"Get to Know Me Before You Throw Me Out": Exploring Agency in Migrant Narratives

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Abstract

Popular depictions of migrants around the world tend to create an image of the migrant as disempowered and dehumanized through the migration process. Often, this is a result of misinformed or politically charged media as well as an overly abstract academic literature, within which the voices of migrants themselves are rarely taken into account. This thesis will explore how agency is expressed in the narratives of migrants living in Warsaw, Poland, particularly through migrant life stories, in order to reveal an important nuance and perspective of migration that is often ignored. A temporal analysis of the migrants' experiences supports the theoretical framework of the interdependence of structure and agency. Additionally, in portraying themselves as agents in control of their own lives, migrants find empowerment through the specificity of the migratory experience and the knowledge that has been picked up along the way. Poland, as a country with relatively few migrants, proves to be an important backdrop for the migrants to exert greater agency in their environment, as they employ a 'dual integration' strategy to change the structural status quo in regards to negative perceptions of foreigners among the Polish population.

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Contents

1. Introduction

"Those people who choose to come to Europe, do not come without any reason. If someone has a good life in their home country, they would not choose to leave right?"

-Migrant from Somalia

This thesis will explore how agency is expressed in the narratives of migrants living in Warsaw, Poland, particularly through migrant life stories, in order to reveal an important nuance and perspective of migration that is often ignored. Within any discussion of agency, though, one cannot bypass a discussion of social structure, or that which can be considered a barrier to expression of human agency. Though a thorough discussion of the agency/social structure debate is beyond the bounds of this research- as Margaret Archer (1996) put it, dealing with questions of structure and agency demands a confrontation of "the most pressing social problem of the human condition"- this work will present a particular perspective on agency as it looks when confronted with social structure throughout the migration process. This is an important task, as the over-concern with the political dimensions of migration "has led to research that works against understanding mobility in terms of transgressive, agency-driven, potentially empowering moves" (Silvey, 2004). A temporal analysis of migrants' life journeys from beginning up to the present show that migration as a strategy is not just an isolated event in which migrants simply respond as "automatons" to mechanical forces beyond their control, but that notions of human agency must also be present in order to get a fuller picture of the phenomenon at hand (Mchugh: 74).

It is well known that most of the world's population are not and do not want to be migrants (Hammar et al., 1997). Thus, migrants, as the minority, consider their actions and essentially, *their* choice, to leave their homes and move to a different nation as the

physical expression of their agency. The notion of migrant agency has largely been looked over in the representation of migrants both in mainstream media as well as in academia. Partly this is surprising, given its particular importance in playing a central role “both in the development of social scientific theory on migration and in shaping the policy responses to people’s movement” (Faist 2000: 23-4). Less surprising are the dehumanizing narratives in relation to the portrayal of migrants, given the politically sensitive nature of the current migration debate in Europe and the efforts to characterize this group of people as “enemies at the gate” (Esses, 2013). Nonetheless, migrant narratives and life stories reveal a great sense of empowerment through the migration process and can be imperative in showing that “migrants are not isolated individuals who react to market stimuli and bureaucratic rules, but social beings who seek to achieve better outcomes for themselves, their families and their communities by actively shaping the migratory process” (Castles, 2004).

Often, policy perspectives have sought to understand *why* people move in the first place, in which structural accounts have taken the lead. For example, Lee (1966) laid out a conceptualization of different structural ‘push-pull’ factors that influence migration: economic, political, demographic, and social drivers. A more all-inclusive approach was taken by Eugenia Georges (1990), who put forth two major theoretical perspectives to account for why people migrate. The first of these, the equilibrium model, places the focus on how individual migrants move in response to factors that push them from their places of origin and pull them to the receiving region. The structural approach, in contrast, is concerned with the historically determined structural conditions that set the stage for migration (3-10). This shows a clear attempt to bridge

agentive and structural accounts of migration decisions. However, the delicate interplay between human agency and social structure is largely disregarded *after* the initial migration move, marginalizing the effect of the migration experience over the course of a lifetime. My focus on migrants' narratives of past, present, and even future will attempt to fill this gap of understanding of the ongoing process that is migration and the place that individual agency holds within it.

Human agency can be conceived of as the individual freedom to make choices that affect one's life without restraint. As Bakewell put it, "people's agency ensures that they always have some degree of freedom – some room to maneuver" (1695). Within the constraints of structural inhibitors, human agents can be "planful and make choices among options that construct their life course" (Clausen, 1993) or have "the capacity to actively influence and change their living conditions" (Brockmeier, 218-219). However, agency goes beyond the universal ability to make decisions. Perhaps the most important conception of the human agent is "to be a driving force of change, with the ability to transform the social relations one is embroiled [in], showing a degree of control" (Sewell, 1992: 20). This thesis, then, will show just how migrants as agents not only conceive of personal decisions as strategies to navigate around structural constraints throughout their journeys to and in Poland, but of action as a force of agentive change of structure in their given environment. I will first provide a brief overview of data on the migration situation in Poland before moving on to the theoretical background and migration literature, in which theories and perspectives stressing the interdependency of agency with structure will be reviewed, particularly those of social scientists like Giddens, Bourdieu, Berger and Luckmann, and Unger. The following

section on methodology will then be proceeded by the analysis of life story narratives of nine migrants living in Warsaw, with a temporal focus from past to present. The findings of this analysis show that these migrants have considered themselves to have agentive capabilities throughout the entire migration process, even in the face of structural constraint. Significantly, the context of Poland and Warsaw as an environment with a relatively small immigrant population proves to be an important factor in the migrants' greater space and opportunity for expression of agency, as they transform their migration experiences into action with the hope of prompting structural change within Polish society, vis a vis the concept of "dual integration", the idea that integration must be a learning process for migrants on the one hand as well as for host country citizens on the other.

1.1 Poland in the Context of Migration

In this section, I will briefly cover the state of immigration to Poland as this information will prove important in assessing the conclusions reached in the thesis. Usually when people think of Poland and migration, they think of the millions of Poles who have left the country and are now living abroad all over the world. This is unsurprising, given that there are at least 20 million people with Polish ancestry living outside the borders of the country (Kuliński). When it comes to Poland as a place of immigration, though, there is the tendency to believe that the country is seen as an unattractive place to settle by foreigners and is usually treated as a transit country on a migrant's journey to Western Europe, made all the easier by its position on the borders of the European Union. However, statistical evidence from recent years point to the fact

that Poland could be going through a transitional phase in regards to migration and that migrants are more often deciding to stay for the long-term in Poland, so that it can no longer only be labeled an 'emigration' country but an 'emigration-immigration country' (Godlewska). Just a glance at one set of numbers shows how this transition is playing out: while in 1998, the Polish state granted 4893 temporary stay permits and 290 permanent settlement permits, in 2011 those numbers were 29,653 and 3733, respectively (*Współpraca…).* At the end of 2013, over 121,000 foreigners were in possession of legal residence permits, though one must keep in mind that these numbers are representative only of those who are officially documented (Winiarska: 9).

Determining the exact number of migrants living in Poland at any given moment is in fact a difficult task due to the incompleteness of officially recorded hard data, inconsistencies with what the word 'migrant' actually means, and the highly mobile nature and irregular movements of migrants themselves (Winiarska). Additionally, there is a wide variation between official and unofficial numbers of foreigners living in Poland. The National Census from 2012 showed that migrants, officially, make up about 0,2% of the population, which in itself would actually constitute a two-fold increase when compared to migrant numbers in 2002. At the same time, the Central Statistical Office assessed the actual number of migrants, or persons residing at any given moment within the territory of Poland, at 380,000, which would constitute 1% of the population. Experts believe these numbers do not reflect the facts and the "International Migration Report" showed that in 2005, the number of immigrants in Poland was 703,000, which would constitute 1,8% of the population (Alscher). Even with this uncertainty as to exact numbers, it is beyond a doubt that the number of incoming migrants to the country are

growing year to year. If we were to take official numbers into account, the scale of migration into Poland in the last few years has been as follows: 39,100 migrants from 2001-2004; 7,300 in 2005; 9,300 in 2006; 15,000 in 2007; 15,300 in 2008; 17,400 in 2009, with a rather high jump in 2011 when 54,449 people were admitted into the country (*Mały…).* In addition, 2013 was the year that saw the Polish state accept the highest number of applications for refugee status in the history of the Polish asylum system. About 15,000 people applied for refugee status, with a majority 35% of the applicants accepted holding Syrian citizenship ("Migracje…"). That same year, temporary residence permits were given to citizens, in order from largest groups, of Ukraine, Vietnam, China, Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Turkey, India, South Korea, and the United States, just to name a few (Winiarska: 10).

