

**Title: The experiences of Accession 8 migrants in England: Motivations, work and agency.**

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**Abstract**

Drawing on a recently completed qualitative study in a northern, English city this paper explores motivations and experiences of Accession 8 migrants who have entered the UK following the expansion of the European Union in 2004. The paper considers commonalities and differences among the group of migrants routinely referred to as A8 migrant workers/labourers. Diversity is apparent in respect of three particular aspects. First, the motivations and forms of movement undertaken. Second, their experiences of work within the UK paid labour market. Third, the extent to which the act and experience of migration offers new individual and collective opportunities and potentially opens up spaces for people to negotiate structural constraints and reconfigure aspects of their identity.

**Key words**

Accession 8 migrants, diversity, work, agency, motivations.

## Introduction

Following enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004, when rights to live and work in the EU were granted to nationals of the Accession 8 (A8) countries<sup>i</sup>, it is estimated that in excess of one million Central and Eastern European migrants have arrived in the UK (Pollard *et al.* 2008). The UK has proved to be a popular destination for these new European citizens for several reasons. First and foremost, although transitional arrangements allowed old Member States a seven year phasing in period for the extension of rights to A8 nationals, the UK was one of only three<sup>ii</sup> among the existing 15 EU Member States that granted A8 migrants immediate access to the paid labour market (PLM). The requirement that those who wish to seek paid work first have to enrol on the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) does not appear to have acted as an impediment. Between May 1<sup>st</sup> 2004 to September 30<sup>th</sup> 2007, 715,000 A8 migrants' requests to work in the UK were approved by the Home Office (Lemos and Portes, 2008). Additionally, a long sustained period of economic growth (which has now ended), a favourable disparity in wage earning potential between A8 migrants' countries of origin and the UK, alongside a comparatively low and differentiated (regressive) tax system all helped to make the UK an attractive proposition for A8 migrants looking to exercise their new right to freedom of movement as EU citizens (Stenning *et al.* 2006).

Some previous discussions of A8 migration (e.g. Home Office, 2006) have characterised the typical central/eastern European migrant entering the UK as a

young, single, Polish male, migrating on a temporary basis to make some money before returning home. Whilst there is an element of truth in this stereotype, this paper argues that viewing all A8 migrants as merely short-term economic opportunists is too simplistic. The factors underpinning the migration of many A8 migrants are more complicated and the importance of gender and ethnicity in mediating the motivations behind and, experiences of, migration need to be acknowledged. As Ryan *et al.* (2009) recognise, the expansion of the EU opens up a range of new options for A8 migrants from which a diversity of movements may ensue; from permanent residence at one end of the scale, to more fleeting circulatory and multiple short-term moves at the other.

Against this backdrop, and drawing on qualitative data generated in a study completed in March 2008, the paper considers the experiences of A8 migrants who have recently relocated to a major city in northern England. Although this research reveals a number of commonalities amongst A8 migrants it also implies heterogeneity within the group often categorised simply as ‘new A8 migrant labourers/workers’. Diversity is apparent in respect of three particular aspects. First, the motivations and forms of movement undertaken by A8 migrants. Second, their experiences of work within the UK paid labour market. Third, the extent to which the act and experience of migration offers new individual and collective opportunities and potentially opens up spaces for people to negotiate structural constraints and reconfigure aspects of their identity. This last issue requires an analysis of A8 migrants’ lives that considers both changing broader/macro frameworks (e.g. the extension of freedom of movement rights, differences in wage levels and/or the cost of living between sending and receiving

countries, shortages or surpluses of labour in sectors of the PLM), and the individual attributes (gender, ethnicity, qualifications, language skills etc.), that may enhance or inhibit the opportunities that migration can bring.

This not to suggest that A8 migrants are merely passive victims of circumstance, indeed, the decision to migrate is itself an act of agency,<sup>iii</sup> and as Lister notes, “people can be, at the same time, both the subordinate objects of hierarchical power relations and subjects who are agents in their own lives, capable of exercising power in the generative sense of self-actualisation” (1997 :40). The ability of A8 migrants to maximise agency is, however, unevenly distributed and is mediated not only by social structures and regulatory frameworks but also importantly by aspects of individual biography and identity that are subject to change as migrants live their lives across time and space (McDowell, 2008). For example, feminist migration research has demonstrated how migration impacts on women’s (and men’s) lives in particularly gendered ways (Anderson, 2000; Koffman *et al.* 2000; Silvey, 2004). Others have noted how aspects of ethnicity (e.g. differences in education, English language fluency and cultural traditions), all shape the labour market and broader social participation of migrants (Bhavnani, 1994; Burholt, 2004; Torres, 2006). Furthermore, the differential skills and qualifications that individual migrants bring with them also impact on their lives in host communities. Migration is, therefore, layered, with differential experiences related to complex inequalities and identities.

