

## Experiences of Polish-born adolescents in Britain during the run-up to Brexit

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### Introduction

2004 marked the accession of the so-called A8 countries to the European Union (EU); of these countries, it was Poland which saw the largest migration to the UK.<sup>1</sup> Polish migrants had been coming to the UK prior to this, yet while the post-1989 migratory demographic had mainly been young men, post-2004 saw a rise in the number of families coming to Britain, often with thoughts of settling.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, by 2008, Polish-speaking children comprised the main group of non-English speaking newly-arrived migrant schoolchildren in England.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, relatively little research investigated the experiences of younger migrants and teenagers.<sup>4</sup> Following the vote for Brexit, however, greater attention has been paid to those under the age of eighteen, particularly as to how they may be affected by Britain leaving the EU. Interest comes from academics, such as the ‘EU families & Eurochildren’ project at the University of Birmingham.<sup>5</sup> ‘The impact of Brexit on children’, a report produced under the auspices of Coram and the University of Liverpool, amongst others, was also put forward for

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Fomina and Justyna Frelak (2008) *Next Stopski London: Public Perceptions of Labour Migration within the EU. The Case of Polish Labour Migration in the British Press*. Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs; Emma Gillingham (2010) *Understanding A8 migration to the UK since Accession*. London: Office for National Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Ryan, Rosemary Sales, Mary Tilki and Bernadetta Siara (2009) ‘Family Strategies and Transnational Migration: Recent Polish Migrants in London’ in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(1), pp. 61-77.

<sup>3</sup> Anne White (2017) *Polish families and migration since EU accession*. Bristol: Polity Press.

<sup>4</sup> Marta Moskal (2014) ‘Polish Migrant Youth in Scottish Schools: Conflicted Identity and Family Capital’ in *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(2), pp. 279-291; Krystyna Slany & Stella Strzemecka (2016) ‘Who Are We? Cultural Valence and Children’s Narratives of National Identifications’ in *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 5(1), pp. 13-34. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=422640>

<sup>5</sup> IRIS Institute for Research into Superdiversity, University of Birmingham ‘EU families & Eurochildren’ website <https://eurochildren.info/>

discussion amongst cross-party parliamentary groups involved with children's rights.<sup>6</sup>

Yet while the reality of Brexit has prompted concern, many of the issues which are now being raised can be seen to have their origins in the period before the Referendum took place. The doctoral study on which this paper is based was conceived and conducted between 2015 and May 2016, with fieldwork completed one month prior to the Referendum. At that time, the climate in Britain appeared to be one of increasing hostility to migrants from member states of the EU;<sup>7</sup> a Referendum on Britain's place in the EU was also being openly discussed within both Britain and Europe itself.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of this, I began wondering how Polish-born teenagers living in Britain positioned themselves in such an environment, and what challenges they faced. This paper will argue that an examination of these adolescents' experiences during the run-up to the Referendum can contribute to the current discussion concerning the situation of Polish youngsters in post-Brexit Britain. The paper is divided as follows: first, it gives a brief outline of the context in which the research was situated; this will be followed by an overview of the study itself, the methodology used, and those who took part in the project. The findings of the study will then be set out, concluding in a discussion of how these findings may be considered pertinent to the current situation.

## Context of the study

2015 saw the evolution of the migration crisis in Europe, caused in part by the numbers of people attempting to escape the conflict in Syria. This coincided with the rise of right-wing and far-right parties

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<sup>6</sup> Chloë Darlington (2017) 'The impact of Brexit on children: Key policy recommendations for the new government' Available at: <https://www.childrenengland.org.uk/the-impact-of-brexit-on-children>

<sup>7</sup> Ariel Spigelman (2013) 'The depiction of Polish migrants in the United Kingdom by the British press after Poland's accession to the European Union' in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 33(1/2), pp. 98-113.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Tim Oliver (2013) *Europe without Britain: assessing the impact on the EU of a British withdrawal*. SWP Research Paper RP 07 18–26. Available at: [http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-research-papers/swpresearch-paper-detail/article/europe\\_without\\_britain.html](http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-research-papers/swpresearch-paper-detail/article/europe_without_britain.html)

across Europe. Examples include the increased vote for Jobbik in Hungary in April 2014, as well the direction increasingly taken by PiS in Poland, elected in June 2015. The US elections of November 2016 saw Donald Trump elected President. The trend towards the far right has continued into 2017, with Marine Le Pen in the second round of the April-May French presidential elections, the increase in support for the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in the German elections of September 2017, and in December 2017 the inclusion of the Austrian far-right FPÖ (Freedom Party) in government coalition talks. All these groups ran on anti-migrant campaigns, which may be seen to have accounted in part for their popularity.

