unrewarded, giving rise to sentiments of disillusionment and exclusion, as expressed in Maciej's words: 'for them [British] you will never be equal, they will tell you that you are Polish'. This sense of deprivation became even more acute during the Brexit referendum campaign; people felt that their contribution to the British economy was not appreciated, as Maciej again states:

Brexit! And suddenly they looked down on us, telling us to leave and that they will be happy without the Poles. Yeah, sure, I would be happy if Poles returned and left them to stay alone with all these... let them fill this void after us, and what would they do then? They would fill it with people from faraway continents, with refugees, who will then control this country, like now in London, with the Muslim mayor.

The sense of deprivation due to feeling like a second-class citizen intertwines with a certain bitterness towards the British. In his words, the positioning is clear – the Polish workers are much more worthy, yet unappreciated,

than the less-worthy workers from *faraway*. The consequence of welcoming *them*, as he sees it, referring to the Mayor of London, is the creeping Islamisation of the country.

In their understanding of British society, the interviewees like Maciej placed a value on whiteness, which places them higher up on the social ladder in the UK, whilst even established ethnic minorities are perceived by them as ‘Others’, as being of a lower social status, as not belonging. Simultaneously, the sense of marginalisation of Polish migrants within British society intertwines with their criticism of European affairs and they see themselves as no longer deluded by what Europe claims to offer:

After all it is good that we are not amazed by Europe anymore. Look at what is happening, we [in Poland] would have all the same that is happening now in France or Germany, I mean the immigrants from Africa and so on, the terrorism (Krzysztof, aged 32).

Such views among my interviewees coincide with the opinions expressed on internet fora, showing that the creation of the discourse about the West, migration and multiculturalism is transnationally constructed within migrants’ social networks and on social media, where it can be easily expressed, embraced and reinforced (Fiałkowska 2018). Maciej’s and Krzysztof’s rants against immigrants, Islam and refugees led them to the conclusion that the freedom and hedonism which Poles observe in the UK weaken the nation but Poles are too strong to be deluded by this, according to Maciej:

For Poles it is a shock, to see it for the first time, this freedom, this liberalism, one gets used to it, it is very cool at the beginning, but later on Poles return to their roots, we are like that, we want to protect our values, and we are Christians, just like the British are, we share a common and difficult past.

In their view, the national and religious values that Polish migrants bring with them strengthen the Christian and European dimensions of British society. Similar thoughts are expressed by Filip (aged 25), who migrated to the UK to join his mother, a circular irregular migrant prior to EU accession. Filip’s adolescence was spent partially in the UK, partially in Poland; he ultimately chose to settle in the UK:

I am most angry at their democracy. People are free here but it is only for some time, they let all of them come here, you know what I mean [immigrants], I don’t accept everything that is going on here, I tolerate it but don’t accept it. Some would say ‘So why don’t you go back to Poland?’ There is that feeling that you are not in your country, but I feel European, I am in Europe, so why should I feel threatened, or fight for my place? I am not afraid, I know my rights, I pay taxes here, I work.

These interviewees talked about their perception of a Europe in decay, which they attribute to mass migration and changes in the socio-cultural landscape of European societies. As such, this perceived decay is linked to the liberal democratic system which gives more freedom to (European) citizens, but also allows ‘Others’ (whether citizens or not) to claim belonging. For my interviewees, their shared European origin serves as a resource for self-identification and a marker of belonging, regardless of the West–East binary. This feeling was also shared by those interviewees who were critical of the nationalistic attitudes expressed by others in my sample:

It is quite clear that Europe, there is this common denominator, the roots of our continent are mainly Catholic, I mean I don't consider myself a Catholic, but generally, you know what, these centuries of Christian tradition have shaped people, our mentality, the values we have are the same to the British – family is important (Janek, aged 35).

Janek's words resonate with the opening quote – *centuries of Christian tradition shaped people*, like Adam being *educated in Catholicism*. Neither of them are churchgoers nor strong believers; however they refer to the same community of values, which is a manifestation of 'secular and Christian cultural identities' (Casanova 2006: 66).

