



INSTYTUT SPRAW PUBLICZNYCH
THE INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Parallel worlds – self-perception of Polish migrants in the United Kingdom

Joanna Fomina



Parallel worlds – self-perception of Polish migrants in the United Kingdom

- The results of the study show the diversity of the Polish Diaspora in the United Kingdom. The Poles themselves are well aware of such differences.
- The study, which involves English-speaking Poles, shows that their self-perception consists of several elements: their perception of themselves based on their experience in the new country; the idea about how they are perceived by the British; the idea of how the newly-arrived immigrants are seen by the “old” post-war Polish community; and the way they see other Poles.
- At least three dimensions can be distinguished in the perceptions of the respondents: (1) the world of the well-educated, self-assured Poles who are confidently climbing up the social ladder; (2) the world of the less resourceful Polish immigrants, stuck in one place, which is often considered equivalent with certain socially marginalised groups, even though it includes both honest factory workers as well as petty criminals; (3) the world of the post-war Polish Diaspora, keeping a distance, looking critically at all newly-arrived compatriots. The inhabitants of these worlds are aware of the existence of the other two but they rarely engage with one another.
- The study outcome suggests that well educated Poles who know the English language, have a strong bridging capital but a significantly weaker bonding capital. In other words, Poles are open to contacts with British people, that is members of the receiving society, whereas they are less interested in developing ties with other Poles or a creating a strong close-knit Polish Diaspora.
- The predominance of the bridging capital over the bonding capital is a result of an interplay of several factors, including self-confidence and a positive self-perception of the study participants; their distancing from “other”, negatively perceived Poles; the sense of a negative attitude towards the “new immigrants” on the part of the “old Polish Diaspora”; the lack of a negative internal bond (sense of discrimination of Poles as a group); the closeness of Poland as well as the sense of being accepted by the English.

- A positive self-perception creates favourable conditions for integration of the interviewed Poles into British society and a deeper integration improves their self-perception.

Poles in distorting mirrors

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of the study on the self-perception of Polish immigrants in the United Kingdom and to reflect on the significance of this perception for the process of integration. The study has not included all Poles living in the UK, but has rather focused on a distinctive group of educated people with a good command of English. As the study shows, these people have a positive self-perception, which facilitates the process of settling into their new society.

In 2008, the Institute of Public Affairs published a report on the perceptions of Poles prevalent in the British press¹. The most surprising result of the research carried at that time was – according to the authors of the report – the dominant positive perception of Poles in the British press, especially in the quality press. Texts with some more negative overtones, which usually appeared in tabloids, most often referred to the consequences of the arrival of so many immigrants to the United Kingdom and were primarily directed against the British government and not against Polish immigrants. When the Polish press reported on the perception of Poles in the UK, they insisted on focusing on alleged witch-hunts against Poles in the British press². This should not really come as a surprise, as articles under the common theme of “Them Against Us” seem more attractive and capture readers’ attention better than balanced publications with rather positive overtones³. It is worth emphasising that the perception of Poles in the British press is much more complex.

An analysis of publications concerning Poles in the United Kingdom directly suggests the existence of certain parallel worlds – the world of model members of the British society and the world of social margins. On the one hand, according to the newspapers, Poles are dynamic successful people who learn English quickly, are willing to integrate and become part of the new community. If they encounter a problem, they know how to fight for their rights. On the

¹ J. Fomina, J. Frelak, *Next Stopski London. Public Perceptions of Labour Migrations within the EU. The Case of Polish Labour Migrants in the British Press*, Warsaw 2008.

² See for instance P. Głuchowski, M. Kowalski, *Polski Borat i tuzin londyńskich opowieści* [Polish Borat and a dozen of London tales], „Gazeta Wyborcza” – „Duży Format” magazine, 1 May 2008.

³ An article worth attention, written by A. Jędrzejczak, *Biją naszych (gazetami)* [They are beating us (with newspapers)], „Przekrój” 2008, no. 26, in which the author debunks the claims about a witch-hunt against Poles in the British press.

other hand, Poles are have been portrayed as cheats, racists, drunks, losers, people fully dependent on the assistance of the welfare state, or poachers with a peculiar taste for swan meat and carp. It is, however, very important to note that in the analysis of press articles on Polish immigrants in the UK, the former world clearly predominated. What is more, even though the positive perception of Poles was more often presented by the quality newspapers, the tabloid press, in addition, though living off scandals and sensation, have more than once written in a very positive tone about Polish immigrants, focusing on their diligence and reliability.

Thus we already know, both the opinion of the British press and the views of Polish newspapers on the contents of British press. That, however, provokes certain questions: What Polish emigrants think about themselves, how they perceive themselves and how – in their view – are they perceived by the English? Do they have an impression that the English are guided mainly by the perception of a Pole – a cheat and a drunk, as the majority of Polish media would like to assert or perhaps they believe that the English can appreciate their diligence, courage, and the Polish willingness to integrate, as, in fact, most reports in the British press indicate? This paper intends to provide answers to those and other questions about the self-perception of Poles living in the United Kingdom.

In our opinion, the way we perceive ourselves depends, to a great extent, on how we are perceived by others⁴, particularly those whose opinion we value. Three elements comprise the self-perception of Poles living in the United Kingdom. First, the way they perceive themselves and people similar to them, how they assess their achievements and experience. Second, what they imagine the perception of Poles in the eyes of the British to be. Third, how they perceive other Poles and their relations with them. Further in the paper, we will discuss those three elements of the self-perception of Poles and the way they interact.

A few words on the methodology

The field study was carried out in Bradford – a middle-sized town in the north of England. Twenty eight open interviews have been carried out with people from twenty two to forty one years of age, with the majority of the respondents aged approx. thirty. Since the study has

⁴ In sociology and psychology we talk about a “looking-glass self”, that is a special social mirror. The basis of our self-image, self-knowledge, is the interpretation of behaviour and statements made by other individuals. See for instance F. Znaniecki, *Prawa psychologii społecznej*, [The Laws of Social Psychology] Warsaw 1991.

been a part of a bigger project devoted to bilingualism, media and identity⁵, the main selection criterion has been knowledge of the English language, although its level varied significantly among the participants. Ability to use English in everyday situations qualified the respondents to participate. There has been an exception in the group, a man who speaks almost no English at all – his experience provides a good counterpoint for the conclusions drawn from the other interviews. Most of the study participants arrived in the United Kingdom after the opening of the British labour market for Poles in 2004, have university or secondary education, come from small and middle-sized towns (only two people used to live in Warsaw before).

The sample selection has been made by contacting Poles living in Bradford through the Internet portal nasza-klasa.pl, the snowball method was also used.

The main research questions have included the following:

- How do Poles perceive themselves?
- How do Poles assess their experience in the UK and what does it tell us about them?
- How – in view of the Polish immigrants – do the English perceive Poles?
- How do Poles perform in comparison to other immigrant groups?
- What is the perception of the whole Polish Diaspora? To what extent do the immigrants identify with it?
- How has the accession of Poland to the European Union influenced – in their view – the perception of Poles?
- Are there any gender-related differences in self perception?

The respondents have been asked about a number of issues related to life in England. The topics raised in the interviews have covered, among other things, various types of experiences in the new place of residence, relations with other Poles, contacts with the English, the post-war Polish Diaspora and Polish institutions, views on the number of Poles and the political power of the Poles living in Bradford.

Before discussing the results of the study, it is also worth to describe Bradford briefly. It is a typical post-industrial town in the north of England, which, at the time of the industrial revolution, was famous for its wealth and elegance, owed to the numerous textile factories. Unfortunately, unlike neighbouring big cities such as Leeds or Manchester, it was not able to adapt to the new economic reality and, after the collapse of the textile industry, it has remained a poor, relatively neglected town with a high unemployment rate and lack of

⁵ Project “Bilingualism, Identity and the Media in Inter- and Intra-cultural Comparisons” is funded by the Academy of Finland. More information about the project – <http://sockom.helsinki.fi/fiss/themes/journalism/bim.html> [access: 20 September 2009].

prospects for prosperity. Bradford is famous for its Muslim community, one of the most numerous in the United Kingdom, formed by factory workers and their descendants, coming mainly from the poor regions of Pakistan. It is also a new home for a large group of Poles who arrived there after the war. There are a few Polish institutions in Bradford, including a Polish Catholic church, a Saturday school, shops, a pub and a restaurant.

