



# Patterns of Middling Migrant Sociabilities: a Case Study of a Disempowered City and Towns

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## Abstract

Drawing on scalar theory of locality and the concept of urban sociabilities, this paper discusses sociabilities, social encounters based on domains of commonality, between middling migrants and local inhabitants in three different settings in Poland. At the same time, however, the paper points out to the feeling of strangeness and otherness experienced by migrants due to cultural and social distance. In contrast to mainstream literature that concentrates on low-skilled migrants or elite professionals in global cities, the article focuses on middling migrants in two disempowered towns (Jelcz-Laskowice and Strzelin) and one city (Opole) within the Walbrzych Special Economic Zone in Poland. It shows the particularities of urban sociabilities in locations that lack well-established migrant communities and have peripheral status in the global economy.

**Keywords** High-skilled migrants · Poland · Incorporation · Sociability · Periphery

## Introduction

Migration studies traditionally were preoccupied with the issue of the integration of migrants into receiving societies defined in national terms (Brettell and Hollifield 2015; Castles et al. 2014). More recently, however, beginning with the pioneering work by Basch et al. (1993), some scholars have started to question this methodological nationalism. Instead of analysing modes of integration, they have begun to explore transnational connections which run across the nation-state borders (Faist et al. 2013; Vertovec 2009; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). However, even if the migrants maintain relations across the nation-state borders, they are still grounded in concrete locations and cannot be seen only in terms of transnational connections (Plöger and Becker 2015). In the wake of this criticism, some scholars have focused on exploring

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migrant life in the local contexts, especially through the prism of the concept of difference, diversity or super-diversity (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008; Vertovec 2007). Yet, as Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar (2008; 2009) argue, the research on difference still frames discussion in terms of the distinct ethnic communities. Inspired by the research programme proposed by these two scholars, this case study goes beyond exploring merely diversity or difference. Referring to scalar theory and the Simmelian concept of sociabilities elaborated by Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009, 2016); Simmel 1949), the paper aims to explore the interactions between migrants and local inhabitants focusing on sociabilities based on domains of commonality; this is on shared interests and values which lay grounds for autotelic social relations (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016).

Whereas most studies on migrants focus on underprivileged newcomers or migrant professionals in global cities, my paper concentrates on a sub-section of highly skilled migrants, namely on the in-between category of migrants of middle-class professionals, which has only recently attracted researchers' attention (Conradson and Latham 2005; Kunz 2016; Plöger and Becker 2015; Rutten and Verstappen 2014). Following Conradson and Latham (2005), I use here the term 'middling' migrants. Drawing on qualitative data, this paper analyses middling migrants' sociabilities in the context of a disempowered city (Opole) and two towns (Strzelin, Jelcz-Laskowice) of the Walbrzych Special Economic Zone (WSEZ) in Poland.

In the next section, I critically discuss scalar theory and the concept of urban sociability in the broader context of the debate on methodological nationalism. Then, I briefly present the methodology behind this study and introduce my results followed by conclusions discussing the findings in the context of scalar theory and the concept of urban sociabilities. My paper presents a novel case study which brings new empirical situated knowledge on the concrete context-dependent exemplar of migrant life. It provides further evidence for the potential utility of scalar theory by showing differences between Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice on one hand and Opole on the other hand. At the same time, however, I argue that, in the context of my data, urban social life cannot be understood only in terms of sociabilities but its analysis needs to take into account an interplay of otherness and togetherness and how it is informed by the local context.