There has also been mounting opposition to migration in Britain. Even prior to the 2015-2017 period, there was a growing concern in Britain around the issue of migration, which extended to cross-European mobility.<sup>9</sup> Barbulescu notes that while this debate was not restricted to Britain, it was there that the EU principle of freedom of movement was coming under increasing question.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, immigration was one of the main issues in the UK 2015 General Election campaign. The 2015 Conservative Party Manifesto promised a Referendum on Britain's membership of Europe to be held by the end of 2017, while the right-wing and openly Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP) ran an aggressively anti-migrant campaign. Posters alluded to migrants taking British jobs, and Britons were exhorted to 'take back control of our country'.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, EU migrant communities within Britain had become the focus of media attention, much of it negative.<sup>12</sup> The 2012 Leveson Report into the conduct of the press received evidence from the Polish Federation illustrating the extent to which Poles had been the target of negative articles appearing in British newspapers.<sup>13</sup> It was

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Ford (2011) 'Acceptable and Unacceptable Immigrants: How Opposition to Immigration in Britain is Affected by Migrants' Region of Origin' in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(7), pp. 1017-1037.

<sup>10</sup> Roxana Barbulescu (2014) 'EU freedom of movement is coming under increasing pressure in the UK and other European states' in *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) blog*. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/02/20/eu-freedom-of-movement-is-coming-under-increasing-pressure-in-the-uk-and-other-european-states/>

<sup>11</sup> UKIP national billboard campaign (1993-2017). Available at: [http://www.ukip.org/ukip\\_national\\_billboard\\_campaign](http://www.ukip.org/ukip_national_billboard_campaign)

<sup>12</sup> Fomina & Frelak (2008); Spigelman (2013).

<sup>13</sup> See Wiktor Moszczyński (2008) '80 ways to say "Welcome to Central European Workers" courtesy of the "Daily Mail"', *Submission to Inquiry from the Federation of*

argued that areas of the press were using stories about EU migrants in order to promote their opposition to Britain's membership of the EU, an argument upheld by the inquiry.<sup>14</sup>

It may therefore be seen that placing the Brexit vote in a broader context allows for a greater understanding of the present situation. This also underscores the relevance of a study which was conducted prior to the Referendum, and the way that its findings may be seen as pertinent to current discussions.

The design of the study and how it was conducted is set out in the following section.

### **Research questions and theoretical framework**

As noted above, my project purported to investigate the experiences of Polish-born adolescents living in the UK, in the light of the changing social and political climate. As a researcher in applied linguistics, I situated the study in terms of socio and applied linguistics work on identity construction. Such work aims to understand the factors which influence the way an individual is able to display her linguistic identities through the language she speaks, and through this, to construct her ethnic identity. I thus draw on the literature in this area, whilst also alluding to work within the field of migration and human geography.

The theoretical framework of the study draws on the concept of positioning as set out by Davies and Harré<sup>15</sup>, whereby subject positions are taken up by individuals according to the way they see themselves; at the same time, individuals are ascribed identity positions by others which may conflict with their own self-positioning. Subject positions are therefore contingent, dependent on space and time, and as such,

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*Poles in Great Britain: Federation of Poles in Great Britain.* Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122145147/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Submission-from-Federation-of-Poles-in-Great-Britain.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Brian Leveson (2012) *The Leveson Inquiry: An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press*, pp. 671-2. Available at:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122144906/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) 'Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves' in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), pp. 43-63.

have to be constantly renegotiated in each new setting.<sup>16</sup> Often, limitations may unexpectedly be put on the subject positions which an individual may be allowed to occupy. In the case of migrants, these positions are often seen as inferior, resulting in challenges to the individuals as they attempt to negotiate their new positioning as members of British society.<sup>17</sup>

Drawing on the above notions of identity construction and positioning, the research questions which guided this study were formulated as follows:

1. What do the stories of Polish-born adolescents living in the UK suggest about the way these adolescents negotiate and construct their ethnic and linguistic identities?
2. In the light of current anti-immigration and anti-immigrant discourses in the UK:
  - i) how do these adolescents position themselves in the stories they tell?
  - ii) how do the adolescents' stories suggest they are positioned by others?