An important aim of this paper is to question the usefulness of the homogenising category ‘A8 migrant worker’ as a tool for understanding the diverse experiences of

migrants from Central and Eastern Europe that have recently come to live and work in the UK. Three key areas are, therefore, addressed in subsequent discussions. First, the various motivations that underpin the different types of migratory movements undertaken by A8 migrants are explored and their stereotypical depiction as essentially short term, transitory labour migrants is challenged. Second, in exploring workplace experiences, discussions highlight how A8 migrants' tendency to work alongside fellow nationals, emerge from their particular, and differing, perceptions of disadvantage within the hierarchically structured UK migrant labour market. Third, in spite of the difficulties that many new European migrants may face, the paper evidences the ways in which international migration may increase individuals' abilities to actively reshape their lives. For both Polish women and Roma migrants the opportunity to relocate to the UK was key resource in enhancing individual agency. Before addressing these key issues in more detail a brief outline of the study on which this paper draws is required.

### **Study outline and methods**

The qualitative data used in subsequent discussions was generated in a research project that focused on the needs, experiences and expectations of A8 migrants, newly resident in a northern English city. Eighty nine people participated in the fieldwork. A series of group interviews were held with members of three, newly resident, A8 migrant groups i.e. Polish, Slovak and Slovak Roma<sup>iv</sup> migrants. Ten key informants, who recruited, employed or acted as community support workers for A8 migrants were also interviewed (see appendix 1). Additionally, four parallel focus group

interviews were convened with members of the established West Indian, Pakistani (differentiated by gender) and ‘white’ host communities in neighborhoods that had recently experienced the arrival of significant numbers of A8 migrants. Finally, three focus groups were held with agencies involved in the provision and/or administration of local public services e.g. City Council services, primary care trusts, housing providers and schools.

Two basic principles, informed consent and anonymity, underpinned the fieldwork. Participant information and consent sheets were translated as necessary and participants were briefed about the aims of the research. Experienced interpreters were present at interviews as required. Interviews were routinely recorded on audiotape transcribed verbatim (translated into English by interpreters as appropriate), and analysed using grid analysis and thematic coding techniques (Mason, 2002; Ritchie and Spencer, 2003<sup>v</sup>).

### **Migrant workers? Migration motivations and types of movement**

At the heart of the EU project lies a preoccupation with the mobility and residence rights of workers rather than citizens *per se* (Dwyer, 2001). It is, therefore, perhaps to be expected that much subsequent literature has routinely used the term ‘migrant workers’ when discussing those who entered the UK post 2004 (e.g. Audit Commission, 2007; LSCYH, 2007). Indeed, a desire to find work, often enhanced by a favourable disparity in wage earning potential between countries of origin and the

UK was seen as the pre-eminent motivation behind the migration of many in our study.

*There are no jobs in Slovakia and the wages are very low. One week wage is as much as one month wage in Slovakia. (FG1 Slovaks)*

*We are doing easy work for small money. But small money here is big money in Poland. If we did the same in Poland - we would have no money. (FG2 Polish men)*

*They are totally motivated by wages. That's all it's about. (KI5 logistics/distribution company)*

However, whilst economic motivations and the search for paid work were important to many A8 migrants, a more complex picture emerges from the range of motivations and types of movement undertaken.

*With the students they very often come for just three months, go back and the next summer they come again. There is a certain percentage of people who have stayed and are planning to stay... How many? Probably 50%. (KI1 recruitment agency)*

Two, young Polish men reported that they had moved together, for a couple of months to earn quick money to finance a forthcoming wedding. Others routinely saw their presence in England as finite and envisaged returning to their country of origin after a year or two.

*The situation is that about half of us will return after one year home...replaced by new people. (FG1 Slovak)*

*For some time - maybe. Maybe for one year or two. Not forever. (FG3 Polish women)*

Nonetheless, the stereotypical fleeting labour migrant was very much in the minority. The data above about intended length of stay should also be read with caution. Other studies (Spencer *et al.* 2007) have observed differences between participants' stated intended length of stay and the actual duration or permanency of their period of residence. In earlier waves of labour migration to the UK many migrants originally intended to return home following a short period of paid work. The reality is that many have settled permanently (Anwar, 1979). This was reiterated in our discussions with more established migrant communities when a man laughingly noted '*I come here 48 years ago; I only come for 5 years. A long 5 years! (FG7 West Indian).*' As people become aware of the potential benefits of their migration they remain for longer periods or take up permanent residence.

*They plan to go back to Poland. Quite a few don't because the life here is so much easier and quite peaceful and they realise that the possibilities here are much greater than in Poland. So they will stay here. (KI3 Polish community worker)*

As plans change short term transitory migration often becomes more permanent with family members relocating to join a loved one who had initially moved alone (Currie, 2008; Ryan *et al.* 2009). Family joiners were certainly a prevalent feature in our study, particularly in the case of Polish and Roma migrants. Routinely male migrants would 'lead' the migration and establish themselves with a job and appropriate

accommodation before being joined by other family members, usually their partners and children.