## Scalar Theory and Urban Sociabilities

It was Martins (1974) who introduced the concept of methodological nationalism into the social sciences at the beginning of the 1970s. However, the term gained currency only in the 1990s and 2000s, when the tendency to conflate society with nation-state was criticised by researchers from various corners of social science (Basch et al. 1993; Billig 1995; Brubaker 2004; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). In migration analysis, methodological nationalism rests on the implicit assumption that migrants pose a threat to the cultural cohesion of the nation-state because their presence undermines the taken for granted isomorphism between state and culture (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Consequently, migration studies traditionally were preoccupied with the question of under what conditions distinct migrant communities would integrate into the national society (Brettell and Hollifield 2015; Castles et al. 2014; Wimmer and Glick Schiller

2002). This approach has been criticised from various angles, but two arguments in the context of the aims of my article are especially important, namely a theoretical argument and an empirical one. Theoretically, it has been argued that ‘the social’ cannot be equated with ‘the national’ and that the nation (and ethnic group) cannot be defined in terms of a self-evident category but must be unpacked as the complex and dynamic processes of social construction (Billig 1995; Brubaker 2004). Empirically, it has been claimed that privileging nation-state in analysis does not correspond with the social, cultural, political and economic realities of the contemporary world, which is becoming increasingly fragmented, diverse and at the same time globalised (Basch et al. 1993). In this regard, methodological nationalism’s approach does not take into account the growing role of non-state actors, especially cities (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008, 2009; Meier 2015). Under the ongoing process of neoliberal restructuring, cities are playing an increasingly independent role in trying to relocate their position in global hierarchies of economic and political power (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Zavattaro 2014). Cities compete to attract capital, cultural events, tourists and migrant professionals who are increasingly regarded by city authorities as the crucial factor in urban development and transformation (Meier 2015). Cities are also playing an increasing role in migration governance: they develop their own local immigration policies and programmes, e.g. concerning the integration of migrants or diversity accommodation. Although these policies are still strongly conditioned by national level political processes, many researchers talk about the ‘local turn’ in migration governance (Garcés-Mascreñas and Penninx 2016; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017).

In line with these criticisms, some scholars have rejected the assumption of the nation-state as the natural unit for analysis and normative ideal of homogeneity and cohesiveness. Instead, they have focused on the study of migrants in the urban context especially through the prism of the concept of ‘diversity’, ‘super-diversity’, ‘everyday multiculturalism’, etc. (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016; Glick Schiller and Schmidt 2016; Vertovec 2007). Although these analyses are instructive in many ways, they still contain some theoretical flaws and do not go far enough in rebuffing methodological nationalism. As Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2008, 2009) convincingly argue, studies on migration in the urban context suffer from two basic weaknesses. First, they too often treat cities as belonging to a single homogenous global domain, or regard cities as representative of bounded nation-states. Consequently, this research fails to provide an adequate conceptualisation of the local or reproduces the assumption of the primacy of the national. Second, while criticising the assumption that cultural diversity poses a threat to host nation-states, this research still frames the discussion in terms of distinct ethnic communities. By introducing the new analytical categories of ‘super-diversity’ or ‘everyday multiculturalism’, it still emphasises the salience of cultural boundaries. Moreover, by focusing on encountering difference, it suggests that diversity is a problem and a potential threat to national cohesion (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008, 2009, 2016; Glick Schiller and Schmidt 2016). Furthermore, it must be added that concepts such as ‘super-diversity’ or ‘everyday multiculturalism’ are not so useful for a study of migration in post-socialist settings, especially in the context of town and cities of the WSEZ. As I will later demonstrate, Opole, Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice are monocultural in comparison to Western post-colonial societies.

This paper follows analytical and conceptual frameworks of scalar theory of locality elaborated by Glick Schiller and Çağlar which enables us to move away from

methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008, 2009, 2016). Consequently, following Glick Schiller and Çağlar, I understand urban not as bounded space locked within boundaries of nation-state, but through the prism of the concept of scales. The concept of scales refers not to the size of the city but to the fact that urban space is ‘constituted by various intersecting trajectories of institutionalised networks of power’ (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016, p. 21). In other words, cities are differentially situated within networks of power (economic, political, etc.) that shape different local opportunities and structures that are available for their residents, including migrants. Following the critique of research on diversity, this article focuses on domains of commonality, that is the common interests and values which form the basis for autotelic social relations (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016). The paper aims primarily to examine the question of how migrants establish autotelic social relations regardless of ethnic differences with the local inhabitants. However, at the same time I do not fully share Glick Schiller and Çağlar’s view that ‘urban social life not as the integration of “the other”, but as the ongoing production of daily sociabilities that while constituted by people of diverse backgrounds, cannot be explicated in terms of difference’ (Glick Schiller and Schmidt 2016, p. 21; Simmel 1949). Whereas I concur with their critique of overconcentration on difference, I see urban life especially in the culturally homogeneous context of Strzelin, Jelcz-Laskowice and Opole in more complex terms. From the migrant’s point of view, living in these localities involves interplay of otherness and togetherness. I will demonstrate that both feelings of closeness and strangeness constitute the experience of my interviewees.