The self-perception of Poles

What is striking in the interviews with Poles in Bradford, is a clear distinction, made by the interviewees when talking about Polish immigration, into the group with which they identify themselves (“We”), and the rest of Poles with whom the respondents do not have and do not wish to have too much to do (“They”). This group is often used as a point of reference, allowing the respondents to define more precisely how they perceive themselves as opposed to other Polish immigrants. For this reason, the description of the perception of Poles under study may be constructed using the principle of opposing pairs: hard working – lazy, brave – helpless, speaking English and not speaking English (as the main indicator of their ambitions and aspirations). There are, however, a few categories that fall outside such divisions, and they become visible only when respondents talk about a certain feature which is – in their view – characteristic for all Poles or when they talk about gender differences.

Apart from that, another important element of the self-perception of Poles is how – in their opinion – they are perceived by English people. It is obviously not an objective description of how Polish immigration is seen by the inhabitants of the United Kingdom, but a “reflected perception” – a subjective view entertained by Poles. It is, however, very significant as it is on this basis that Poles form their self-perception. A certain role is also played – in the opinion of the respondents – by the way in which they are perceived by the post-war Polish community, since their opinion affects the perception of Poles as the entire ethnic group in Bradford and on the willingness to identify with it. Wherever it was possible, we also tried to confront the opinions of Poles about their perception with the results of the above mentioned study of the press.

Two faces of the “Polish work ethic”

The study of the press referred to above shows that one of the most distinctive features of the perception of Poles in the United Kingdom is their industriousness. The respondents participating in the study discussed here also perceive themselves as very hard-working and conscientious people. They emphasise their education and willingness to continue their

development through further studies, enrolling in courses of different types. Nevertheless, many of them have talked about people who were not satisfied with honest work – about cheats, thieves and swindlers. As one of the respondents has noted, “some people are trying to be crafty and have Polish habits, to work in such a way so as not to work hard”⁶. The respondents particularly disapprove of those Poles who – in their view – have made collecting benefits their way of life and who believe that they are entitled to everything.

Most of our interlocutors also believe that the English appreciate Poles as very good workers: conscientious, responsible, hard-working and that is why they are willing to employ them, “when I started [my work] in the factory, there were ten of us. Later, they valued our work and there were 90% [of Polish workers in the plant]”⁷. According to the respondents, it is fully understandable, “I think that [the English] have a better opinion of us than of other ethnic groups. But we work hard for that reputation”⁸. What is more, the opinion of Poles as good workers greatly contributes to the generally positive perception of Polish immigrants in the eyes of the English. In the view of the majority of the respondents, out of all immigrant groups, the English like the Poles most, which is caused, to a great extent, by the perceived diligence of Polish workers, “It seems to me that the English like us more than the Pakistanis [...] that Poles are valued higher as workers and that might be the reason. In the factory, Poles worked diligently, the others – not necessarily so. That was probably why the English had a better opinion of us”⁹.

The respondents admit, however, that the perception of a Pole – a good worker, in the UK is rather stereotypical, superficial, which is a little damaging for immigrants from Poland. In the opinion of the English, Poles are a little crude, unqualified, behind the times, good for physical work or for some simple manual tasks, “Poles are seen as experts on heaters, pipes and painting. But not necessarily on any advanced technology”¹⁰. The respondents explain this, on the one hand, by the lack of the knowledge of English among many Poles, “Unfortunately, since a large group of Poles do not speak English, we are treated as Poles, who work hard but do not know much. This is not true as most of the people here have their master’s degrees”¹¹. On the other hand – the English generally know very little about Poland, which for a lot of English people is a faraway backward country, situated “somewhere near Russia”. The inhabitants of the United Kingdom are surprised, for instance, that Poles have

⁶ Interview 18th – Krzysztof, 29 June 2009.

⁷ Interview 6th – Monika, 18 June 2009.

⁸ Interview 22nd – Aga, 1 July 2009.

⁹ Interview 10th – Ania, 22 June 2009.

¹⁰ Interview 2nd – Jarek, 20 April 2009.

¹¹ Interview 12th – Magda, 23 June 2009.

Coca-Cola and think that immigrants from Poland “have never seen a computer in their lives”. One of the respondents, a graduate of journalism at Warsaw University, has told us how after she got a job, she was trained in using a copier and turning a computer on and off, which she initially treated as a joke, but soon realised that her colleagues had very good intentions and wanted to enlighten a newcomer from a faraway exotic country¹².

The interviewees know very well the myth about Poles taking jobs away from the inhabitants of the UK, but they will not let themselves be convinced that they really harm ordinary English people or that this is the opinion of the majority of the English people, “Theoretically it is said that Poles take the jobs away but I think that is only in “The Sun”. The English rather do not think the same”¹³. A lot of respondents emphasise that only uneducated readers of the tabloid newspapers “The Sun” and “The Daily Mail” may keep repeating something that they have read there, but most people in England do not think so. Thus Poles, not only create the above mentioned division of Polish immigration into two groups (“We” and “They”), but they also divide the English into those enlightened and those more benighted: “A lot the English people from upper and middle class have a different perception of us, especially of those normal Poles. Unfortunately, there is also a lot of rabble. Those enlightened English know what we do for this country. They know that we pay taxes and support the British economy. My boyfriend, who is English, says that the English economy would be worse off without Poles”¹⁴. So Poles prefer to base their judgment on the opinions of educated English people, even though they do realise that the British are not very eager to express their feelings and it is difficult to be one hundred percent sure what they really think.

Other respondents have emphasised that the allegations that Poles take away jobs from the British are groundless since Poles apply for jobs exactly in the same way as the English. They are also able to fight such claims in conversations with their English co-workers. One of the interviewees has mentioned a situation when he heard such an allegation from his colleague at work to which he just curtly replied with an ironic “Thank you very much!”, hearing which, his English colleague, in turn, assured him that he did not mean anything specific and had only quoted what he had read in “The Daily Mail”.

To sum up, an important element of the positive perception of the Poles under study is their industriousness, for which – according to the respondents – they are also highly valued

¹² Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Interview 5th – Edyta, 18 June 2009.

by the English, especially those better educated. Polish immigrants are also proud of their own education. They emphasise, however, that not all Poles in the UK are industrious as there is quite a numerous group of their compatriots who damage their overall reputation, by failing to follow the principles of work ethics or by taking up undemanding jobs because of their inability to speak English.

Successful people versus oversensitive boozers

The interviewed Poles consider themselves resourceful and brave, they are also proud of what they have managed to achieve in the new country. Professional success is especially highly valued by Polish immigrants because most of them have come a long way, usually starting from simple and hard jobs in factories – regardless of their education or knowledge of English. The fact that they have managed to succeed in a foreign country in a relatively short time, makes them more confident and immune to negative reactions of the British. “I am proud to be Polish and proud that I have achieved so much here”, says one of the respondents. “And I wouldn’t worry if an 18-year-old Brit who has never worked a day in his life and lives off a welfare benefit makes some comments about me, someone who works and pays taxes”¹⁵. Generally Poles feel that they do not need to prove anything to anyone because they know what they are worth, “I don’t buy my clothes in expensive boutiques, because it does not make me feel a better person. What makes me feel a better person is my studies and the fact that I have come here without knowing the language., that I have managed to achieve something myself, that I know people of different cultures, that I am able to talk about Islam, that I am doing well”¹⁶. As it has been mentioned above, the press study shows that Poles as people of success are a frequent subject of reports about immigrants published in British newspapers (“The Times” has been the one to write particularly much about Poles who have made it big in the United Kingdom).

For Poles, the UK is a land of opportunity. Polish immigrants know that if they try hard, they can achieve a lot – even being foreigners and new to the country. Most of them think that, in many respects, life in the UK is easier than in Poland, “here, I can rather see opportunities rather than threats [...] there are no such bureaucratic issues here that you feel you’ve come up against a wall”¹⁷. Poles can see the variety of possibilities to improve their situation – and use them, “If you work full time and your earnings are below certain level, the

¹⁵ Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

¹⁶ Interview 14th – Kasia, 23 June 2009.

