

BETWEEN SOCIAL DUMPING AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The Challenge of Creating Orderly Working Conditions among Polish Circular Migrants in the Copenhagen Area, Denmark

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In a world increasingly challenged by neoliberal restructurings of labour markets within the global economy, labour organisation is continuously challenged. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Polish construction workers in Denmark, both at their place of work and in their homes in Denmark and Poland, this article traces the objective of creating “orderly working conditions” at insecure and temporary workplaces. The relational analysis – going into work organisation and work/family dynamics – shows how “Polishness” is used as a brand (that the unions need to adjust to) connoting flexibility and availability, and that the composition of the migrant family significantly impacts how migratory practices are made feasible and desirable.

Keywords: East-West migrants, labour mobility, social dumping, migrant families, ethnographic fieldwork

“40 Poles Illegally Crammed Together”

Headlines like this¹ regularly hit the Danish news media. In this case a newspaper article from 2010 reveals that an employer lodged 40 Polish workers in a building approved only for commercial activities, with insufficient sanitary and kitchen facilities as well as serious flaws in safety standards. Such hazardous housing conditions are frequently accompanied with very poor working conditions. The debate that usually arises from such examples point to the deplorable fact that the Danish labour market – once known for its high standards – is deteriorating.

In this paper we explore the challenge of creating “orderly working conditions” at insecure and temporary workplaces that employ Polish migrant wage labourers in Denmark.² How these working conditions are negotiated need to be seen in light of the changed influence of labour organisations and the EU free mobility regime. As we will argue, a vital outcome of open borders and weak trade unions is that national self-branding comes to play a central role when wage labourers seek to ensure their well-being in changeable labour markets. Migrant workers are no longer simply incorporated into existing

labour rights arrangements, a fact which might contribute to making the (Eastern) migrant an intrinsic part of the threat scenario. Media stories, like the one presented above, entail much more than isolated instances of contract violation; they symbolise a situation where an old system of labour organisation is fundamentally shaken.

Through an empirical focus on male circular migrants in the construction industry it will be shown how the difficulty of providing employment with orderly conditions is further complicated by the different ways in which migrants try to establish a feasible and lasting family life.

Labour Movement and Competition – Introducing a New Era?

Not only the Danish but most European labour markets are experiencing profound changes in wage levels and working conditions in the broadest sense. Affected are the realms of security, working hours, permanency of employment, right to holidays, and accruing of pension.³ Within these developments there is a strong tendency to blame the feared and problematised “Eastern migrants” (cf. Pijpers 2006).

Are these realities part of a new pattern? One could assert that the landscape of enterprises, work sites, and individual labourers searching for work has always been marked by flows, cross-border mobility, and rivalling groups of workers together with varying forms of employer strains, and that these characteristics have been an inseparable part of the supply and demand mechanism intrinsic to the labour market. To some degree, this is true. In the capitalist economy that has run Western societies for more than 150 years, working conditions are constantly changing. In this type of economic system, labourers all essentially compete with each other for available jobs. However, what in the decades following 1900 became the order of the day in most industrialised countries was a labour movement with an increasingly stronger societal footing; this allowed for a reduction in internal rivalry through agreements about working conditions.

Although this development (with considerable variety) took place in most European countries – and

despite the self-perception of the labour movement as an association aspiring for worldwide unity of workers – the still stronger position and increasing strength of the movement was first and foremost provided for within the borders of the nation states. National trade unions made agreements with national employer organisations within the limits of acceptability and possibility as viewed by national governments (Jul Nielsen 2004). In that way, the potential competition between workers was kept in check by nationally based systems of organisations, laws and regulations.

This mechanism of the nation state is closely related to the question of migration. For much of the twentieth century, migration was controlled within the frameworks of strong nationally embedded regulation systems. While the years up until WW I were still marked by a somewhat open European labour market, the interwar years – in particular during the crisis of the 1930s – witnessed the closing of national borders, a pattern that continued after WW II. Despite an overall USA-led capitalist economy based on liberal doctrines and the founding of the EEC on similar principles, the European labour markets were not at all marked by free moving labourers and cross-border mobility. As Hansen has keenly illustrated, starting with the boom of the European economy in the late 1950s, which resulted in a severe shortage in labour supply, strong labour unions became highly sceptical of the risk posed by pressure to lower wages in the case of guest-worker migration; and, more importantly, unions had the power to ensure that these workers were granted the same basic conditions as the residential workers (Hansen 2003: 25f.).⁴ Also characteristic of this period was the incorporation of guest-workers in the existing labour organisations.⁵ Still, the guest-worker migration did not persist; as a consequence of the economic setback in the early 1970s, all countries more or less put an end to the guest-worker schemes. During the following two decades, it was mainly family members of former emigrants and asylum seekers that emigrated, which did not fundamentally shake the labour market system (ibid.).⁶

Neoliberal Restructuring

Crucial for the period in question in this article is, however, the shift that took place after 1990. In the aftermath of the Cold War, a profound liberalisation put its stamp on the European as well as the global economy.⁷ Although the EEC had always been based on liberal dogmas, the 1990s introduced a new era. The single European market was formally established in 1993 and a strategy laid out for the EU's "global competitiveness". With these changes, national governments were less able to protect their own companies and their labourers against international competition (Pedersen 2011: 41, 44). One offshoot of this new order was the founding of the World Trade Organisation in 1995 to prevent protectionism and ensure completion of internationally settled liberal agreements. This overall development, usually labelled *neoliberalism*, basically denotes a "fundamental preference for the market over the state as a means to resolve problems and achieve human ends" (Crouch 2011: 7).