Following Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2016, p. 29) who argue for the need of ‘comparative research that examines emplacement sociabilities within cities of different relative and relational positioning within multiscale hierarchies of power’, the paper explores the social engagements of newcomers in the disempowered city of Opole and the two towns of Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice. Most research on migrants in an urban context focus on low-skilled working-class labourers in global cities (Rutten and Verstappen 2014). However, recently there has also been some interest in highly skilled migrants. These studies usually focus on high-skilled migration in the context of global cities like London or Singapore (Kunz 2016). In contrast to the prevalent trend in the literature, my paper concentrates on a subsection of highly skilled migrants, namely on an in-between category of migrants in disempowered and peripheral towns and cities which have not, to date, attracted much research attention (Conradson and Latham 2005; Kunz 2016; Plöger and Becker 2015). As I already noted in the introduction, following Conradson and Latham (2005), I use the term ‘middling’ professional migrants in this context, by which I mean migrants of middle-class background and status who are in a mid-level career. Although middling professionals are privileged migrants due to their education, social status and profession, they are not part of the global elite that operates in a de-territorialised and cosmopolitan space of global flows. In other words, this in-between category of migrants does not include senior executive officers who move between global cities, but employees with higher education, in middle management positions or in positions requiring specialised knowledge (e.g. managers, chief accountants, IT specialists, academics). Such migrants have stronger links with host societies than hyper mobile members of the global elite (Bielewska and Jaskulowski 2017; Meier 2015).

As for the locations, Opole is a city in southern Poland with a population of around 125,000 inhabitants. Opole is the capital of the Opolskie Voivodeship, which is the smallest of Poland's 16 voivodeships. Opole is a local urban, academic and cultural centre with cinemas, theatres, philharmonic orchestra, university, colleges and other cultural institutions. However, they are underfinanced and have only local significance. For example, Opole University is ranked 15 out of 17 public universities in Poland. Economically, Opolskie Voivodeship has a marginal position not only in the global economy but also in the Polish economy. Opolskie Voivodeship is responsible for only 2.1% of Polish gross national product (and GNP per capita is lower than the national average). In 1990–2015, Opolskie Voivodeship attracted only 1% of foreign capital invested in Poland. Opolskie Voivodeship experienced a large economic emigration abroad after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, particularly young and educated people who could not find a job on the local labour market. As a consequence of migration abroad, the labour force has been shrinking. The sectors most severely affected by the lack of workers have been services and construction and metal industries. However, as a result, the unemployment rate in the voivodeship is low, slightly higher than the national average. Another consequence is the inflow of remittances from migrants working abroad, which has a positive impact on the standard of living. However, the outflow of young people results in depopulation and ageing of the voivodeship population and the feeling of stagnation and lack of prospects (Kubiciel-Lodzinska 2012).

Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice are minor post-industrial towns. Jelcz-Laskowice has about 16,000 and Strzelin circa 12,500 inhabitants. Both cities were destroyed during World War II, especially Strzelin (90% of the old town was destroyed). The towns were extensively rebuilt in the 1960s and 1970s in the typical socialist architectural style: empty spacious squares and panel buildings made of pre-fabricated concrete blocks. During the communist period, both towns had a mono-industrial character: Strzelin was known for its granite quarries and Jelcz-Laskowice was the centre of truck and bus manufacturing industry, which provided employment for a large part of their population. The political-economic transformation after 1989 brought about the closure of unprofitable industrial plants, which resulted in an increase in unemployment, a slowdown in economic growth, as well as a decrease in the number of inhabitants. For example, in 1995 the population of Strzelin was 13,336 people, now it is almost 7% lower. The towns' budgetary revenues have also fallen, which has had an impact on the level of public services. Although the cities were not among those most affected by the economic transformation, they experienced urban decay, including depopulation, deindustrialisation, a deteriorating physical environment, political disenfranchisement and poverty. Despite the improvement in the economic situation in recent years, Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice still face a number of problems, such as depopulation and outflow of young people (Masztalski 2005).