From the official statistics we are also able to determine that the majority of migrants coming to Poland are men, more people settle in the cities than in villages, and that the Mazovia region, especially the city of Warsaw, absorbs the highest numbers of newcomers from the greatest variety of backgrounds. Unsurprisingly Warsaw, as the political and financial capital of Poland, is the city with the highest number of migrants in the country, where they account for around 2-3% of the municipal population (Buchowski, 2012). Researchers estimate that Warsaw alone is home to about a quarter of all foreigners residing in Poland, numbering around 45,000 people, spanning 132 officially registered nationalities (Piekut, 2012). These numbers at first glance may not seem like much and they indeed constitute a fraction of the entire population of the country. The above numbers show that the phenomenon of migration in Poland is still demographically insignificant when compared to immigrant numbers in other countries

of the European Union. In contrast, Germany houses an immigrant population of 15.7 million in a population of 82 million, Holland 3.35 million in a population of 16.3 million, Sweden 700,000 in a population of 9.3 million, and Greece around 840,000 in a population of 11 million (Triandafyllidou). Perhaps for this reason is has not attracted the necessary attention of researchers, policy makers, and the public alike, though it is a dynamic movement that is taking on traction in the country. Though it is true that some voices in Polish society suggested a "catastrophic" surge in migration into Poland, their predictions have, up to now, been unfounded (Buchowski). Nonetheless, economic, demographic, political, and socio-cultural factors in Poland and the EU will most likely result in a constantly growing number of foreigners coming to the country in the years ahead (Proc. of Polska…).

2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

2.1. Theory

A central problem in sociology is the debate on structure and agency and subsequently, the nature of social life and organization. At the forefront of the debate have been two opposing viewpoints. One, associated with sociological traditions like structuralism and functionalism, sees social life as largely determined by social structure, and explains individual actions simply as outcomes of the given structure. The other viewpoint, apparent for example in symbolic interaction theory, challenges this by stressing the ability and agency of individuals to construct, reconstruct, and give meaning to their world through individual choice and will. A third approach to the structure-agency problem suggests a synthesis which attempts to transcend

oversimplified dichotomous formulations of individual-society, action-structure, and subject-object. As Marx famously said, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1935). Thus, we cannot draw a sharp distinction between social structure and social agency, and social scientists such as Giddens (1986), Bourdieu (1977), Berger and Luckmann (1966), and Roberto Unger (2004) stress human agency which takes on board the significance of social structures while at the same time preserving a sense of human creativity and purposive action. This synthetic approach forms the theoretical framework for this thesis.

The work of Anthony Giddens sets out a foundation for the construction of a framework within which both structure and agency can both be captured and used in analysis. What he sought to understand was “how the concepts of action, meaning, and subjectivity should be specified and how they might relate to notions of structure and constraint” (Giddens, 1986: 2). The interdependence between structure and agency is articulated in his central concept of the “duality of structure”:

> “Crucial to the idea of structuration is the theorem of the duality of structure… The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices that recursively organize.” (Giddens, 1986: 25)

Thus, his theory of structuration expresses the mutual dependency of human agency with social structure, without giving primacy to either. Structure is both the medium and outcome of social action by individual agents. In this sense, every human is an agent. Central to Giddens' perspective on human agency is the idea of "reflexivity," or the ability of an agent to consciously alter his or her place in the social structure by monitoring and rationalizing those actions (Giddens, 1991). Social historian William Sewell supports Giddens' arguments, specifically those on the "idea of dual structures" or how "human agency and structure, far from being *opposed*, in fact *presuppose* each other" and also on the understanding that "structure must be regarded as a process, not as a steady state" (Sewell 1992: 4). Although one can see that Giddens' conception is one in which individuals and agency are highly valued, his formulation of structure is indeed both constraining and enabling- agency determines structure which determines the possibilities for the expression of agency.

Following a similar thread, Berger and Luckmann, in their seminal book *The Social Construction of Reality (1966)*, also point out that social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life. Serving as a precursor to Giddens' formulations, they also see the relationship between structure and agency as a dialectical one in which society forms individuals who in turn create society, following a self-sustaining pattern. Since individuals essentially recreate and create the structures of the social world, this leaves an open path in the way of agency for social agents to influence structures in a purposive and intentional way. As such, social structures are shown as being within the realm of control by individual actors. The findings of this research will crucially point out this very interplay between structure and agency that Giddens and

Burger and Luckmann set forth, showing how actors react to the structural constraints in their environment by making critical choices, but also, how they see their own actions in affecting the structure.

Pierre Bourdieu's "theory of practice" puts forth another formulation of a theoretical framework in which agency and structure are shown to be mutually constitutive. Like Giddens, Bourdieu wishes to "integrate micro and macro, voluntarist and determinist dimensions of human activity…into a single conceptual movement rather than isolated as mutually exclusive forms of explanation" (Swartz, 1997: 9). Bourdieu's key concept for understanding the relationship between action and structure is *habitus*, which in his words consists of "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). In other words, habitus can be defined as a system of dispositions, values, and expectations within an individual agent, developed in response to the objective conditions he/she encounters. Habitus is embodied and internalized, meaning that Bourdieu sees the actions of agents as a result of unconscious calculations and thus done through much less reflexivity than Giddens would have it. Indeed, he has been previously criticized for "his apparent denial of conscious decision making in the determination of human behavior, in marked contrast to most theorists of action" (Elder-Vass, 2007: 328). Though Bourdieu's theorizations generally favor the role of structure over agency in social life, it is still quite unclear how much room he leaves for agentive action, though I do believe that within that framework, opportunities for agency do exist. External social worlds may become embedded, unconsciously or otherwise, in the mental sphere, though social agents still develop their own strategies which are adapted

to the needs of that specific social world, leaving us with an embodied sense to an otherwise disembodied structure. I find that Bourdieu's conception of human agency is highly contextual, highlighting the strategies taken in specific environments. This is a crucial point within this thesis as well, given that the context of the migration situation in Warsaw and Poland plays a crucial factor in the space and opportunities for agency for this specific group of migrants.

Perhaps the most optimistic rendition of human agency in relation to structure is put forth by social theorist Roberto Unger within the development of the concept of *negative capability*. Going against a Marxist historical determinism, Unger suggests, in his theory of *false necessity*, that there are no pre-set institutional arrangements that society adheres to, but rather, that humans are free to choose and shape the paths that societies take. Thus, there are numerous ways in which people can resist social and institutional constraints, leading to an empowerment that can make change possible. This empowerment is Unger's *negative capability*, or the human capacity to reject what may seem structurally "natural" or "logical". While Unger still recognizes the existence and possible constraints of structure, he asserts that people have the ability to transform their social worlds in order to enact change and truly become agents within their given context. By looking at human action through *negative capability*, one can see that the individual is not conceived of as simply complying with or rebelling against a given structure, but rather, sees agents as self-empowering through a variety of means (Unger, 2004). This is a critical perspective forming the foundation of the findings of this thesis, given that the Warsaw migrants I spoke with not only expressed a search for balance between structure and agency, but crucially, their desire and ability to find

empowerment through means of being the source of structural change in the environment they find themselves in.