Janek has lived in the UK for 10 years and, during the interview, he often mentioned the way the English make him feel inferior, especially in inter-male relationships. He negotiated this position by proving himself at work and by using his sense of humour to deal with the cruel and vicious types of joke told in his very masculinist work environment (cf. Datta 2009). He also perceives Europeanness and religion as common denominators serving as a basis for understanding with the British, helping to minimise and negotiate the inequalities: 'religion is total bullshit, the only worth is in these Christian values, they are better than those of other religions (...)'. The alleged similar mentality of the British and the Polish, deriving from their shared Christian tradition, is something that allows the interviewees to negotiate the asymmetrical hierarchies between the British and themselves. To achieve belonging, migrants also employ strategies which they probably did not use in Poland and refer to categories of manhood (strong work ethic, reliability, moral values, patriotism), whiteness and religion.

Clash of masculinities

Intersections of gender and other categories in the migratory context can potentially subvert male privilege – cf. reactions to the inter-ethnic relations of Polish women in Siara (2009) or the perceived (un)attractiveness of Polish men abroad in Wojnicka and Młodawska (2011). This was also a recurring topic in my research when respondents realised that their Eastern European masculinity was not perceived as attractive:

Poles are often related to as Easterners, more primitive, like Russians or Lithuanians, so women look at us as if we represent a lower standard. Italian, Spanish, oh this is something different [ironically] (Janek, aged 35)

Whilst on some level, Polish migrants were intersectionally rewarded through assumed cultural proximity to the British (cf. Bell and Pustułka 2017), their Eastern Europeanness, as Janek explains, influences not only labour-market positioning (the shift from desired, yet cheap workers, to undesired/undeserving Eastern Europeans) but also their positionality in social relations. Similarly, while they are aware of their male privilege within the EU labour market (reliable, hardworking and non-threatening EU migrants) they are also aware of the intersectional power structures which place them lower on the social ladder: 'as a Pole I certainly have it easier, than, let's say, a Somali. But it is more difficult for me than, for example, a Swede' (Mateusz, aged 29).

The construction of masculinity which gave Polish men a privileged position in their country of origin may become a burden in the UK, with some Polish men experiencing being seen as barbaric or primitive, especially in relation to other masculinities, as described by Janek. This ties in with the unease which men feel about Polish women entering into inter-ethnic relationships; furthermore, they view British women as sexually promiscuous and therefore unsuitable as potential life partners. Adam, whom I quote in the opening of this paper, mentioned his date with a woman who was soon to be married, which made him rethink his dating strategy in

the UK: 'I only date Polish women. In my opinion, English women are degenerates'. This perspective was challenged by another interviewee, who interprets it as the inability of Polish men to overcome their conservative gender-relation ideals:

If any of my Polish friends entered into an inter-ethnic relationship, it was always a woman, I don't think I know of any men who wouldn't be in a relationship with a Polish girl [Author: why do you think that is?] Women are more open-minded, Polish men are more backward, closed, and these foreign women are even more open-minded and I have a feeling that some Poles wouldn't like it, these women are too emancipated, it won't be a woman who will stay at home and serve her master, so they don't like it, they are looking for Polish women (Wiktor, aged 32).

Tension arising from the fact that Polish women are sexually available to non-Polish men on the one hand and the migrants' gender-relation ideals on the other have already been observed by researchers (cf. Siara 2009) as well as by the migrants themselves, as becomes clear from the above quote. Janek (aged 35) explained how he views the inter-ethnic relationships of Polish women:

Women, you know, they are more fragile, and the first thing they do is to search for someone, for a partner to take her hands and lead her, (...), and I would say that these are mostly men from Asian or Arab countries, who are taking advantage of their position, you know what I mean? These women happen to be in a completely different culture, which could be the reason why they are so fragile as women, but then they should have searched for a European partner.

He elaborates on the notion of women who need protection and men's support. This construction of femininity relates to a context in which men should protect women and families against the unpredictable outside world (cf. Kociolowicz-Wisniewska 2017). In his view, women who find themselves outside of the socio-cultural context which they are familiar with are easily deceived. The lesser evil is when the woman finds a *European partner*; Krzysztof (aged 32) attaches a great deal of importance to this:

There is a cultural shock, cultural differences. I am not saying that women cannot enter into inter-ethnic relationships, but that they do so for no good reason. Races are mixing; it is not only Polish women but most are from Eastern Europe. Some say that, in the future, only five per cent of the population will remain white and this will be a problem. The cultural clashes are bad and the children suffer as a result. In most cases this happens when a Polish woman marries a Muslim; this is a heavy topic – children have to follow the husband's religion and then the problems start.