*R1: My story is similar. My husband came first then me and my daughter.*

*R2: I joined my husband after two months.*

*R3: So did I. After three months.* (FG3 Polish women)

*Initially it was singles, a high proportion of males to females, 18-25 yr olds.*

*But now a lot more families are coming in, family joiners, who have started to settle down. (SP2 Asylum/migration services)*

### ***Escaping persecution: the motivations of A8 Roma***

Although the history and treatment of Roma across Eastern Europe is complex (with identifiable differences across East European states), much current A8 Roma migration takes place against a common backdrop of severe exclusion and discrimination within their countries of origin. Under the communist regimes that flourished post World War II the Roma were routinely subject to forced settlement and recognition of their ethnicity and cultural practices denied (Barany 2000; Klobucky and Strapcova; 2004; Guglielmo, 2005). Following the post-communist transition Roma communities have often found themselves bearing the brunt of economic restructuring with steep falls in living standards linked to low levels of educational attainment and a very high incidence of, often long-term, unemployment (Vermeersch, 2002; Hancock, 2000, 2005).

A8 Roma migrants now resident in the UK have migrated from a variety of EU states and are diverse in terms of language and culture. However, these populations have common experience of widespread prejudice and racist abuse in their homelands. The need to migrate to find paid work is clearly valued, but this is augmented by a strong desire to escape persecution and discrimination in their country of origin and the opportunity to provide a better and safer environment for their children (THPR, 2006).

*Racism against the Roma [in Slovakia] has escalated. I came to England to escape the racism in Slovakia. I was educated but work was out of the question due to racism and discrimination. We are normal human beings, but [in Slovakia] I could not work in a restaurant, people would not take food from me. (Roma 2, Mother)*

The view that the Roma migration, post 2004, may be prompted as much by the search for freedom from persecution as by work was further endorsed when two other participants described previous unsuccessful attempts to relocate their families to the UK by claiming asylum prior to EU enlargement. Generally, the Roma participants stated an unwillingness to return to their country of origin due to the high levels discrimination and violence that they had suffered there. All of the Roma families intended to settle permanently in England and make new lives for themselves.

Whilst short term, transitory labour migrants remain an important element of the latest phase of new European migration it is increasingly problematic to discuss A8 migration in such a stereotypical manner. Length of stay varies from a few months to

permanent settlement, and, as family joiners become increasingly commonplace, it is likely that more will stay for longer (BCEEWG, 2006). Post 2004, the relative economic advantages available, for the first time, to A8 nationals looking for work in a booming UK labour market were undoubtedly a strong pull factor in many initial decisions to migrate. The search for temporary work, however, is only one part of an unfolding story. Roma migrants are also motivated by a wish to escape the endemic prejudice and persecution they face in their country of origin. Others, (in our study a substantial minority of Polish migrants), are keen to maximise the financial and emotional advantages of more permanent residence and look to “improve their standard of living by relocating the entire family...[so they can] be together and enjoy the fruits of their labour together.” (Ryan *et al.* 2009 :65). Decisions to settle on a more permanent basis are, however, often dependant upon migrants’ experiences within the UK labour market.

### **Workplace practices and experiences**

The poor quality of many jobs occupied by A8 migrants is well documented (Anderson *et al.* 2006; Mackenzie and Forde 2006; CIC, 2007). The majority of A8 migrants in England are routinely employed in the relatively low skilled, manual and repetitive jobs within the hotel and leisure sector, warehousing and manufacturing, processing and construction industries (Pollard *et al.* 2008). This new pool of labour has been broadly welcomed by the majority of British employers who prior to the current economic downturn struggled to fill such “3D, (dirty, dangerous and dull) jobs” (Favell, 2008 :704) with more locally available workers (Dench *et al.* 2006;

Spencer *et al.* 2007). As new arrivals filling gaps in the PLM that others choose not to take, A8 migrants (particularly those who are recruited by employment agencies) often find themselves required to work long hours on unsociable shifts.

Reflecting the fact that black and minority ethnic B&ME workers are over represented in the lower echelons of the UK PLM (Mason, 2000) many of the workplaces occupied by A8 migrants are already home to an ethnically diverse workforce.

*Eastern European, you name it... On induction day it's like the United Nations. It's really mixed. We actually did a survey last year and we had 27 languages on site. [KI8 food production company]*

Nonetheless, within such workplaces, occasions when A8 migrants routinely mixed with co-workers of different ethnic or national backgrounds (including any British workers), were the exception rather than the norm. Generally, the majority worked with fellow nationals and tended to stick together at work. The Slovaks we interviewed all worked alongside each other on a night shift as did the majority of Polish men in various factory settings.

*R1: 70% of the workforce there is Polish.*

*R2: In my factory the majority of the workforce is Polish.*

*R3: At work I did not have any problem with the language because I worked with Poles. The warehouse was divided in half - Polish part and English part.*

*(FG2 Polish men)*

Employers were keen to stress that all workers, regardless of their ethnic background, were treated equally. As managers of a diverse workforce they were aware of their duty to actively promote a discrimination free working environment but they all commented on the preference for most A8 migrants to gravitate towards their fellow nationals at work. KI5(b) stated that, initially at least, new Eastern European workers tended to ‘*stick together*’. Others noted that, although a reduction in the tendency to self-segregate can occur over time, the warehouse or factory floor is rarely a site for meaningful interactions that traverse ethnic or national lines.