¹⁷ Interview 4th – Malwina, 17 June 2009.

state subsidises your studies. For such people, a lot of college courses are free of charge. This is fantastic for people who want to improve their qualifications”¹⁸. The knowledge that such possibilities exist also has impact on the positive perception of the Poles participating in the study, as it allows them to believe that if they try hard enough, they might achieve anything they want. As another respondent say, Poles do not feel particularly discriminated against and they know from their own experience that they are treated on an equal basis with others – which they sometimes discover contrary to their expectations, “I have got a permanent job at the Bradford Council. I had gone for the interview just for fun. There were a lot of candidates – all of them English, and I was the one who got the job. It was a real shock! This made me stay here longer”¹⁹. There is no doubt that this also contributes to their sense of self-satisfaction and pride in their own achievements. Polish immigrants know that even if they start from simple physical jobs, in future they will be able to find employment adequate to their qualifications and skills. “If someone has got brains, is willing to learn, the door is open”²⁰. They are also aware that if they pass a certain level, get out of “The Sun” readers’ circles, they get equal chances with the Brits, “Then, even if there is a crisis, when you are employed you are treated as the English. You get the same pay”²¹. Not all respondents share equally optimistic views. Gosia notes, for example, ‘They are very tolerant. They give a chance to other nationalities, but still they try to keep what is good for themselves’. And she adds, ‘I have a lot of friends who work at school, as teachers. Often English department graduates. They work as *teaching assistants*, because the director does not trust them as they are foreigners”²². But this does not put Gosia off, even if she believes that more is required of her, that she has to prove that she is as good as English employees. She works as well as she can and she is happy that her hard work has been appreciated²³.

Most of the respondents also emphasise that they have personally never come across any example of a negative attitude of the British, with any bad treatment, although many of them have heard that some of their acquaintances have been treated badly or even battered. If they do experience discrimination, it is in factories. And they immediately explain this by referring to the poor education of their English colleagues, “They are very simple people and sometimes they make you feel it. And it’s not so much about us being Polish, as being

¹⁸ Interview 22nd – Aga, 1 July 2009.

¹⁹ Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

²⁰ Interview 18th – Krzysztof, 29 June 2009.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Interview 21st – Gosia, 30 June 2009.

²³ *Ibidem*.

immigrants”²⁴. Therefore the label of someone “inferior” does not really stick to them. They keep explaining to themselves that it is not their fault and that it should not be their problem and they need not be bothered. They also think that, in fact, a lot of English people value Poles highly not only for being hard-working but also for their aspirations and the ability to cope in their work and in life in general, “They have noticed our ambition, industriousness, the fact that we pursue our goals, that we want to achieve something and we can stand up for ourselves”²⁵. Such brave and resourceful people have often been the heroes of reports about Poles in the United Kingdom, published in local press²⁶.

In two cases, the respondents experienced racial discrimination at work. Both cases are being examined by the court. The interviewees explain that they realise that not all English people are like that and they assess that their experience has usually been very positive but when conflict situations do arise they are not going to pretend that nothing has happened but they will immediately go to the court²⁷. This indicates some ease of operating within the world of UK institutions as well as the courage and self-confidence of the interviewed Poles. The theme of Polish immigrants being able to cope with problems and fight for their employment rights has also appeared in the British press²⁸.

Financial independence and a much better material situation than in Poland also makes the immigrants feel better, even if they do not work in accordance with their qualifications, “in Poland I earned [the equivalent of] 140 pounds, working in a bank, here I earn 1400 pounds. There’s a world of difference, and I work in a factory. Where will I be able to afford more?”²⁹. This respondent is learning English, she knows that her work at the factory is only temporary and when her English improves she will find a better job.

According to the respondents, however, such an attitude is not very common among Polish immigrants. A lot of Poles, especially those who do not speak English, are helpless, frustrated, withdrawn. They usually contact only other people from their own country. Their helplessness is connected with the lack of knowledge of English, which leads to an inability to fight for their rights, a fear of anything new, a failure to take up challenges, and it leads to becoming dependent on their employers, Polish institutions or other Poles who are able to speak English. The respondents have given examples of women working in a factory who are not

²⁴ Interview 2nd – Jarek, 20 April 2009.

²⁵ Interview 11th – Arek, 22 June 2009.

²⁶ J. Fomina, J. Frelak, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Interview 24th and 25th – Justyna and Emil, 26 June 2009; interview 18th – Krzysztof, 29 June 2009.

²⁸ J. Fomina, J. Frelak, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Interview 5th – Edyta, 18 June 2009.

able to demand payment for overtime or who are afraid to go to a doctor, even if they know that the doctor is Polish³⁰.

Some of those “other” Poles – in the views of the respondents – are oversensitive, always detecting some disapproving glances, signs of discrimination or racism on the part of the English. The immigrants from that group keep explaining to themselves that they have not got a job or have been treated badly because they are Polish. One of the respondents makes a following comment, “I can’t believe it, because I’ve been living here for over five years and nothing like that has ever happened to me. Certainly, some things do happen but not as often as people think”³¹. The interviewees emphasise that such attitude differentiates the “other” Poles from them, “Poles have this attitude: he gives me a disapproving glance because I don’t speak English as well as he does [...]. For me it is not a problem”. In addition, the respondents indicate that finding signs of discrimination everywhere and focusing on the injustice allows the “other” Poles to justify their own failures, “Some Poles justify their ineptitude or laziness by the fact that they are Polish. They do not learn the language. They will not find a better job”³². What is interesting, examples of confused, helpless Poles who lost their jobs and ran into trouble, appeared also in the British press, but were usually used to criticise the UK government which had not prepared itself for the influx of such a big group of immigrants³³.

“One-man bands” versus “inhabitants of the Polish village”

A very important element of the self-perception of the Poles participating in the study is a sense of their own separateness, independence and self reliance in relation to the whole Polish community. Most respondents claim that they do not look for contacts with other Poles, although they would not necessarily refrain from them. They can simply manage well on their own and do not need any support from other Poles – they know where to look for expert advice. As one of the respondents says, “I don’t live with Poles, don’t work with Poles – I don’t stay in the Polish ghetto”³⁴. The study participants usually have a small group of trusted friends with whom they meet from time to time. But they often stress that it is not because they are Polish but because they are people with similar interests and similar outlook. They select their acquaintances and make friends using other criteria than ethnic origin. They believe that one should not get enclosed in one’s own safe little world where everybody is the

³⁰ Interview 13th – Justyna, 23 June 2009; interview 6th – Monika, 18 June 2009.

³¹ Interview 8th – Ilona, 21 June 2009.

³² Interview 4th – Malwina, 17 June 2009.

³³ J. Fomina, J. Frelak, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

same. As Patrycja says, “it does not suit me to have only Polish friends. It is not important for me where someone comes from, but I would not like them to be only Polish...”³⁵. Those people do not need all the “attributes of being Polish” such as pierogi, Żywiec beer and the Sunday mass, in order to remember that they are Polish.

The respondents from this group are not so strongly attracted to anything that is Polish, although at the same time they do not deny their Polish origin. They like to go to a Polish restaurant from time to time to have pierogi (often with their English friends), to go to a mass at the Polish church, but all that is not absolutely necessary for them. As one of the respondents says, “It’s nice to drop into a Polish shop, to see all those products – but I could live without them”³⁶. Certainly, a significant factor is the accessibility of various Polish products, Polish church, the awareness of the presence of other Poles and also the ease of travelling – Poland is within a stone’s throw so there is no need to seek its presence in everyday life.

In view of the study participants, unlike themselves, the non-English speaking Poles are very much attached to the Polish Church. The stereotype of Polish Catholics filling the churches (an opinion of the British press) is true only in reference to some of the Polish people, especially those who do not speak English. And it is not the matter of real faith, but rather the need to be among your own kind, having an opportunity to show off, to exchange gossip and information. For the Polish immigrants from that group, Polish shops, where they even buy their flour and milk, are very important. For many of our respondents, it is difficult to find their place in this world of artificially re-created Poland. One of the study participants, being on unpaid extended maternity leave, often meets other Polish women – mothers of small children, during special classes funded by local authorities, “When I worked, I had contact with Poles who spoke English. Now those mothers, it depends, but they usually need me for something. They are attracted by all those Polish sites, for instance, shops. Their fondest dream is to go shopping. We are more inclined to travel and go sightseeing”³⁷.