As well as exploring whether these Polish-born adolescents are able to assert their identity as British and/or Polish, the study also examines the extent to which they are able to position themselves as individuals with a right to live and build their futures in the UK. The 2016 Referendum campaign suggested that such entitlements could be threatened in the post-Brexit situation. The second part of this paper therefore examines how the adolescents perceived the Referendum.

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<sup>16</sup> Ron Darvin and Bonny Norton (2014) 'Social Class, Identity, and Migrant Students' in *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 13(2), pp. 111-117

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Blackledge (2001) 'The wrong sort of capital? Bangladeshi women and their children's schooling in Birmingham, U.K.' in *The International Journal of Bilingualism*, 5(3), pp. 345-369; Aneta Pavlenko (2001) "'In the world of the tradition, I was unimagined": Negotiation of identities in cross-cultural autobiographies' in *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 5(3), pp. 317-344.

## Fieldwork

Much of the work done in linguistics and migration examines urban populations,<sup>18</sup> and communities situated amongst the ‘super-diversity’ found in cities;<sup>19</sup> however, I was interested in how Polish-born adolescents might be adapting to life in a region with a less diverse demographic, and less accustomed to the arrival of migrants. I therefore recruited participants from two semi-rural towns in South East England, with small Polish communities.<sup>20</sup> The first location was Grovesham School, a mainstream state secondary school which provides GCSE Polish lessons. Grovesham is found in Fieldstone, a town of 60,000, whose Polish community developed post-2004. The second setting was St. Ferdinand’s, a Polish complementary Saturday school in Steadton, roughly 15 miles from Fieldstone, with a population of 15,000; the Steadton Polish community dates back to the end of the Second World War. Both towns have a ‘White’ population of over 85%, ‘White’ being taken as ‘English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British’.<sup>21</sup> Such a high proportion of those identifying as ‘White’ sits in stark contrast to cities such as Birmingham (53.1%), Coventry (66.6%) or Manchester (59.3%). In the 2016 Referendum, Steadton had a Remain majority of 55%, while Fieldstone had a slim Leave majority of 50.5%.

The participants in the study comprised a group of Polish-born adolescents, five girls and six boys aged 11-16, all of whom had come to the UK post-2004. They had various migratory trajectories. Some had left Poland as young children; others had migrated more recently. Several had lived in other countries or UK towns before moving to their current location.

Prior to the research taking place, consent forms available in Polish and English were signed by the participants and their parents. I

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<sup>18</sup> Sebastian Rasinger (2012) “‘And Everything is Polish...’: Narrative Experiences of new Migrants’ in *The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL*, 1(2), pp. 33-49.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Vertovec (2007) ‘Super-diversity and its implications’ in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), pp. 1024-1054.

<sup>20</sup> The names of locations and participants have been anonymised.

<sup>21</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2012). *Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales 2011*. London: Office for National Statistics. Available at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-ethnicity.html>

also obtained permission from the heads of the schools where the interviews would be conducted, and from Jo Malinowska, the Polish teacher at Grovesham, who also participated in the research. Fieldwork took place between January and May 2016 at Grovesham. An initial session was held, where I observed the first Polish lesson of term (coded as S1). This was followed by five sessions of one hour, consisting of group interviews (S2, S3), interviews in pairs (S4, S5) and also individual interviews (S5, S6). Two 45-minute pair interviews were held with two participants at St Ferdinand's Polish School (S#1, S#2). These were held on consecutive Saturdays in March 2016. I audio-recorded and transcribed all the interviews, while the observation lesson was transcribed by a native Polish speaker, who also verified my translation of the transcript.

## Methodology

The research was designed as a qualitative study, comprising group and individual narrative interviews. Group interviews are considered one way of approaching sensitive issues when interviewing children,<sup>22</sup> with the possibility of progressing to individual interviews once trust between researcher and participants has been more firmly established.<sup>23</sup> Such a method seemed appropriate for a study addressing potentially upsetting questions concerning anti-Polish sentiment, or the forthcoming Referendum. Discussions were therefore initially held in a larger group and then in pairs; I was also able to interview some of the participants individually.