In the 1990s, the tenets of the four freedoms – freedom of labour, capital, commodities and services – were given fervent priority; the freedom of labour is obviously of special interest here. An outcome of the Maastricht treaty was European Union citizenship; it gave all EU citizens the right to live, move and work freely in all member countries (Vestergaard & Sørensen 2004: 10). A significant consequence of this new agenda was the loss in influence of labour organisations. Following Crouch's outline of the neoliberal agenda: "... neoliberals are unequivocally hostile to trade unions, which seek to interfere with the smooth operation of the labour market" (Crouch 2011: 18). For most of the twentieth century, unions had the ability to set a societal agenda; today, national workers' associations, if not marginalised, suffer from considerably diminished authority.⁸

It will be interesting to observe how European labour markets respond to the increased liberalisation of post-industrial societies within the global economy; will they increasingly be divided into "A teams" and "B teams"? In this scenario, the B-side is composed of those who do so-called "3D jobs" (Dull, Dirty and Dangerous), that is, the routine,

service based and/or risky jobs that secure the safety and health of those on the A-side, who benefit from and to a wide extent also contract such services (Favell 2009: 170).⁹ Such dichotomisation of labour markets would certainly increase the demand for a foreign (often also feminised) labour force that is cheap and flexible, "easy to hire and easy to fire" (cf. Pijpers 2010; Sanchez-Carretero 2005). Parallel to the development of the labour market is the probable reorganisation of local communities in host countries where new groups of immigrants attempt to establish settlements (Shutika 2011). In Denmark this is mainly taking place among Muslim immigrants or refugees, while the Polish population is still too small and scattered to put its stamp on whole residential areas. Moreover, the short distance to Poland and the possibility of crossing the border without violating the law means that it is not necessary to make an ultimate decision concerning settlement.

Understanding Open Borders

A supposed consequence of the global economic developments evolving during the 1990s was a "world without borders". This somewhat shabby image has by now been criticised thoroughly (see, e.g., Andersen & Sandberg 2012; Houtum, Kramsch & Zierhofer 2005; Sassen 2008). As is evident from recent developments especially related to migration and the EU's external border regime, Europe's borders are at present undergoing processes of both debordering and rebordering. Furthermore, it is a common misinterpretation that the opening of borders between the European nation states began with the introduction of the EU Schengen agreement. Certainly, the time before WW I can in many respects be regarded as an open border regime where free mobility of the labour force was possible without visas or work permits (Favell 2008, 2009; Kolstrup 2010). Denmark experienced its first wave of Polish labour migrants in the early 1890s and onwards, when seasonal workers were recruited to the Danish dairy farming and sugar industry. This seasonal labour recruitment system was adopted from the German sugar beet farming industry and indeed depended on the possibility of free movement across European borders.

Starting in the 1870s, rural labour from Poland and Galizia entered Germany, a movement known as “going to Sachsen” (*Sachsengängerei*) (Nellemann 1983; Olsson 2007).

In order to grasp the consequences of the open border regime of the present day EU, the emergence of new kinds of territorialities as well as the changeability of the role of the nation state needs to be taken into consideration. Interestingly, this changeability of the state has undergirded its solidity. For some decades now, transnational approaches have pointed out that there is an analytic need for *going beyond* the perspective of the nation state in order to overcome the trap of “methodological nationalism” (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992; Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). The nation state perspective was regarded a trap as long as it remained an unquestioned methodological point of departure as well as an established analytical line of demarcation around a supposedly homogeneous “container” of national culture. Recent contributions, however, and most notably those made by Saskia Sassen, have pointed to the need for *looking inside* the nation state in order to understand how borders are reconfigured and how new forms of territorialities take shape (Mann 2013; Rumford 2008, 2009; Sassen 2009: 587). For example, when foreign companies or agencies establish themselves (or intent to post workers) within another national territory, they do not only refer to national law but also to European law, more specifically the EU Directive for Posted Workers. In effect, new types of bordering as well as novel configurations of the global/national/local occur. Likewise, national employment markets are increasingly Europeanised economically as well as politically. Lubanski (1999) points to the vital role of national tender contracts which according to EU policy should be made as open calls at the European level before the work is contracted. Consequently, any metro or bridge on EU ground cannot be built solely with nationally based contractors unless the tender bid was obtained in equal competition with other European companies. In this respect, transnational changes are potentially developing not only outside and between nation states but also at

intra-national venues such as on the pluri-national construction sites and within companies performing work abroad. Importantly, however, the de- and recomposing of the national does not imply that the nation state is erupting or dissolving itself; on the contrary, and as argued by Sassen, processes of “denationalising can coexist with traditional borders and with the ongoing role of the State in new global regimes” (Sassen 2009: 569). In the analysis of the Polish circular migrants, we emphasise how the state is in itself an actor fostering new bordering processes and how various reconfigurations of the actors in the European labour markets play intrinsic parts in these developments.¹⁰