There are also exceptions in the group of study participants, for instance Gosia, who is closely attached to the Polish community, works actively for the Polish school, takes part in the preparations to the celebration of Polish holidays. In her case, it is not a result of passive dependence on Polish shops or institutions – Gosia works at an English school – but it is a result of her enthusiasm and the willingness to do something for the Polish community in

³⁵ Interview 28th – Patrycja, 20 June 2009.

³⁶ Interview 13th – Justyna, 23 June 2009.

³⁷ Interview 6th – Monika, 18 June 2009.

Bradford, so as to help it to unite, to become more active³⁸. It should be noted, however, that Gosia is alone in her efforts.

In contrast, the only respondent who does not speak English, confirms how important the semblance of Poland they have in Bradford is important for him and his relatives. The whole Polish environment makes it possible for them to function as if they never left Poland, “It is easy for us. There are quite a lot of us here. We have got everything Polish. Those who came here in the past did not have Polish shops, Polish television. We do not feel it that much that we are abroad”³⁹. Shutting oneself away in one’s own comfortable world radically differs from the efforts of the other respondents, who try to put down roots in British society, without renouncing their Polish origin at the same time.

Integration not for everyone

The sense of separateness and independence from the Polish community, functioning outside the “Polish ghetto” is accompanied by the sense of integration into British society, “blending in”, becoming a part of it without losing one’s Polish identity. The study participants emphasise that they travel a lot, are curious about their new country, learn about its history, in a sense, feel the local pride. But they do not try to become English and are very critical about those who, in their view, try too hard to be more English than the English themselves. As one of the respondents has put it, “I will always be Polish but I will also be a part of this community”⁴⁰. The British press, particularly the quality newspapers, also devoted a lot of attention to the willingness of Poles to integrate into British society, for instance publishing reports about Poles who start their own businesses and attract English customers, travel around the UK together with their British friends, put down roots in the new communities⁴¹.

The respondents from this group are also very critical about the Poles who refuse to make any effort to learn English, who remain shut away in their own world, in the “Polish ghetto”, who are attracted only to Polish sites, who are helpless and dependent on other Poles, who are very narrow-minded. One of the respondents states, “There are Polish ghettos here just as Jackowo [Avondale Chicago, US] in the US in the past. There are so many Poles here who

³⁸ „When I came here with a diploma, I wanted to continue in this direction, even though I didn’t have the language skills or knowledge. That was when I got accepted to the Polish school. It is a Saturday school. I taught there since 2004. Now I have taken a break because I have too many things to do. Through this I was also attached to the church, because we had school masses. Through this I was attached to the Polish club, because school events were held there. I didn’t have to do it, but I wanted to” (Interview 21st – Gosia, 30 June 2009).

³⁹ Interview 15th – Piotr, 24 June 2009.

⁴⁰ Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

⁴¹ J. Fomina, J. Frelak, *op. cit.*

arrived a few years ago and still can't speak English"⁴². Monika, who is now on maternity leave, which leads her spend a lot of time with other Polish mothers, has to deal with people who do not speak English. She stresses the existence of two worlds – an open one, bilingual world of offices, contacts with many different people, the world of opportunities where she belongs and the world of people who do not speak English, rather hermetic, the world of people who cannot operate well in the new territory, the world full of fears and uncertainty, "Sometimes it is really hard for me as I am on the border of the two . My husband, his English friends, and those women, their preconceptions, prejudice, fears"⁴³.

It is also worth noticing that the knowledge of English does not necessarily coincide with education. Piotr, the only person in the group that does not speak English, has higher education and has been living in Bradford for three years. The fact that many people do not learn English is rather a result of their passivity, lack of mobilisation or bad self-organisation. They feel safe in their own world and do not feel a strong need to learn the language. As Piotr explains, "Yes, it's true that in our company they have tried to start courses a few times, but it somehow does not work out. It does not work out because we work rotating shifts. I attended only one class. If we worked fixed hours, [it] could be planned somehow. Laziness, too, unfortunately. When we came here, we brought books, notebooks to study. But it has never got beyond the ambitious plans"⁴⁴. As he himself thinks, the Polish speaking community, the possibility to use the assistance of interpreters in public offices, "is good but it makes you lazy"⁴⁵.

People who do not speak English avoid situations where they would have to use the foreign language, and therefore they have only limited contact with English people and thus fewer opportunities to improve their English. Piotr does realise how restricting the lack of knowledge of the English language is, "We haven't been to an English pub, yet. You must know the language for that. They talk to you and when you do not know how to respond..."⁴⁶, and those contacts between Poles and English people can be totally different. Piotr has contacts with the English "possibly at work, but these are just token contacts. We do not have such relations. There are Poles who speak good English, they are much closer [with the English]"⁴⁷.

⁴² Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

⁴³ Interview 6th – Monika, 18 June 2009.

⁴⁴ Interview 15th – Piotr, 24 June 2009.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

In addition, as it has already been mentioned, all respondents emphasise the fact that English people definitely prefer Poles to people from other immigrant groups, in particular the Pakistanis. What is interesting, favouring Poles by the English does not result – in their view – from the knowledge of local people that Poland is a member of the European Union, and thus from the fact that Polish immigrants have the rights of European citizens. Just the opposite, the respondents think that the English very often are not aware of that and have a very limited knowledge about Poland, usually associating it with a remote country, somewhere at the edge of Europe, neighbouring Russia. As Anna says, “I meet a lot of people who do not realise that Poland is a member of the [European] Union. And they demand a visa or a work permit. And they are not embarrassed by their ignorance, when you tell them what the reality is”⁴⁸. It is surprising, especially considering the media campaign carried out by the British press in connection with the opening of the UK labour market for Poles. As the press studies show⁴⁹, all papers have devoted a lot of attention to that event, and the quality press tried to engage in a serious debate, emphasised the symbolic return of Poland to Europe and rather presented the arrival of Poles in a positive light, whereas tabloid press mainly scared their readers with the flood of cheap labour and blamed the government for the poor preparation for such a serious step as opening the labour market. One way or another, it would seem that no reader of the British press could fail to notice such an important event as the Polish accession to the European Union and the opening of the British labour market for Poles. According to the study participants the reality is completely different.

The more positive attitude towards Poles is explained by the respondents by the fact that English people see cultural and religious similarities and, what is extremely important, the efforts of Poles to integrate. This is how one of the respondents explains the situation, “it is easier for them to accept us because of the Christian religion and the colour of skin. Only the accent, when we speak, gives us away. We assimilate and with the Pakistanis, one never knows. One group will assimilate, another will not. You come to a foreign country, you are a visitor here and you say: you must do what I do”⁵⁰. The Poles under study have the sense of being visitors, but rather welcome visitors. As visitors, they know that they cannot demand too much, that they must adapt to the customs of the new country, because that is what they would expect from the visitors in their own country. In their view, the English see that and value Poles higher than other immigrants, especially those of Pakistani origin. An English

⁴⁸ Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

⁴⁹ J. Fomina, J. Frelak, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Interview 19th – Anna, 29 June 2009.

acquaintance, in a moment of frankness, told one of the respondents that he “respects Poles because [...]we do not build mosques here, we blend in with the crowd and assimilate with the society and try to adapt to them. And we do not make every effort to be different”⁵¹. As Edyta sums up, “I think that if someone behaves normally and does not stand out from the rest of the community, the community will accept them”⁵². Obviously, one may wonder, to what extent those opinions reflect their own prejudice, justification of their dislike for “those Pakistanis throwing their weight around”, who feel too much at home in this European country. In any event, the inhabitants of Bradford of Pakistani origin provide the Poles with an excellent opportunity to feel appreciated, liked and welcome in comparison with those “others” – usually unwelcome and protected only because of political correctness predominating in the UK. As Magda explains, “Most of the people I know who love Poles, strongly dislike the Pakistanis. Maybe it is because we who live here, respect the fact that it is not our country. We are not fully at home. Whereas they feel totally at home. They think that they can do everything here”⁵³.

