Migrant Men’s Fathering Narratives, Practices and Projects in National and Transnational Spaces: Recent Polish Male Migrants to London

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Historically migrants have been constructed as units of labour and their social reproductive needs have received scant attention in policy and in academic literature. The growth in ‘feminist-inflected’ migration research in recent decades, has provoked a body of work on transnational care-giving that poses a challenge to such a construction, at least as it relates to female migrants in general and mothers in particular. Researchers, however, have demonstrated less interest in how migrant men give meaning to and perform their fathering roles. Such neglect is increasingly problematic in the context of rising social, political and academic interest in the significance of fathering in European (and other) societies. With the purpose of making a preliminary contribution to knowledge on migrant men’s fathering narratives, practices and projects, this article draws on findings from interviews conducted with recent migrants from Poland to the UK. By focusing on migrant fatherhood, we add to the understanding of transnational care-giving by illuminating the many parallels between migrant mothering and fathering. Our findings are consistent with much of the literature on transnational mothering, highlighting tensions between breadwinning and parenting and the various strategies fathers deploy to reconcile these tensions. Nevertheless, we find that migrant men’s fathering narratives, practices, and projects, while challenging the construction of male migrants as independent and non-relational, remain embedded within the dominant framework of the gendered division of labour. More uniquely, the article also demonstrates the importance of situated transnational analyses, in this case the institutional arrangements between the UK and European Union new Member States, which gave the Polish migrants privileged labour market access and social rights within the UK’s highly differentiated migration regime. This access allowed mobility, settlement and or family reunion according to the migrant’s specific circumstances and preferences with respect to the labour market and parenting.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the fathering narratives, practices, and projects of migrant men. While, as noted below, there is a rich body of literature on transnational mothering, comparatively little is known about the fathering experiences of migrant men. This has been explained in terms of the assumed normativity of father-absence for breadwinning purposes (Parreñas, 2008). Yet, in

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advanced industrialized societies there is evidence of shifting norms around fatherhood, with a growing expectation for men to combine breadwinning with ‘active’ and ‘involved’ fathering (Hobson and Fahlén, 2009). Our analysis of the experiences of migrant fathers, in the context of a changing fathering paradigm, as well as changing migration patterns and governance in Europe, seeks to contribute to the debates on transnational care and migration regimes.

Historically migrants have been constructed as individual units of labour by migrant-receiving states, a construction largely unchallenged by migration studies, which were dominated by economic perspectives and tended to conceive migrants as individual economic actors (Ho, 2006), and as male (Hibbins and Pease, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009). The growth in ‘feminist-inflected’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2000: 119) migration research, however, has led to an explicit focus on female migrants. One consequence has been the emergence of research examining the care implications of women’s migration. There is now a large body of work on transnational mothering (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001), and another on transnational care for older dependants (Baldassar et al., 2007; Baldock, 2000).

While it is now acknowledged that the uni-dimensional construction of migrants as units of labour had implications for policy and academic understandings of women and migration, it is less recognized that it had implications for men too. Yet, as Hibbins and Pease (2009: 5) argue, it has led to the treatment of men as ‘non-gendered humans’. More nuanced understandings of men as migrants, however, are emerging through for example, explorations of racialized discourses of migrant men’s masculinities (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner, 1997; Ramirez, 2011), of men’s migration experiences through the lens of sexuality (Cantú, 2009), and migrant men’s fathering experiences (Dreby, 2010; Parreñas, 2008; Pribilsky, 2004). This article seeks to contribute to the last of those areas of enquiry, not least because to continue to ignore the fathering experiences of migrant men has exclusionary potential. Specifically, it has the effect of reinforcing the construction of male migrants as independent and non-relational, at a time when, reflecting stated male preferences (Hobson and Fahlén 2009), there is intense advocacy to recognize the connectedness of men in general to family-life.

