SAGE Research Methods Cases

Interviewing Polish Migrant Women in the United Kingdom and Poland

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Migration from the 'new' European Union Member States to the United Kingdom has been identified as one of the most significant social phenomena of recent times. Evidence shows that migrant women constitute a large proportion of international migrants. When considering migration within the European context, migrant women outnumber their male counterparts. Even though gendered studies of migration are now attaining recognition, there is limited literature in relation to Polish migrant women. Drawing on preliminary findings from new fieldwork research undertaken in Poland and the United Kingdom in 2012, this case study focuses on research undertaken to explore how Polish migrant women exercise their rights as European Union citizens to better their own and their families' well-being. This is a qualitative research study conducted with the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews. This case study focuses on sampling, recruitment issues and challenges encountered in the data collection process. The benefits of studying depth, of the active involvement of the researcher and the researcher's relationship with the participants and the data are explored. This case study showcases issues relating to reflexivity as the research was conducted from a gendered perspective. The data gathered was analysed using thematic analysis.

Learning Outcomes

This case provides an account of a doctoral research from start to finish and is designed to give new researchers an understanding of the real-life methodological and personal issues linked to conducting research. By the end of this case study, you should

- Understand the impact that doing research can have on researchers and those that are researched
- Understand the complexity of conducting cross-national research that involves more than one country

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- Better understand the complexities of doing research with the use of new technologies, for example, communication software such as Skype

Rationale for the Study

Lipszyc (2004) posed the question, 'following traditional gender roles, when women break geographical ties, do they gain independence?' (p. 21). This research aimed to shed some light on this particular issue. Previous research noted that migration can have a positive effect on migrant women and their status (Castles & Miller, 2003). Through migration, many women become more autonomous and independent as they gain income and respect which positively affects their self-esteem. Arguably, through migrating, women are constantly exposed to new social and cultural norms and different lifestyles which may affect their views on the values they were taught in their home country. All of this may have positive consequences when it comes to gender equality in their country of origin (Caritas, 2011). This may be the case especially when the women in question decide to return to their home countries and bring back not only financial remittances but social (e.g. work/life experience, language skills) and human (e.g. contacts, networks) remittances too.

This research explored the gendered roles of Polish migrant women and how these were affected by the migratory process(es). The researcher asked whether or not migration has emancipated women from their often traditional gender roles and how, if at all, their gendered responsibilities with respect to work (paid and unpaid) and welfare (formal and informal) were altered as a result of their migratory movements between Poland and the United Kingdom. This project focused on migrant women not as passive followers and dependants of men but active decision-makers. Some researchers have argued that female migration is not understudied per se, but rather that the existing body of academic literature on migration has persisted with its male bias (Morokvasic, 1983). Despite this being written several decades ago, it can be argued that this is still the case today, and so the aim of this project was to provide some balance to the existing literature and fill the gap in the literature in regard to Polish migrant women and gender (Pascall & Kwak, 2005). This PhD research project started in October 2011; it is expected that it will be completed in October 2014. The fieldwork was conducted

between October 2012 and February 2013. The work is supported by a University of Salford scholarship.

The Researcher's Role(s)

Arguably, it is inevitable that research is affected by the researcher's own specific positioning (Stanley & Wise, 1990). In the case presented here, this proved to be to my advantage as I am a Polish migrant woman and so were the research participants. My dual identity was particularly important here; I am a Polish migrant woman and a researcher at the same time and had to negotiate the two roles throughout the course of the research. It should be noted that women talking to (interviewing) other women may be more effective than male researchers undertaking the same task (Oakley, 1981).

I adopted the *insider's stance* (cf. Blaikie, 2007) which requires the researcher to be thoroughly immersed in the participants' world and make use of their own experiences. I also took the role of *an expert* and made use of the existing knowledge on the subject. This kind of relationship is seen as particularly useful because of my identities (i.e. a migrant woman, a researcher, a Polish national). This was viewed as an advantage here as I wished to marry the two – the existing knowledge on the topic and my own experiences – and analyse these with the data from the fieldwork. This enabled me to compare and contrast versatile data sources and achieve more accurate results. I took the role of a *familiar stranger* (Agarwal, Liu, Murthy, Sen, & Wang, 2009). This is to symbolise that I was somewhat similar to the research participants, but at the same time, I was a stranger in the sense that I took the role of the researcher gathering information on fellow migrant women who could have had various, very different experiences. I, as both expert and insider, aimed to compare the accounts of the inside and the outside.