2.2. Agency and Structure in Migration Studies

Much of the theory and literature on migration has tended to elude the problem of structure and agency, despite its apparent importance for understanding social organization. While the effects of various structures (e.g. political, economic, demographic, socio-cultural, environmental), in explaining why migration starts or continues are well documented, the concept of agency of migrants themselves, or of a particular group of migrants remains understudied. Scholars who have attempted to bridge studies in migration with the structure/agency debate tend to investigate the agency of migrants by seeking agency within the migration process itself. Adler (2000), whose ethnography looks at transnational migrants living in both the US and Mexico, analyzes how a group of migrants reacted to changes in US laws. Importantly, she outlines the concept of 'migrant agendas', or the "strategies regarding the purposes of migration, the maintenance or disassociation of social ties to the sending area, and the way that community is defined" (172). She posits that a consideration of these agendas implies agency in the migration process, and comments that this is often overlooked by scholars. These specific agendas motivate behavior and thus, show that migrants have the power to make their own decisions and that structural constraints for this particular group are irrelevant, with neither laws nor economy determining the options they take. She concludes that the purposive evasion of laws of both the US and Mexico

demonstrates how migrants resist those policies that have negative consequences on goals.

Rodriguez (1996) focuses on undocumented migrants in an effort to "contradict the perception of undocumented migrants as a docile, job-happy, helpless population" (27). By focusing on social change, he recognizes that studies of this kind of change remain wedded to the structural level of impersonal forces and often fail to recognize the "transformative power of human agency by ordinary men and women," including that of migrants (26). By showing how undocumented migrants participate in the activities of the larger immigrant community, he brings to light the development of community forces that, while marginally situated, eventually can affect core institutional sectors in mainstream society. Thus, Rodriguez's work contributes to the perspective of the power of the human dimension in structural change, showing that, in this case, undocumented migrants are not merely passive recipients of structural conditions, but they actively take part in the process of creating meaning and establishing change. Hellgren (2012) also looks at how a specific subgroup of migrants, in this case, those labeled 'illegal' in the host country, deal with the structural constraints that are specific to their situation. By placing legal status at the cross-section of structural forces and agentive possibilities, she shows how "'legality', in its multiple experiences and forms, has varying consequences for migrants' family life and individual agency" (34). Her research shows how legal status can indeed seriously impact multiple spheres of migrant livelihoods- personal, societal, family life- however, despite certain structural limitations, it becomes important to recognize the "potential for migrant agency in the face of legal restrictions" (37). Such potential allows for migrants to employ a variety of 'strategies' for navigating

the constraints and requirements of legal status, and thus, show how they "adjust and attempt to conform to the law, possibly redefining structures in the process" (37). Similar to Rodriguez, Hellgren points out how structural constraints, in this case, legal constructions, both shape and react to migrants' active decision-making. Thus, structure is limiting but not precluding the power of migrant agency. This "redefining of structures" mentioned by both authors is thus a critical intersection at which human agency may indeed offer an option of overcoming the constraints or limitations of structure through action as will prove to be true in the findings of this thesis as well.

Other migration scholars have discussed the ways in which human agency can play a central role in influencing the migration process and, more specifically, in the motivations for making decisions to migrate. Black et al. (2011), who attempted to study the effects of environmental change on human migration, recognized that while identifying "environmental migrants" as such may be close to impossible, it is necessary to incorporate agency into how motivations translate into action. By incorporating both structural and behavioral drivers of migration, they show that "migrants have agency, and indeed are both self-aware in terms of their motivation for movement, and willing and able to express these motivations to social researchers" (S5). Thus, the authors' article develops a model that understands migration processes in terms of a confluence of structural and agentive factors, however, it is agency which in fact proves to be the deciding factor in the initial movement: "the presence of drivers of migration does not necessarily mean that migration will take place. Rather, migration is the result of a decision…in response to these drivers, and this decision is influenced partly by personal and family characteristics, and partly by barriers or facilitating mechanisms that may be

in place" (S10). Szewczyk's (2015) recent work also acknowledges the importance of both structure and agency in studies of migration, albeit with a greater acknowledgement of individual agency. Through a case study of Polish graduates, born at the end of the 1970s and 1980s, who migrated to England after 2004, Szewczyk analyzes personal narratives of change and migration in order to pinpoint agency, with a specific focus on graduates' generational unity and belonging. She finds that the experience of witnessing substantial change- the collapse of the socialist system, emergence of capitalism, the accession of Poland into the EU- has had major influence over her subjects' subsequent motivations to migrate and take risks. She identifies two main generational cohorts, the "Generation of Changes" and the "European Generation of Opportunities and Migration", which, though different, share the common strand of change and its significance on their agency (159). Szewczyk concludes that the taking up of a chance to migrate shows graduates' intentional agency in administering their life courses (160). Structure is emphasized in her defense of focusing on the economic and political aspects of a participants' sending state at the time of migration in order to get a greater understanding of the migration decision-making process. Though she includes Sewell's (1984:3) notion that "human action occurs as a durée, a continuous flow of conduct, and therefore this study argues that migration should not be analysed as a one-off event," her research only presents how past experiences could have played a role in a person's decision to migrate. What I find missing here, and truly, in almost all literature on agency and migration, is a look at how agency is continually expressed in a temporal framework of a migrant's life, not just in the past in regards to migration

decisions, but further on in the present as well as agency with an outlook on the future, as will be presented in this thesis.

3. Methodology

The collection of data for this thesis research came about in a rather peculiar way. When I arrived to the field in Warsaw, Poland, I had arrived with the intention to carry out quite a different project, albeit one that was still linked to the topic of migration. However, in the initial stages of data collection, I realized that I was on the road to doing what I disliked so much in mainstream migration literature - turning migrants into "theoretical constructs" rather than taking a more humanistic approach (Adler: 166). This was the point when I decided to collect migrant life stories in order to see how migrants constructed themselves, their journeys, and their lives through narration. Thus, in April of 2015 I collected nine life stories of migrants living in and around Warsaw. I was able to meet my informants by first getting in contact with many of the organizations that work with migrants throughout the city, such as the "Foundation for Somalia", the "Multicultural Center", "Migrant Info Point", and "Ukrainian World." Usually I would arrive at organizations when Polish or English language classes were taking place so that I could introduce myself and my project to the migrants personally, before offering them the chance to participate. Otherwise, the organization would take my contact information and send out an email asking for participants. This was a very useful strategy as it allowed me to find participants from a variety of different backgrounds willing to take part in the project. As such, I was able to move "beyond the ethnic lens" in migration studies and "reject the methodologies that begin with the assumption that

ethnic or ethno-religious identities, beliefs, practices, or networks are central to the lives of people of migrant background" (Glick Schiller et al., 2006; Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2013).

The interviews took place wherever the participants felt most comfortable- either at one of the organizations, at home, or at a café. For all the interviews I started by asking the question '*Can you tell me about yourself and how you got here to Poland?'* This is of course a very personal question without a simple answer, however, as my interviewees were talking I tried to interfere as little as possible, only to keep the narrative going as naturally as I could. When I first told my participants about the project many were a bit hesitant to open up so quickly to me. This is understandably so, given the types of representations that media has of migrants in Poland (some thought that I was a journalist) as well as the discriminatory attitudes they often face, both of which are discussed in the chapter with my findings. However, I found that by sharing with them my own personal experience as a child of Polish migrants to the United States, we were able to connect in a special way which in turn built more trust between the interviewee and myself. All of the interviews took about an hour or so and were first recorded, then transcribed and usually had to be translated as well (either from Polish or Russian). I was also given permission to spend some time at the organizations themselves to ethnographically observe, listen, write, and talk to people. This served me greatly in not only witnessing the day to day workings and project preparations of these groups, but also in gaining a wider perspective on the migrant situation in Poland presently, as I was able to speak to Poles and migrants alike on related topics.

As mentioned already, this thesis is premised on the personal narratives and life stories of the migrants, analyzed in such a way that agency and structure can be distinguished temporally over a person's life course. This is important as the "life course perspective offers a framework for exploring the dynamics of multiple, interdependent pathways" (Jr., Glen, 1994). When narrating a life course, one can reflect on the different choices made throughout that course as well as the range of options that a person may have had in deciding what kind of life to lead. Thus, this 'people centered' approach puts human agency and its contribution to "changing policy, social commitment, and norms that require collective action at the forefront of research" (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). The manufacturing and self-design of one's own biography allows the individual to "actualize themselves through the activity of narrating" and to "become active agents in building their biographies" (Ochs and Capps, 1996).