The article draws on data from 22 in-depth interviews conducted in London in 2008–09.1 20 of the interviews were with recent Polish male migrants aged 25 to 45 years. The remaining two were with Polish women, both recent migrants to the UK; one was a co-worker of one of our male participants and the other a wife and co-worker. The latter was interviewed primarily as a co-worker and not as a wife since the study did not include partners of migrant men; a gap which limits our analysis of gender roles and gender division of labour. The men were equally divided between those who were fathers, and those non-/not-yet-fathers. We include the latter as our research indicates that migration and family projects are closely related, even among the childless (see also Ryan et al., 2009). Consequently, in addition to fathering practices, we analyse fathering narratives in which our respondents produce or affirm who they are or want to become as fathers (see Temple, 2001), and fathering projects which construe fathering as a strategic as well as a contingent process. The fathers were distributed across three fathering situations – transnational fathers, migrant fathers with children present in the UK and migrant fathers with children both in the UK and ‘back home’ – although, reflecting the dynamic nature of both migration and family processes, many had experience of more than one of those situations. In terms of the locus of dependants our focus is more varied than that adopted in much of the research on migrant mothers, which examines predominantly transnational care flows. As we demonstrate below, the greater variety of fathering situations in our study reflects the comparatively advantageous position of Polish and other EU8 migrants within the UK’s highly differentiated migration regime.11 All of the migrant men interviewed were working in the same sector, what we have termed in the broader study, ‘handyman services’, but their profile is diverse in terms of geographical origin, educational attainment, and professional qualifications and status.

The next section of the article contextualizes the men’s migration and family strategies within a review of Polish migration to the UK. Thereafter, the article discusses migrant men’s fathering. We
examine firstly, the place of fathering within men’s migration strategies, continue by exploring the meanings, performances and challenges of transnational fathering, before examining the experiences of those men who have children living with them in London.

**POLISH MIGRATION TO THE UK**

Polish migration to the UK is not new, but following the Accession of Poland to the EU in 2004, its scale and speed has been unprecedented (Burrell, 2009). Between 2004 and 2010, there were almost 710,000 successful applications from Polish citizens to the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) – the scheme, operational until 1 May 2011, EU8 workers seeking employment in the UK were required to register with – representing 63 per cent of successful applications from all EU8 nationals over that period, and as much as 71 per cent in 2006/07 when the scale of Polish and other EU8 migration to the UK peaked (UK Border Agency, 2009: Table 3; Home Office, 2010a: Table 4.4). In the context of the ‘global’ economic recession and its differential impact on European economies, EU8 migration, and particularly Polish migration, to the UK has been slowing down since 2007 (Perrons et al., 2010), such that in the first three-quarters of 2010 the number of successful applications from Polish citizens to the WRS was just one-third of the level for the same period in 2007, and Poles represented only 45 per cent of all applicants (UK Border Agency, 2009: Table 3; Home Office, 2010a: Table 4.4). There is also evidence of return migration (Finch et al., 2009), although its scale is contested (White, 2011). Recent WRS data indicate that the falling trend in EU8 applications has levelled off (Home Office, 2010b: 3), and Poland-UK migration, albeit at a significantly reduced level, continues with just over 37,000 approved applications to the WRS between January and September 2010 (Home Office, 2010a: Table 4.4).

The scale of Polish-UK migration post-2004 was made possible by the UK government’s decision to adopt a relatively open-door approach to EU8 nationals seeking to work in the UK. While the majority of existing EU Member States restricted EU8 workers’ residency, labour market and social protection rights, the UK, along with Ireland and Sweden, immediately opened its labour market to EU8 workers, imposing registration with the WRS as the only condition. The UK’s motive was economic, designed to plug labour market shortages, especially in low-waged/skilled sectors (McDowell, 2009), despite the relatively high educational attainment of Polish migrants (Drinkwater et al., 2009). That said, the UK government did not expect the scale of EU8 migration that ensued (ibid.). The particularities of the UK migration regime for EU8 nationals extended beyond the labour market. Those entering the WRS became eligible immediately for a restricted range of social benefits, and following twelve months of continuous registered employment, EU8 workers were entitled to European Economic Area (EEA) residency status, extending eligibility to the full range of social benefits, including child-related benefits. EEA residency status also conferred a right of residence in the UK on the worker’s family-members, whom under EU law include ascendant and descendant dependent relatives regardless of their nationality.

The labour market, social and family rights awarded to EU8 migrant workers in the UK since 2004 have placed them in a relatively privileged position within the UK’s highly differentiated migration regime. Thus, for example, while workers from subsequent new EU Member States – Bulgaria and Romania – have the right to enter and remain in the UK, their access to the labour market is restricted to temporary and seasonal work in the agricultural and food-manufacturing sectors, and while those given permission to work can bring dependants (ascendant and descendant), access to social rights is more restricted than in the case of EU8 nationals. While motivated by economic imperatives of integration and competitiveness, and couched in the rhetoric of free movement of workers, this change of status for EU8 migrants represents a significant modification to treating this group of migrant workers as solely economic actors. The coupling of labour market
with social rights acknowledges, albeit implicitly, that EU8 migrants are socially embedded and have social reproductive needs and responsibilities, and when compared with other nationalities, the UK migration regime provides a comparatively advantageous set of conditions to EU8 nationals for the configuration of migration, work and family.

