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The role of food in the Polish migrant adjustment journey

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ABSTRACT

In 2015, there were 916,000 Poles living in the UK, making them the largest group of non-UK nationals at 16.5 percent of the population. Though increasingly research has focused on the consequences of this migration for both migrants themselves and the receiving country, little research has looked at food habits. This paper will explore the role of food in the Polish migrant adjustment journey. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with nine Polish migrants.

In this study, Polish migrants described the move to a new culture as a time of stress and loneliness. Due to a lack of money, they were forced to eat local food, which exacerbated their unease, as they found it to be tasteless and unhealthy. As soon as their financial situation improved, they reverted to a Polish diet, relying on ingredients brought from home, from London, or more recently, purchased from local Polish shops. This gave them comfort, and all participants acknowledged the vital role of food in their adjustment to life in a new culture.

1. Introduction

On May 1 2004, Poland joined the European Union together with seven other eastern European countries. The 2004 UK census recorded 69,000 Poles, which rose to 916,000 in 2015, making the Poles the largest group of non-UK nationals at 16,5 percent (Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2015), and constituting one of the largest migration movements in contemporary Europe. Records for the Accession Monitoring Report (Home Office, 2009) show that between 1 May 2004 and 31 March 2009, the highest proportion of approved applicants to the UK Workers Registration Scheme was from Poland (66% of the total 965,000), which means that over half a million Polish migrants registered to work in the United Kingdom. The Statistical Bulletin issued by the Department for Work and Pensions (2015) shows that in 2014 the total number of National Insurance Number registrations was 768,000, an increase of 23% on 2013. According to the Migration Observatory (MO, 2016), the Polish-born population in the UK is widely spread across the UK, although London accommodates over 390,150 Polish-born residents (4.59% of London's population). The Midlands meanwhile is noted for hosting many industries that provide employment to about 102,473 Polish migrants, while Scotland accommodates 75,231 Poles (MO, 2015). Polish migrants to the UK are aged mainly between 20 and 24; this contrasts with the older cohorts aged 25–29 and 30–34, who tend to go to the Western European countries such as Germany (Department for Work and Pensions, 2015).

Research on Polish migrants has grown significantly over the last few years, covering a variety of topics related to the way Poles have negotiated their lives following transition to the UK. Research has focused on the social interaction patterns of Polish migrants, with Garapich (2007) and Ryan (2010) exploring social networks, and Ryan, Sales, Tilki, and Siara (2008) and White and Ryan (2008) examining links between the origin and host country. The structure of the Polish community in the UK has been investigated by numerous authors (Brown, 2003; Garapich, 2007; Spencer, Ruhs, Anderson, & Rogaly, 2007; Temple & Koterba, 2009; White & Ryan, 2008). Meanwhile Rabikowska (2010) has considered the importance of traditional food to migrants, whilst Rabikowska and Burrell (2009) have explored the proliferation of Polish shops in British cities. Identity issues have been the subject of research (Eade, Drinkwater, & Garapich, 2006; Egger, 2011; Kempny, 2010; Kosic, 2006), related to which are studies of church attendance (Burrell, 2006), economic income and status (Bobek & Salamonska, 2008; Eade & Grapich, 2007; Nowicka, 2012), and language difficulties (Janta, Lugosi, Brown, & Ladkin, 2012; Lyon & Sulcova, 2009). Finally, the extent of Polish migrant integration with the host community and other ethnic groups has been the subject of research attention (Burrell, 2009; Datta & Brickell, 2009; Nowicka,

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2012, 2014; Ryan, 2010).

This paper will explore the role of food in the Polish migrant adjustment journey. A literature search shows that there is a gap in knowledge on the role of food in the Polish migration experience. As Locher, Yoels, Maurer, and van Ells (2005) point out, food and emotions are interlinked, therefore it is to be expected that it will occupy an important role in the migrant adjustment process.

2. The adjustment journey

Migration is a global phenomenon. Between 2010 and 2013, around 1.4 million non-EU nationals, excluding asylum seekers and refugees, immigrated into the EU each year (Eurostat, 2015). In the United Kingdom, the number of migrants reached 7,550,000 in 2011 (ONS, 2013). According to the UNPD (United Nations Population Division, 2015), an international migrant is someone who has been living for at least one year in a country other than the one, in which they were born. Moving to a new cultural environment is one of the most traumatic events an individual can experience, provoking some degree of culture shock (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Culture shock is defined as anxiety that results from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, and their substitution by other cues that are strange (Hall, 1995). It is likened by many writers to a period of mourning for the home world, characterised by feelings of grief and separation anxiety (Garza-Guerrero, 1974). The severity and duration of difficulties experienced during this period is influenced by many factors including personality, purpose of visit and cultural distance (Hofstede, 2001; Sulkovski & Deakin, 2009).