To analyse the data, I drew on narrative analysis. Narrative inquiry has been described as 'as a way of making sense of the world';<sup>24</sup> it has been used in applied linguistics work in identity studies

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<sup>22</sup> Caroline Heary and Elias Hennessy (2006) 'Focus groups versus individual interviews with children: A comparison of data' in *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 27(1-2), pp. 58-68.

<sup>23</sup> Donna Eder and Laura Fingerson (2002) 'Interviewing children and adolescents' in Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (eds.) *Handbook of Interview Research*. London: Sage, pp. 181-202.

<sup>24</sup> Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007). 'Thinking big with small stories in narrative and identity analysis'. In Michael Bamberg (ed.) *Narrative—State of the Art*. pp. 146-154. Amsterdam: Johns Benjamins, p. 145.

as well as increasingly in migration studies.<sup>25</sup> However, in contrast to the ‘longstanding tradition of big stories’,<sup>26</sup> younger participants are often unable to construct such lengthy narratives.<sup>27</sup> In analysing the participants’ accounts, I therefore drew on Bamberg’s notion of ‘small stories’, defined by Georgakopoulou as ‘snippets of talk’ which can in themselves be seen to constitute a small story.<sup>28</sup>

The data was initially analysed using a thematic approach, so as to identify the ‘common thematic elements’ which emerged from the different stories told by the participants.<sup>29</sup> A more detailed line-by-line analysis was then made, allowing for closer attention to be paid to how the adolescents were constructing their stories.<sup>30</sup>

Participants were encouraged to recount stories of their own migration trajectory, their family situation and the languages they used at home and at school, using images and newspaper headlines as prompts.<sup>31</sup> I also asked whether the adolescents had encountered any anti-Polish sentiment. The initial question was: ‘How do you think people in this country think about Polish people living in the UK?’. This led to questions such as ‘Have you had any experience of this?’ referring to the anti-Polish sentiment expressed in the prompts. Following the official announcement on 20th February 2016 that the EU Referendum would be held at the end of June, I elicited from the adolescents their thoughts on the forthcoming vote.

I also took fieldnotes during the observation lesson and held informal conversations with Jo Malinowska, the Polish teacher at Grovesham. These brief discussions were not always recorded, but I documented them after finishing each session at the school.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Justyna Bell (2012) ‘Migration as Multiple Pathways. Narrative Interviews with Polish Migrants in Belfast, Northern Ireland’ in *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis Studia Sociologica*, IV(2), pp. 106-118.

<sup>26</sup> Georgakopoulou (2007), p. 146.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Bamberg (2004) ‘Form and Functions of “Slut Bashing” in Male Identity Constructions in 15-Year-Olds’ in *Human Development*, 249, pp. 1-23;

<sup>28</sup> Bamberg (2004); Georgakopoulou (2007), p. 146.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Riessman (2005). ‘Narrative Analysis’ In Nancy Kelly, Christine Horrocks, Kate Milnes, Brian Roberts & David Robinson (eds.) *Narrative, Memory & Everyday Life*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, pp. 1-7; p. 3. Available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/4920/>

<sup>30</sup> See Bamberg (2004).

<sup>31</sup> See Colin Robson (2011). *Real World Research: a Resource for Social Scientists and practitioner-researchers*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 284.



## Findings

Discussions on the topic of anti-Polish sentiment revealed that many of the adolescents had encountered such sentiments during their time in the UK. It also appeared that, in several instances, the adolescents confronted this directly and resisted others' attempts to question their right to be in the UK.

Several adolescents report having experienced problems at school. Greg (Grzegorz) is a sixteen-year-old who has lived in the UK since the age of five. He is planning to study sports science at university. In the following extract, Greg describes an incident that had occurred during a geography lesson on the subject of contemporary migration.

### Extract 1. S3 Grovesham: group interview with Greg, Beata & Janusz (G: Greg)

- 1 G: [...] stealing jobs.  
 2 I've had that personally. from my Dad. I've heard that from him. had that said  
 3 to him. that kind of thing. erm. in my geography. we study Polish immigrants  
 [...]  
 4 it was like. last week we had it and it's. erm. there was like loads of like we  
 6 got turned against basically the whole class were against us. like it was so  
 7 bad/ there's like two of us in the Polish class and er. we just got. er <laughs  
 8 slightly> bombed. basically. there were like jokes and references. don't steal  
 9 my jobs. and all those things/ and my friend couldn't hold it in. I mean. he  
 10 like. just gave them all the facts that it's not really true exactly.  
 [...]  
 11 I find it wrong like when people don't understand and I find that I want like  
 12 them to know. try and tell them the facts. like this is wrong. and like the truth  
 13 about it!