The city of Opole and both towns are located within the WSEZ. The Zone was established in 1997 with the intention of generating economic growth and providing employment opportunities for the local population. The WSEZ covers areas particularly afflicted by high unemployment after local industry collapsed during the transformation from a state-led to a market-oriented economy after the disintegration of the communist system. In return for the creation of a particular number of jobs, WSEZ investors are offered a tax reduction. WSEZ attracts many multinational corporations, among them

IBM, Toyota, Bosch and BASF, which also employ some international professionals. However, in comparison to western Europe, the number of migrants in Poland is very small, amounting to only around 0.2% of the total population since traditionally Poland was more a sending country than a receiving one (Mayblin et al. 2016). The percentage of migrants in Opole does not differ from the average. It should be mentioned that the main city in the region is Wroclaw (100 km from Opole, 40 km from Strzelin and 30 km from Jelcz-Laskowice), which is better positioned in the global economy and is one of the most successful cities in Poland for attracting foreign capital and high-skilled migrants. Nevertheless, the population of migrants in Wroclaw is also relatively low in comparison to major cities in Western Europe, at just 0.7% of the city's population (GUS 2011; Jaskulowski 2017, 2018).

## Method

This paper draws on data derived from 12 semi-structured interviews conducted in Strzelin, Jelcz-Laskowice and Opole (Kvale 1996). The sample includes three male migrants working in Jelcz-Laskowice, two male migrants working in Strzelin, five migrants from Opole (2 male and 3 female), and, additionally, two female partners of migrants: one working in Strzelin and one working in Opole. Most of them were in their 30s or 40s. All the male migrants work in multinational corporations. As for the female migrants, they work in academia, the health service or in education and one woman interrupted her career to take care of her children. All male informants have academic degrees and work in a position that requires professional knowledge. Their female partners also have academic degrees. At the time of the interview, they had spent between 7 weeks and several years in Poland. Although the sample of 12 interviews is small, it meets the criteria of non-representative probing (Guest et al. 2006). The small size of the sample reflects the low number of high-skilled migrants in Opole and the smaller towns in WSEZ. Despite persistent efforts, it proved to be impossible to find more informants of middling migrant status working in small cities and towns. Most migrants tend to concentrate in the nearby city of Wroclaw, which is, as already mentioned, the main city of the region (Jaskulowski 2018). The informants have consented to the use of the interviews for academic purposes on the understanding that they remain anonymous. Since the number of high-skilled migrants in Opole, Jelcz-Laskowice and Strzelin is very small, to secure anonymity, I do not present personal information, such as the real name of the corporation where they work, personal name or their exact age.

All interviews were conducted from February 2015 to August 2015. They were conducted in English, except for three interviews which were conducted in Polish (three female interviewees from Opole who come from eastern Europe). Each interview lasted on average 1 hour and was carried out in a 'natural setting' for the interviewee, such as a workplace or cafe of the informant's choice to make the interviewee feel comfortable. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. As for the analysis, my point of departure was open coding, involving multiple readings of the data to allow themes and categories to emerge from the data. In the next step, I conducted focused coding, which aimed to reduce the number of themes and categories (Saldaña 2012).



## Results: Patterns of Urban Sociabilities

This section of my paper analyses the patterns of urban sociabilities in three locations of the WSEZ. First, I discuss the specificity of social life as seen by the interviewees in the small towns of Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice; then, I consider urban sociabilities in Opole.

### Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice: Limited Sociabilities

None of the interviewed migrants working in Strzelin or Jelcz-Laskowice chose to live in these towns. Instead they decided to settle in Wrocław and drive to work. They all emphasised that they felt uncomfortable in Strzelin or Jelcz-Laskowice due to the cultural homogeneity of these towns. Thus, one of the informants explains:

The first time I arrived here – wow, so many Caucasians, really surprising, so many white people, little shock for me. Wow, I am alien. You would feel the same you go to [my country] (...) Kids stare at me (...) I look different, but it's fine. (Interview 1)

They pointed not only to the cultural differences between migrants and local residents, but also to the discrepancies between life in the small town and in the city:

I know that in Jelcz people are simpler than in Wrocław. They don't need so much as people in Wrocław. I also see that they are not much interested in fashion, in going out or going to restaurants. In Wrocław... they are already more similar to... an Italian or European city (...) there is a big difference between the small village and a big city like Wrocław (...). In Jelcz (...) few foreigners... so we are still strange. When you are going somewhere... you feel like you are not really integrated. (Interview 2).

The informants see Jelcz-Laskowice and Strzelin as undifferentiated spaces of limited opportunities that are populated by simple and rather uneducated village people who are not used to seeing foreigners, are closed to contact with them, are immobile and have limited needs and ambitions, and do not know any foreign languages. In contrast, they regard Wrocław as much more friendly to migrants, where one can meet natives who speak English and are more eager to socialise with foreigners. As one of the informants put it, Wrocław and Strzelin are 'two different worlds' (Interview 1):

Wrocław inhabitants are more open people, willing to really host people with other experiences and coming from different countries, while the inhabitants of Strzelin are more focused on their own business and they are not so willing to welcome newcomers and to get in contact with them and maybe socialise with them. (Interview 3)

The informants clearly idealised Wrocław, seeing it as an open city, which resulted from two reasons. Firstly, it reflects their internalisation of the promotional discourse of the Wrocław authorities, which try to present the city as a multicultural and open space. However, this promotional discourse has little to do with reality. As we have seen, Wrocław is culturally rather homogeneous. Moreover, research shows that migrants in Wrocław have also experienced hostility, especially since the refugee crisis, which right-wing politicians have used to stir moral panic against culturally different immigrants, especially against Muslim refugees (Hodór and Kosińska 2016; Jaskulowski 2018, 2019; Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski 2018; Narkowicz 2018; Pędziwiatr 2018). Secondly, the informants extrapolated their own experience related to a rather specific social incorporation in Wrocław. In other words, high-skilled migrants are integrated into a specific multicultural and middle-class corporate environment of international and Polish professionals in Wrocław, which is characterised by openness to the difference (Jaskulowski 2018).

Not only is it the case that the informants have no social relationships or friendships with local residents in Strzelin or Jelcz-Laskowice, but in general, their contact with them is very limited. Their factories are located on the periphery of the towns and they do not go into town:

Strzelin is a very small city and I don't really go into Strzelin other than driving here for work (...) this is just very like a typical manufacturing setting, because we usually have manufacturing sites not far from the major city but with a little distance, so this is about we have in [my country] as well. (Interview 4)

They simply drive to work and spend their working day in a narrow circle of mostly Polish professionals with similar backgrounds (knowledge of English, tertiary education, experience of working abroad and middle-class status). After work they drive to Wrocław, which is the centre of their social life. Even if they meet with some colleagues from their workplace after work, they do it in Wrocław. In addition to these narrow circles, they described their contacts with other co-workers as rather sporadic and formal. Their relations with other workers are also difficult due to their higher social status and their higher position in the corporation.

They respect me on the one hand but on the other hand they envy me as I represent a different position in the ranking, from a social perspective, so this could create some conflict, let's say, and in general I see the same with other colleagues at work, who come to manage the business, there is always respect, but there is also, let's say, cold behaviour (...) while in Wrocław it's completely different. (Interview 3)

The towns of Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice present extreme cases of very limited sociabilities. The informants experienced at first hand the otherness and strangeness which were due not only to the cultural difference but also to the provincial character of these towns. They pointed to the differences between living in a big city compared to a small town that does not provide many opportunities for spending free time and



socialising with local inhabitants. They also speak about the social distance between them and the local inhabitants. For these reasons, they chose to live in the nearby city of Wrocław and commute to Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice where they have contacts mainly with co-workers of similar status. However, due to the limited size of the sample and its non-representative nature, it is impossible to draw more general conclusions. Yet, the question of sociabilities in small towns and rural areas warrants further analysis.