*You get the pockets of indigenous population who won't talk to people with a different accent. You've got Polish people who just want to come to work and not integrate. And then you've got, and its getting bigger, where you know it's a classic example when one of my security guards says, I can say 12 words in Polish now. That sort of thing. But there is still going to be the core. And in fairness, there's no hostility, there's just lack of integration. (KI4 logistics/distribution company)*

*[The]Polish, because they are quite clicky...it alienates other people in their department. So one of the things we have done is we've banned them talking in their own language...We've said when they are on their breaks, they are not in our employment, it's their own time they can speak however they like. But if they are on public corridors, in the restaurant or anywhere then they need to speak English. (KI2 hotel/hospitality company).*

In a period of increased diversity of migration flows into the UK, where contemporary policy emphasises the need for migrants to integrate into diverse yet ‘cohesive

communities' (Cantle, 2001; CIC, 2007) the '*lack of integration*' within the workplace, highlighted above, may be seen as alarming by some. However such, cultural clustering, which often relates to structural inequalities in settlement and employment patterns, is a noted feature of many post-migration experiences (Musterd, 2003; Burholt, 2004). Studies of previous groups of migrants have demonstrated how migration brings about a process of rebuilding communities and social networks in new locations, often around shared cultural practices, ethnic communities and religious organisations (Moriarty and Butt, 2004; Maynard *et al.*, 2008). The tendency of A8 migrants to gravitate towards fellow nationals in the workplace most likely represents a pragmatic coping strategy rather than a rejection *per se* of a desire to integrate with others. As subsequent discussions highlight, those with limited English language abilities feel trapped in particular jobs and discriminated against. 'Sticking together' with those who speak the same language and share everyday pressures can be a vital source of informal support. Also, for those A8 migrants who only plan for short, transitory periods of working abroad, mixing more widely with other groups in the workplace may have little intrinsic value.

Arguably integration is an ongoing, two way process that requires an element of co-operation on the part of host communities (Castles *et al.* 2002) which may not be forthcoming in a workplace setting for two reasons. First, established workers are more likely to occupy line management or supervisory positions and may, for a variety of reasons, favour those who they are used to working with (see hierarchy section below). Second, established workers may resent the A8 newcomers in their midst, particularly, when they are praised by employers (as in our study), for their

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superior work ethic, i.e. ‘going the extra mile’(KI4) and ‘being very obliging’ (KI5) compared to the ‘mollycoddled’ (KI2) pool of pre-existing workers. As Favell notes, “where there is conflict with the ‘natives’ over jobs and resources the reaction gets expressed in populist and xenophobic terms” (2008 :711).

### ***A diversity of disadvantage? Hierarchies within the migrant workforce***

Previous studies report a large proportion of A8 migrants as overqualified for the jobs they undertake in the UK (BCEEWG, 2006; Stenning *et al.* 2006; Mackenzie and Forde, 2007). The majority of participants in our study were also employed significantly below their skill levels and abilities. The more highly qualified reported frustration at attempts to move into better jobs and cited an unwillingness on the part of employers to recognise qualifications and work experience attained in their countries of origin.

*They did not have any respect for Polish education. They did not take it into account. I was quite high in Poland as a physiotherapist. Here I did not work as a physiotherapist. (FG2 Polish women)*

*I worked as a clerk for 6 years in Poland, coming here they say no it doesn't count at all. I went on specialised courses, recognised worldwide to increase my ability as accountant clerk...It is a closed circle. (FG3 Polish men)*

Concentrated in largely unskilled sectors of the PLM, undertaking unpopular work and often thwarted in their attempts to find better employment, many A8 migrants commonly perceive themselves to be discriminated against and disadvantaged in

comparison to more established white British and B&ME workers. This sense of being at the 'bottom of the pile' was strongly articulated by Polish workers.

*Being foreigner puts you in a worse position... English people are scared of black people. Black people can take you to court and say that you are racist. You don't have this problem with Poles, so Polish people are now on the end.*  
(FG3 Polish women)

Likewise, the Slovakian participants, who all worked at a food production factory outlined at length the grievances they had with other, relatively more established, B&ME workers who they worked alongside on the night shift.