As in other nationalisms, women are seen as the bearers of cultures and reproducers of national boundaries (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2005; Yuval-Davis 1997), and this becomes ever more important when abroad. The clash also relates to the image of Muslim men, constructed as violent, primitive, uncultured and impulsive, also in sexual terms and therefore dangerous to women. This is contrasted with Christian masculinity, which is civilised, rational, moral and disciplined, especially when it comes to sexual relations (Nagel 1998: 245). As noted elsewhere, Christianity and whiteness have become normative and, through vocabularies of difference (civilised vs uncivilised/villainous), influence the racialised perception of men of other religions, especially Muslims (Joshi 2016: 130–131).

The way that Polish migrants emphasise whiteness, Europeanness and Christianity, and racialise other masculinities, shows how they manoeuvre to situate themselves more favourably in the British racialised status

hierarchies and make themselves similar to white British society (cf. Fox and Mogilnicka 2017). It enables them to show belonging to the same community of values and resist their migration-related lower status. The clash of masculine ethnicised Catholicism and masculine racialised Islam, brought about by encounters within multicultural society and in the shadow of the so-called refugee crisis, shows how Polish migrants navigate these hierarchies to achieve belonging. This is also evident in some of my interviewees' narratives, when they used racialised vocabularies of difference to justify the lack of acceptance of refugees and Muslim immigrants in Poland:

We can't let this happen to Poland, to see these hooded Muslims [referring to the headscarf] walking around, you know what I mean. Poland has to remain Polish, I don't say that nobody else is allowed but they should respect the country that is not theirs, they should work for this country, do everything to make that country better, and not to take their values from some primitive lands to their new country, only to destroy it and enslave it (Filip, aged 25).

The insider–outsider relationship is invoked once more with the presumption that *we* are actually talking about the same thing – ‘you know what I mean’ does not only refer to *us* being Polish and observing *this* happening to Europe (immigration and multiculturalism seen as destroying the continent) but also to *us* sharing the same opinion, as if we both know and agree upon how dire the situation is. The interviewees did not refer to how this affected them personally but to how it may affect their country of origin, in a broader sense – the imagined community. The categorical attributes here are used to construct sameness and otherness, to further delineate who is and who is not entitled to certain positions and resources (Yuval-Davis 2006: 199). Needless to say, the discourse about ‘protecting’ Poland, Europe and the European Christian identity is strongly gendered, masculinised and heteronormative and refers to power (Kociołowicz-Wiśniewska 2017).

Over-sexed men – Muslim refugees – are one threat to the nation but the ‘under-sexed wimp’, associated with homosexuality, is another as it transgresses gendered geographies and challenges heteronormativity. The heteronormativity, too, is strongly linked to the ideal of manhood and supported by nationalism and religion:

For me a woman is a woman and a man is a man. This is what the family should be like, this is how one should raise children. (...) What about the Christian values? I don't talk about religion as such but values, who will pass the values to future generations if not normal families? (Fillip, aged 25).

Piotr (aged 39), a former student at a clerical seminar and still a very faithful Catholic, elaborates on his position towards homosexuality, saying that it comes from his personal convictions and religious teachings about what is right and wrong:

Poland is a majority Catholic country, and Catholicism doesn't allow such things. Let's not pretend, this isn't normal, never was and never will be, they [persons of a homosexual orientation] will try to convince us that it is, I know them, I know what they are, but the nuclear family is the core of society, men and women. That is how we are made, it is a perfect match, and two men, perhaps platonically they can love each other, but they will never make a family.

Both interviewees refer to the normality of gender relations (often referred to as natural law – see below) and its construction within the Catholic tradition, where the duties of men and women are clearly defined. Sławek (aged 33) says: ‘If I had known what Brighton was like I would have never come here, I was shocked’. He

softens his stance on this matter; however, he still sees it as a deviation of some sort: ‘This is against nature, against natural law’.