New Forms of Labour Migratory Practices

The 2004 and 2007 EU accessions opened up novel kinds of border crossings from the new to the old EU member states.¹¹ The Schengen agreement, providing a political infrastructure that at least ideally eases mobility across borders through the abolishment of working permit requirements as well as passport controls, was broadened to encompass the new Eastern European EU members (Favell, Recchi & Kuhn et al. 2011). This provided the possibility for new types of mobility across the borders of the EU 27, such as shuttle or circular migration, and chain migration.¹² This development fostered yet again national fears of mass migration, in particular anxieties around masses of Eastern European working migrants potentially invading the employment markets and profiting from the social goods of the Western welfare states. In reaction to this, many EU member states including Denmark (and with the UK, Sweden, and Ireland as the notable exceptions) introduced special transitional regulations immediately after the 2004 enlargement. These regulations required working permits from Eastern European working migrants, which can be seen as an attempt to control or at least downscale the expected flows of Eastern working migrants (Kolstrup 2010; Pijpers & Van der Velde 2007).

In the following we shed light on some of the new forms of labour migration we witness after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements and how these practices con-

tribute to a reconfiguration of work places and to new types of migrant/family patterns in Denmark.

Polish Labour Migration to Denmark

In Denmark, Polish workers form the largest group of labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, followed by Lithuanians and Romanians.¹³ Immediately after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, most of the Eastern European labour migrants went to the UK, Ireland, Germany, Sweden, presumably due to the absence of transitional regulations in these countries.¹⁴ During the years 2004–2007, approximately 30,000 work permits were issued to Polish workers in Denmark. To this number should be added at least 15,000 posted workers (who are not registered as arrived migrants since they are working for a foreign company) and the unrecorded numbers covering an unknown amount of illegal workers (Kolstrup 2010: 314). According to Statistics Denmark, these numbers are quite stable, with a slight increase in the number of Polish immigrants by a couple of thousand each year since 2005 (Danmarks Statistik 2013).

Most Polish workers take jobs in the building and construction, manufacturing and agricultural industries (Arnholtz & Hansen 2011). However, the (low-skilled) service sector has also seen an increase in Polish work migrants, such as in cleaning services and the hotel and restaurant business. Often these workers are employed through temporary staffing agencies (Kolstrup 2010: 314). As in Norway, the domestic labour force in Denmark has witnessed an increase in Polish migrants (Friberg 2012: 316). The demand for a Polish workforce in Denmark seems to be stable, if not increasing.

Through conversations with central actors in the field (representatives of labour unions, employers as well as contractors) the impression is that the Polish migrants in general have a good reputation among Danish employers and contractors. Mostly, they seem to be known for their flexibility and all-around skills. Interestingly, this picture matches the way the Polish working migrants have managed to brand themselves so as to align perfectly with the ideal of the migrant “flexiworkers” (Pijpers 2010). Although

their numbers have not been extraordinarily high, especially when it comes to Denmark, an interesting ambivalence surrounds “the Polish worker”, who stands out as an EU intra-migrant, being both a feared and desirable part of the workforce.

Research Design and Ethnographic Material

The following analysis focuses on circular migration within the construction industry. The practices of the migrant construction workers studied can be characterised as circular, as they work in Denmark on a temporary basis, while their families, houses, and in some instances also other jobs are in Poland. Interestingly, the assignment of temporary work contracts abroad is conducted on a more or less regular basis, which means that this type of migratory practice takes the shape of permanent commuting.

Our research has focused on the ways (Polish) labour migration affects the Danish employment market and how various actors are involved in this process. The ethnographic material was collected in 2011–2013 and consists of participant observations from various Copenhagen-based construction sites and in-depth interviews with members of the Polish teams employed at the sites, their Danish colleagues and managers on-site, representatives of Danish labour unions and employer associations, and recruiting agencies and EU politicians. Furthermore, as a part of the relational research design, we have interviewed family members of two of the Polish workers in Poland as well as in Denmark.

Outline of Analysis

Due to the fact that a Polish construction worker can earn a much higher wage in Denmark than in Poland, economic motives are obviously significant. However, simply listing the economic motives of the migrating individuals is not sufficient to address the question of how new kinds of circular migratory practices are made feasible (Sandberg 2012). Concurrently, we follow two approaches to understand the rationales behind circular migrant practices more broadly.

First, we show how the creation of orderly working conditions at the workplace is regarded as an

objective for the temporary circular migrants. The migrants in question are eager to do all kinds of jobs and willing to work below their skill sets and professional qualifications. However, this does not imply that the material conditions under which the work is done are insignificant. As we will illustrate, regular payment and clear agreements about working hours are crucial for making mobile livelihoods feasible and desirable, together with less essential but highly valued assets such as the supply of appropriate clothing and access to a heated workman's hut.

Second, we would like to strengthen our analytic understanding of the role of family when exploring the work-lives of the circular migrants. In migratory practices, family members are often left behind. However, just like the migrating family member represents more than one individual's choice to cross borders, in order to access economic benefits, the family members are transformed into a migrant family although they stay in the home country.