*R2: You know all the team leaders and supervisors are Kurdish or Indian but no Slovaks or Polish. So Kurdish team leader prefers Kurdish workers, for example...*

*R1: They are having easier work, Kurdish get easy jobs. We get the work they don't want to do... They were here before us.*

*R2: There is discrimination towards us. If a Slovak or Polish worker has got problem, it's ignored.*

*R1: Our versions of events is never taken as a truth.*

*R3: If there is an argument, the Kurdish worker always wins.*

*R4: I'm suspended now. I had an argument with a Kurdish worker. He hit me and then complained that I did hit him. He quickly gathered a few gypsy*

*witnesses who never even saw the incident. He then threatened my mother and my girlfriend. I have not been working for a month and I'm awaiting a disciplinary decision.* (FGI Slovaks)

Whilst it is impossible to confirm the veracity of the last incident outlined above, the data is, nonetheless, indicative of the discontent felt by many A8 migrants who clearly believe themselves to be worse off than other B&ME people who share the same workspace. Perhaps such sentiments arise because, “many A8 migrants see themselves as whites in a largely white country and expect to not suffer discrimination or even be in a privileged position the job market” (McDowell, 2009 :30). Mutual mistrust and tension between white British, and more particularly established B&ME workers and A8 migrants is a feature of many shared workplaces. Among A8 migrants, who themselves feel ‘deskilled and devalued’ (see Currie, 2008), such sentiments at times may develop into less tolerant and/or racist attitudes towards their ‘fellow’ workers (McDowell *et al.* 2007; McDowell, 2008).

Beyond the commonly held perception of shared disadvantage which was strongly expressed by all three groups of A8 migrants interviewed, further analysis point to emerging inequalities *within* the general population of A8 migrants. Both Slovak and Roma participants believed themselves to be disadvantaged in the workplace in comparison to their Polish counterparts.

*I go everyday to an agency and they say there is no work. I would be happy with a job. People from Poland get jobs but not me? There is a little*

*discrimination in the agency. But Polish can get jobs. Banks translate in Polish but nothing in Slovak. (Roma 3, Son)*

*We would like to have a better chance to find different work like Polish people.*

*They have their own agencies which will help them... It is much harder for us because we have to communicate with English people. (FG1 Slovaks)*

Slovak and Roma participants clearly felt that Polish migrants occupied a relatively privileged position that enabled them to find work and/or access the best positions available to new European arrivals. Polish workers are by far the largest single A8 new migrant group (Audit Commission, 2007). The sheer numbers involved has resulted in specialist Polish recruitment agencies being set up to facilitate labour migration to the UK. These factors, in combination with pre-existing Polish community networks established by the earlier wave of post-WWII Polish migrants, and a thriving, and well networked Polish community centre in the city in which the study took place appear to have been important in facilitating and supporting newly arrived Poles (Christiansen, 1996). Such resources did not exist for the Slovak and Roma migrants. An awareness of differing migration histories and contexts and how they may shape contemporary workplace disadvantages and inequality among the diverse population of A8 migrants is important. As the migrants above note, banks are happy to translate for Polish customers because the Poles are a sizable and, therefore, potentially lucrative new customer base. Similarly, there are no specialist Roma or Slovak recruitment agencies to approach for help when looking for work. In the absence of translated services and bi-lingual intermediaries in employment agencies and elsewhere, Roma and Slovak migrants were acutely aware that a lack of English

language fluency further disadvantaged them in comparison to those Poles with English language skills.

### **A8 migrants and agency within, and beyond, the workplace**

Previous discussions have highlighted how many A8 migrants routinely work on shifts alongside fellow nationals within workforces where the majority of employees are from other B&ME groups. Allied to this many are engaged in, “low skilled and poorly paid jobs” that are at odds with the, “high levels of education that many post enlargement migrants have” (Pollard *et al.* 2008: 37). Within our study, however, a minority of Polish migrants (male and female) relayed accounts of more positive workplace experiences and instances when they were able to access better employment opportunities. Beyond the workplace a number of participants also spoke about how the act of migrating to the UK had enabled new possibilities for empowerment and opened up space for individuals to develop a new sense of self. Before embarking on a discussion of how migration may facilitate positive opportunities for identity development it is necessary to explore how English language capability plays a vital role in enhancing A8 migrants’ agency within the UK PLM.

#### ***English: the key to occupational mobility?***

The minority of the Polish migrants who were able to exercise occupational mobility all had English language skills that set them apart from their peers. Employers in

mundane sectors of the labour market (who as previously noted had struggled to fill vacancies with local workers), were keen to hold on to the more capable A8 migrants.

*He started off as a linen porter, his English was good, he'd been to university in Poland. We had a conference porter/ driver vacancy so he transferred over to conference porter... then we had a supervisor vacancy and he applied along with external candidates and some other UK internal candidates and we actually gave it to him. (KI2 hotel/hospitality company)*

*After 6 weeks my company proposed a contract... They sent me on many courses... my company was actually investing in me. Because I told them straight away I could read and write in English, which was a very big bonus for them. They said, 'we will put you in office and administration'. (FG2 Polish men)*

Management in companies that employ significant numbers of Poles clearly recognise that workers with bi-lingual abilities who are able to operate as an interface between the shop floor and management are a valuable asset. For individual workers this ability to communicate in English and Polish can often lead to internal promotion within a particular company and/or more control over the type of work they do and the conditions that they work under. For example, a young Polish woman spoke of how her employer, rather than loose her from the payroll, had allowed her to reduce her hours and work flexitime so that she could begin to study at university and continue to work.