With regard to the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, it is important to decide whether to do the research *on*, for or *with* people. However, because of the methodological choices explained later, I wished to be a *reflective partner*, a *conscientizer*, with the aim to better the participants' situation in some way (Blaikie, 2007). This was achieved by giving them a voice and opportunity to be heard,

thus providing more balance to the existing literature on citizenship in relation to migrant women.

Research Questions

The research aimed to explore and unpack three research questions:

- 1. How does gender impact Polish migrant women's lives?
- 2. How, if at all, has migration impacted Polish migrant women's roles as carers and workers?
- 3. How do Polish migrant women manage their roles over time and space?

The Field Research

Prior to fieldwork, all relevant ethical issues were addressed (i.e. voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, secure storage) and ethical approval received. After ensuring these were sound, data collection started with fieldwork planning: designing the interview topic guide, conducting pilot interviews and making any necessary amendments. The next step consisted of conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews in the North West of England. This part of England was chosen as the area with the second highest population density in England. At first, the county of Greater Manchester was chosen due to its vibrant international community and its being the destination for many migrants. However, I felt that Greater Manchester may be too narrow and, as a result, limit the scope of the research. Hence, the North West area was chosen due to my established links with the migrant community. I already had excellent links with Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants and organisations working with them in the area through my work at one of the voluntary community organisations. The fieldwork in the North West was followed by a period of fieldwork in Poland, where I again used my links to get in touch with returnees. Snowballing was also adopted to identify suitable individuals who fit the selection criteria to be included in the sample (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). I asked each of the UK-based respondents whether they knew of anyone who had returned to Poland and, if so, whether I could be put in touch with them.

Research Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted from a gendered perspective as this was suitable for exploring gender roles and migrant women. This is particularly relevant because migration has, for a long time, been androcentric, with women essentially being invisible although physically present (Morokvasic, 2004; Oakley, 1981; Phizacklea, 1983). I was initially inspired by and followed the principles of some earlier feminist scholars who argued that their research has to be based on women's experiences (Finch, 1991) and that 'the cultural background of the researcher is part of the evidence' (Blaikie, 2007, p. 166). Arguably, researchers need to recognise that women cannot be treated as research objects and that subjectivity is not necessarily unscientific or unwanted (Stanley & Wise, 1990). Here, the interview is seen as a conversation ('conversation with a purpose', Oakley, 1981) between two (or more) fellow women who both have something important and/or interesting to say and want to listen to each other and exchange experiences.

The project was underpinned by the view that knowledge in social sciences has a male bias and balance is needed (Finch, 1991). The following four principles were adopted: (1) active involvement of the researcher, (2) aiming to explore the experiences and opinions of women, (3) recognising the need to combine the knowledge and experience of research partners – the researcher and the research participants, and (4) generally aiming to improve women's lives in some way (Becker & Bryman, 2004).

Research Method: Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews were the chosen research tools. They were selected to give depth of information and to allow informal conversation and, when and where appropriate, new questions to be formulated as a result of the interviewee's responses. Interviews were favoured over structured questionnaires because the latter provide only a limited chance of explaining social phenomena due to their more rigid structure. They were also favoured over the use of focus groups because the topic may be too sensitive to be explored in a group setting. Moreover, the depth of understanding

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and flexibility which can be achieved through interviewing made it appropriate for this qualitative research project (cf. Babbie, 2004).

An interview, on average, took approximately 50 min. During the interviews, women were encouraged to talk about their migration history and its impact on the following: work – paid and unpaid (public/private dichotomy); welfare – formal and informal; career and financial autonomy (i.e. work–life balance); and general quality of life (i.e. UK welfare system). Additional field notes were taken during and/or immediately after completing each of the interviews to record preliminary thoughts in regard to the respondents and any potential categories and themes for data analysis.