A Pole – not always a Catholic

The issue of religion deserves a separate discussion, as it has been a theme frequently touched upon by the British press. The Catholicism of Poles has been presented in a positive way – God-fearing, decent people who fill the churches in the United Kingdom which used to empty before⁵⁴. The picture that emerges from the most recent study is, however, much more complex. On the one hand, as most respondents claim, it is easier for the English to accept Poles than Pakistanis because of the Christian religion practised by Polish immigrants, and in consequence, the common values. Even though today, the United Kingdom is a very secularized country, it does have Christian roots and is not very favourably inclined towards other religions, especially Islam. As one of the respondents said, the influx of Poles “defends England from flooding by Islam”⁵⁵.

On the other hand, although the perception of a Pole – an ardent Catholic, comes true when we talk about the perception of Poles by the English or the perception of Poles as the whole group of immigrants, the respondents, however, mostly distance themselves from that perception. Some of them declare that they are non-practising, like for example Jarek, who

⁵¹ Interview 22nd – Aga, 1 July 2009.

⁵² Interview 5th – Edyta, 18 June 2009.

⁵³ Interview 16th – Madzia, 26 June 2009.

⁵⁴ J. Fomina, J. Frelak, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Interview 4th – Malwina, 17 June 2009.

says, “I don’t go to church in principle. Among my friends very few go”⁵⁶. In case of some of the respondents, the religious attachment has become weaker abroad, when they found themselves away from the vigilant eye of their family and friends. Emil and Justyna put it straight, “In Poland we were much more church-going”⁵⁷. They still declare themselves to be Catholic but in their own way – less practicing and less “church-going”. Another group of respondents say that they do not practise because of their reluctance towards the Polish Catholic Church in Bradford, as a result of various negative experiences, “I don’t like going to the Polish church, because it is a fashion parade., watching one another”⁵⁸. The respondents often perceive the Polish church in Bradford as an unfriendly and very conservative institution, which also tries to control the immigrants and it is exactly because of such a form of social supervision and parochial attitude that they have left Poland. One of the respondents has given an example of a refusal to baptize a baby of a couple who were not married, which – in her view – was unacceptable⁵⁹. A total renouncing of Catholicism also happens among immigrants. One of the respondents explained that she converted to Islam but only for the sake of peace and quiet, because of her husband’s religion, although she is still not very religious. The perception of a Catholic Pole thanks to whom Polish churches abroad were bursting at the seams is not a dominant feature of the self-perception of immigrant Poles. Although for a small number of people, Polish church remains an important element of their lives and the source of Polishness, “it is nice to go to the Polish church, to hear the Polish language”⁶⁰.

When gender matters

Another theme worth discussing is one related to gender, particularly highlighted by the female respondents. Some issues have come back in a number of interviews: the theme of women doing much better abroad than in their home country, the theme of Polish women as model wives, the question of mixed couples, including the naïve women and jealous males with racist attitudes. The female interviewees have emphasized their achievements, have been proud of what they have managed to achieve and have often doubted whether they would be able to get that far in Poland. For them, the United Kingdom has turned out to be a country of unlimited possibilities. Unlike – as they claim – for the great majority of men who do not

⁵⁶ Interview 2nd – Jarek, 20 April 2009.

⁵⁷ Interview 24th and 25th – Justyna and Emil, 26 June 2009.

⁵⁸ Wywiad 14. – Kasia, 23 June 2009 .

⁵⁹ Wywiad 6. – Monika, 18 June 2009 .

⁶⁰ Wywiad 17. – Łukasz, 29 June 2009

manage well as immigrants. Quite often even people with higher education diplomas, when faced with the lack of immediate success, lose their ambitions, become passive and frustrated.

One of the female respondents describes it thus, “From what I have noticed, the men are so flagging, wearing cheap tracksuits. Such little boys who just need the playstation, a beer to be happy [...]. They are passive. [...] All the businesses here are started by women”^{61,62}. According to the women participants of the study, it is connected with the lack of knowledge of English and the lack of willingness to learn the language actively and systematically. It seems as if men were even more afraid of helplessness, of the ridicule entailed by the necessity of going back to school and preferred to do nothing, hoping that the knowledge of English would just come to them by itself. Women, in contrast – according to the female respondents – are active, enterprising, not afraid to start something anew, to learn the language from the beginning or get new qualifications, thanks to which they can find a good job, “I knew only one [man] who went to college. I told my brother to go to school to learn English, but he said that he will learn somehow at work. Perhaps it is enough for them to work in a factory [...]. How many single mothers have I met here who work and learn!”⁶³. At the same time, Polish men still remember the perception, instilled in them since their childhood, of men as a tough guy, bearing the burden of supporting the whole family. A lot of them cannot come to terms with any other family model in which the relationship is much more partner-based or in which a woman leads financially. As Kasia tells, “My friend, a Pole, when he came to me, he could not bear the fact that he didn’t know the language and would have to depend on me financially”⁶⁴.

Those differences – according to the female respondents – result in instability of relationships that have been formed back in Poland, “a lot of relationships here break down because women get on better”⁶⁵. Another describes how she has broken up with her partner with whom she had come to Bradford, because he felt jealous of her success, her ambitions and achievements and he himself was not willing to make any effort to find something better than factory work, which required only physical effort⁶⁶. Whereas she came not knowing the language, although with a higher education diploma, but over five years she has mastered the language so that she has been able to find a job adequate to her qualifications.

⁶¹ Wywiad 13. – Justyna, 23 June 2009.

⁶² Which is not fully confirmed by the facts – one Polish pub and at least one shop have been started and are run by men.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ Interview 14th – Kasia, 23 June 2009.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ Interview 21st – Gosia, 30 June 2009.

The female interviewees also point to the racism of male Poles, visible especially in their very negative opinion of relationships between Polish women and men of other ethnic groups. Also some male respondents have generally pointed to the problem of racism among Polish immigrants. As one of the female study participants says, “Some Poles are declared racists, and some are concealed racists, who sometimes let something slip”⁶⁷. It is obviously a matter of discussion on whether such a strongly negative attitude to mixed relationships has a racist background and to what extent other factors may be involved. The female respondents are convinced, however, that Polish men strongly dislike the situations when Polish women form relationships with men of other nationalities. As one of the female interviewees notices, such an attitude has nothing to do with the care for Polish female immigrants who might fall victim to more socially conservative partners and is tinted with a significant dose of hypocrisy, “Poles can be very critical [about such mixed relationships], and they themselves sometimes beat their wives or girlfriends”⁶⁸.

Men asked about mixed relationships generally have nothing against the contacts between Polish men with females of other ethnic groups, they are however, very negative about Polish women who have chosen partners other than Polish men, especially when it comes to a different skin colour or religion, “It really pisses me off. [...] They do not act nicely and it is not about love. Then such a Pakistani man says that a Polish woman is a hooker”⁶⁹.

What is interesting, Polish women also speak rather unfavourably about female Poles getting romantically involved with foreigners but their judgment is not so unequivocal, it is more complex, less moralizing, and even full of understanding and empathy. First of all, the female study participants differentiate between mature serious partner relationships formed by men and women without stereotypes and prejudice and cases of foreigners using naïve girls coming from Poland, who have become intoxicated with freedom, are fascinated with everything exotic and new. In their view, such girls often simply want to show off before others and do not fully realise the possible consequences⁷⁰.

In addition, the female respondents believe that they are perceived as attractive partners by mothers of Poles born in the UK – they very often come across such opinions in case of female emigrants from the 1980s than from representatives of the second generation of the post-war emigration. The assumed virtues of Polish women are their cordiality, family spirit, helpfulness, readiness to self-sacrifice. In other words, the mothers are not looking for a life

⁶⁷ Interview 4th – Malwina, 17 June 2009.

⁶⁸ Interview 14th – Kasia, 23 June 2009.

⁶⁹ Interview 7th – Zbyszek, 18 June 2009.

⁷⁰ Interview 14th – Kasia, 23 June 2009; interview 12th – Magda, 23 June 2009.

partner for their sons but for a “surrogate mother”. At the same time, which the women under study are displeased to see, such mothers approach Polish women with great distrust, treating each of them as a potential (*gold digger*). As Agnieszka tells us, who for three years was in a relationship with an Englishman whose mother came to Britain in the 1980s, “Once I was standing with my aunt in front of the church, one of the ladies came up and said that Polish girls were mysterious. That is strange because the mothers wanted wives from Poland for their sons and at the same time they were afraid that the girls would not be able to face the [challenge]”⁷¹. Later, Agnieszka learned about phone calls to her partner’s parents from “friends” telling some incredible stories about her⁷².