We thus investigate how objectives of creating "orderly conditions" are negotiated in practice and how these conditions (fail to) fit with the material-discursive conditions of the migrants' everyday life practices. The second part of the analysis follows the labour migrants in their homes and meetings with their families in order to grasp the various work/family dynamics of the migratory labour practices in question.

Negotiating Orderly Working Conditions

We introduce two different work sites, both located in the Copenhagen area and with the same company owner. The two sites also share the characteristic that Polish teams of workers are employed in projects contracted by the municipality. The first site is a nursing home with facilities for handicapped citizens; the second is communal rental apartments. An important similarity between the two workplaces is that in both cases the Polish teams have a special agreement with the labour union regarding working hours: They work for three or four weeks in a row for 46 hours a week and consequently have the opportunity to visit Poland approximately once a month. In general, the workers are very pleased with this ar-

range. However, although it works well in the context of a commuting practice where the family resides in Poland and time spent in Denmark is dedicated mainly to work, the opposite is the case when the strategy is to build a family life in Denmark.

Included in the agreement is an obligatory, paid membership in the trade union, which is not generally the case among East-West migrants (Larsen 2011). This provides the workers with a wage in accordance with the collective agreement (although not as high as the norm for Danish workers¹⁵) and access to unemployment benefits. This way of managing working hours is a good example of how a flexible arrangement can be part of establishing orderly working conditions for both employee and employer.

Of further importance are the material working conditions, which seem to be adequate. Working clothes, safety boots and private lockers are emphasised as assets by the Polish workers, as well as a mobile workman's hut to use during breaks. Such orderly working conditions are in stark contrast to previous experiences among the Polish workers in this team, some of whom worked in Berlin during the construction boom of the 1990s as illegal immigrants consequently more vulnerable to exploitation.

The Polish Teams

The two teams consisted of eight respectively nine Polish workers, all male between 25 and 50 years of age. Most of them were married and had children in Poland. Some of the team members were related, and it was apparent that recruitment and jobs were impacted by networks of family and friends.

Within our fieldwork and workplace observations, one 39-year-old man, Karol, played a special role, as we had the opportunity to follow him in various job situations during approximately two years of his employment in Denmark (Jul Nielsen 2013b; Sandberg 2012). Karol is a tile worker, and he has a wife and two children in Northern Poland. In Denmark, Karol earns 19 euro/hour, which is approximately one-third more than he could hope to earn in Poland. In addition, he receives tax allowances due to the fact that he has two households

to maintain. According to Danish regulations, tax rates are reduced for people who work abroad, are married, and can prove that they support family in their home country. During our research, we had the chance to witness and visit the different places where Karol has lived: a dormitory sharing one room with a Polish colleague, a small flat where three colleagues were installed, and a rented summer house in South-Zealand. All of these living spaces were spartan, yet functionally equipped. We will later compare the living spaces of Karol's in Denmark with his home in Poland.

The Polish Brand

At the first construction site, several teams are connected to a range of subcontractors and sub-construction firms. Some of the teams are Danish, others are mixed (which is the case among those employed by a staffing agency), one team is Polish, and there is also a group of Serbs working on the site. The Polish team conducts all-around tasks such as providing building materials, preparing the work tasks, keeping the buildings under construction dry, and cleaning up after other workers on the site. When asked, several of the Polish workers revealed that they were well-educated, including for example a technical engineer, tile worker and even a German philologist. It seems, however, to be commonly accepted that professional skills are set aside or at least not put to direct use in the tasks undertaken at the workplace.

As mentioned, the Polish workers are viewed as reliable, punctual and able to do "an honest job" by employers and construction managers. The Danish workers on the site communicated that they were not bothered by having Polish workers do general tasks at the workplace. What we are thus witnessing is the construction of a brand of effective construction workers whose effectiveness is intrinsically connected to their Polishness. This "ethnification" of skills is obviously not connected to genuine differences between Danish and Polish workers. Rather, it is a matter of making a niche for one's work in the labour market. The niche is not linked to professional skills but rather to the fact that the workers come from a

low-wage country. In this manner we can observe a Polish self-branding which is crucial to entering and remaining active and attractive in the job market.

At the second construction site the work is organised differently. The teams are more strictly divided; the Polish workers prepare the concrete and make isolations, facades and outdoor structures (terraces of wood). A Danish team from Jutland (the western part of Denmark), where prefabricated elements are produced, commutes to and from the factory to install the built elements and complete all indoor work. Here we see an example of Polish workers doing more professionalised tasks; the niche is different compared to the all-around tasks at the first construction site.

Orderly Working Conditions

A niche can theoretically be spoken of as a monopoly (Jul Nielsen 2002, 2013b): In order to prevent the constant threat of being priced out, a specific group of workers is given exclusive access to specific parts of the work. Such monopolisation always includes some workers and excludes others.¹⁶ If the labour market organisations are involved in the creation of monopolies, both employer organisation and trade union approve the specific arrangement in accordance with the general agreements of the labour market. In this way, open competition between groups of workers is avoided, at least during the contract period.