From the outset, I felt that the research participants should be offered incentives for their willingness to spare their time and share their opinions with (essentially) a stranger. Thanks to the Jagiellonian University in Poland and its Polish Research Centre in London research grant, this was possible. The research grant enabled me to travel across Poland to meet with the respondents and award them for their time. Each of the interviewees was offered £10 or its equivalent (50PLN) as a thank-you gesture, a sum they were not aware of when they were recruited. Potential interviewees knew there would be a small amount given out as a thank-you because this was included in the participant information sheet, but they did not know the actual amount. Thus, because the amount was not stated and I did not mention this until after an interview was completed, the incentives could not have played a decisive role. In the situation when the respondent was unwilling or uncomfortable accepting the incentive, I donated it to a charity chosen by the research participant.

Internet Interviews

Arguably, Internet interviews provide an excellent way of reaching those who are far away. Because of the development of the new communication technologies, researchers can now conduct interviews regardless of geographical distance. Furthermore, Internet interviews, as opposed to interviews to which the researcher has to travel, are very inexpensive; in fact, the costs are close to zero. Furthermore, 'the interviews take place in real time and, include visual contact between the interviewer and the interviewee' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 190). It can be asserted, that no data are

lost, or that the same amount of data are lost as when conducting standard interviews. This made Internet interviews an ideal way of carrying out the interviews with Poland-based participants, when necessary.

Given the potential dispersal of the respondents in Poland, it was assumed that I would, at some point, conduct Internet interviews. This was done only when the respondent had access to a stable Internet connection, communication software such as Skype installed and a webcam. Although I had access to all of these technologies, I did my best to minimise the number of interviews conducted this way as I believe interviews conducted in person are invaluable. This is why I intended to undertake fieldwork in the United Kingdom first, and ask each of the UK-based interviewees whether they knew any other women who having lived in the United Kingdom for a minimum of 6 months returned to Poland and whether they would agree to being contacted (i.e. snowballing). By utilising this snowball technique, I was able to plan my trips to the places in Poland where the respondents were based. However, it was anticipated that it may prove to be a difficult task to visit everyone in person. Having taken into account that I had only a limited amount of time and, perhaps more importantly, resources, Internet interviews seemed to be the perfect solution. Therefore, I decided to carry out Internet interviews as a last resort and only when I had exhausted all other options.

In total, six interviews were conducted through the Internet using communication software (Skype). All six of those interviewees were based in Poland and had no objections to being interviewed in this way. Two of the Internet interviews were conducted without a webcam on the participants' part. While it was explained that a camera is necessary, due to unforeseen circumstances, respondents did not or wished not to use it. It was not ideal, but I decided to carry out the interviews regardless of the lack of video communication technology. I felt that the possible disappointment of the interviewee may be greater than the difficulty with which I had to conduct the interview. Those two interviews were, perhaps not surprisingly, quite challenging as I found it difficult to recognise when the respondent was taking time to think and when she was ready for the next question. Besides, during conversations, seeing the other person's face extends trust and makes the conversation less artificial. As a result, in these two interviews, some information was impossible to gather, such as non-verbal communication (e.g. nodding, body language).

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The Sample

Strategic purposive sampling was adopted (Mason, 2002). This sampling strategy is particularly appropriate when aiming to approach those individuals who fit the sampling criteria and who are recognised as those who could potentially make a considerable contribution and generally have something to offer when it comes to the area under research. This sampling strategy was also seen as relevant to this study because the sampling criteria were very specific. The sample consisted of two groups of women who identify themselves as being of Polish origin. For the purpose of this research project, Polish origin was understood as being born in Poland and Polish being the native language of research participants. As already described, snowball, or chain, sampling was also employed (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003, p. 94).