The English and the Poles born in the UK are also perceived as more attractive life partners by Polish female immigrants – because of their more equal attitude to relationships, the lack of the need to constantly prove their masculinity and the rejection of the fixed conservative division of gender roles. As one of the respondents explains, “In Poland, the model dominating among men is the “macho” model. I can understand that. There are no jobs, there is no money. Generally, they do not have anything to impress the women with, for instance financially. So in order to impress them, they have to put on a brave front. This is sad because it is reflected in the relationship. An Englishman is easygoing, a modern easygoing type. He has a partnership attitude to a relationship; equal rights, tolerance, understanding. I would not exchange that for anything anymore. Marek is like that and so are his friends. Englishmen are not possessive. The relationship is more relaxed. This is not stressful. Life is stressful enough as it is. Polish men make things unnecessarily complicated”⁷³. Obviously it is not difficult to see that while Polish women, in the eyes of their partners’ mothers are attractive as wives exactly because of this assumed, more clear division of roles played by spouses in Polish society, the Polish women themselves want to run away from that into the world of more equal chances and more equal relationships.

About solidarity – or rather the lack of it

All the respondents emphasise the lack of solidarity among Polish immigrants in the United Kingdom and very few signs of friendliness shown by Poles towards other Poles, “We are

⁷¹ Interview 23rd – Agnieszka, 1 July 2009.

⁷² „When I started to go out with Marek, different ladies started to call his mother, 1980s emigrant, and told her different things about me. The telephone did not stop ringing, each of them had something to say. Marek’s parents are well off and obviously that was supposed to be the most attractive about him. Fortunately, his parents are really nice” (Interview 23rd – Agnieszka, 1 July 2009).

⁷³ Interview 21st – Gosia, 30 June 2009.

friendly and open but not fully towards each other. Towards the English – OK”⁷⁴. They justify it, among other things, by the fact that immigrant life changes the system of values for Poles who begin to pay more attention to the material side of life, keep comparing themselves with others with respect to success, job, pay, standard of the house and make of car. They even compete in knowledge of English⁷⁵, since the ability to use the English language has tangible consequences for the improvement of one’s social situation. Such competition quickly leads to envy, which is not good for the solidarity within the group. As one of the respondents says, “But as it is, there is a lot of envy among us, than one is better off than the other, and plotting against one another”⁷⁶. The fear of competition gives rise to hostile attitudes towards everyone who makes a greater effort, who is more successful. Accusations of disloyalty appear, “there were such situations in the factory: a guy who worked better and the employer saw that. That bothered others. They would say that he crawled to the boss, he didn’t stick with us because he stuck with them. It was totally groundless because he wasn’t hurting anyone. He just wanted to earn more”⁷⁷.

According to the respondents, the level of trust among Polish immigrants is very low. As one of the respondents says, “I have heard that many more people have been let down by the Poles than by the English. It is strange because we are in a foreign country and we should rather stick together, but it is not so. There is a group of people on whom you can rely but it is not a large group. [...] Everyone thinks about themselves”⁷⁸. No solidarity can be achieved without trust. The interviewees also stress that there is no element that would bind this – today already quite big – group of Poles living in Bradford, who cannot unite. When asked whether they think Poles in Bradford constitute a strong political power, whether they can do anything together, most people answer sarcastically, “Poles? Together?!” In addition, the respondents generally do not feel any signs of sympathy from the post-war Polish community, which – in their view – also perceives the newcomers as a threat. As one of the respondents summed up the attitude of the “old” Polish community to the „new” one, “We were here first and you want to take our business away from us”⁷⁹.

The reluctance of a number of new immigrants to involvement in Polish community matters, in the cultural and social life of the Polish community, is justified, in the opinion of one of the study participants by the not very favourable attitude of the “old” Polish

⁷⁴ Interview 16th – Madzia, 26 June 2009.

⁷⁵ Interview 26th and 27th – Monika and Sebastian, 28 June 2009.

⁷⁶ Interview 10th – Ania, 22 June 2009.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ Interview 20th – Janek, 30 June 2009.

⁷⁹ Interview 18th – Krzysztof, 29 June 2009.

community towards the economic migrants. Unlike most of the respondents, this person is strongly involved in the activities of the Polish community. She explains that the opinions she has heard are not positive, because Poles who settled in the United Kingdom after World War II had to fight for their place in the new community, had to care for everything themselves – be it the club or the church – whereas the Poles who came after 2004 assume the welfare state mentality, use whatever they need but do not what to get involved themselves. As she says, Poles “think believe they have right to it. They do not feel they belong there, they do not want to be included in the community. This place is there for them when they need it when they have a business to do, when they must get something translated, baptise a baby or conclude a marriage. Apart from that they are not interested”⁸⁰.

But the majority of the immigrants do not miss a close-knit Polish community. People from that group say that they have left for another country and now they are more interested in what is happening here, in the everyday things connected with the life of British society. They have Poland in Poland. Therefore activities for the benefit of the Polish community are not important for them. A lot of the respondents are afraid of putting down roots in the stifling oppressive world of the community that is close-knit but at the same time controlling one another. They have not come to England to get stuck in the Polish community. They were running away from the parochial nature of Poland and do not wish to get into the same kind of environment in Bradford. As Kasia says, “Generally, I owe my success to the fact that I have not been entangled in the Polish community”⁸¹. She also believes that she is better off when she is, in a sense, cut away from the Polish Diaspora, even though she does act for the benefit of the Polish community – she is a translator – and she has helped many of her countrymen.

“The pathological element”

The reluctance of the post-war Polish community towards the new wave of immigration from Poland is also explained by the respondents, to some extent, by the behaviour of the “other” Poles – unwilling to integrate, not speaking English, uneducated, and especially those who belong to the “pathological element”⁸². As it has been mentioned before, the interviewees often describe themselves, emphasising features that set them apart from the “other” Poles, with whom they do not want to identify. It is striking how many people talk directly about a “pathological background”, from which – in their view – quite a significant number of Poles

⁸⁰ Interview 21st – Gosia, 30 June 2009.

⁸¹ Interview 14th – Kasia, 23 June 2009.

⁸² Interview 16th – Madzia, 26 June 2009.

living in Bradford come, with whom they would not wish to have anything to do. Obviously not all Poles who do not speak English are automatically treated by the study participants as the “pathological element”, although it is difficult to find the borders of such a division clear and unambiguous. They themselves do not make a distinction between those who are decent but do not speak English and those whom they describe as the “pathological element”. The statements of the respondents indicate that the “other” Poles drink, provoke brawls, fights, “such that people are thrown out the windows”⁸³ – simply behave in a disgraceful way. The negative attitude of the Polish Diaspora is therefore understandable, “As I talked to them, from what they say, they perceive us rather negatively. But that’s no wonder. Most people who have come here, maybe they are not social margins but it is a shame to say where you come from. It is especially visible on Friday and Saturday nights near bars”⁸⁴. Such a division of all Poles into two groups is definitely not conducive to solidarity, building bonds among all Poles, As Madzia concludes, “it is difficult for the two groups of Poles: the pathological one and the educated one, to unite”⁸⁵.

The respondents use a rather strong language to describe the people whom they perceive as the “pathological element”. One of the study participants describes the phenomenon in the following way, “Now there has come a group of country bumpkins. They’ve never learned and they don’t want to learn English. Everybody was going so they have gone too, because it was easy to get a job and now they complain. They have taken whole families with them and they still sit and complain. A complaining Pole drinks and provokes brawls”⁸⁶. Other interviewees are less delicate in their judgement: “Those new groups of Poles who come here, are complete junk, a lot of pathology. I know a few people who have escaped prosecution”⁸⁷. The expression “pathology” appears particularly often in the interviews, “there are quite a few people here who have run away from something, from pathological groups”⁸⁸, but stronger expressions abound, such as “rabble”, “junk”, “drunks”. As one of the respondents sums up, “Such Poles are here that make you really scared!”⁸⁹.

As it has been mentioned before, this group – in the opinion of the respondents – effectively damages the reputation of Poles in Bradford, both in the eyes of English people and the „old” Polish community, especially as the members of the “pathological element” are

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ Interview 2nd – Jarek, 20 April 2009.

⁸⁵ Interview 16th – Madzia, 26 June 2009.