With the two workplaces we have described two different ways of creating a monopoly, both defining the Polish workers as a clearly demarcated group with access to particular tasks. We have elucidated the rationale – at stake in both cases – seen from the Polish workers' perspective: An orderly arrangement concerning wage and general conditions, including the special working hours agreement, which allows them to sell their work.

What is the employer's perspective in these arrangements? We see this as mainly related to the reductions in the wage budget. Although wages are within the limits of the collective agreement, they are still lower than the overall wage level for Danish workers. As one of the employers states: "We will

simply take some Danish instead, if they [the Polish labourers] are on the same level.” The Poles are chosen as an outcome of their lower price.

The trade unions enter the arrangement as a necessary sacrifice; it makes it possible to organise – and be attractive to – foreign workers. In other words, a downward pressure on wages is accepted to prevent losing influence with social dumping as a potential outcome. Labour unions can thus maintain the ability to be the recognised negotiator in the labour market.

Therefore, the central question is not simply a matter of whether or not migrant workers adhere to “Danish conditions”; rather, if it is possible for the labour organisations to adjust to the present challenge of including workers from low-wage and low-cost countries without completely losing the ability to set parameters for work conditions.

We now turn to the diverse and contrastive work/family dynamics as another entrance into understanding the rationales of the circular Polish labour migrants from our ethnographic study. First, we introduce three traits crucial for the understanding of transnational families.

Circular Migrant Practices as Work/Family Dynamics

As emphasised by Bryceson and Vuorela, transnational families stand out as an elusive phenomenon to study due to the fact that they are “spatially dispersed and seemingly capable of unending social mutation. Their ability to reconstitute and redefine themselves over time contingent on spatial practicality and emotional and material needs challenges even the most multi-disciplinary social scientist’s analytical efforts” (Bryceson & Vuorela 2007: 3).

These researchers made an effort to comprehend the basic characteristics of consanguineously related people, who for some or most of the time live separated from each other across national borders, yet maintain a feeling of unity and “familyhood” (ibid.). It follows that any effort to understand the relationship between labour migrant practices and family life will be challenged by the many different ways they unfold in practice (see also Kofman 2004;

Körber & Merkel 2012; Fog Olwig & Nyberg Sørensen 2001). However, at least three important, basic features are useful to take into consideration when researching migrants’ practices related to family.

First, as a number of scholars also stress (Ryan 2009; Bryceson & Vuorela 2007; Grzymała-Kazłowska 2005), “family” must be seen as an entity broader than the household living under one roof, since siblings and grandparents often participate in the arrangements related to migratory practices. Bryceson and Vuorela employ the notion of *family relativisation* to point out “the variety of ways individuals establish, maintain or curtail relational ties with specific family members (...), the modes of materialising the family as an imagined community with shared feelings and mutual obligations” when families are split and living separately (2007: 13). Much of this can be said to apply also to non-transnational families. However, in transnational families the roles and family identities cannot be taken for granted and must be deliberately determined and maintained, since some family members’ contributions to the arrangement are paramount.

Second, the age of the involved family members tends to impact the relationship between migrant labour practices and family life. It is thus necessary to include a life course perspective in order to grasp the changing patterns of family relations throughout various life stages (cf. Ryan 2009: 74). The presence of small or young children is probably the most important to consider here due to the manifold obligations children unavoidably imply. Economic migrants commonly reason that the ability to accumulate a satisfying output is to leave their kids behind, at least in the beginning of the migrating process (Zentgraf & Chinchilla 2012: 356). Concerns regarding ageing parents or other relatives can also influence the decision surrounding place of residence (Ryan 2009).

Third, it is important to distinguish between dissimilar basic forms of family/migration patterns. By its very nature, migrant labour – at the lower end of the wage scale – provides an unstable and unpredictable basis for existence. Migrant labour families approach this uncertainty in diverse ways. A main

dividing line can be drawn between those that leave the main part of the family back home with only one of the spouses migrating and those that move the whole (nuclear) family. However, it is important to bear in mind that decisions, whether they are of one or the other kind, are not necessarily sustainable. The instability of the employment conditions makes it difficult to make long-term plans. Particularly in the case where the whole family moves in order to settle – at least for a longer period of time – it can prove difficult to cover the increased costs of living that often accompany the higher wage level.

Cross-Border Family/Migration Patterns

As our ethnographic material stems predominantly from the construction industry, the main focus of the following analysis is on Polish transnational families in which the male spouse is working in Denmark. This family/migration pattern – where the husband is the transnational commuter – is of course only one among many, and it is not necessarily a permanent one. It is, however, not atypical, and, more importantly, it is regarded as a basic form by many transnational families themselves, since it aims to combine traditional family values with the conditions of a labour market that encourages migrant work. Our analysis concerns migration within a wage-labour logic where cross-border work must be understood as a means to improve living conditions outside of work. This contrasts with highly skilled migrants, for whom the transnational mobility is rather an element within ongoing career improvement.