White (2011) suggests that the post-2004 migration regime for Polish nationals in the UK has contributed to a shift in the Polish ‘migration culture’ from one of ‘incomplete migration’, characterized by the migration of male breadwinners, to one where whole-family migration, albeit staged and restricted to those countries where it is possible under migration rules, has become more common. This portrayal requires caution: recent migration patterns and migrants’ demographic characteristics display continuity with past trends, and public debate on the costs and benefits of migration does not point to consensus. Specifically, seasonal and temporary migration continues to dominate, most migrants are relatively young (18–34), tend not to have children, and are more likely to be male (60%) (MG, 2007) – patterns which are similar to the pre-Accession period (Morańska, 2001). Moreover, together with whole-family migration, family separation and dissolution feature strongly in the debates in Poland over the social costs of migration (Debowska, 2007).

While mindful of the above caution, it remains the case that there is evidence of whole-family migration among Polish migrants to the UK, although capturing the scale of it with any accuracy is impossible, in part because family migration strategies are dynamic (Ryan et al., 2009). Thus, while only eight per cent of workers registering with the WRS to March 2009 reported having dependants in the UK (UK Border Agency, 2009: Table 5), this measure does not capture subsequent family reunification or family-building in the UK; both revealed in our study to be common family migration strategies. Applications by EU8 nationals for UK Child Benefit, of which there were 207,000 to March 2009 with 134,000 of those being approved (UK Border Agency, 2009: Table 15), are another indicator of whole-family migration. Likewise, however, this will not render a fully accurate picture, in part because benefit take-up among migrants may be constrained by factors such as lack of knowledge and language barriers.

**MIGRANT MEN’S FATHERING NARRATIVES, PRACTICES AND PROJECTS**

Fathering and families figure strongly in the migration motives of the migrant men interviewed, where the precise narratives, practices and projects of transnational and resident parenting varied – highlighting the role of individual circumstances and agency, in addition to the importance of the formal migration policy regime. Thus a range of family migration strategies was apparent. Of the ten fathers, one had arrived in the UK with his wife and child. Nine had migrated alone, but five of those subsequently brought over family members, often in a staged way, with for example, wife first, followed by children who were sometimes accompanied by a grandmother. For four of the fathers, all divorced before migrating, there was no post-migration family reunification; three of those, however, went on to build new families in the UK. Indeed, subsequent family-building was a common strategy across all the fathers. The non-/not-yet-fathers were universally single at the point of migration, with some remaining so at the time of interview, while others were in relationships. In what follows we examine how fathering figured in the lives of the migrant men, focusing firstly on how fathering was configured in men’s migration, then turning to examine transnational fathering, before moving to an account of migrant men who were raising their children in London.

**Men’s migration and the place of fathering**

The men interviewed expressed a range of migration motives, including adventure, love, and freedom from the perceived ideological, especially religious, constraints of Polish society. Particularly
for the fathers, however, economic motivations underpinned more varying personal rationales. The recent Poland-UK migration wave is partly a product of uneven economic development within an enlarged Europe, with inequalities, as captured by rates of GDP per capita, between the UK and Poland, especially at the sub-national level, remaining high (Perrons et al., 2010; Drinkwater et al., 2009). Macro-economic inequalities are reflected in differentials in households’ standard of living, with more than one-third of the Polish population in 2007 reporting material deprivation, compared with an EU27 average of 17 per cent, and just over ten per cent in the UK (Eurostat, 2010: Figure 3.16). As a result of a combination of unemployment, low pay, job-insecurity and an inadequate social safety-net, many of the men interviewed had been faced with poor economic prospects in Poland, and London could offer the opportunity for work and wage rates not possible back home. For fathers, such relative economic circumstances were not framed in an individualistic way, but were discussed in relation to their families’ needs (see also Pribilsky, 2004). Migration, though, was not only conceived as being instrumental to meeting the immediate material needs of children; in line with Pribilsky’s (2004) observation that children have increasingly become ‘a project’, migration was also seen as having ‘social-investment’ potential (Giddens, 1998). On the latter, however, experiences could be more equivocal; thus a father spoke of how racism was marring his son’s education in the UK.