These views are contested by some of my interviewees, whose criticisms link such views to Catholic teachings and local specificities:

I took my First Communion, I was even confirmed because, long ago, I thought I would get a Church wedding, more due to tradition. My grandma was a churchgoer and a believer, but now I absolutely don't identify with Catholicism. Christianity says that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, but this does not apply to refugees, or to gays. Polish Catholicism is very parochial when it comes to this (Wojtek, aged 32).

The equality of all human beings as the basis of religion has previously been addressed by Sojourney Truth in her speech ‘Ain't I a Woman?’ (hooks 2014); in intersectional feminist studies, religion has been also mentioned as one of the social divisions in international human-rights discourse and practice (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006). Here, too, Wojtek refers to the God-given equality of mankind and notes that Polish ethnicised Catholicism draws boundaries along ethnic/national, gender, religious and sexual lines. Some refer to Catholicism to claim that homosexuality is unacceptable and abnormal, against nature or natural law and that the nuclear family is the core of society (cf. Arcimowicz 2016; Collins 1998). Similarly, those who distance themselves from the Church see such attitudes as informed by Catholic teachings. In their arguments for equality they refer to religion as well, emphasising different aspects of Christianity than do those who strive against homosexuality.

Conclusions

The focus on religion, intersecting with gender, nation and class, has shown how it serves as a resource for self-identification and self-worth, to support social recognition and to draw boundaries in the migratory context for both those migrant men who identify with the Catholic Church and those who distance themselves from it. In their narratives my interviewees, to different extents, referred to these categories, describing in their own words how intersectionally rewarded or marginalised they are, understanding the relationality and processuality of their social positioning within the wider British society (from deserving cheap workers to socially unattractive and economically unwelcome Eastern Europeans) but also reflecting on the hierarchies of Polish migrants in the UK.

Gender and ethnicity are invariably linked to structures of domination and power relations. Negotiating their position, some of my interviewees naturalised the construction of gender differences, linking gender, nation (and ethnicity) and the concept of belonging to the (European) nation and the hierarchies and obligations derived therefrom (cf. Collins 1998). Identifying as Polish, Catholic and belonging to the ‘Christian family of nations’ is the way that my interviewees worked to achieve belonging and stressed the rightfulness of their presence in the UK. Whilst race/ethnicity/nation became proxies for religion, references to ‘Others’, especially racialised Muslims, emphasise the difference, highlighting the *us* versus *them*. The *us* have the right to belong and the *them* do not – they are uncultured and are becoming more bold and more demanding, while they should remain silent and humble given their lower status (Joshi 2016: 135). These forms of identification also help to elevate the social status of Polish migrants, allowing them to distance themselves from non-European migrants or to reduce the social distance between them and the British, as discussed in other work (cf. Fox and Mogilnicka 2017). What is more, attitudes towards Polishness and Catholicism (differently defined and at times conflated) highlight the differences between Polish migrants, as the narratives of my interviewees made clear.

Coming from a predominantly white and ethnically and religiously homogenous country – where stigmatised ‘Others’ either do not exist (like the Jews) or are marginalised (like the Roma) – Polish migrants encounter multi-ethnic society for the first time. The men not only negotiate the status hierarchies, building on the

whiteness and heritage of ‘Christian civilisation’ but also create a superiority discourse towards the UK, in which the whiteness of their country of origin is valued more than economic prosperity and viewed as something that should be protected.

I have shown how religion and religiously motivated narratives are used to overcome and resist the lower status which Polish migrants hold in the social hierarchy of the UK. As mentioned throughout the paper, the Catholic Church and religion (in the sense of belonging but not believing) is presented by some as the backbone of Polishness. Under the influence of Brexit and the current nationalist revival, which sees mass immigration from outside Europe as a threat to Christian civilisation, the alliance of nationalism and religion may be strengthened. These issues should be also analysed with reference to the extreme-right-wing movements and organisations that are gaining popularity among some Polish migrant groups in the UK (and elsewhere) and in the country of origin; more research in this direction is needed.

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Note

¹ A Catholic TV station (lit. ‘I persist’) run by the Lux Veritatis Foundation and headed by Redemptorist Father Tadeusz Rydzyk. For more on the radio and its position in the wider Polish Catholic Church and state relations, see Pędziwiatr (2015).

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