



Humanising migrant women's work



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ABSTRACT

Female migrants make an important contribution to the global tourism industry yet their employment experiences and histories are poorly understood. This paper draws on a phenomenological position to explore the life-world and ten-year employment trajectory of one highly skilled Polish immigrant to the UK as told through her own voice and artwork. It challenges prevailing de-personalised and gender-blind accounts of tourism migrant workers, and demonstrates the methodological potential of one-voice research to humanise the female migrant experience, document long-term employment trajectories and foreground complex working lives. The paper provides nuanced understanding of intersectional gendered and ethnic marginalisation in the labour market and explores the ways in which employment creates spaces for both oppression and self-determination for precarious workers.

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Introduction

Humanising explorations of migrant experiences could not be timelier in light of contemporary debates over global migration governance, trans-regionalism and national identity, and the politicization of immigration and integration, especially in Europe and North America (Koopmans, Lancee, & Schaeffer, 2016). Contrary to popular misconceptions, it is skilled women who are at the forefront of many contemporary migration movements (Kofman, 2012) and their migration behaviour, use of social networks and employment challenges and opportunities differ markedly from men's (Anthias, Kontos, & Morokvasic-Muller, 2013; Dyer, McDowell, & Batnitzky, 2010; Lugosi, Janta, & Wilczek, 2017). Such migrant workers are hugely important to the global visitor economy and, whilst they have recently attracted increased attention (e.g. Baum et al., 2007; Janta, 2011; Janta & Ladkin, 2009; Janta, Ladkin, Brown, & Lugosi, 2011; McDowell, Batnitzky, & Dyer, 2008; Slavnic, 2013), studies have not focused specifically on migrant women to examine their intersectional experiences.

Migrant women are triply disadvantaged in tourism employment as female, foreign and often low-status workers (Rydzik, Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley, 2013). Regardless of their skills and qualifications, they occupy predominantly low-paid, gendered and racialized roles and as a result, are vulnerable to exploitation and deskilling (Baum, 2013). This paper presents and analyses the story of Kasia, a Polish migrant, now in her 30s, as told through a series of in-depth interviews and her own artwork. Poles constitute 'the single largest foreign national group resident in the UK' (Pollard, Latorre, & Sriskandarajah, 2008: 5) and many young, white, highly skilled, single Polish women work in the UK visitor economy. This

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paper seeks insights into their experiences and argues for greater inclusion of the subjective voices of migrant women and nuanced explorations of their working lives. As such, it challenges both tourism studies' reliance on multi-voice interviews and its gender-blind, de-personalised and homogenised representations of workers (Veijola, 2009a,b).

As a study drawing on a phenomenological position and discussing sensitive issues of personal identity, it employed a person-centred, participant-led methodology. This approach is favoured by scholars in fields such as mental health and psychology (e.g. Gilbert, Rose, & Slade, 2008), where highly personalised testimonies have informed research and policy agendas, precisely because they embody emotion, experience, agency and individuality (Ray, 2007). Central to this approach are the principles of critical humanism, which pay 'tribute to human subjectivity and creativity – showing how individuals respond to social constraints and actively assemble social worlds' and particularly focus on 'concrete human experiences – talk, feelings, actions...' (Plummer, 1983: 5). With so many accounts of migrant workers framed by negative media and political discourses, which reduce migrants' lives to homogenising descriptions, it is appropriate to turn to the subjective lived experience. By humanising an individual female migrant worker in this way, the paper provides a rich account of Kasia's complex post-migration experience and shifts the focus from the industry to the employee (Veijola, 2009a). It also demonstrates the capacity of one-voice research to complement traditional qualitative approaches in developing holistic understandings of employee lived experiences (Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016; Slavnic, 2013). Here, Kasia's testimony and artwork provide a fine-grained exposition of the complexities of her workplace experiences and interactions and reveal how her tourism employment is both a realm of intersectional marginalisation and an opportunity for personal empowerment.

Literature review

Migrant women, mobilities and working lives

Migrant women are typically considered to be unskilled and therefore receive less scholarly attention than skilled migrant men (Kofman, 2012). Skilled migrant women actually outnumber migrant men but are disproportionately affected by deskilling processes, which depreciate their cultural and social capital (Dumont, Martin, & Spielvogel, 2007). Migrant women's skills and qualifications are overwhelmingly under-valued in receiving countries, meaning they are often over-qualified for their jobs and/or work in sectors outside of their fields of expertise with low entry thresholds (Kofman, 2012), such as tourism (Sinclair, 1997). Women represent a high proportion of the visitor economy's migrant workforce, predominantly filling lower-skilled, lower-paid, and gendered positions, such as hotel housekeeper and receptionist (Ladkin, 2011). In the UK after 2004, white, young, single and educated EU8 migrant women filled many of its customer-facing roles, such as reception work, regarded as *white women's work* (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). EU8 is the term given to the eight Central and Eastern European countries (CEE), Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, that joined the European Union (EU) in 2004. Although they are often 'othered' in media discourses (Fox, Moroşanu, & Szilassy, 2012), EU8 migrant women's whiteness constitutes a significant advantage in positions where emotional (Hochschild, 1983) and aesthetic labour (Nickson, Warhurst, Witz, & Cullen, 2001) form an inseparable element of their job (Dyer et al., 2010).

Over-represented in unskilled low-paid jobs, EU8 migrant women are often exposed to exploitation and tend to accept poor working conditions, even though since the 2004 EU enlargement they currently constitute a legitimate UK workforce. In a 'migrant dense' industry like tourism, where over a fifth of all UK visitor economy workers were born outside the UK (People 1st, 2013), there is a risk that migrants 'could fall into the role of a semi-exploited (if often compliant) "underclass", with limited long-term prospects for social mobility and integration' (Sumption & Somerville, 2010: 29). Moreover, as tourism employers often classify migrants according to their country of origin, rather than their qualifications (Dyer et al., 2010), they regard EU8 migrants as willing to do any kind of job due to their superior tourism employability skills, positive work attitudes and good customer service skills (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly, & Spencer, 2006; Lyon & Sulcova, 2009). Nevertheless, EU8 migrants earn the least (Sumption, 2010) and have the lowest rates of return on their education of any UK immigrant group (Drinkwater, Eade, & Garapich, 2006) as employers 'assume that they [are] only capable of low-skilled work' (Baum et al., 2007: 237). Hence, EU8 citizens largely work in a precarious labour market with poor working conditions, which disproportionately affect women (Currie, 2009). Yet, very few challenge exploitative employment practices due to the cost, time and dismissal risk, which tribunals entail (Barnard, 2014). This prevalence of exploitation and harassment in tourism's low-paid and un-unionised workplaces are well established (Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Hoel & Einarsen, 2003), but few studies examine the intersection of gender, ethno-nationality and migration.

Intersectionality and translocational positionality

Several theoretical frameworks have been applied to gendered labour divisions and labour market inequalities, including 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983), 'interactive work' (Leidner, 1993), aesthetic labour (Nickson et al., 2001), 'body work' (Wolkowitz, 2006), interpellation (McDowell, Batnitzky, & Dyer, 2007) and performing (Kensbock, Jennings, Bailey, & Patiar, 2016). In this paper intersectionality is a key concept (Browne & Misra, 2003; Collins, 1990; McDowell, 2008; Valentine, 2007). Intersectionality emerged from black feminism and centres on those whose voices are ignored, examining the junc-

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