As such, my analyses place heavy emphasis on language and narration in order to discern agentive action within those narratives. I am in agreement with Brockmeier (2009) when he posits that for "understanding the human condition it is far more important to investigate the ways human beings construct their real and possible worlds than it is to classify and evaluate their ontological status and, we may add, it also is more important than to judge these worlds in terms of their being true or false" (p. 215). Thus, I do not put myself in the position to judge whether a person's declaration of agentive action is absolutely true or false, but rather, I am basing the analyses on how that person understands their agentive action or structural constraints at any given moment in their lives as expressed narratively. This brings me to Rom Harré's (1995) idea of *agentive discourse*, under which terms such as subjectivity, intentions, agency,

participation, decision-making, action possibilities, and reasons for action fall. For Harré, being an agent and discursively presenting oneself as an agent are one and the same (225). Therefore, the study of human agency cannot be separated from the language of agency, or the "discursive practices in which our agentive powers are manifested." (122, 224). For me, it is thus this presentation of the self as agent that is an important marker in determining whether one in actuality does consider themselves to be an agent in their life course or not. As Charles Taylor (1985) has argued, people are essentially self-interpreting and self-evaluating beings, and that our capacity to interpret and evaluate our own desires is a crucial feature of human agency. Since people cannot free themselves from their interpretive and reflexive stance towards the world and themselves (223), I believe I am in a position to base my arguments and conclusions on narrative representations of 'self' and on the reoccurring patterns that were shared by migrants.

4. Between Structure and Agency in Migrant Narratives

4.1. The journey's start: choosing to migrate and settle in Poland

As previously mentioned, it has become widely recognized that individual as well as institutional factors represent important filters as to whether people actually move or not in any specific case (Black et al., 2011). Thus, structural and agentive motivators, as well as the ways they influence each other, must be taken into account in any analysis of migration narratives. My analysis of narratives below will show that traditionally documented structures- economic, political, demographic, and social- set the stage for

migrants' lives in their home country. However, the subsequent choice to migrate in the given environment is represented throughout as a rational, calculated decision on the part of the migrants themselves, after the structural constraints have already been established. As mentioned above, structural motivators are not enough to account for people's choices to move, as most of the world's population still decides to remain in their home countries. As such, a certain degree of agency must be involved in the initial stages of the migration journey.

In the narratives, the individuals are greatly aware and reflexive on the structural constraints experienced in their home countries, but quick to represent their move as a personal decision, differentiating themselves from other countrymen who stayed behind. One migrant from Sudan, who had already been living in Poland for nine years, recalls the process of formulating his own decision within the confines of the political environment he and his fellow countrymen were experiencing (my italicizations):

> "When I left Sudan it was simply because of *the decision* to have a different life. I was active politically and I did not agree with what was going on there. *I had different plans* for my life as well as for the life of my country. I wanted to fight in Sudan for democracy and I was one of those people who were fighting for that cause. You can say that my entire generation felt that they needed to leave the country."

My emphases in the quotation above show how this migrant represents his move as an independently formed decision related to how he saw his own future and desired life course. The mention of his entire generation is an expression of the desires which so many people then had, but which not everyone acted upon in the way that he did.

Addressing the structural (political) environment in his home country at the time points out the basis and means for wishing to move away. Thus, it was not solely the political situation which forced him out, but his subsequent, calculated choice to do so, demonstrating the important interplay at work between structure and agency in migration choices.

This interplay is further articulated by another recent migrant to Poland from Pakistan, whose entrepreneurial motivations caused him to move to Dubai first in 2008, after which he finally made his way to Eastern Europe. When I asked him to tell me about how his migration journey began, he told me that

> "It was all to start a business. The last ten years I had been in the banking sector, as a branch manager. But *I wanted* to go in a different direction, to start a business. That job is a kind of job for me…But Pakistan is an unsafe place, with many terrorist attacks. So you can put your money into everything and into your own business, but what is the point when you are not sure if you will not go back home? There is much uncertainty…. that's not a good environment for business."

The desire to be in a particular profession, in this case, business, is constrained by the fact that the environment in Pakistan is unsafe, unsure, and therefore unfit to follow such a route. My informant sees this clearly, but instead of passively accepting the situation and an unsatisfying profession, he chose to leave to a safer environment, exemplifying his "specific capacity of actively influencing and changing [his] living conditions" (Brockmeier, 218). This agentive discourse continued, as he described his personal desires and plans for his life, leading him to his current situation:

> "I want to do business. I don't want to do this kind of job where you have to get up early and put on a suit and a tie and go to work, come back at 5 or 6 pm, have no social life or no friends *(laughing)*. With business, I can do something that I enjoy to do. And you are your own boss and can make your own rules."

My informant envisioned a life course he had set for himself which did not fit into the structural constraints he was facing in his home country. His narrative portrays a sense of resistance to the conflict and danger in his country and perhaps more importantly, a resistance against a commonly accepted paradigm of work, under which he felt that he did not have enough freedom or power to make decisions for himself. His story is powerfully telling of how following personal life goals is strongly tied to structural 'push' factors which may lead an individual to take a risk such as migrating which otherwise may not have been taken.

It is especially in difficult political situations that the nuances between structure and agency can become blurred and hard to distinguish. As in the case of another migrant from Libya, the individual choice to migrate and to stay in Poland is only made clear when looked at from the broader perspective of the structural context in Libya when the decision was made:

> "There are maybe two reasons why I came here to Poland. The first one is that after the revolution in Libya *I decided* to change the situation for me and my family. I wanted also to continue my education…It's not just for me it's for my family. I need to find a good place for them to grow and live. Why would I go back there when almost everyday

someone is killed, someone is dying, for no reason? I don't need to go back to live in this situation with my family. For me, Poland is a really good place to be, a safe place."

The narrative above shows that my informant is able to not only recognize the structural constraints he and his family would have to face if they stayed in Libya- conflict, violence, death- but on top of this he is also able to recognize the options he has for his life course and choose the one he feels is best for him as well as his family, namely, the choice to continue his education and to stay in Poland. Just as with the accounts already mentioned above, it is important to note the kind of language used by migrants. Phrases along the lines of *"I decided"* or *"I chose"* point to the fact that even with the structural push factors in their given environments, these migrants consider their choices to migrate as an episode of their ability to act freely and to make their individual choices based on a rational calculation of the given options in their specific situation. The informant from Libya further points this out by recalling that his friends and family who stayed behind in the country tell him that he "made a really good decision in [his] life and that [he] got out of the place," a reminder of the fact that even in the same community of people who share a similar experience of their environment, not everyone is willing to make the decision to migrate, differentiating those who actually do.

The political situation in the country of origin was also cited by a migrant from Somalia, who has been a long-term resident in Poland already, as a driving factor for leaving his home country. He tells me his story from the late eighties in Somalia, when the country was experiencing its first outbursts of civil war:

> Like every Somali person who *had the sense* to get out I did. I went from Somalia to Syria, from Syria to Russia, and Russia to Poland. I knew my destination was to be Europe so I had *my mind set* on getting there. The only route available to me to get to Europe was through Russia. Of course every Somali's imagined destination is not a country like Poland, it is places like Sweden or England where many Somalis went. But I got here and that's when *I was deciding* whether to go on further or to stay, and in the end *I chose* to stay."

He portrays himself as having been one of the group of Somalis "with sense" to get out, or in other words, with the recognition and understanding that the political situation in Somalia was becoming unacceptable. With the decision to leave having been made, his eye on Europe as his final destination point reveals how having a specific plan made up for the future and the resolution to make it happen no matter what already gives the individual a sense of agency and control over the course of their life, especially if they are able to successfully follow through on that goal, as this migrant has done. Additionally, the representation of the decision to stay in Poland, when the possibility to move on to further countries was open, shows that he believes himself to be solely responsible for the continuation of life in Poland.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this section, political drivers are not the sole drivers of decisions to migrate. Additionally, one can account for demographic as well as social factors in the decision-making process to move from one place to another. One of the migrants who shared his story with me was from Senegal and had moved to Poland in the eighties. As a young man trying to complete his education in the Senegalese capital of Dakar he describes how his

> "main reason for deciding to leave to anywhere really was that…there was only one university then and it was one of the only universities in Western Africa, and after the country and region gained independence many students started coming from different countries to this one university in this one country. And that was the start of the problem, there were too many people, not enough space or scholarships, some problems in the residence halls, basically everywhere there was trouble."