⁸⁶ Interview 26th and 27th – Monika and Sebastian, 28 June 2009.

⁸⁷ Interview 9th – Wojtek, 21 June 2009.

⁸⁸ Interview 16th – Madzia, 26 June 2009.

⁸⁹ Interview 3rd – Jagoda, 17 June 2009.

more visible than the hard-working Poles who blend in with the crowd, “Perhaps the “old” Polish community were waiting for our arrival and have been disappointed. And yet, we, who have come here to study and to earn money could not be seen. We did not go to the Polish club. Those visible were those who punched their card in the factory and then went to the club and did not stop drinking. It was offensive. They provoked brawls”⁹⁰. The study participants try to separate themselves, first of all physically – they do not go to the same bars and places, do not make acquaintances, avoid those people, and in their presence even try not to show that they are Polish (“If we go to Bradford, I often say: Child, now be quiet and do not say anything in Polish. Because from the other side of the street three or four men are coming with beer in their hands and every other word starts with k... [f...] and everybody must get out of their way. Then I am ashamed to be Polish. I want to run so as not be accosted by them”⁹¹), but also mentally, as if they told themselves, “this does not concern me, it is not about me”. “I do not know why I should be ashamed for Poles, for all of them”⁹² – explains one of the respondents, adding that she wants to feel like an independent individual, judged only for her own experience and not through somebody’s negative stereotypes.

Parallel worlds: Poles in Bradford

The results of the study analysed above show how varied the Polish community in the United Kingdom is and how Poles themselves are aware of that, especially those who are better educated and more prone to reflection. In the perceptions of the respondents, at least three dimensions may be distinguished – three parallel worlds whose inhabitants are aware of the existence of the other two but which rarely interpenetrate: (1) the world of the well educated, on their way up the ladder, self-confident Poles; (2) the world of the less resourceful Polish immigrants, stuck in one place, which is often considered equivalent with the socially marginalised groups, even though it includes both honest factory workers as well as petty criminals; (3) the world of the post-war Polish Diaspora, keeping a distance, looking critically at all newly-arrived compatriots.

In the British press, there appeared examples of both the hard-working brave Pole and the Polish immigrant posing a threat to public order, social cohesion or welfare state. It is worth emphasizing, however, that all quality newspapers focused primarily on the first group – on this part of the Polish Diaspora who get on well in the UK. This opinion is consistent with the

⁹⁰ Interview 22nd – Aga, 1 July 2009.

⁹¹ Interview 26th and 27th – Monika and Sebastian, 28 June 2009.

⁹² Interview 4th – Malwina, 17 June 2009.

self-perception of the Polish study participants and – which is important – with the perception of Poles held by the English, as the respondents themselves have noted. The Polish study participants do not feel negatively perceived or discriminated, they do not think that they are treated stereotypically, as Polish journalists writing about the perception of Poles in British press attempted to prove.

The relation between the perception of their own group and the perception of the “other” Poles is complex. On the one hand, the study participants may feel appreciated, create a more positive picture of their own circle, comparing their own achievements and experience with the situation of the other countrymen. On the other hand, however, the interviewees are afraid that the negative opinion about some of the Polish immigrants may affect the perception of all Poles, including the respondents. Most of them believe, however, that English people, especially the educated ones, can see the difference between the group of Poles to which the study participants belong and the “other” Poles.

It is striking that – in view of the respondents – that many Britons do not realise that Poland is a member of the European Union and that the UK labour market has been opened to Poles, which should have automatically raised the status of Polish immigration in this country. The press reports on that subject have always been placed in the context of opening the British labour market to Polish citizens. The limited awareness of the Polish membership in the EU and all its consequences for Poles in Great Britain may be related to the specific character of Bradford – a small town, where most immigrants come from Pakistan. It may divert the attention from Poland and other countries of Eastern and Central Europe. However annoying that might be for Poles, they may believe that their generally good perception has been earned by themselves. This is especially true – in view of the respondents – as Poles are also better perceived when compared to immigrants from other Eastern and Central European countries which belong to the European Union.

The situation in which women immigrants get on better than men and are more resourceful should not come as a surprise. This phenomenon is not new and has been well described in the literature⁹³, and it usually takes place in case of immigration from relatively conservative states to countries socially more progressive, in which professional and family roles resulting from gender are not so rigorously imposed. For men it is more difficult to reject their self-perception of a “macho” – the head of the family who earns more and from whom more is

⁹³ See for instance: E. Kofman, *The invisibility of female skilled migrants and gender relations in studies of skilled migration in Europe*, „International Journal of Population Geography” 2000, vol. 6, pp. 45–59; S.M. George, *When women come first: Gender and class in transnational migration*, Berkeley 2005.

expected. Immigration often, at least at the beginning, is connected with the loss of status acquired in the country of origin. Such a situation usually irritates men more often as they take it for granted that, as men, they should manage well from the very start and so they act following the all-or-nothing principle. If they leave Poland with an MA in history and abroad they end up in a factory instead of a well known research centre, it is more difficult for them to change their status. They feel that they have already lost the first battle and are reluctant to take up any further challenge. In contrast, women are more humble, adapt more easily to new requirements and also often think that less is expected from them therefore in case of failure they will be less exposed to criticism. They apply the method of small steps that often proves effective, which gives them even more strength and self-confidence. This obviously does not mean that all men and all women behave the same way – it is just an attempt to explain the mechanism of the phenomenon described by the female respondents quoted above.

It is not surprising, either, that many Polish men feel negatively about relationships between Polish women and representatives of other nationalities. Especially in conservative patriarchal societies women have always been perceived as the embodiment of national values, guardians of the nation's honour⁹⁴, and the control over their sexuality constituted an act of defending the national pride against tarnishing it by strangers, especially those of different faith, ethnic origin or race. Poles entering into relationships with foreigners, in a symbolic sense, escape the control of Polish men, despise Polish men and bring shame upon the whole Polish community. Obviously not all Polish men are guided by the abstract notion of the nation and the symbolism of a woman, but the emotional character of the statements concerning Polish women entering into relationships with foreigners indicates something more than the general care for the fate of "naïve girls". An important message in the statements has been the theme of bringing shame on the whole Polish community and also a certain jealousy, based on thinking in terms of "what is it that they have and we don't". The awareness of the negative attitude of Polish men towards Polish women remaining in mixed relationships may lead to their greater feeling of alienation from the Polish community abroad, creating favourable conditions for a situation in which Poles abroad live next to one another but not together.

The famous distinction formulated by Robert D. Putnam into the *bridging* social capital and *bonding* social capital⁹⁵ helps to understand the way in which Poles perceive themselves.

⁹⁴ This topic is raised, among others, by: N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London 2005; A. Graff, *Rzecz o płci, seksualności i narodzie*, Warsaw 2008.

⁹⁵ R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York 2000.

The bonding capital is characterized by strong bonds, high level of trust and sense of solidarity within one's own social group, whereas having the bridging capital assumes going beyond one's own group, making contacts over the divisions delineating social groups. Whenever Putnam talks about the bridging capital, he means, first of all the condition of the broadly understood civil society, built by participation in clubs, associations and social organisations which group people of different backgrounds, professions, financial and cultural resources. This distinction is also very helpful in discussions about immigration and integration.

On the basis of the study discussed here, it can be stated that the respondents, that is, Poles who are educated and know English language, have strong bridging capital and significantly weaker bonding capital. In other words – the Poles under study are open to contacts with the English, that is, members of the receiving society, whereas, to a lesser extent they are interested in forming bonds with other Poles, building a strong and close-knit Polish community. As the study shows, a significant role is played by the internal diversity of the Polish Diaspora in the United Kingdom, with the most important criteria of division being education and the knowledge of English as well as the time of immigration (the “old”, post-war Polish community and the “new” post-accession one). The study participants, on the one hand treat the “old” Diaspora as the receiving society and they know that as newcomers they are closely watched. The reflected perception is not, however, too positive for the respondents – they can feel the critical glance of the “old” Polish community, their lack of trust and sympathy. On the other hand, the respondents feel a great distance towards a group of people who have come to the UK at the same time and differ from them not only by the lack of the knowledge of English or low level of education but also the reluctance to learn English and, in consequence, reluctance towards integration, their sense of alienation from the new environment. What is more, with the group of the “other Poles”, a “pathological element” is often linked, from which the respondents would like to simply cut themselves off. They also believe that the negative – in their view – perception of themselves in the eyes of the “old” Polish Diaspora is caused by the fact that they are identified with the “social margins”. A situation in which a group of Poles believe that they are not well perceived by another group of Poles, while, at the same time, they have a negative view of still another group of Poles, is certainly not conducive to building bonding capital among Polish immigrants.