In common with other studies (e.g. FRCG, 2007) a large proportion of migrants in our study were over qualified for the jobs they were doing. However, among the Poles several had skilled or management level jobs that reflected their qualifications and experience in Poland. This was not the case for the Slovakian factory workers even though many of them were educated beyond a basic level; for example, one was a qualified computer programmer, another a trained chef. The major factor that distinguished the minority of Poles in better jobs, from the majority of other A8 migrants in low status work, was an enhanced ability to understand and communicate in English. Those who did not possess such skills were acutely aware that their lack of English acted as a significant barrier to them finding better employment in the future.

*It's hard to change this work because we at least understand what we have to do and what shifts. But yes, naturally we would like better jobs. (FG2 Polish men)*

*I'm not happy with the type of work I do but a lack of English is holding me back... I'm working when classes are held. Language is very important. Speaking better English would make all the difference. I don't like having to rely on my children and also I could get better work. (Roma 2, Mother)*

*Most of our problems arise from not speaking English language. (FG1 Slovaks)*

For many the desire to attend classes to improve their English was strong. However, unsociable shifts and long hours at work made it difficult for them to attend college based English language classes that many believed were the key to securing better work. Employers presented a somewhat different view with several stressing that they

provided opportunities for A8 workers to improve their language skills at work, but that workers were reluctant to spend time away from the production line attending classes as this impacted negatively on take-home pay. This kind of disinclination perhaps makes sense if migrants see their stay as finite and temporary, but it does not correspond with the opinions offered by the migrants themselves.

The importance of English language capabilities in respect of a migrant's ability to exercise agency within the labour market is further evidenced by the accounts of two English speaking Poles who, aware that they had other options, actively took steps to improve their working lives.

*When I handed in my notice they laughed at me...I went to the bank because I had some queries on my account and I just asked if there was an opportunity to work there, they said – 'yes, just bring your CV'. So I got my CV and they employed me without further interview. (FG3 Polish women)*

*[Be] aware of your value to the company. Sometimes you need to fight to be promoted, to be given your rights. And the way to do it, is by giving notice. Then they will appreciate you, 'OK let's sit down and review your contract' (FG2 Polish men)*

Sick of working below her abilities, the woman above successfully obtained clerical work that was more in keeping with her work experience at home in Poland. Her male counterpart threatened to use a similar exit strategy as a lever in order to renegotiate better terms and conditions. Although employers have been keen to exploit the additional pool of labour that A8 migrants represent, it appears that they harbour a

certain level of resentment towards employees who act to improve their working lives. The data below is typical of several comments made by key informants who were dismayed when migrants looked to exercise their right to seek new employment elsewhere as their skills (particularly language skills), developed.

*What we found was that they learnt their English, we paid for it, and then they went... to somewhere else in the city that wasn't hotel work and they got more money. (KI2 hotel/hospitality company)*

The same manager went on to lament how within 12 months many new migrants lost their 'work ethic' and developed a '*bit more of the know it all*' attitude he associated with UK workers. In line with other research (Anderson *et al.* 2006; Dench *et al.* 2006; McIlwaine *et al.* 2006), our study found that migrants who are trapped in low paid, low status work frequently look to validate their disadvantaged situation by asserting the 'hardships' of the work they undertake whilst simultaneously proclaiming their superior work ethic in comparison to 'native' workers. Labour market inequalities initially situate many new A8 migrants in low paid, low status work. Nonetheless, migrant workers are not, as Rogaly (2008) reminds us, merely passive recipients of imposed conditions. Those A8 migrants who entered the UK PLM with more than an elementary grasp of the English language (i.e. in our study exclusively Poles), used their abilities to secure more skilled and better paid employment, often alongside English workers, at the earliest opportunity. Those who couldn't speak English fully understood that developing their language capabilities was key to them exercising occupational mobility in the future. *Realistically, however, the ability of such workers to choose to attend language classes are severely*

constrained by the necessity to continue working long shifts and overtime (given their low, hourly wage rates), in order to earn a living wage. As MacKenzie and Forde note, this situation is likely to persist for as long as employers are able to continue to offer opportunities to successive waves on migrant workers on the basis of a “maximum hours for the minimum wage” (2009 :156) principle.

### **Migration, agency and identity**

Feminist scholarship has done much to theorise the concept of intersectionality and has built on work which suggests that identities are complex, fluid and changing but at the same time structured by gendered and racialised norms and practices (see e.g. Minow, 1997; Valentine, 2007; McDowell, 2008). The potential for migration to disrupt individual identities in both positive and negative ways has also been acknowledged (Silvey, 2004). As previously noted, choosing to migrate can in itself be considered an indication of individual agency. Members of two particular groups of migrants outlined the ways in which migration to the UK had positive impacts on upon their perceived and projected senses of identity.

On several occasions female Polish migrants articulated the subtle but significant ways in which moving to live and work in the UK had generated unanticipated benefits. Several expressed feelings of liberation due to the enhanced opportunities for personal development that their new lives in England had bought about.