For some of the men interviewed, migration was intimately linked to the project of family-building: “We wanted to have another child and in Poland we couldn’t afford it” (Fryderyk). While this man went on to have a second child in the UK, the relationship between migration and family-building could also work in several stages, whereby realization of economic aspirations facilitates future fertility. Thus, a number of non-/not-yet-fathers’ plans for return to Poland were bound up with the desire to start a family; something some were reluctant to do in London because of the lack of familial support, as well as perceptions of wider societal problems such as indiscipline in schools. More generally, and as found by Ryan and Sales (2011), decisions around the timing of migration revealed a sensitivity to children’s life-stages, and especially to their school careers, further illustrating the relationality of men’s migration plans:

But I am a globetrotter so maybe I would go somewhere else. But there is a problem with that because [my son] goes to school…it is not a big problem. I want him to get the best education and that’s beyond any questions. But I don’t know, maybe when [my son] finishes school we can try somewhere else. (Filip)

Narratives, practices, and projects of family and fathering emerged thus as a prominent feature of the migration strategies of the Polish men in our study. Although multiple and interdependent rationales were present, there was an emphasis on the opportunities migration afforded for breadwinning and the economic well-being of their families, suggesting the continued importance of the traditional gender division of labour.

Transnational fathering

Half of the fathers interviewed had experience of fathering transnationally. A number of those had temporarily left children behind in Poland while they became established in London. They had anticipated that co-presence of children would be difficult in the context of the intensive paid work and uncertain housing conditions they expected to confront in the initial stages of migration, and for some the temporariness of their transnational situation lasted longer than planned precisely because ‘getting established’ took longer than expected, paralleling findings from the guestworker era (Böhning and Maillat, 1974). For other fathers, geographical separation from children was more permanent: these were mostly divorced men, whose children were in the care of former partners back home, and men with grown-up children who had independent lives in Poland or elsewhere.
While much of the research on transnational family-life points to the gendered nature of transnational parenting (Parreñas, 2005a; Goulbourne et al., 2010), Dreby’s (2010) recent study of Mexican transnational mothers and fathers living in New Jersey finds that parenting activities are very similar. Since we did not interview female migrants, we are limited in the extent to which we can comment on whether the fathers in our study gave particularly gendered accounts. That said, what is striking from our research is how similar the men’s descriptions of transnational fathering practices are to those reported by women in studies of transnational mothering. Thus, we found evidence that fathers undertook what Zontini (2004: 1129) refers to as “kin work” – “the work of keeping family links alive and creating a sense of family ‘togetherness’ in spite of geographical separation”. Zontini (2004) has identified four strategies associated with transnational mothers’ kin work: remittances, gifts, transnational communications and reciprocal visits. Like those in Dreby’s study, our fathers, even those who were divorced and those whose children were grown up, albeit to varying degrees, engaged in such practices, to communicate, as did the mothers in Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila’s (1997) early study of transnational mothers, a sense of “I’m here but I’m there”. A number of the men and those they worked with, whom we interviewed as part of the broader study, spoke of sacrifice in the UK, in order to maximize remittances. Ironically, the sending of remittances, in combination with the costs of living in London, could delay the process of establishing the conditions necessary to bring children over to join them.

It would be a mistake to interpret fathers’ remitting purely within a male-breadwinner framework of fathering for, as with transnational mothers for whom remittances have been found to be “not just a cash transaction [but]...a means by which migrant mothers establish intimacy across borders” (Parreñas, 2005b: 324), the remittances had symbolic meaning for fathers. And, as has been found in the case of mothers (Parreñas, 2005b), remittances could be used instrumentally by fathers to involve themselves in the everyday practices of fathering, as this father, divorced with children in Poland and Ireland, as well as a step-child in the UK, reveals when talking of his son in Poland:

This month [my son] did not get any money because I try to push him to opening a bank account. He’s 17 years old...He should have the money in his bank account and not in his pocket, so he could learn how to save the money and how to have the money...That’s what I expect from him. I told him he would get the money once he’s opened an account...I try to encourage him to that. (Jakub)

For Pessar and Mahler (2003), remittances provide a lens on the ‘power geometries’ of transnational social relations. Viewed in that way, the above father’s withholding of money may be a form of ‘distant disciplining’ – behaviour that Parreñas (2008) identifies with the performance of a “heightened version of conventional fathering”. It is worth noting, however, that providing direction and guidance to children back home has also been found to be a feature of transnational mothering (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997: 564), and that perceptions that children squander remittances has also been identified as a source of conflict between transnational mothers and their children (Zontini, 2004: 1134).