The situation in Dakar's university mentioned above shows how even an annoying, albeit non-threatening, structural difficulty can lead an individual to contemplate if this is something that they want to accept as a given in their lives or change in a way that they see fit. As the narrative of this informant shows, he was not willing to accept the difficult surroundings he found himself in and thus, after "reading in a newspaper that scholarships were available to socialist countries," decided to take a risk and move to begin his studies in a completely new place. As he puts it, "I had made *my decision*. Getting to know a new language, a new place, so I came to Poland." There is the inherent sense and narrative representation as the agent, making the structurally-derived decision to change a life's unwanted circumstances.

Social drivers of migration also serve as important structural bases for individuals to turn to migration as a choice for their own lives. What is interesting in this ethnography is that those who had identified social drivers in their decisions were all Ukrainian, which may come as a surprise to some, given that many people in Poland and elsewhere will assume that all recent Ukrainian migrants are moving due to the ongoing conflict in the country. However, as the narratives will show below,

assumptions cannot be taken for granted and even individuals coming from conflict-prone countries may decide to migrate for reasons entirely unrelated to their home country's political situation. One of my Ukrainian informants, a middle-aged family man from Kiev, describes to me how he came to be in Poland:

> "I have two handicapped children. One child is blind and in Ukraine they do not have any normal schools or preschools for the blind. Physically, there are none, they only exist on paper. There are some teachers maybe, but there is no system available for those who are blind or paralyzed. And here in Laski *(outside of Warsaw)* there is the best school for blind and handicapped children in Poland, and even in all of Europe. And we *(him and his wife)* decided that it would be best to try to get our son to come to this school."

He understands the structural barriers he faces if staying in Kiev, that his handicapped children will not be able to receive an adequate education, and together with his wife acts upon changing the situation for himself and his family, even though he may have otherwise been entirely able to stay in Kiev and live a comfortable life. As in the story of the Libyan migrant given previously, this informant values family above all else and has taken the risk of coming to Poland to make a living in order to live the life he has envisioned for himself and his family.

In the life narratives from an older couple from Ukraine, it also became clear that though the conflict in the country may have played a minor role in motivating their migration behavior, it was in fact sidelined by their more important personal and

religious outlook on their lives, which could be more compatible in Poland rather than in Ukraine.

> "We're from Donbass. We lived in Ukraine but then there was the decision to come to Poland. We came here in November last year. We've been here half a year. We heard that there was a better life here in Poland. That everything is good in Poland. And we got interested to see the kind of life that we could live here as well. It wasn't only the war that pushed us to leave, it was kind of the situation in our city… and we are very religious, we are Reformed Baptists. We had some kind of *other religious or moral imperatives* that we wanted to follow that were not available to us, since most people in Ukraine are Orthodox. And so in this way *the decision* came. Here in Poland we have a reform church."

This narrative shows, just as in all the narratives above, that the decision to migrate is portrayed as calculated, rational, and as something not simply necessary for survival but as an option taken for the betterment of the individuals' lives in one way or another. Rather than accept their situations as fixed, migrants consider their own structural and individual understandings of their lives and the given context in order to take what they deem to be the best option for their lives at that moment. The Ukrainian couple's desires and "moral imperatives" are strongly suggestive of the *intentionality*, that is, "the sphere of subjectivity defined by one's intentions, beliefs, hopes, emotions, and moral commitments", that is largely at play in agentive action. (Brockmeier: 224). The initial act of migrating serves, therefore, as the first stepping stone of migrants' subjective agency, as they themselves see it as a moment of reflection on their place in their world and

how they envision their own life courses, choosing to act on these reflections and be self-determinant rather than letting their lives go on as they are.

Here, one must point out the distinction that is drawn by migrants between themselves and the home country citizens who, in their eyes, decided to stay behind. For many, this serves as the basis for constructing a narrative of agency in the decision to migrate, as they have seemingly taken it upon themselves to change their life courses while others did not. Importantly, certain structural barriers, though they may be hidden in the narratives, may play a huge role in whether or not someone has the *capacity* to indeed move or not in the given context. McLeman and Smit's (2006) concept of 'vulnerability', which they see as a function of exposure and adaptive capacity in a particular time and place, suggests that the 'exposure' and plan of action in regards to the same environmental constraints may indeed be further limited by the individual's 'adaptive capacity', which is often significantly influenced by household capital. Thus, even though the individuals above are quick to underline their agentive action within the social structure, their 'adaptive capacity' may have allowed them greater opportunity for the expression of agency than, say, those who were left behind in the country of origin, resulting in an international move. Nonetheless, agentive actions as well as the interplay of structure and agency do not end after a migration decision has been made. The perceived agency involved in the initial act of migration continues well throughout the entire journey, playing out in the country of destination, as will be depicted in the next section.

4.2. Life in Poland: working around structure

Building a life in Poland, especially for the more recent migrants, is not without its own difficulties. When speaking of migrants anywhere one cannot ignore the fact that with any move to a new country, these individuals face the oftentimes daunting tasks of settling in an entirely new place, finding work, obtaining the necessary documents for their stay, learning the norms and laws of the new society, dealing with discrimination, and forming relationships. Throughout the process, it is almost impossible not to be met with structural constraints that may impede the exercise of individual agency. The analysis of narratives below will show just how structural constraints in Poland can limit individuals' sense of agency and action, but subsequently, how these individuals dealing with and working around these constraints, as "people's agency ensures that they always have some degree of freedom – some room to maneuver" (Bakewell, 2010). Being that this experience is quite specific to migration, it is important to note that the entire migration experience can have a profound effect on a person and the way they see themselves and their place in the world. Thus, narrative constructions of identity will also be analyzed in order to understand how migrants pick and choose the way they want to be represented in the world, without taking for granted the labels that others may place on them.

Legality and Work

A migrant's legal status, proper documentation, and work life are all intrinsically tied to each other. Legal status is defined by the type of paperwork that the migrants have or have not received from the Polish state, which in turn greatly affects their ability to work, whether they find employment or not. One of the migrants from Libya perfectly

sums up this triangular relationship when he spoke to me about receiving a residence card and trying to find a permanent job in Poland:

> "I'm now in the process of possibly receiving this temporary residence card, and until then I cannot leave Poland, actually I am stuck in here with my family. But also even if I get a positive decision, I have to wait one month to get the card…No, I'm not working. I cannot work because I don't have this card, and without this card…nobody is allowed to employ me…So now I am waiting for this card. Because I found some jobs and they would like to employ me."

One can see that there is an obvious desire to begin work, which is impeded by the fact that this migrant does not yet have the proper legal paperwork to do so. Even already having found willing employers, the only barrier left I attaining the goal of having a full-time job is the residence permit. Not only does not having proper paperwork affect work mobility, his comments reveal that physical mobility is also highly affected by these legal constraints. Similarly, the narrative of another informant from Ukraine also shows how mobility is affected by this legal constraint:

> "My first contract is seven months, but my visa ends in the beginning of June and my current contract ends at the end of June, I don't know how that happened. [My employers] want me to get a new visa so now they encouraged me to apply for a residency card, and I have to wait three months, and I cannot go outside of Poland from the beginning of June."

For this individual, if legal conditions are not met, like getting a residence card to extend her stay, her work life could be greatly affected, even to the point of losing her job in Poland, nonetheless, having to go back to her home country. In these cases individual agency is deterred in favor of structural constraints, or the legal barriers that so many migrants must deal with. The Ukrainian informant mentioned in the first section who is set on having his handicapped child attend a school in Warsaw will only be able to complete this goal if he can find work, allowing him to have legal stay in Poland. He told me about the difficulties he faces in his current situation:

> "I have a work visa here right now and I have been here looking for work. But I also got the information that it would be difficult here for me without a 'Polish card' or a residence card. That is the problem here, for those people here who have a visa like the one I do. And I even bought this visa, like many Ukrainians are doing nowadays. This visa is only good until September. And I must find a job now until September, otherwise I will have to go back."