*R1: It's school of life.*

*R2: The experience is important because we learn something.*

*R3: Living in multicultural society opens up your mind. In Poland we have like one nation so we have lots of prejudices and here you can get rid of them and try to cross the border.* (FG3 Polish women)

Their experience of living and working in different cultural and social spaces had clearly allowed them to question the custom and practices of their homeland. In physically moving across national borders they had also begun to metaphorically challenge previously accepted views about the roles ascribed to themselves and others. One woman spoke of the tangible benefits that relocation had bought within the workplace in terms of the greater rights and respect afforded to women employees who became pregnant in the UK.

*I think for women here it is less scary to get pregnant. It is a big advantage of living in Britain. In Poland it is not accepted when you get pregnant as an employee. Here you get some respect when you are pregnant. I worked in an office in Poland and after the birth I did not have job anymore to get back to. My employer was very unhappy that I got pregnant.* (FG3 Polish women)

Drawing on Ho (2006), Ryan *et al.* note how, “migration may reinforce as well as disrupt traditional gender roles” (2009 :68). Although a number of the Polish women interviewed had followed their partners to England, they spoke of mobility reconfiguring aspects of their lives positively. Moving abroad had allowed them the space to develop a different personal perspective on who they had been and, in some respects, who they might be in the future. Their lives continued to be mediated by

gender but relocation to a new social setting had allowed them in some ways to reconsider and reconfigure their identities as women.

Throughout discussions Roma participants stressed how they much preferred their new lives in England, not just because of the possibility of work, but also because of the chance to escape the virulent, and at times violent racism, that routinely blights their everyday life in their countries of origin (THPP, 2006). In the context of her discussion of current and the previous waves of Polish migration to the UK, McDowell is right when she states that, “what unites the old and new EU migrants, as well as their commitment to hard work is their skin colour” (2009 :27). This does not, however, hold true for darker skinned Roma migrants. Ethnicity and skin colour continue to be important aspects of identity for Roma in England but their impact is played out in different ways in their new home. For example, a Roma woman related how, in Slovakia, her husband was the only family member able to find work because “*he has blue eyes and is fair like you*” [to interviewer]. In England most of the Roma participants were able to find factory work and reported no problems with workplace discrimination. However, some of their new neighbours clearly resented the non-white newcomers in their midst. Interestingly, two Roma families reported that the antipathy of certain locals towards them had receded once it was known they were not of Pakistani origin.

*When we moved here some people thought we were Pakistani, once they realised we are Christian, from Europe, everything was fine. (Roma 2, mother)*

In light of the above quotation, Favell's assertion that, "European publics are likely to be more comfortable with the scenario of getting used to Balkan and Slavic accents, rather than seeing the black and brown faces in the same jobs , or (especially) hearing them speak the language of Allah" (2008 :712) is both right and wrong. The data presented supports Modoods' (1992) assertion that 'cultural racism' (which includes oppression around differing religious practices), is often as fundamental an aspect of racism as one based on colour and suggests that Favell is right to recognise that some in the West harbour a particular hostility towards Muslims. On the other hand, the Roma are simultaneously Eastern European, Christian and 'brown'. It is, therefore, too simplistic to equate A8 migration exclusively with the movement of white people and experiences of racial harassment were still part of the everyday lives of the Roma in our study. Nonetheless, overall the Roma participants strongly believed that migrating to England had enabled them to more freely express their particular ethnic identity. This sentiment was best expressed by a Roma woman who spoke of being more secure and better able to be who she really was, within the relatively anonymous setting of a multicultural UK city (cf. Pollard *et al.* 2008). Her migration had allowed her to celebrate her identity as a 'gypsy', something that had been an impossibility in her country of origin, due to endemic prejudice and persecution.

*Here I am a gypsy. In Slovakia I am not a gypsy - we don't have our own country. We feel free here because there are other nationalities. No one cares about me and that is good, I'm just some lady. (Roma 1, daughter)*

## Conclusions

Favell (2008) has argued that the expansion of the EU has opened up, “European territorial space” which encourages, “temporary and circular migration trends” (2008 :706). Such relatively short-term movements appear to be a significant element of the A8 migration flows. The IPPR has estimated that approximately one million A8 migrants have arrived in the UK since 2004 but also believe that around half of those who entered have already left the UK (Pollard *et al.* 2008). However, Favell’s claim that we may have to rethink some of the previously held truths about permanent settlement and that the paradigm of ‘immigration and integration’ is now redundant is perhaps too bold. A8 migrants engage in a diversity of migration strategies that encompass a range of movements from short-term movements linked to specific working contracts through to permanent settlement. Of the estimated fifty per cent of A8 migrants who remain in the UK many may have originally envisaged a short stay but significant numbers are now choosing to reunite their families in their chosen destination (Ryan *et al.* 2009). Such family joiners were certainly a feature in our study. This was especially true for Roma participants who, although motivated by a search for work, were also eager to escape the prejudice and discrimination of their homelands and settle in the UK on a permanent basis.