In our research, the specific migrant/family life pattern in which the husband is abroad and the rest of the family resides in Poland rested on a mutual agreement between the spouses. This does not necessarily entail a trouble-free arrangement, and it was striking how two aspects of the separation were repeatedly emphasised: its inevitability for improving life perspectives and its temporality. This common understanding appears to be an important condition for holding the geographically separated parts together. Also, it appears that migrant life is understood within a life-course perspective with the even-

tual objective of stability and old age lived in Poland (or, in some cases, abroad).

Challenges are manifold for a successful family life that is based on cross-border work. The long periods of separation between family members is probably the most important dividing line between transnational families and non-transnational families, and it requires a significant amount of accountability and mutual agreement between the spouses. The migrating partner will be involved in new – and often changeable – settings. Beyond communication, these settings remain more or less unknown to the non-migrating partner: Not only working hours but also spare time and money is spent outside the direct sphere of knowledge or control of the spouse. Vice versa, the migrating partner leaves the child-rearing and everyday family contact to the spouse and, often, to parents-in-law. He risks appearing an unnecessary surplus that the family can manage without. It is in this context that families establish a common perspective regarding the importance of money earned abroad. Not only the spouse but also children and siblings take part in the arrangement, acknowledging the sacrifices that the life of a migrant labourer entails and thus making allowances for the “lacks” accumulated vis-à-vis non-migrant family life. As Zentgraf has pointed out, the acknowledgement and importance made of remittances can be understood in this context (Zentgraf & Chinchilla 2012). Put simply, it is paramount to construe the improvements in the well-being and material status of the family as a direct consequence of the privation of migrant life.

This correlation between cross-border work and family life in Poland can be exemplified through the insights we gained from visiting Karol and his family in the Polish hometown as well as Marcin and his family while they all lived in Denmark. These two migrant families are striking examples of the difference between leaving the spouse and children at home and making a migratory move together in an attempt to establish a life for all family members in the arrival country. Our “entrance” into these insights came through our home visits to the Polish labour migrants, which is why we emphasise the

different ways that “home” materialises in the two families’ ways of organising themselves (cf. Bendix & Löfgren 2007; Miller 2007). The two families are thus presented as contrasting examples of possible cross-border work/family dynamics.

Two Contrasting Examples

Karol lives with his wife and two sons in an ordinary Polish residential neighbourhood with four-storey buildings. The apartment is filled with the visible outcomes of the husband’s migrant work. The two sons have access to modern computers, and several rooms are equipped with flat screen TVs. During our visit the wife prepares a warm lunch for us in the well-equipped and brand new kitchen. The contrast between the humble and scarcely furnished room that Karol inhabits when abroad – often with Polish colleagues – and the home where the rest of the family lives is tremendous. Life in Denmark and life in Poland are like two different worlds, but they are closely knit together and mutually interdependent. To understand one you must know the other. By examining the interior of the apartment, we get an idea of the organisation of this transnational family. It is striking how the commuting father of the family is what we might term *present-though-absent*¹⁷ in every room of the apartment through his tiling of floors and walls, construction of artistically lowered ceilings, and all kinds of do-it-yourself projects. Behind the big sofa lay hidden brand new parquet blocks intended for a replacement of the older living room floor.

As a consequence of the weight put on the positive outcome of working abroad, it is highly problematic if migrant labour fails to produce a surplus. And this is not an unlikely situation in an unstable and precarious labour market, frequently on the margins of regular work relations. The employment situation can change from stable to unstable, leading to periods of unemployment without income, followed by efforts to take on undeclared work. In each case the changed circumstances impact earnings. Extra expenses – maybe paid under the table – for accommodation and travel will often be part of such periods and burden the household budget for the rest of the

family. Nevertheless, mutual trust and recognition must be maintained also under such circumstances.

In other words, in order to succeed with a family life that ensures some kind of stability on the terms that migrant labour sets, it seems crucial to create recognition and respect around the family member working abroad to ensure his or her status as an integral part of the family unity despite long periods of separation. In a family where everyone agrees on the arrangement related to cross-border work, the children, depending on their age, often adjust to the special demands by trying not to cause unnecessary concern to their parents. As a whole, the special circumstances will have an impact on them, although it is not possible to generate general statements regarding the consequences of transnational family life upon children (Zentgraf & Chinchilla 2012: 350). What is unavoidable, however, is that children play a significant role in the whole arrangement. In the case of Karol’s family, it was striking how the two boys of the family in every respect assisted their parents and the choices they had made through a very supportive attitude. It was evident how the children had been involved in and also adhered to the decisions entailed in the family arrangement.

When the family is residing in the home country it is common for the person staying behind to have some sort of stable, though often low, income. In Karol’s family, the wife had a steady part-time job in the municipality, and although this was at the lower end of the wage-scale, it ensured a permanent basic income for the family. This means, however, that the main part of the day is occupied with numerous tasks, since for long periods of time the person staying at home must take over all obligations of running the family: the ever-changing responsibilities surrounding childrearing, food preparation, cleaning and other household tasks, and eventual duties related to other family in the home country. In Karol’s family, the son Jacek has participated in cross-border labour assignments during summer breaks. For his 18th birthday, Karol bought a used Ford station wagon for him, which is a clear status symbol both among friends and family members. At 19, Jacek was admitted to his and his parents’ ideal

course of study at the Technical University in a larger Polish city. Part of the future plan is that Jacek continue working in Denmark during summer breaks, making it possible for him to study full-time the rest of the year in Poland. The father's putting aside of professional skills is thus accompanied by a strong wish of the parents for the younger generation to advance further in educational and social status.