There is limited consensus and clarity as to what adjustment means, as the construct has been described and measured in varying ways and from several perspectives and various models have been put forward. Once arrived in the new culture, migrants are faced with several acculturation strategies. According to Berry (1997, p. 31), acculturation is: *'the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members.'* Berry offers a fourfold model of acculturation distinguishing four adjustment approaches, namely: *assimilation* - rejecting the legacy of the old culture and adopting the new culture; *segregation* - maintaining ethnic identity, heritage, and traditions; *integration* - adopting certain aspects of the new culture, while maintaining some cultural identity; *marginalization* - rejection of heritage and refusal of an association with the leading group. An additional strategy is that of *multiculturalism*, which implies the willingness of all cultural groups to be accepting, tolerant and accommodating of other cultures and, at the same time, preserving their own ethnic identity. Brown and Holloway (2008) emphasise that no one model can accurately describe or predict the adjustment journey, which is experienced differently according to a host of individual, environmental and cultural factors. In addition, it is important to note that migrants may adopt different strategies in differing parts of their life.

3. Food and adjustment

Anthropologists highlight the role of food in group identity (see Toussaint-Samat, 2009; Tannahil, 1995), with food habits being ingrained in group members during the process of socialisation (Fieldhouse, 1995). Food habits represent a central element of culture: overall they are stable, enduring and resistant to change (Finkelstein, 1999; Hall, 1995). The move to a new culture however may alter or challenge dietary practices (Edwards, Hartwell, & Brown, 2010). There may be a tendency among migrants towards food neophobia, defined as the rejection of foods that are novel or unknown (Dovey, Staples, Gibson, & Halford, 2008). Rogers, Anderson, and Clark (2009) qualify this definition by stating that openness to change is more common in industrialized countries and among the higher socioeconomic groups of a society. Nevertheless, some change may be inevitable, at least in the early stages of transition to a new culture (Brown, 2009).

Changing food habits has been linked however with negative health effects among migrants. Research has shown that migrants are unlikely to be overweight or obese upon arrival in a western country, but that they slowly converge to native-born levels over time (McDonald & Kennedy, 2005). This is supported by Rabikowska (2010) who observes a link in Polish migrants between eating British food and gaining weight gain. A higher incidence of obesity and diabetes among migrants has been associated with an increased consumption of Western style food (Burns, 2004; Gordon-Larsen, Harris, Ward, & Popkin, 2003; Kedia, 2004; Saleh, Amanatidis, & Samman, 2002). Researchers have also focused on changes in diet among the growing number of international students worldwide, and a similar association between weight gain and the adoption of a western diet has been made (Brown, 2009; Edwards et al., 2010; Pan, Dixon, Himburg, & Huffman, 1999).

There is a relationship between diet and adjustment level, according to McDonald and Kennedy (2005) who found that Hispanics with higher levels of acculturation ate less fruits and vegetables than those with lower acculturation levels. Fat usage was also different; the less adapted used less fat and oil products when preparing food than non-Hispanic highly adapted peers. Ayala, Baquero, and Klinger (2008) also note that the health of Latinos' diet deteriorates during the acculturation process. Meanwhile, a reduction in the number of meals eaten has also been observed: Pakistani and Sri-Lanka migrants to Norway reduced their consumption of three daily hot meals to one-and-a-half, to meet the host country rules, mainly due to work pattern changes but also the type of weather (Wandel, Raberg, Kumar, & Holmboe-Ottesen, 2008). Pérez-Escamilla (2009) asks a pertinent question then: does acculturation make people sick?

Returning to the focus of the current study, Burrell (2009) states that Poles in the UK integrate quickly and successfully into British society and include British citizens in their social networks. This does not imply that Polish migrants assimilate into British culture and give up their Polish identity, however. Indeed, offering support for the claim that dietary habits are highly resistant to change (Finkelstein, 1999), Burrell (2009) and Sklepynawyspach (2010) observe that Polish migration has been accompanied by a rapid proliferation of Polish food shops, delis and cafes on British streets. Rabikowska and Burrell (2009) use such evidence to indicate the important role that food plays in maintaining emotional links with home. In her ethnographic study of Polish migrants in London, Rabikowska (2010) notes that the act of preparing and consuming Polish food bolsters a sense of collective identity at the same time as denoting a distinction and a distance from the host culture. Food, according to Rabikowska, allows a migrant to feel belonging with the culture they left behind. Particularly important to Polish migrants are food objects from home which evoke nostalgia such as traditional sweets. As Rabikowska notes, Polish shops allow Polish migrants in the UK to buy traditional foodstuffs, which is vital to their ability to replicate traditional dishes. Rabikowska also indicates the importance of food parcels sent from home, and the food items that 'dominate in the hand luggage on the cheap flights between the UK and Poland' (p. 389).

4. Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore the role of diet in the adjustment process of Polish migrants. A qualitative approach was