His story suggests that there is a sense of vulnerability in his position. On the one hand, he has taken the responsibility to change his family's life for the better. On the other hand, he may have to look at different options to achieve his goals, should he not be able to find work. His agentive position is expressed when he further stated to me that many Ukrainians will take most any job for little pay, but that he "will not work for those kinds of salaries." He is not portraying himself in a situation of desperation. If this were the case, he would willingly take any job to come his way. His resistance against being undervalued professionally goes to show that he is aware of the options he has in his

specific situation, but that he will only take the one that is most agreeable to him personally.

The husband and wife couple from Donbass are also on similar terms in regards to legal status and finding work, however, they clearly express their formulations of how they see their futures and life course:

> "Here we are not allowed to work, we are currently getting processed as refugees, but we've spoken to people about the possibly of starting this process in other countries as well, like America. We are refugees and maybe in another country there would be people who would care about us. So now, we are looking for things we can do, but who knows if we will be able to find anything…We would like to just stay here, if they accept us. But we can also move on, we are mobile. There is a large world and we can move if we want to and learn any language and so on."

They portray themselves as highly mobile, willing and ready to move on if the opportunity allowed them to. As they spoke to me about this they seemed at ease, almost with a sense of unconcern about their legal processing. From their narrative it becomes clear that their migration experience has already prepared them for any possible mobility in the future and that they see the world as an open road, within which opportunities can be taken at their discretion. The analyses of work and legal status above remind us that there is a strong interplay between structure and individual agency for these migrants and that this dynamic easily plays out in other arenas of life in Poland.

Discrimination and Integration

When it comes to topics of the dynamics of Polish culture and relations with Polish people, often migrants made it clear that structural constraints such as discrimination were impeding their intent to be involved and integrate into Polish society. My informant from Pakistan annoyingly told me about his recent experiences in Warsaw and his understanding of Polish life:

> "I feel that with people in Poland, some things are worse than in other European countries. For example, they don't like when people from other countries come here, but foreigners come from outside and invest money into the country. But they do not like you. If I want to go to any disco for example, they tell you "no, you are not going inside". Any bar you go to on any weekend, I even try to go to two or three bars, but they don't let me in. I think maybe it's a matter of racism, maybe not all people but some people are like this. But when somebody comes here and wants to go to a bar, they give their money, this is a business, why should you tell them not to go inside?"

As a businessman, he has the naturally tendency to look at this situation from an economic standpoint, where the bar he speaks of is losing money from a customer. However, his narrative reveals that beyond that, his desire to fit in with Polish society and create social situations for himself is under threat due to discriminatory practices of places like the bar he just described above. Such discriminatory sentiments, originating from within Polish society, are not reserved only for the arena of social life. My informant from Sudan went on to tell me that

> "[I] will be walking down the street here and people will be staring at [me] because of the color of [my] skin. It still happens to me even after all these years."

He continued on to reveal that

> "On the housing market, when you call them to show you an empty flat, it's fine. When you show up and they see you, right away it's already been rented out or they give some other excuse. They are afraid of foreigners, I don't know of what, but they are scared. They ask themselves questions like 'What is this person doing here?' and 'What do they want?' They would rather rent a place out to a jobless polish thief than to a hardworking and honest foreigner."

Furthermore, the wife of my informant from Libya also mentioned her uncomfortable experience of outwardly showcasing her Islamic religion in public:

> "Most of the unpleasant experiences I encountered had to do with my wearing the hijab. Now I don't wear the hijab when I go out. Because sometimes when I go out people would look at you and I didn't want to create any problems or something."

Thus, discrimination can and has been encountered by migrants in Poland, as the narratives of my informants go to show. This can affect life in a number of ways, including in instances of socializing, finding a place to live, or even when simply walking down the street. However, this does not stop migrants from taking the matters into their own hands, most importantly when it comes to the topic of integration into the new

society. By revealing that they themselves are eager to integrate without anyone necessarily telling them to do so, it shows how these individuals are able to assess their given environment and decide what the best plan of action would be in such a situation. This, of course, could be motivated by structural factors, such as the discrimination mentioned above. However, most of my informants expressed their own personal desire and initiative to be responsible for their integration and acceptance in their new society. For example, one of my informants had this to say about his own perspective and experience with integration:

> "Of course *I want* to integrate myself into Polish society. I don't know how you cannot integrate with other people around you…If one accepts the certain norms which allow for peaceful coexistence, like respecting the law, respecting other people, and also respecting otherness, then I think that is what integration is. And an openness to give of yourself what you know of your own culture and to acknowledge what you gain from Polish culture. That is interaction and that interaction is working."

Interestingly enough, when informants talked about their relations within Polish society and their own strategies of adapting to their new situations, almost all brought up the importance of learning the Polish language. Knowing the majority language, of course, can be a structural motivator, however, personal narratives when discussing language learning show how these migrants believe their learning the Polish language to be not only their own responsibility, but that they had other motivations for learning it aside from simply integrating into the host country. Take for example this reflection form a Libyan migrant about his partaking in Polish language classes:

> "I'm involved now because when I finished my studies, I decided to stay here. I decided that I would like to stay here and so now I must speak Polish, because it's not good all the time to ask people to speak English around you. I mean I am in Poland, if I don't speak Polish I am one person and in Warsaw alone there are 2.5 million people who speak Polish. And also I like to challenge myself, especially now when I cannot have a job yet and I don't have much to do, I must do something. If not I feel I am pointless, you know?"

Another informant from Senegal put it this way:

> "Language is like an art in itself, however, it's also just very important as you can get more involved when you have the language. I usually use three different languages on a daily basis, so I simply value learning the language."

Thus, investment in language is not just for integration, it is also for personal growth and education, as well as a vehicle for becoming more involved in the life of the host country in general. There is never any mention of learning it as part of any given integration program, or because the notion was forced on by some outside force. The Ukrainian couple I spoke with spoke of learning Polish almost as an enjoyable hobby, albeit one that they simply decided on:

> "But we are learning the Polish language because we like it. There were seminaries available for us to learn the English language too, but we don't really like that language.

> So we never learned it. So will know the Polish language and we'll be able to converse with Polish people."

The consensus is thus one of acknowledgement of the desire to be a part and truly, play a part, in Polish life. These migrants are not prepared to be bystanders in the world around them, but hope that through integrating, specifically, learning the Polish language, they will have the capacity to be a part of Poland's social fabric and thus, the agents in the "practices that recursively organize" (Giddens, 1986: 25).

Identity Formation

Migration and personal constructions of identity are intrinsically connected. The changes and new experiences that go along with the migration process undoubtedly leave their mark on an individual, subconsciously or otherwise. Identity in the context of migration is especially of interest for a number of reasons. Most people around the world associate their identity closely with the nation-state they call home; when a migrant moves from one place to another, breaking the physical and psychological boundaries between nations and many times living their lives between two or more locations, the assumption that a singular nation provides the means of identification must be broken and identities are "suddenly thrust into consciousness" (Mchugh, 2000). On top of this, migrants, as outsiders and vulnerable members of society, are oftentimes subject to the labels and identifications placed on them by the host society and the popular media. So along with a certain ambiguity tied to a transnational lifestyle, there is also the additional burden of lacking a voice in how the outside world sees them. However, the ways people personally choose to identify

themselves is strongly tied to an agency of representation. Legality and processes of work have shown to be quite constraining to migrant agency, migrants' initiation of the integrative process into Polish society is suggestive of perhaps a type of maneuvering around structural constraints to better their own situations, but identity formation can truly be seen within the dimension of human agency in this case. When given the chance to speak of themselves to an outside source, perhaps a journalist or a social researcher such as myself, the variety of responses is reflective of the idea that they, like any other human being, can choose to accept, reject, or reconfigure the assumptions that many people make of them. Zetter (2007: 173) writes that a 'label' "recognizes both a process of identification and a mark of identity" and "implies something independently applied, but also something which can be chosen and amended, has a tangible and real world meaning, but is also metaphorical and symbolic." It is in this way that migrants can exhibit control over their formulations of the 'self'. Take, for example, the informant from Sudan, who told me that

> "I am Sudanese, and will always be Sudanese. Culturally, the way I act is like a person from Sudan. But there are situations, when there are certain norms, and it's hard to say that at that moment I am acting like a Sudanese and in the next moment I act like a Pole, it's difficult for me to say that. But I definitely am not now 100% like a Sudanese when I am here in Poland."