In this extract, Greg explains how he has heard accusations of 'stealing jobs', both from his father (line 1), and also within the geography class (lines 8-9). He and the other Polish boy in the class attempt to defend themselves by explaining the situation in which Poles find themselves. Greg expresses the wish that others would 'understand' (line 11) their circumstances. A similar sentiment is voiced in the story recounted by fifteen-year-old Beata, who has been in the UK for about eighteen months.

**Extract 2.** S3 Grovesham: group interview with Greg, Beata & Janusz  
(B: Beata)

- 1 B: [...] some of them  
2 actually always asking us why we moved here and most of the answers are  
3 because of the job/ because in Poland we've got big unemployment and in  
4 here it's really easy for Polish people to find a work because they are really  
5 hard-working people/ [...]  
6 for example. my Dad/ he moved here to job and he's been really hard-  
7 working [...]

Here, Beata describes the way people are 'always asking' her family why they are in the UK (line 2). Like Greg, she tries in response to explain the difficulty of finding employment in Poland. As further justification, Beata also emphasises the 'hard-working' nature of Poles (lines 5-7).

The third member of the group interviewed, thirteen-year-old Janusz, who has spent half of his life in the UK, did not relate any specific instances. He nonetheless noted that he was aware of prevalent attitudes around him. Other adolescents spoke of more generalised bullying. Thirteen-year-old Filip has been in the UK for two years; his aim is to become a vet. Filip explained that while he was very happy at Grovesham, things had been more difficult at his first school.

**Extract 3.** S4 Grovesham: pair interview with Filip & Sylwia (F: Filip;  
SY: Sara)

- 1 F: um. before I went to this school. I was in a different school  
2 SY: ok  
3 F: and people there were just terrible/ I was getting bullied and –  
4 [...] SY: ok. what sort of things were they saying? can you tell me?  
5 F: um. they were telling me to go back to Poland/ like. they don't want me here  
6 SY: um-hm  
7 F: and um. yeah they just bullied me physically

The hesitancy with which Filip recounts his story, suggests that he finds it a difficult subject to broach. In an individual interview during the final session (S6), Filip explains how the ongoing bullying was one of the factors that led to his parents' decision to move to Fieldstone.

**Extract 4.** S6 Grovesham: individual interview (SY: Sara; F: Filip)

- 1 SY: ok. so why did your parents move to Fieldstone?  
 2 F: er – there are a few reasons/ the first one is because we couldn't find a house  
 [...]
   
3 F: and. er. the second one is because I was getting bullied a lot

Eleven-year-old Sylwia, who moved to Ireland at the age of two, and then to the UK five years later, was another student who had asked to change schools due to bullying. Like Filip, she was reticent in telling her story.

**Extract 5.** S6 Grovesham: individual interview (SY: Sara; S: Sylwia)

- 1 SY: you went to two different primary schools. [...] was it [the first school] good.  
 2 or –?  
 3 S: <speaking more quietly> no. cos um. I don't know exactly. but the people  
 4 there weren't so nice and they were annoying me  
 5 SY: um-hm  
 6 S: <still quietly> and they. they just weren't nice to me/ and then I asked Mum to  
 7 move school/ and then we found another school.

Usually a vivacious girl, here Sylwia is more subdued as she speaks of her experience. She appears reluctant to give further details beyond saying that 'the people there weren't so nice' (lines 3-4). Nonetheless, it may be inferred that the situation distressed Sylwia enough for her to broach the subject with her mother. As with Filip, Sylwia changed schools.

Once the date of the Referendum was announced, I asked the adolescents for their reaction. Some of them knew very little about the forthcoming vote, while others had stronger views on the topic. Discussions about the Referendum also took place prior to its date being confirmed. In an interview in early February, Greg recounts a conversation with his father:

**Extract 6.** S3 Grovesham: group interview with Greg, Beata & Janusz (SY: Sara; G: Greg) [3rd Feb]

- 1 SY: ok. um. do you know anything about what's going on in this country with the  
 2 referendum – [...]  
 3 G: [...] I had this topic with my Dad this morning and my Dad gave  
 4 me a thought that well. the people that've been living here a while. they're not

5       gonna like throw them out. they're not going to do that! like you're living  
 6       here. but I think that the people who like come in. who are going to be coming  
 7       after. coming in. they might have a bit more trouble getting in here/ but I think  
 8       the people that are here already. they won't just like throw 'em out. cos like  
 9       that would leave like loads of people with unemployment. like the companies  
 10       would just go bankrupt/ and people that have bought houses on credit. they're  
 11       not going to throw them out. are they? [...]