### Opole: Patterns of Urban Sociabilities

In contrast to Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice, all the informants from Opole worked and lived in the city. They also experienced discomfort. Migrants with darker skin especially felt this otherness. For example, an informant from South America complained that everyone looks at her, which she interprets as an expression of curiosity but also hostility:

The Polish people are not very used to seeing people like me,. Like with me skin colour and that's all. It's very annoying to me that everybody looks at me. (...) They are staring at me yes. And I know that some people do it more like as a curiosity but I also feel that other people look at me bad (Interview 5)

This quotation should be interpreted in the context of the aforementioned anti-immigrant *moral panic*. As a result of this panic, the atmosphere of hostility towards culturally distinct immigrants, especially visibly different immigrants, has increased in Poland: in practice, skin colour has become a concrete and easily noticeable sign of cultural differences and strangeness, which can also be seen in the earlier quotation (Jaskulowski 2019). The informant felt such otherness and hostility that at the beginning she did not want to leave her home because she felt uncomfortable in Opole's streets. After some time, she learned to ignore people staring at her. Speaking publicly in foreign languages attracts curious looks:

most people just... kind of... look at me weirdly, this family is speaking English (...) we got used to it, after a while I... kind of... felt like alienated, like a stranger in a strange land... I eat my ice cream, speak English and everyone is looking at you, they're trying to listen over the conversation but they can't quite understand it, cause of the dialect of English we speak, so it's just different. (Interview 6)

In the informants' accounts, this feeling of otherness was part of their daily experience, which they explained in the context of the cultural homogeneity of Opole: the inhabitants are not used to cultural differences. It is also necessary to mention the strong conviction in Poland that the culture of the titular nation should dominate in the public sphere: cultural difference is often perceived as metaphorical dirt, something out of place and threatening (Jaskulowski 2019).

Informants also speak about other forms of cultural differences, especially relating to the work culture. Yet, despite this otherness, the informants were able to establish

relations based on mutualities and togetherness. Moreover, in their opinion, it was these relations that defined their stay in Opole. They spoke about life-long friendships and regarded Opole as their home even if they did not plan to stay permanently: ‘even only being here for a year and a half we have got people that we consider friends for life (...) we have been very fortunate to meet some really outstanding people here’ (interview 6). From the very beginning of their stay in Poland, in Opole, the informants met people who were willing to disinterestedly help them. For example, the same informants told a story about a translator from a company who did much more than was expected of him, assisting the informant in his daily activities after work:

the very first friend I made here, and I definitely call him a friend, was probably the company translator (...). He is a local guy from Opole, and I have to call him my first friend, because when I was here in Opole, the first week, nobody spoke English, so I had no way of communicating with anybody really, so I had him hanging around with me, like all the time, until I could start learning some of the basics of like ordering food and all that stuff. (Interview 6)

In this case, initially contractual relations became the basis for more durable and autotelic engagement as they became friends. Other examples include assistance from a landlord who also did much more than was required of contractual relations. The informants from eastern Europe who found employment in academic institutions relied on the assistance of their work colleagues, and this was facilitated by the fact that they already operated in academic networks, including researchers from Opole:

so they were colleagues from the academia world, I had no other friends here... one was my co-author... I knew him for years because he began to come to [my country] for academic purposes, it was a very long time ago, maybe in 1988 ... or even earlier, a very long time ago and he spoke excellent Russian, now he does not speak Russian because he speaks with me in Polish. (Interview 7)

All informants emphasised that if they had not met friendly and helpful local people, it would have been much more difficult to settle down in Opole.