The lack of positive bonds is accompanied by the lack of a negative bonding factor, that is, experience in the face of which Poles would feel the need to unite: a sense of threat, general sense of discrimination of Polish immigration as a group or a specific exceptional case with

which all Polish immigrants could identify, which would evoke their empathy. In this context, it is interesting that the Polish media has focused on the allegedly negative perception of Poles in the British press. This is, however, contradicted by the above mentioned press study and the subjective feeling of the Poles staying abroad themselves. At least people who are educated and are able to use the English language generally do not feel discriminated against – just the opposite, they believe that in the eyes of the English they come out quite well, especially when compared to other immigrants. They do not focus on negative experience, they know where to go when they encounter problems, how to cope when something bad happens to them, such as for instance discrimination, they are aware of their rights and possibilities and have the sense of control over their own lives. Therefore they do not need the defence wall around them that could be provided by a strong, close-knit Polish Diaspora. And even though the respondents stress the lack of solidarity within the group of Polish immigrants, they do not lament it too much.

Alejandro Portes draws attention to the negative consequences of social capital, including the use of control, exerting pressure on the members of the group, limiting their personal freedom⁹⁶. This is certainly another reason for the weak bonding capital of the Poles under study. For many Poles, the trip to England also meant getting away from the cosy protection of the family as well as from the vigilant eye of the prying “friendly” neighbours, an escape from the small town, parochial mentality. Those people know that getting actively involved in the life of the Polish Diaspora – which is connected with the necessity to compare their achievements with others, with subjecting themselves to the constant judgement, let alone voluntary acceptance of the “care” of the post-war immigrant community and the Polish church – will *de facto* mean going back to the situation from before their leaving Poland.

In addition, the study participants have regular contacts with Poland and they do not need a semblance of it in the form of Polish community institutions, they do not need to re-create the irretrievably lost homeland, as it was the case with the post-war Diaspora. For them, the Polish spirit is close at hand – they know of the existence of Polish shops, a Polish school or a Polish church, they have access to Polish language media, they can board a plane at any time and be in Poland on the same day. That is why they do not feel anything missing in the UK, do not feel that they must somehow care for their ‘Polishness’ in any special way. Because of their limited contacts with the Polish community, they do not feel that they constantly have to

⁹⁶ A. Portes, *Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology*, „Annual Review of Sociology” 1998, vol. 24, pp. 1–24; idem, *The two meanings of social capital*, „Sociological Forum” 2000, vol. 15, pp. 1–12.

account for their Polish spirit⁹⁷. They are self-confident and sure of their identity because they know that there is no contradiction in being a rightful member of the British society and a native Pole. Their positive self-perception and self-confidence make it easier to see positive aspects of residing in the UK. The fact that they feel they have passed the test, they have managed to succeed in a foreign country also gives them a greater distance in approaching their Polish identity. They do not need to prove to anyone that “a Pole can manage”, because they know that it is simply true. They do not have to defend their Polish spirit or cherish it in any special way.

On the basis of the social identity theories⁹⁸ it can be stated that the self-perception of Poles creates favourable conditions for integration of Polish immigration in the United Kingdom. If Poles felt discriminated, they would try to dilute in the new society, to adopt the new language, new customs, even new names, that is, to assimilate fully and if that failed they would adopt a defensive position and would look for sources of high self-esteem in a strong, well integrated ethnic group. The study participants, on the one hand, do not feel a strong bond with their ethnic group, on the other hand, they feel accepted by the receiving society, the English people, as Poles – they have a positive self-perception in the eyes of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom. Therefore they do not need to hide behind a curtain of their Polish identity or be more English than the English themselves. And even though a few respondents have used the word “assimilation” to describe the behaviour of themselves and some of other Poles in Bradford, in fact it is worth emphasizing that in this context one should rather talk about integration and not assimilation⁹⁹. The basic difference, important from the point of view of the study discussed here, is that the respondents have preserved their Polish identity, while at the same time being members of British society.

The study participants generally feel as visitors in Bradford, which should not be surprising taking into account the short time of their stay in the new place. What is important, however, – they think of themselves as welcome guests, who are warmly encouraged to “feel at home”. And they try to feel like that. In order to describe their situation accurately, one can use a metaphor of a landlord and a tenant: the Poles in Bradford do not feel as landlords yet, they feel like tenants who have come into the legal possession of a new place, know their rights

⁹⁷ See: idem, *Social Capital*, *op. cit.*; idem, *The two meanings*, *op. cit.*

⁹⁸ H. Tajfel, J. Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, [w:] *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, red. W.G. Austin, Monterey 1979; D. Taylor, F. Moghaddam, *Social Identity Theory*, [in:] *Theories of Intergroup Relations: International Social Psychological Perspectives*, Westport 1994.

⁹⁹ More – see I. Koryś, *Integracja imigrantów, a asymilacja, segregacja i marginalizacja – słowniczek podstawowych pojęć*, 2005 [materials of the International Migration Organisation] – http://www.enigma.wsb.pl/debata/download/integracja_imigrantow.pdf [access: 20 September 2009].

and obligations, take care of their place, also know how to execute their rights in case of problems.

The willingness to integrate with the new society is also – according to the respondents – one of the main reasons which has helped them earn the favour of the British. It is a two-way process: Poles want to integrate, which the English – as the respondents say – appreciate and accept them, thanks to which Polish immigrants are even more eager to become part of the British society. It is interesting that when comparing themselves to other ethnic groups, Poles forget about the part of the Polish community which they are not willing to identify with and which also, as they notice themselves, do not integrate well. What probably plays an important role here is “imposing one’s own rules”, which is typical – according to the respondents – for the inhabitants of Bradford of Pakistani origin, something that Poles are careful not to do.

As the press studies referred to above indicated, the pass to the new world was not education but the knowledge of English. In a number of press articles, for instance, the problem of wasting human capital has been raised – with reference to Poles who find employment well below their qualifications. The results of the analysed study show that the reason for that situation is primarily the lack of knowledge of English and not discriminating attitudes of British employers. People who are determined enough to overcome the language barrier, achieve a great deal and build a positive self-perception which facilitates further integration. To modify the famous phrase, we may say that that the rule “not a diploma but a strong heartfelt desire...[will make you an officer]” seems to come true in the case of Polish immigrants in the UK and their integration into a new society.

List of interviews

1. – Małgosia, 15 June 2009
2. – Jarek, 20 April 2009
3. – Jagoda, 17 June 2009
4. – Malwina, 17 June 2009
5. – Edyta, 18 June 2009
6. – Monika, 18 June 2009
7. – Zbyszek, 18 June 2009
8. – Ilona, 21 June 2009
9. – Wojtek, 21 June 2009
10. – Ania, 22 June 2009
11. – Arek, 22 June 2009
12. – Magda, 23 June 2009
13. – Justyna, 23 June 2009
14. – Kasia, 23 June 2009
15. – Piotr, 24 June 2009
16. – Madzia, 26 June 2009
17. – Łukasz, 29 June 2009

18. – Krzysztof, 29 June 2009
19. – Anna, 29 June 2009
20. – Janek, 30 June 2009
21. – Gosia, 30 June 2009
22. – Aga, 1 lipca 2009
23. – Agnieszka, 1 July 2009
24. and 25. – Justyna and Emil, 26 June 2009
26. and 27. – Monika and Sebastian, 28 June 2009
28. – Patrycja, 20 June 2009

Project: „Polish Integration Forum” is co-financed from European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals and state budget.



The sole responsibility lies with the Institute of Public Affairs. The European Union are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained there in.

Copyright by Fundacja Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warsaw 2010
All rights reserved. No part of this report may be printed or reproduced without the permission of the publisher or quoting the source.

Institute of Public Affairs
00-031 Warsaw, Poland, Szpitalna 5 / 22
tel. +48 22 55 64 260; fax +48 22 55 64 262
e-mail: isp@isp.org.pl, www.isp.org.pl