It is unclear from Greg's description how the subject of leaving was raised. Nonetheless, his story may be taken as an indication that such worries were already being voiced even before the Referendum date had been announced. Jo Malinowska, the Polish teacher at Grovesham, also told me of concerned acquaintances who were investigating how to acquire British passports in the event of a Leave vote.

In the final session, held one month before the Referendum, twelve-year-old Ryszard, resident in the UK since the age of six, also mentioned the idea of leaving.

**Extract 7.** S6 Grovesham: individual interview at Grovesham (SY: Sara; R: Ryszard) [25th May]

1    SY: ok. so what do you think about what's going on at the moment with the  
 2       referendum?  
 3    R:   um. oh. it's okay. but if we go out the EU. or if the UK goes out the EU. well.  
 4       it depends. er. if they will. because I heard that some people have been  
 5       saying that one third of the migrants have to. will have to leave. or something  
 6       like that

Here, it is unclear whether Ryszard sees himself as part of those who may be asked to leave. However, an analysis of line 3 suggests the way that he is uncertain about his own position. He begins 'if *we* go out the EU', before pausing, and changing the appellation used: 'or if *the UK* goes out the EU' (my emphasis). Ryszard's shift from 'we' to 'the UK' may indicate that he is here positioning himself as someone who no longer belongs in the UK.

Fourteen-year-old Anna, resident in Britain since she was five, is more confident in her use of 'we' when discussing the Referendum, as shown in the extract below.

**Extract 8.** S2 St Ferdinand's: pair interview with Anna & Krystyna (A: Anna; SY: Sara) [19 Mar]

- 1 A: I think we should leave [...]  
 2 because all of our – we're getting something like budget cuts right now  
 3 because all of the. erm. cos we. um. our country's quite rich/ so we get. we  
 4 get a lot of money but then we have to like share it out with other countries/ to  
 5 help other countries in the European Union where that money could be used  
 6 to help us as well  
 7 SY: what. us like in Britain?  
 8 A: yeah! um. and I think we're just like playing it safe by just staying/ I think one  
 9 day we'll just have to like get out by ourselves. like. like just be an indepen-  
 10 like not independent but like – just be like our own country [...]

Anna's use of the personal pronoun 'we' throughout her response contrasts with Ryszard's shift from 'we' to 'the UK' (Extract 7). The way that Anna talks about becoming 'our own country' (Extract 8, line 11) suggests she has picked up on the discourses of independence as promoted during the Referendum campaign by many of those on the Leave side who saw the UK as ceding increasing sovereignty to the EU.<sup>32</sup> That she has a different approach to the Referendum may also be due to the fact that, unlike the other participants in the study, Anna holds both a Polish and a British passport. The 'us' and 'them' dichotomy implicit in the above extracts was reflected in other conversations held with adolescents; it suggests at their uncertainty as to the extent they can consider themselves at all British.

## Discussion

The stories told by the adolescents provide a certain insight into their lives in the UK. Many of those interviewed have experienced anti-Polish sentiment in some form or another. The bullying to which they describe being subjected at school would suggest that other children are echoing the prejudices surrounding EU migration, such as those propagated in the media. These are then repeated to their Polish classmates, be this to Greg in terms of 'stealing jobs' (Extract 1, line 1), or in telling Filip 'to go back to Poland' (Extract 3, line 5). The behaviour of such children would chime with a 2015 schools survey which reported that '60% of the children questioned believed it was

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<sup>32</sup> This is still a key argument of the 'Get Britain Out' group, which echoes the rhetoric of the Leave campaign; one of their stated key aims is 'to restore UK democracy' (Get Britain Out website 2017).

true that “asylum seekers and immigrants are stealing our jobs” (*The Guardian* 2015).