The main site for establishing more cordial and autotelic relations was the workplace: ‘Well, as I say ... actually it all starts with the work ... and most of my friends, I believe that I have in work’ (interview 7). There, the informants meet people who share their interests, aspirations and values, and this facilitates sociabilities. The informants met some international professionals, but, first and foremost, Polish co-workers, a factor that reflects the low number of high-skilled migrants:

There are some similarities between [South American] and Polish culture. You know, we have completely different stories, OK? But I’m able to find this common values (...) for example (...) most of my friends are very work-oriented, like, you know, we discuss different things from work. These are...these are, most of them, let’s say, have family as the number one thing, even though they work

most of the time, you know, strong family values, share some religious thoughts, you know, that's not the pillar but it's still there. (Interview 8)

The informant emphasises the role of common values, as well as religious similarity in the formation of a common relationship. It must be stressed in this context that Catholicism plays an important social function in Poland; even for non-believers, it is an important indicator of Polish cultural identity (Zubrzycki 2006). The most important thing for the informants, however, was to work closely with colleagues. Migrants working in corporations were part of a small group of professionals who understand English and cooperate closely to achieve some task, such as setting up a new factory. This close cooperation and common working, together overcoming various obstacles, such as bureaucracy, enabled them to make friends.

Obviously it's easier to make friends with your work colleagues first because, you know, they are the ones you spend all day with, I mean, like I spend more time with these guys than I do with my family. So, naturally I was able to make some really good friends. Some of the best friends I have are these ones, because we started as a company here in Opole and it was a very small group, like less than twenty people (...) we spent a lot of time together about how to get the plan up (Interview 6)

However, some of these professionals live in Wrocław and do not have time to socialise after work. At the same time, similar to migrants in Strzelin or Jelcz-Laskowice, the informants do not have many contacts with their co-workers who understand English but have lower social status and occupy lower positions in the corporations. In the case of the informants from eastern Europe, establishing relations was facilitated by swift acquisition of the Polish language, which is quite similar to eastern Slavic languages.

Studies concerning the nearby city of Wrocław demonstrate that most middle-class migrants who come there do not have children and usually are single (Jaskulowski 2018; Jaskulowski 2017). In contrast, the informants from Opole arrived with families and children. There is only one international kindergarten and one primary school that follow an American curriculum in Opole. These institutions are also open to Polish children, and it was here that the informants met mainly Polish and some foreign parents with whom they established friendships:

she moved to this kindergarten and we connected with the people... I mean we made new friends (...). They were extremely curious... what I'm trying to tell you... invited us to their houses and they were very eager to understand how we think (...) and they ask so many questions. (Interview 5)

In the case of informants from eastern Europe, kindergarten and school does not play an important role in establishing sociabilities because their children are older and more independent. As for family life, three things are important. First, in comparison to their home cities, their circle of friends is narrower. Second, they also indicated that Opole does not provide too many opportunities for leisure activities. Further, they also noted

that there are shorter working hours in Opole than in their home cities due to lack of pressure to take overtime and longer paid holidays in Poland. In consequence, they have a great deal of time to spend with their family. As one of the informants explains:

we do spend much more time together, because it's only the three of us, so we have to be together. As we were back home, we were together only at weekends, because from Monday to Friday my husband is working, and the working hours in our country are way longer than here.... So it has a huge impact on our family because we are spending so much time together, like which we have never done before. (Interview 5).

Informants also point out that Opole is a compact city with good public transport, quiet and clean and friendly to families with children. Although they could live in Wrocław, for these reasons, they decided to live in Opole.

## Conclusions

In contrast to much of the literature, my paper focuses on the under-researched category of middling migrants in locations that have peripheral status in global hierarchies of power. It gives insight into how global hierarchies act at a local level and inform migrant social life and how migrants themselves experience working or living in a peripheral city and towns in the context of their social relations. In other words, it broadens our knowledge by showing in detail the ways in which marginality is mediated and negotiated in migrants' experiences.