In the type of family life first presented here the home base in Poland is relatively stable and all possible surplus derived from migratory work is used to solidify and expand that base. A stark contrast to this is the example of Marcin, where the whole family endeavours to establish their life in a new country. Marcin is 30 years of age and has been working in Denmark for 6–7 years. He has been working together with Karol in the Polish team for several months. Recently, his wife and (at the time of field-work) 11-month-old daughter followed. In the beginning, the wife managed to get a job as a cleaning lady; however, she is now unemployed. The daughter has started at a day care institution, which both parents stress as a significant economic burden. In such a situation it is less likely that the home in Denmark will receive any extra income (when bills are paid and necessary expenses dealt with), since now both parents are subjected to unpredictable working conditions and possible periods of unemployment. Consequently, housing is typically only provisional since flexibility is essential in order for both parts to be able to respond to new job opportunities. This atmosphere of temporariness was reflected in the two-room apartment that the couple had rented in one of the low-price areas at the outskirts of Copenhagen. The apartment is scarcely furnished, and there are relatively few homely markers, such as pictures on the walls, decorations and the like. Extra investments in the home all seem portable. No luxurious or lasting improvements, such as tiling or floor work, were made to the apartment. In contrast to Karol's materialised presence in his decorated apartment despite his migrant work and being abroad for most of the time, this apartment bears witness to the fact that this family has not yet become settled; their apartment is still rather empty. In such a case, the insta-

bility not only applies to shifting work situations but also to family life. There are additional aspects missing here: the elderly generation is not present to assist, and there is a dire lack of knowledge concerning social conditions and rights in Denmark as well as language barriers regarding communication with neighbours, authorities, and welfare officials including care workers. Moreover, expenses are typically higher than those in the homeland. In some cases these complications lead to a strategy where not only core families but extended families – including the older generation and siblings – move together and settle in less attractive neighbourhoods where big apartments are cheap. In the environs of Copenhagen this is the case for instance in Farum and Ishøj. In this way a broader network of support develops, though this does not ensure the flexibility to pursue new work opportunities. Consequently, the family member that earns money might temporarily live apart from the family – only now the division is taking place within the host country.

Migrant working life as a means to improve conditions at home takes the form not only of immediate exchange of earnings for coveted consumer goods but also for long-term dreams and plans. It is a common dream among the Polish construction workers to build or buy a new house when sufficient savings have been made – a house that will be the ideal home for retired life. It is not unusual to see the coveted house appearing as a picture on their mobile phone screen.

The conditions for maintaining close connections to family members in-between¹⁸ have changed significantly during the last decade thanks to information technology. While explaining cultural patterns with technology can lead to technological determinism, it is apparent that the internet and more importantly the broad and relatively easy and cheap access to it have, in basic ways, altered the possibilities for keeping in close and frequent contact with family members (Sandberg 2012). Many of our interviewees are in daily contact with family in Poland through Skype and mobile phones, which, although more expensive to employ, are in regular use. This is in stark contrast to the situation less than twenty

years ago when the option for making contact – besides writing letters – was an expensive phone call from a public telephone. For those who prioritise close connections and intimate contact with spouse, children and friends, this has opened up new possibilities and enhanced the chance of being *present-thought-absent*.

Concluding Remarks

In the past two decades, increased opportunities to move across borders and gain employment in diversified labour markets has incited opportunities as well as challenges for a growing number of migrant workers. We have highlighted two main concerns surrounding these workers' practices based on our relational study on Polish circular migrants in Denmark: First, we observe an urge to achieve what we term "orderly working conditions". This desire might interfere with the ability to compete for prospective employers who especially value migrant workers if they represent lower costs and higher flexibility. As a consequence, migrant workers are not necessarily likely to generally adhere to the Danish labour market system unless it is able to ensure their competitive advantage over national workers. This is the case in the examples we have presented. Again, we point out the observed difference compared to the previous period of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s when an ethnic brand such as Polishness did not play such a significant role. Trade unions were much too powerful to allow for that kind of internal competition.

Second, by exploring practices among migrant wage labourers it becomes clear that the labour related migration must be seen as a means rather than a goal in itself. From our study, it seems reasonable to infer that the latter in this case is related to the well-being of the family, whether it moves or stays behind in the country of origin. Thus, despite the large distances and the frequent separations, what takes place in the labour markets and working sites is not only closely connected to but also impacted by the specific organisation of the families that the migrant workers are linked to. Therefore, an important key to understanding behaviours in the labour market is insights into the related family context.