In the accounts they give, the adolescents do not however position themselves as victims. Rather, they reinforce a sense of their identity as Poles and as citizens with the right to live in Britain as they attempt to explain their situation to those who appear to be challenging such a position. Greg and his classmate defend themselves to the others in the geography lesson; Beata also endeavours to explain the situation in Poland to those who ask why her family left. While the hesitancy with which Filip and Sylwia recount their experiences of bullying may be illustrative of the emotional difficulty this has caused them, both nonetheless position themselves as agentive individuals in the way they take up the decision to change schools. In her study of Poles in Belfast, Marta Kempny identified a tendency for Polish migrants to ascribe to the notion of victimhood.<sup>33</sup> For Filip and Sylwia, however, as for the others in this study, rather than accept such positioning, they challenge others’ perceptions. Despite their initial negative reception in the country, both express their staunch desire to stay in the UK.

In relation to the Referendum, Greg and Ryszard express concerns about whether people will have to leave. Even if this is not voiced explicitly, there is a sense that each of the boys is concerned about his own future position in the UK. This insecurity contrasts with Anna’s pronouncement that leaving the EU would be better for Britain; her British passport allows her to speak from a place of greater security. Anna’s comments may also be seen to be echoing the arguments promulgated by the Leave campaign, and by UKIP. It is necessary to recognise that there were Poles living in Britain who became members of UKIP,<sup>34</sup> although discussion of this lies beyond the remit of this current paper.

It is also important to be wary of making broad generalisations based on a study of eleven participants. There were several adolescents at both Grovesham and St Ferdinand’s who chose not to take part in the research, and who may not have been as open about wanting to discuss the question of their identity. This would echo findings by Sordyl and

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<sup>33</sup> Marta Kempny (2011) ‘Interpretative Repertoire of Victimhood: Narrating Experiences of Discrimination and Ethnic Hatred among Polish Migrants in Belfast’ in *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 20(1), pp. 132-151.

<sup>34</sup> *The Economist* (2015). ‘Nigel Farage’s Polish friends’ 3 February 2015. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21641989-nigel-farages-polish-friends>

Janus whose study of Poles in the London Borough of Lambeth noted the existence of those who prefer to disguise their Polish origins.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, it appears from the accounts given by those who did participate in this study that many of the adolescents feel themselves to be part of the UK. In their stories, the adolescents present themselves as individuals who are constantly asserting their right to be in the UK, explaining this to those who question that right, simultaneously asserting their identity as Poles but also as valid citizens within British society.

## Conclusion

While my study was conducted in the run-up to Brexit, several themes which emerged from the research remain pertinent in the current context. These issues have taken on greater urgency and intensity following the Referendum, but they are not new in themselves. The anti-Polish sentiment that was argued to be a feature of post-Referendum reaction has in fact been part of these adolescents' lives for a number of years. For those in this study, however, such challenges do not appear to have thwarted their desire to remain in the UK or the aspirations they hold for their future. Of greater concern is how the outcome of the Brexit deal will affect these adolescents' ambitions.

As of winter 2017, Brexit negotiations are ongoing, with Britain's official withdrawal from the EU timetabled for March 2019. As noted above, the Referendum was initially planned for the end of 2017. It is a moot point to consider how things may have been different had the then government adhered to that original schedule.

Writing of the Polish community in Britain in earlier times, Sheila Patterson remarked: '[t]he European political situation is so fluid that it would be rash to predict the future of the Polish exile community in Britain'.<sup>36</sup> That Patterson was writing at a time when the dominance of the Soviet Union appeared unassailable serves to underline the eternally capricious nature of political events. In the maelstrom of the Brexit

<sup>35</sup> Marta Sordyl and Paulina Janus (2013) *Polish Insight Project* Available at: <http://www.stockwell.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Polish-Insight-Project-report.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Sheila Patterson (1961) 'The Polish Exile Community in Britain' in *The Polish Review*, 6(3), pp. 69-97, p. 97.

negotiations and the tumult of uncertainty engendered by the process, what remains paramount is the importance of listening to younger voices about the challenges they have faced and continue to encounter; and how these should be recognised in the ongoing discussions over the impact of Brexit.

## Appendix

Transcript conventions adapted from Coates (1996, pp. xii-xiii).

(/) indicates the end of a chunk of talk, where this is not marked by a question mark or exclamation mark.

◊ non-verbal utterance.

(.) a short pause; (–) a longer pause.

[...] marks an ellipsis in the transcript.

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