In addition to remittances, many of the fathers we interviewed attempted to maintain connections with children in Poland through the sending of parcels, regular contact over the phone and internet, and visits. Those with prior migratory experiences reported how the performance of such kin-work tasks was now easier than before, due in part to the rise in ICTs, cheaper and more frequent air travel and the growth of regional airports (Portes, 2001; Baldassar, 2007; Wilding, 2006; Ryan et al., 2009; Stenning and Dawley, 2009). Increased capacity for visiting Poland and having family visit the UK, however, is also related to the improved position of Polish nationals within the UK migration regime since 2004, and is an important reminder that migration status plays a critical role in the shaping of transnational family relations (Fresnoza-Plot, 2009). Zontini (2004) has observed that the conditions of reception also shape migrants’ family practices, and the fathers in our study...
simultaneously spoke of the constraints on doing kin work transnationally, linked to their specific positioning within the UK labour market. Long working hours, arising variously from self-employed status, irregular work flows, low wage-rates, exclusion from employee rights and employers’ demands for flexibility, were a common experience among the fathers, and constrained in particular the capacity to take holidays from work in order to visit Poland.

While transnational fathers reported undertaking a range of activities to maintain relations with their children, as with transnational mothers (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009), close family ties were not an inevitable outcome and, as with the South American migrants interviewed in the UK by Mas Giralt and Bailey (2010), the experience of ‘being split’ featured in some fathers’ accounts. For one father this was experienced with a degree of puzzlement since he felt he had made an effort: “I thought that it was enough to call very often, but… his mother’s behaviour has influenced him too much” (Wojtek). The same father elsewhere in the interview speaks of having a much closer relationship with his young daughter who is being raised in London with him. Another father, and again similar to reports of the experiences of transnational mothers (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997), spoke of the transfer of his child’s affections: “Now there is a matter of a long separation…she is totally attached to my ex-mother-in-law” (Wiktort). The breakdown of a marriage, which was itself sometimes seen as a consequence of migration, was felt by some men to have contributed to child-father distance, particularly where relations between parents were acrimonious. In those cases, fathers often blamed mothers for the problems in the child-father relationship. While studies (Dreby, 2010; Parreñas, 2005a; Pribilsky, 2004) have found that close father-child ties in father-away families are highly dependent on mothers playing a bridging role between fathers and children, Parreñas (2005a: 85–86) observes that this responsibility adds considerably to the workloads of mothers; a point which went unacknowledged by our fathers. It was not only mothers, however, whom the migrant fathers blamed for the emotional loss experienced. One father framed the ‘pain of family separation’ (Parreñas, 2001) within a negative public discourse around parental migration in Poland: “[A]t that time when parents left the country they were rubbish because they left the child,” (Adam). While other studies (see Lutz, 2010; White, 2011) have highlighted the tendency within the Polish media in the context of the recent wave of out-migration to problematize parents who leave their children behind, they suggest that criticism is levelled more heavily at mothers; a reflection no doubt of traditional gender roles. Yet, as the above quote reveals, fathers can be affected by this discourse too.

**Fathering in situ: Polish families in London**

Not all fathers had left their children behind when they migrated, and of those who had, a number had subsequently brought children over to the UK. Additionally, and at least for some in fulfilment of their migration plans, a number of our interviewees had had their first or additional child/ren since arriving in the UK, and one man had become a step-father. In total, therefore, at the time of interview, nine of the interviewees were fathering in situ.

Reflecting a dual frame of reference (Waldinger and Lichter 2003) between life in Poland and life in the UK, all of the fathers felt that migration had benefited their families financially. While all worked in the same sector, what we have termed in the broader study, ‘handyman services’, and almost all defined themselves as self-employed, our interviewees were differentially positioned. Some, enabled by English-language skills and a longer duration in the UK, had become owners of small handyman businesses, and reported earnings in the top decile. Most of those we interviewed, though, had earnings closer to the male median. The nature of the business, however, meant that earnings could be precarious, and many of the interviewees reported that uncertainty had increased in the context of the UK recession, as both the supply of work and the rate they could charge reduced. A number identified the added issue of the high cost of living in London, especially housing costs. That said, all still felt financially better-off in the UK than Poland. This was not only related to differences in the economic circumstances between the two countries, but also to the intervie-
wees’ relatively privileged position within the UK migration regime, which as we noted above, gives Polish and other EU8 country nationals, access, albeit restricted, to UK social rights. Thus, in line with other research (Corrigan, 2010), while we found no evidence of what is pejoratively called ‘benefit tourism’, some fathers identified the receipt of social security benefits in the UK as an important source of additional, and more critically, secure additional, income (see also White, 2011).