For him, identity is not something static, but rather, something that can be changed and acted upon given the specific circumstances. His case is not unusual for transnational migrants who take on the norms and practices of their host nations while keeping intact

the culture of their home countries. There were also discourses of a more traditional nation-state identification, such as in the case of the Pakistani migrant who told me that he "identif[ies] everywhere [he] go[es] as Pakistani" and that it is something to be proud of. This, of course, could also be a consequence of being a recent migrant and not yet having the full lived experience of navigating between two different worlds. As such, I became interested in hearing in what ways the longer-term migrants conceived of citizenship and forms of identity expressed through having Polish citizenship. Their narratives are telling of what to them is a non-essential nature of citizenship when it comes to identity:

> "To be quite honest, it doesn't change a lot. I will always be a Somali, that's how I identify. The fact that I have Polish citizenship just means that I have more rights here,"

In the words of a Russian informant:

> Yes, I am a Polish citizen. But it doesn't give me anything, I simply live here. I don't know, maybe other people have different ways of approaching citizenship, but in my opinion it's about living in a certain place. And that's it. I have been living in Poland and I live here now and now I am a Polish citizen.

Finally, an entire rejection of the notions of labeling and identifications was given by the Senegalese informant:

> "I don't have a need to identify myself in any specific way. People who identify themselves nationally are those people who have some sort of identity complexes, but I have no need for this. I don't think that I have the need to say to someone that I am Polish…I don't think at all about myself that I am a foreigner or that I am a migrant. I feel that I am at home here but I feel no need to prove that to anybody… I just don't live my life based on those kinds of categorizations…That's just, not what it's about, and that's what I want to emphasize. Because those kinds of categorizations give the impression that you have to thank someone out there for it, not even really knowing who."

The different degrees of migrant identity construction is indicative of how strong a component identity can be in a migrant's agency. These degrees range from more subtle national home-country identifications, to progressions of transnational identities, and finally to a more cosmopolitan outlook by the Senegalese migrant, whose insistence on non-identification is a reminder of misconceived perceptions of "native" identities that are so often associated with migrants. Identity, as a non-static process, is thus a means of migrants' reconstructing themselves and their perceptions, as well as the perceptions others have of them, in order to make themselves feel comfortable in their new environments.

4.3. Changing the structure: migrant knowledge as a source of agency

As mentioned in a previous section on Poland's migration context, it is still a country which receives relatively few foreigners, especially when compared to incoming migrant numbers in other countries of the European Union. This means that migrants,

such as those I spoke with in Warsaw, are encountered with a unique situation where they are not able to rely on extensive ethnic networks as in the traditional immigration countries. This may lead one to think that the individual in this scenario is left powerless and in fact, unable to navigate social ladders in order to improve his own standing. However, as the below section will demonstrate, the inexperience of Poland with immigrants and the small size of the current community of migrants opens the way for individuals to reclaim a sense of power based on their experiences as migrants and, maybe more importantly, to work as agents in changing the larger social structures they find themselves in, namely the cultural attitudes of Poles towards foreigners. This falls in tune with Giddens' (1986) and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) conceptualizations of the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, in which both are constantly influencing and shaping one another. A narrative interpretation of how these migrants talk about their current lives in Poland points to a few important elements in the enactment of individual agency. Initially, they can determine that there is a lack of knowledge and experience in Poland, dismissing the assumption that Poles react to foreigners the way they do based simply on racism. Interestingly, this lack of knowledge is most often connected to media and the poverty of information and perspectives it presents to the general public. They follow up on this lack of knowledge by clearly stating that it is their responsibility to educate Polish society and work to gradually change attitudes and perceptions of foreigners. Finally, narrative evidence as well as my own ethnographic observations show that migrants in Warsaw see themselves as the most important support system for future incoming migrants to the city, as the government does not currently have its own initiatives in this arena.

The lack of knowledge and experience in Poland when it came to matters of migration, foreigners, and how to deal with them was clearly stated to me in the course of most of the life stories I heard. Many times, this lack of knowledge was brought up in the context of discrimination in Poland, where the migrants were in a sense giving Poles the 'benefit of the doubt' and dismissing the simple explanation of racism in regards to how migrants are currently treated in the country:

> "It is hard to say whether Poles accept outsiders. Some of our clients *(at the Migrant Info Point office)* had some complaints that they had gotten discriminated against. And it's a sort of unsure situation whether they had truly gotten discriminated against, or whether this was just an example of someone lacking the knowledge of or experience with multiculturalism." (Migrant from Sudan)

Another migrant from Somalia also had a very similar point of view on this:

> "Poles in general are just lacking in the knowledge or experience with multiculturalism or acceptance of people from outside of their own country or culture, and that's what we are trying to change. Because it was true that when people looking like me come here, people are scared. It's maybe something different from racism, maybe fear, but they just don't know what's going on. It's a lack of knowledge."

Furthermore, a lack of knowledge in Poland was also supplemented with the idea that it is the migrants themselves who carry this specific knowledge or experience, as

"migration entails exposure to new ways of thinking and doing" (Mchugh: 77), giving them a sort of advantage over Poles in this arena:

> "It is about a lack of knowledge but also a lack of having the communication skills to use in certain situations. For example, when I am meeting with someone from a culture that is very distant to my own I may have the ability to speak properly with this person because that's just my situation. For a different person who has maybe had very few experiences with foreigners, like Polish people, that person may have trouble communicating because they are in a situation that is not something they encounter every day. It is a weird situation for them and the foreigner in this case may think that this is discrimination. It may not be discrimination as we understand it normally." (migrant from Senegal)

Other informants also told me about the "dismissive approach to the topic of multiculturalism" that Poles have at the moment, and that they did not consider there to be enough "political and public discussion about migration," leading to the public at large being "weakly informed when it [came] to these topics." The issue here, according to the migrants, is that "simply what is lacking is education," and that Poles are in a sense deprived of any positive education about migrants and migration. The one greatest contributing factor to this poverty of information, in their eyes, is the role of the media in shaping how the general public has come to have a negative construction of foreigners.

There is an overall agreement in regards to the one-sidedness of the information that is portrayed in the news and otherwise in regards to migrants in Poland:

> "And with the people watching the same media here all the time, it is going into their heads that the migrant is bad. There is never anything about them being hardworking, or about them doing something good. It is simple, they are sort of brainwashed here." (Migrant from Somalia)

> "They (Poles) just get one-sided information and they will make their decision based on that, you know." (Migrant from Libya)

These narratives reveal a rejection of the dominant portrayal of migrants that is given in Poland. This could be very much connected to the fact that migrants are rarely made visible to the public at large and therefore, they are essentially unable to even have the chance to transmit their viewpoints or experiences as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic discourse in the media. To make this point, many of the migrants reference the way television programs go about preparing topics related to migration, drawing the comparison to similar programs in other countries:

> "So the Poles who just get their information from television and these newspapers here, they have this one specific image of migrants or Muslims and that's it. You don't have it this way in countries where there are many migrants because if you have a program about a topic like this you have 20 people invited from that community to give their input. The fact that they don't do this here is a big problem." (Migrant from Libya)

Or in another story, my informant from Somalia spoke to me about how

> "When there is some kind of discussion that has to do with Somalia, they never invite someone from Somalia to participate, they invite 'experts' who know everything about Somalia, who may have never been in the country."