On the political level it is obvious that the higher degree of competition that follows from increased cross-border work migration needs to be counter-balanced by regulations that ensure reasonable social standards avoiding social dumping, whether these are based on union negotiations or legal frameworks. Of relevance here is the relationship between the EU and its member states. We have illustrated the importance of acknowledging state-determined borders, although these probably should be comprehended not only as lines of demarcations but also as domains of authority practiced within and across territories. The way that migrants travel between two or more different regimes of labour market and social regulation is an example of that. Also, it is advisable to focus not only on labour market conditions but also to see migrant lives as different compositions of work *and* family. This concern must also include considerations of a temporal kind regarding whole life spans in order to ensure that working lives based on migrant work – that crosses different legal frameworks of sickness insurance and retirement income – can provide what is necessary also in old age. In sum, conditions must be arranged in a way that makes it possible to attain "orderly conditions" from cradle to grave.

Notes

- 1 News headline concerning a trial against an owner of an engineering company, *Sjællands Nyheder*, April 27, 2010.
- 2 The case presented here forms part of a continuing research project on Polish labour migrants in the area of Copenhagen, Denmark, conducted by Associate Professor Niels Jul Nielsen and Associate Professor Marie Sandberg, in the Ethnology Section, the Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen.
- 3 With the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, this picture is becoming more grim; it is important though, to note that the development was already taking place previous to the crisis. One expression of that was the spreading of the phenomenon of *working poor*, a notion that entails an under poverty-level state of living despite full-time employment (Andreß & Lohmann 2008).
- 4 Hansen (2003) focuses on West Germany, Great Britain and France in particular, but also claims that similar developments took place in most other Northern European countries including Scandinavia.

- 5 We can add to Hansen's overall picture a few examples from our research and the research conducted by our students: On the shipyard Burmeister & Wain in Copenhagen the first wave of "foreign workers" in 1969 was without question assimilated into the union system (Jul Nielsen 2013a). At a big steel works in Northern Zealand it is reported that in 1970 incoming foreign labourers from Yugoslavia were immediately led by a union representative to the union office for their assignment as they approached the train station (student interview, 2011, made by Kristine Gårdhus and Galit Peleg).
- 6 That is as a consequence of migration. In Great Britain the labour organisations were severely challenged by the politics of the conservative government. The 1980s were generally a weak period for the labour side, but in other countries changes were less notable. In Denmark the government support of the employer side in relation to a huge strike wave during 1985 was a sign of a more generally changed agenda (Jul Nielsen 2004: 321f.).
- 7 See, among many others, Crouch (2011).
- 8 Here is not the place for a discussion of what lies behind this development – a changed production pattern and the end of the Cold War are probably the two most prominent reasons (Jul Nielsen 2004) – but it embraces the challenge of migration with a principally new framework compared to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.
- 9 The term "3D jobs" was originally used to characterise the cross-border labour migration system evolving at the US-Mexican border. This is where we see a clear example of the development of parallel labour markets with a more or less permanent demand of cheap services provided by usually illegal workers (Düvell 2009; Favell 2009).
- 10 For a further elaboration of what might constitute a state as "an actor" of a principally other kind that might be key to understand the persistent presence of mutually related "state subjects", see Bolving & Højrup (2007) and (www.lifemodes.ku.dk). For a discussion – based on an analysis of the development throughout the twentieth century – of the theoretical relation between the role of state sovereignty and the basic conditions of wage labourers, see Nielsen (2004).
- 11 Cf. similarities with former historical periods pre-WW I, see the section above.
- 12 Whereas circular migration and shuttle migration refer to migratory patterns that are based on migrant practices working temporary abroad (although this could be on a permanent basis), the concept of chain migration depicts the new inflows of labour migrants entering the East and Central European countries, such as Ukrainian labour migrants in Poland (Kindler 2012).
- 13 According to The National Labour Market Authority the numbers of foreign workforce with a registered income in Denmark were in 2013: 1) from Poland: 24,189, 2) from Rumania: 9,326, 3) from Lithuania: 9,078. Source: *Arbejdsmarkedsstyrelsens database Jobindsats.dk. Udenlandske statsborgere med lønindkomst i Danmark*.
- 14 Further has Norway, as according to Friberg, become one of the top migrant destinations among Poles with around 140,000 Polish migrants arriving between 2004–2011 (2012: 316).
- 15 This tendency of Eastern migrants to be placed at the lower steps of the wage ladder is part of a general pattern, cf. Andersen & Felbo-Kolding (2013).
- 16 A monopoly will always be temporary. The particular borderlines between different work areas will over time be exposed to changes according to fluctuations of power balances between wage earners and employers. During major transformations, like the one we are undergoing in these years, this is particularly the case; that is why we witness how dividing lines between trades, skills and functions are submitted to grave alterations.
- 17 Here the notions of absence and presence are applied in order to depict the gap between the observed closeness of the relations within the family and real life conditions for being together. The absence-presence figure could also be seen through Derrida's notion of *différance*, which relates to the poststructuralist idea that whatever the form of an object (or phenomenon, expression or ritual), this also implies a set of absences. Along this line of thought absences are not *non-existing* but temporarily postponed, which makes an object a pattern of presences and absences. Inspired by STS-scholar John Law (2002, 2004), the absence-presence figure is further discussed and applied in Sandberg (2009a, 2009b).
- 18 Importantly, this applies not only to spouse and children but, dependent on their importance in the family/migration pattern, also to other relatives (Ryan 2009: 63f.; Vuorela & Bryceson 2007: 3; Körber & Merkel 2012).

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