In total, 32 interviews were conducted: 16 with Polish migrant women in the United Kingdom, who migrated to the United Kingdom after 2004 and continue to live in the United Kingdom; and 16 with Polish return migrant women in Poland, who migrated to the United Kingdom after 2004, lived in the United Kingdom for at least 6 continuous months but who have subsequently relocated back to Poland. The number of interviews was decided during the course of the project and was determined by the point at which new data ceased to emerge from the interviews (i.e. sampling until reaching data saturation point; Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). I recognised that it may be a challenge to identify appropriate research participants given the specific sample selection criteria and the fact that individuals who fit these criteria may not be easy to locate, especially in Poland and, if found, may not wish to take part. Moreover, I was permanently based in the United Kingdom. Overall, being successful in securing and carrying out 32 interviews is satisfactory.

The sample included individuals from different age ranges but of working age (between 18 and 65 years old), who are of different socio-economic characteristics, who have been living in the United Kingdom for different lengths of time (not less than 6 months) and who are of different relationship status (i.e. married/single/in relationship, with/ without children). For the purpose of this research project, 6 months is seen as the minimal time needed for migrants to settle in their new environment and develop links with the established communities. I recognise 6 months as enough time to, at least,

be able to notice the different communities and different lifestyles of others living 'next door'. To achieve as diverse sample as possible, its composition was regularly reviewed and reflected on.

Locating Respondents and Negotiating Access

As stated above, the fieldwork was conducted in the United Kingdom and in Poland. The UK interviews were conducted first, which was to enable snowballing and identifying individuals who fit the sample selection criteria and can be classed as return migrants. However, using snowball sampling when interviewing the UK-based women to locate individuals living in Poland resulted in a wide spread of women in different parts of Poland. Given the research project timescale and resources, it would have been extremely difficult for me to travel to all those locations. Therefore, I travelled to some of those interview locations, depending on how far they were from my place of birth where I had access to free accommodation provided by my family. Those respondents, who lived in the opposite parts of Poland and to whom travelling would have been extremely difficult, were invited to participate in an Internet interview, provided that they had the appropriate equipment and willingness to do so.

A number of UK-based participants were recruited through various agencies working in the North West of England (e.g. Europia, Open Culture Project, Rainbow Haven, Greater Manchester Pay and Employment Rights Advice Service, Migrants Supporting Migrants) and their contacts or partners. The Poland-based participants were selected through already established contacts in some of Poland's major cities. Snowballing proved to be useful when trying to find participants in Poland, as the sample selection criteria made it relatively difficult to find potential respondents. For this reason, Internet interviews were conducted (Denscombe, 2010).

Popular social networking sites such as Facebook were very useful in locating potential respondents. It seemed that people were happier to use such sites than their email accounts. It was also clear that those sites were not only more popular among my interviewees but they were accessed more regularly. More importantly, social

networking sites are more likely to be associated with friends and socialising rather than work, so the response rate to a casual invitation to take part in a research project received on a social networking site may be higher and viewed more positively than when received by email. Therefore, Facebook was treated as a tool when trying to locate and recruit potential respondents. This is not to say that random individuals were approached. Quite the contrary, on several occasions, after making sure I had a provisional 'yes' from a friend of a potential respondent, I sent a message through Facebook outlining the research and asking for this person's personal email address. This meant that I had to take extra care in making sure that my profile was professional but still fairly casual and that it provided relevant information about my background so that it was clear in what capacity I was approaching others.

Ethics

The research was carried out in compliance with the Social Policy Association Guidance on Research Ethics as these are of particular relevance. Throughout the research, I was mindful of any arising ethical issues. The research and data collection process were based on two principles: informed consent and confidentiality. The overall aim and objectives of the research were explained to potential participants prior to the interview. Each participant had the right and opportunity to ask questions and/or withdraw (without reason) at any stage of the research process. All participants were asked to sign consent forms prior to the start of the interview. All participants were also asked whether they consented to being voice recorded. It was explained to participants that voice recordings were desired so that eye contact could be maintained during the interview and to ensure that information is not lost during the transcription process; participants were also assured that I would be the only person listening to the recordings. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, where possible, subject to the limits imposed by harm minimisation. To maximise confidentiality and to increase the feeling of research ownership among respondents, all participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves. The research participants were informed that the research findings will be published as a PhD thesis, in academic journals, and presented at national and international conferences. I also ensured my own safety by carrying a mobile phone. To not breach anonymity of the respondents, I left the address

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of the interview location in a sealed envelope, to be opened only in an emergency situation (e.g. if I had not returned for several hours).