And yet another migrant had this to say:

> "Migrants don't have access to the media and they are never put forth to voice their opinions on topics regarding them. Whether someone on television is talking about migrants, or talking about homosexuals, or talking about women, or about soldiers, it would be fitting to have someone there who identifies this way. For example in the west it is hard to find discussions on migrants without having the presence of a migrant there, at least when I watch French television, when there is a theme like this then of course they invite those involved. In Poland the media has still not developed this kind of habit. (Migrant from Senegal)

The belief in the lack of knowledge or experience with migrants in Poland is not meant to only discern the broader structural barriers that these migrants must currently face, it is also meant to point out that it is they themselves who can supplement this gap, as they see themselves as the bearers of their first-hand experience of which only they have the authority to portray. The notion of Polish 'experts' that are brought onto television programs to speak in lieu of migrants personally, and the mocking ways in which the migrants spoke of them, point to their beliefs that they, the migrants, are the only 'experts' that should be consulted in these types of matters. Their 'expertise' and first-hand experience is what they consider to be their major assets, their leverage over "inexperienced" Poles, and essentially, their source of agency in Polish society.

This agency is not only reserved for narrative expression such as in the statements above. More importantly, these migrants choose to act upon their "experiential agency" in such a way that this agency can have tangible effects in their surroundings. To this end, these migrants actively plan and participate in numerous initiatives aimed in educating Poles and changing their opinions in such a way that the mainstream media cannot, as discussed above. In the course of my fieldwork I was made aware of, for example, the numerous campaigns as well as conferences that they organized to "show Poles that migrants can be constructive people as well" and to "show the image of the migrant in a new light in this country". Many told me of "events where [they] invite Poles to come and get to know [their] culture, [their] stories, and about [them] as people, even preparing food and so on." Migrants from Africa brought up the annual Day of Africa they planned each year in Warsaw as well as the numerous initiatives they have directed at Polish children, such as the publication of a book on how to speak about children of Africa or the "Animation of Culture" program where they actually go on multicultural visits to schools. The list can go on when it comes to the numerous initiatives put forth by migrants in Warsaw, however, the overarching message of their involvement is that they want to "show that [they] are not bad people. That [they] are not as bad as people and media make [them] out to be." The message of "*Get to know me before you throw me out"*, a catch-phrase for one of the initiatives, was what one migrant called "a good perspective" from which to look at the situation, and that perhaps it will change the way Poles look at them. Their initiatives of action within Polish society in regard to perceptions of migration are indicative of the "individuals'

striving to extend their influence over their living conditions, an effort that necessitates participation in societal action" (Brockmeier: 219).

This brings me to the idea of a dual-integration. Often when one thinks of what 'integration' is supposed to denote in the sense of policy or government institutions, it is very much a measure aimed at the migrant community only, often as one part of the process known as "migration management" ("Migrant Integration", IOM). There is often the understanding, then, that the responsibility of integrating is solely left up to the migrants, who are expected to acclimate to the culture and lifestyle of the receiving country. However, though migrant responsibility for integration was acknowledged in the narratives, the migrants I spoke with also had a different conception of what integration must be in the context of Poland and that it is their responsibility not just to integrate themselves, but to integrate Poles into an attitude of openness and understanding of migrants as a benefit to their society, hence the 'duality' and two-way process of integration in this sense. A statement from one migrant sums it up well:

> "This (integration) does not work in one direction only where one side tries to integrate but the other stays the same. There has to develop an understanding in both directions."

Integration is inherently tied to education, and thus, the migrant narratives show how they hold themselves in the powerful position to initiate educational strategies in the hopes that such a dual-integration will work in Polish society. These migrants have recognized a cultural and educational gap in society which they now work to fill vis-à-vis their own migration experience and knowledge. This provides them with an important stepping stone for action and truly, an agency that is not only empowering for the

individuals but perhaps powerful enough to change the structural dynamics of cultural attitudes in Poland. As these migrants reject the structural status quo in their context, they find empowerment through Unger's concept of *negative capability*, asserting themselves as people who have the ability to transform their social worlds in order to enact structural change.

An additional source of empowerment and agency for these migrants, which in large part has to do with the current inefficacy of the Polish state's migration system, is the fact that they work together to provide both formal and informal institutional support for already present, but especially future incoming migrants to Poland. This was reiterated personally in the narratives given as well. In reference to building organizations meant to serve the migrant community, one of my informants from Sudan told me that

> "Because there are not many people really who work with these kinds of issues and really we were only observers first but then we became participants ourselves."

Their transition from 'observers' to 'participants' demonstrates the way in which these migrants decided that instead of accepting the system as it is, they would actively in engage in the transformation and really, the building, of that system themselves. Just going to any one of the various organizations in Warsaw dealing with migration or multiculturalism it becomes instantly obvious that these organizations are basically run and powered by migrants. And this is no small undertaking; aside from organizing events and initiatives such as those mentioned above, most organizations provide support in the form of (usually) free Polish and English language classes, visa and

permit information, housing and schooling assistance, cultural orientations, children's activities, and so on. This is what one migrant calls their "calling"- to be the agents necessary for both the psychological acceptance of foreigners in Poland and the growth of the institutional support required for a sustainable immigration system, which the Polish government has only been in the process of constructing thus far and which will be ever-more necessary in the coming years, as greater numbers of migrants are coming to Poland year to year. Migrants working in Warsaw to "constantly provide help to the migrant community coming [there]" can therefore be seen, and see themselves, as agents not just navigating around structure, but seeking to actively change the structure within the society that they find themselves in.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of life narratives of migrants living in Warsaw unveils a rare glimpse into migration as a process of personal empowerment, an empowerment which stems from the specificity of the migratory experience, resulting in new knowledge acquisition, a broadening of global perspectives, and the sense that one is in control of his or her own life. Fielding (1992) remarks that there are two contrasting views of migration in terms of experience: migration as excitement, challenge, freedom, new beginnings, going places; or migration as rootlessness, sadness, rupture, loss, failure. It becomes apparent that all the migrants I spoke with in Warsaw consider their migrant experience to be the former and that they feel themselves to be the agents and decision-makers in their own lives. A look at the entire process of migration, from the moment the decision

was made through to the current lives these migrants are leading in Poland, shows that we indeed are not able to draw a black and white distinction between structure and agency in life courses. The theories backing the interdependence of the two are given strong support through the evidence, as we see how individual actions and decisions are influenced by greater environmental structures, and in turn, how individual actions can shape the environment that individuals find themselves in. Importantly, however, is the way in which migrants choose to construct their personal life stories and experiences, displaying themselves as strong-willed agents and capable humans, who have the desire and capacity to choose among many options in order to set their own life course how they envision it.

For these migrants, being an agent means not simply manipulating or maneuvering within structural constraints. A true expression of agency is put forth in the ways that these individuals actively work to change the social structure and thus, the world around them, as they fight against the “taken for granted” structures within Poland with the goal of eventually changing public perception in regards to migrants and migration. The space allowing for the practice of agency is thus highly contextualized. Poland’s relative inexperience with incoming migrants and perhaps even its transitional nature in regards to societal norms allows an open pathway for migrants to take the lead in becoming the educators themselves. As such, one can see that these individuals are not simply complying with or rebelling against a given structure, but rather, becoming agents of self-empowerment through a variety of means. This can, in effect, change the way we see and talk about migrants, not as helpless child-like figures with no control over their lives, but as strong-willed agents for whom migration was both the

answer and calling to their specific life circumstances. The role that migrants can play in structural transformation suggests that migration should not, then, be treated as a process in isolation, but should be crucial in the analysis of broader processes of social transformation, especially in a country like Poland which is predicted to undergo a significant demographic transformation in the years to come (Castles, 2010). This research has shown that migrants desire to be a part of the society that they find themselves in as well as to act in transformation of structures when there are significant benefits to be had from this. Given that the influx of new migrants into Europe is unlikely to die down in the near future and that Poland is among the EU countries highly considered for “sharing the burden” of the migrant population, perhaps the transformation of attitudes that the migrants in Warsaw are trying to instigate within the Polish nation are necessary now more than ever (“Europe’s…, “Euro-MPs”).

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