My paper shows almost the complete lack of sociabilities between interviewed middling migrants and the local inhabitants in the disempowered towns of Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice. My informants see these semi-industrial towns as undifferentiated spaces lagging behind more developed areas. They regard these towns as some kind of 'non-places' (Augé 1995), typical manufacturing sites, deprived of their own distinctive identity, with very limited opportunities for spending leisure time and socialising with people. While experiencing barriers to local integration, they themselves engage in practices of othering: they stereotypically construct local people as a homogenous and undifferentiated category of simple 'folk' people (Plöger and Kubiak 2018). They draw on modernising discourses which contrast the modern city with the backward small town and village, and on neoliberal imagery of the dynamic, mobile, consumerist and career-oriented life project juxtaposed with the static and unambitious life of people who are unable to fully participate in consumer society. Not only do they reproduce these modernising discourses, but they embody them in their emotional responses: they talk about a feeling of estrangement and alienation in the context of the peripherality of Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice. Thus, my paper demonstrates how the economic and social marginality is associated with cultural images, discursive schemes and emotional dispositions, or in other words with the habitus of middle-class urban migrants.

Whereas Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice were seen in terms of isolation, alienation and backwardness, living in Opole was experienced in a more complex and rather

neutral way by my informants. From the point of view of the interviewees living in Opole, it consists of both the feeling of strangeness and togetherness. Thus, my informants experienced both otherness and close relations with local inhabitants. They underline that they do not always feel comfortable in Opole which, due to its marginal position, does not attract too many migrants. In consequence, they felt that the city is too homogenous; they were confused by the intrusive staring by the inhabitants. However, despite this felt otherness they were able to establish more cordial relations, especially with some locals with similar backgrounds. The paper shows the crucial significance of workplace and kindergarten for sociabilities in the town of Opole. Contrary to other studies on more economically privileged cities (Plöger and Becker 2015), I demonstrate the low importance of sociabilities with neighbours. This can be explained by the low level of social capital and generalised trust in post-socialist societies which manifests itself, amongst other ways, through weak neighbourhood ties (Jaskulowski and Surmiak 2016).

In contrast to studies on better-positioned cities, this paper shows that ethnic networks did not have any salience in Opole (Conradson and Latham 2005). The informants' sociabilities mostly included native inhabitants, similar to those in other disempowered cities such as Dortmund in Germany or Manchester, NH, in the USA (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016; Plöger and Becker 2015). This can be partially explained by the fact that ethnic communities in Opole did not reach a 'critical size', that is the city does not contain a sufficient concentration of people with shared ethnicity (Plöger and Becker 2015). However, this paper also suggests the significance of class position, which seems to be more important than ethnicity as the informants establish autotelic relations mostly with people of similar status. The informants' experiences of Opole suggest the utility of the concept of sociability by demonstrating that, even for high-skilled migrants who can rely on some institutional support (relocation service, company translator), sociabilities have crucial importance. The paper also underlines the significance of sociabilities within family. Due to a narrower circle of friends than in the home city and limited opportunities offered by Opole, my informants spend more time with family. Moreover, they claim that Opole is a more family-friendly place than the nearby city of Wrocław. However, further studies are required to determine whether disempowered cities with limited opportunities attract migrants with families, especially with children.

My paper suggests that there are different modes of migrants' sociabilities in the semi-industrial towns of Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice on one hand, and Opole on the other hand. Drawing on neoliberal and modernising imageries, my informants constructed and emotionally experienced Strzelin and Jelcz-Laskowice as some kind of backward 'no-places' which do not give opportunities for socialising with the natives. Those informants who live in Opole regarded this city in more neutral terms. They also socialise within a small circle of local people of the same social background. However, we need more research into various local contexts to understand more fully how the peripheral status of disempowered cities and semi-industrial towns is experienced by migrants themselves. It seems that researchers too often focus on metropolitan areas with large and easy to reach migrant populations, while neglecting less accessible migrants who work or live in less successful areas, especially in semi-industrial and rural towns. My paper suggests that these areas may have their own peculiarities, patterns of social life and migrant sociabilities, which are structured by limited

opportunities, possibilities and cultural imageries shaped in turn by their marginal position in global hierarchies of power.

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