When asked personal questions linked to my migratory experiences, I gave an honest and detailed answer. It is, of course, difficult to totally eliminate the interviewer effect, if at all possible (Denscombe, 2010); however, I believe it was minimal given that I shared gender, ethnic origin, nationality, native language and often age range with the respondents. At all times, I tried to ensure I did not come across as superior in any way or the one in the position of power. I believe I was successful in achieving this as I was referred to as 'one of us' on several occasions (expressions such as 'you know how it is, you've been there' confirmed this). I endeavoured, at all times, to be sensitive to the cultural, religious and socio-economic background of the research participants.

Handling of Data: Bilingual Research

Translation issues should also be considered here as the research study involved two languages: Polish and English. On the one hand, I was based at a British university and all of the documents had to be available in the English language. On the other hand, I was researching Polish migrant women as one of them, and therefore, certain documents needed to be also available in Polish to enable the participants to choose the language they felt most comfortable with. However, working with two languages posed some important matters in regard to translation and language equivalency.

In the end, all of the interviews were conducted in the Polish language. I did not intend to encourage interviewing in the Polish language only, but felt this language was more appropriate with regard to the respondents whose first language was Polish. I did not transcribe from one language to another (i.e. from Polish to English) as this could have resulted in losing valuable interview data; therefore, a dual-language interview set was used for coding and analysis. Providing all of the transcriptions in English would also involve searching for and employing a professional translator which would increase the costs of the study. Therefore, the ecological approach to translation was adopted (Jagosh & Boudreau, 2009). According to this approach, finding equivalent concepts in different languages is not always possible. It does not propose giving up the search for linguistic equivalences across languages, but it sees both – the original and the

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translated version – to be equally valuable and any translation discrepancies as valid research findings. This approach accepts the non-transferability of language, thus it was particularly well suited here, especially because perhaps the most important notion to this study, the term *citizenship* has no adequate equivalent in Polish. It would normally be translated to *obywatelstwo*; however, this word has arguably a narrower meaning than *citizenship*. What is more, it is difficult to compare the two as the two countries in question, due to history, have more (United Kingdom) or less (Poland) developed civic society and what comes with it notions such as citizenship and its understanding.

Conclusion

The complex process of conducting research often proves to be challenging, but it is also extremely rewarding. Playing an active part in it and knowing that we can contribute to the theoretical developments in our field is a privilege. Additionally, gathering new knowledge on the topic that interests us is an exciting opportunity.

Here are a few words of warning. Plan your research thoroughly, try to think of every possible eventuality and be prepared for situations you did not predict. During my research, for instance, a couple of interviewees got very emotional while telling their migration history. What is more, one of them was during an Internet interview, which made it particularly challenging (but at the same time seemed almost cathartic). Be confident and professional, after all, you designed your study and you are the expert when it comes to your research. Make sure you know your project's strengths and weaknesses and be prepared to make changes as your research progresses. It is important to realise that social research does not have firm guidelines, so to succeed, you need to be motivated and good at time management. Most of all, remember that it is a process, not many get it right the first time.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1. How might the use of Internet interviews impact the interview process? Think of their positive and negative influences.

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- 2. Do you have any ethical concerns about any aspect of this study? If so, which aspects, and why?
- 3. Are there any difficulties in conducting cross-national research? If so, what are they?
- 4. What can we as researchers do to prepare for, or minimise, the impact of doing research?
- 5. The researcher in this study interviewed women only. How would the research change if men were also included? Explain.
- 6. The researcher who carried out this study is also a Polish migrant. How, if at all, would the study change if it was carried out by a British researcher? Explain how shared characteristics may impact the research.
- 7. What advantages and disadvantages of bilingual research can you think of?

Further Reading

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Web Resources

Office for National Statistics: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html

Official website of the European Union: http://europa.eu/

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