While working in the UK enabled the fathers to better fulfil their breadwinning responsibilities, contemporary normative expectations around fathering emphasize father-involvement alongside breadwinning (Hobson and Fahlen, 2009). As Perrons et al. (2010) demonstrate, research indicates that Polish fathers are just as likely as UK fathers to subscribe to such expectations: Hobson and Fahlen’s (2009: 220) analysis of the European Social Survey, for example, suggests that more than 90 per cent of fathers in the UK and Poland consider it important to find a job “that enables them to reconcile employment with family life”. While the Polish fathers in our study emphasized their breadwinning role, they also endorsed an active, involved and nurturing fathering ideal, frequently contrasting this with their own experience of being fathered. Many of the fathers interviewed, however, reported that the pressures of paid work constrained the time available for spending with children and partners:

Work often takes up most of the time in the week as well as during the weekend, so it limits the amount of time for the family and that makes things difficult. …[I]t is a bit like a vicious circle because when you start a family, you have to try to provide enough for some standard of life… so automatically you fall into this work spiral to ensure a standard of living for yourself and the family. … [T]he work automatically gets longer and there is less time for the family. (Piotr)

Fathers (and non-fathers) frequently employed a dual frame of reference to the issue of time too, and on this dimension, Poland always had the advantage: “I definitely have less time for the family. …[T]here… I was back home at 5 or 6 pm and over here it is 8 or 9 pm when I come back” (Filip). The source of constraints on family-time for those migrants with children in the UK were as for those identified above in relation to transnational fathers – that is, their positioning within the UK labour market – as well as the additional factor of long commuting times for those living in London. Strong family values and an expressed preference for jobs facilitating reconciliation of work and family life are insufficient for our interviewees to overcome the institutional barriers to easing the tensions between breadwinning and parenting; thus the extent to which traditional gender roles can be challenged and transformed is constrained.

Childcare posed a challenge for dual-working Polish families. For some, the problem was one of affordability. Despite increases in government subsidies (both demand and supply-side) for childcare over the last decade and more under the UK National Childcare Strategy, childcare in the UK, and particularly London, remains expensive, and parents in the UK contribute more towards the costs than in any other OECD country (OECD 2010). As one father commented: “Nurseries here are also very expensive… £170 per week. That’s a lot!” (Fryderyk). Other fathers, however, expressed a reluctance to use childcare services:

As we, Poles, are used to, when we are talking about leaving the child with someone, we only consider family. We are not used, for example, to hire a babysitter… I’m not talking here about financial aspects, as it isn’t like that… but our mentality prevents us from leaving the child with a stranger. (Piotr)

This father’s care preferences reflect a more generalized orientation towards family-based care – that is, care by mothers and / or grandmothers – in Polish society, which has emerged in the context of weaknesses, including low availability, poor quality, high costs and inflexible opening regimes, in the public childcare sector in Poland (Plomien, 2009). As a result, and in common with
the Eastern European migrants in the USA interviewed by Nesteruk and Marks (2009) for whom the absence of grandparents as a potential source of childcare was described as one of the biggest losses of migration, many of the fathers, and indeed, non-fathers, in our study spoke of the difficulties in raising children without the support of extended family which, had they been in Poland, they could have expected. ‘Flying grandmothers’ have been identified in other research as a dimension of migrants’ transnational care strategies (Nesteruk and Marks, 2009; Zontini, 2004; Lie, 2010). So too, a number of the fathers in our study reported bringing grandmothers from Poland to London, either for short periods at a time or on a more permanent basis, to address their care-deficit; a strategy also reported by some of the Polish migrant mothers interviewed by White (2011). In contrast to other migrant groups in the UK whose family-members’ entry and stay are conditional on visa requirements (see for example, Lie, 2010), ‘flying grandmothers’ were a care-resource our Polish fathers were able to mobilize without migration restrictions.