There is much discussion around the potentially transformative role of English language proficiency in promoting the wider integration of migrants (Audit Commission, 2007; ICoCo, 2007; BIA, 2008; Revill, 2008). It was certainly a key

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enabling factor in promoting the agency of A8 migrants who operated most successfully in the UK labour market. In particular, some of the Poles with English language abilities were able to negotiate improved terms and conditions with their employer or move to new jobs elsewhere which better reflected the skills and experience they had acquired before migrating. Consequently, they were far more likely to work alongside British workers. The ‘everyday encounters’ (Laurier and Philo, 2006) of these migrants in the work place also appear to have been significant in promoting their integration into wider society.

However, the majority of A8 migrants do low paid, low skilled jobs and are often located in workplaces that are routinely populated by fellow A8 migrants and/or workers from Black and minority ethnic communities. As the latest group of workers to arrive in the UK A8 migrants feel they are disadvantaged compared to the other groups that they work alongside. Many such workplaces appear to be at best, sites in which different nationalities and ethnic groups tolerate one another, or at worst places that are characterised by mutual mistrust and resentment. The working environment potentially provides opportunities for meaningful mixing and facilitation of wider integration. However, in our study such potential was rarely realised in practice. As Valentine notes, “proximity does not relate to meaningful contact” (2008 :334). Diverse groups of people can share the same space but it is a mistake to make the, “naïve assumption that contact with ‘others’ necessarily translates into respect for difference” (2008 : 325).

The tendency to homogenise the experiences of different nationalities and ethnic groups who make up the A8 migrant category also needs to be resisted. The Slovak and Roma participants who took part in our study clearly believed that they were relatively disadvantaged compared to Polish migrants. As already noted the evidence suggests that those Poles with good English language abilities were able to get better work. Additionally, all the Poles were able to draw on social networks of support that had been established following the earlier post World War II migration to the UK. Such informal support systems were lacking for other nationalities.

Finally, it is also important to note that for some A8 migrants the decision to move to the UK has brought about additional advantages beyond any economic rewards that may ensue. For some Polish women their new life abroad had opened up the space for them to critically review their own attitudes and beliefs. The Roma families interviewed had managed to escape the entrenched discrimination and prejudice of their country of origin. Gender and ethnicity remain important factors in the lives of A8 migrants. The act and experience of migration offers new individual and collective opportunities and potentially opens up spaces for people to negotiate structural constraints and reconfigure aspects of their identity.

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## Appendix 1

Table 1. Key informant participants

KEY INFORMANT NO.	ROLE AND ORGANISATION
KI1	Recruitment agency specialising in Polish migrant labour
KI2	Manager for a company in the hotel/hospitality sector that employs A8 migrants
KI3	Community worker with Polish migrants
KI4	Services manager for a logistics/distribution company that employs new migrants
KI5	a) Human resources manager b) Group head of corporate responsibility c) Training manager for Leeds operations All work for a logistics/distribution company that employs new migrants
KI6	Regional representative of a trade union
KI7	Community worker for new Roma migrants
KI8	Human resources manager of a food manufacturer which employs new migrants

Table 2. New migrant participants

CODE NO./ NAME	INTERVIEW TYPE	NUMBERS AND GENDER	AGE RANGE
FG1 Slovaks	Focus group	3 men 3 women	Late 20s to mid 50s
FG2 Polish men	Focus group	8 men	20s to late 50s

FG3 Polish women	Focus group	9 women	20s to mid 50s
ROMA 1	Joint interview	1 man 2 women (Mother, brother and sister)	30s to early 70s
ROMA 2	Joint interview	2 women (Mother and daughter)	Late teens to late 30s
ROMA 3	Joint interview	2 men 1 woman (Father, mother and son)	Late teens to 50

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<sup>i</sup> The A8 states are: Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Maltese and Cypriot nationals were also part of the 2004 enlargement. They have full freedom of movement rights and are not required to register as workers.

<sup>ii</sup> The others were Sweden and Ireland.

<sup>iii</sup> A detailed consideration of the much discussed concept of agency lies beyond the remit of this paper. A number of authors offer relevant discussions around the perennial question of the relationship between structure and agency (see e.g. Giddens (1994) on 'structuration theory' and Roberts (1997) 'structured individualization'). Our use of the term here draws on Deacon and Mann's definition which sees agency as "actions, activities, decisions and behaviours, that represent some measure of meaningful choice. That does not mean that such choices are free floating of any structural restraints, but rather that some option existed, albeit restrained (1999 :413).

<sup>iv</sup> It was necessary to modify our original approach in order to gain the trust of the Roma participants. Initially we had intended to hold a focus group with eight to ten participants. However, due to previous negative experiences in their country of origin they would only agree to being interviewed in their own homes following our introduction by a trusted community member. Similarly, they also did not want interviews to be recorded verbatim. Consequently two members of the research team conducted three

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interviews in the participants' homes, one initiated conversations the other took extensive field notes of discussions.

<sup>v</sup> See Authors (2008) for a fuller description of methods. (citation anonymised for referees).