CONCLUSION

At a time when communications have expanded globally, transnationally and regionally, but opportunities vary between locations, increased migration is a likely outcome. Unlike commodities, people have attachments and commitments and cannot simply flow from one location to another without carefully evaluating the balance between potential economic gains and possible emotional losses, and for parents (as well as other carers), by making arrangements to cover their caring responsibilities. In some situations, this has resulted in transnational parenting as the global care chain literature demonstrates convincingly, mainly with respect to mothers. As this article shows, men too have attachments and commitments to their children, which go beyond breadwinning. Overlooking men’s relational attachments and involvement in childcare not only risks failing to understand the character and complexity of contemporary migration patterns, but also risks excluding migrant fathers from being able to meet new social norms with respect to parenting.

While the economic rationale for migration figured strongly in our findings, migrants also expressed other motivations, including love and adventure. Migrant fathers combined the economic rationale with a desire to provide a better life for their children. Fathers with resident children in the UK referred to the importance of investing in their child/rens’ education as an influence on their decision; those who had left their children behind referred to ways of keeping in contact – being both here and there – using their earnings to support their families in Poland and buying gifts, while economizing on their own living expenses, with parallels to the transnational mothering literature (Parreñas, 2005a,b), as well as to Dreby’s (2010) study of transnational parenting. Based on the fathering narratives, practices and projects of migrant men in our study, however, we do not find any evidence that the many parallels with migrant women in parenting, close the gap between mothering and fathering; a finding that bears a range of policy implications (see below).

It is also important to acknowledge that some fathers, particularly those divorced or separated, reported a lack of real contact and control over children left behind, and in a few cases contrasted these fractured relationships with the very positive bonds formed with the children of their second families in the UK. As our research relies on the fathers’ accounts only, we do not know whether these emotional attachments are recognized or shared by their children. Neither do we know whether these sentiments are specific to fathers or shared by the mothers, both questions for further research. While uneven development provides an economic rationale for migration, such general tendencies are always shaped by specific circumstances such as language, politics, religion or by specific institutional arrangements, which in this case gave EU8 nationals privileged access to the UK with respect to the labour market and social benefits. This favourable positioning within the migration regime critically shaped their integration into the UK economy and society, and widened
the range of choices available with respect to configuring family life when compared to other migrant groups (see for example Wills et al., 2009). For migrant fathers with children in the UK for example, receipt of child-related benefits provided some security, particularly important in an occupation characterized by fluctuating incomes. In addition, the different individual characteristics of migrants, especially with respect to language, influenced their specific position within the labour market, some becoming small scale entrepreneurs employing other handymen while others remained as basic labourers. In both cases, however, their favourable legal position was to some extent undermined by the precarious and uncertain work, leading to long working hours which impinged negatively on family life.

Overall, our findings caution against the risk, associated with the transnational care literature’s recognition of ‘deterritorialized’ (Baldassar, 2008) care-giving, of analytically privileging transnational spaces, and point instead towards a ‘situated transnationalism’ (Kilkey and Merla, 2013), in which wider processes are examined within particular contexts and specifics (see also Ryan, 2011). In this case the favourable rights are conferred by EU legislation which covers all Member States, and arguably corresponds to the EU desire to fulfill the economic and social imperatives for an expanded labour supply, either in the context of economic growth (up until 2007), or the longer term problem of ageing, from elsewhere within, rather than beyond, Europe (Klein, 2002). At the same time, open access to the labour market combined with social rights recognizes that even though the majority of migrants are young and single, some EU8 migrants (as well as other migrants) have social reproductive needs and responsibilities. In this respect, future research could usefully explore how migration regimes are not only differentiated in terms of labour market and residency rights, but also in terms of family-rights. Such an agenda would contribute to acknowledging that migrants are people with social relations and obligations and not simply units of labour.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to the financial support of the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-2590), to all the research participants, and to the three external reviewers.

NOTES

1. Interviews were undertaken as part of a larger study, which analysed gendered understandings of the relationship between globalisation, migration and social reproduction through an exploration of the commoditisation of stereotypically male forms of domestic work such as household and garden maintenance and repair in middleclass UK families, and its displacement to migrant men. 79 in-depth interviews were conducted, including with migrant men and employing households. For a reflexive account of the key methodological and epistemological issues, including positionality, rapport and trust, see Kilkey et al. (2013).
2. EU8 migrants come from Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia; countries which joined the EU on 1st May 2004.
3. All names attributed to participants are pseudonyms.

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