

# Positive Changes and Appreciation of Life among Economic Immigrants in Scotland

## Abstract

**Objectives:** Existing qualitative studies focussed predominantly on exploring immigrants' stress, distress and coping aimed at reducing stress. Little attention has been paid to immigrants' psychological growth or positive life changes. In the present study the impact of post-migration experiences on well-being among economic immigrants has been explored.

**Design:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 17 immigrants. Transcripts were analysed by a deductive and inductive thematic analysis.

**Results:** All immigrants reported positive life changes as a result of migration. Experiences related to migration helped immigrants rebuild their sense of self-worth and find 'mental peace' after living a demanding and burdensome life in Poland. Immigrants' accounts also suggested that their thinking and behaviour patterns may be shaped by their cultural values and socio-economic background.

**Conclusion:** Overall, the study indicates that migration is not merely a stressful life event but can have a positive impact on many aspects of immigrants' lives and may provide opportunities for personal growth.

**Key words:** migration; well-being; psychological growth; positive life changes

## Introduction

### *Migration & stress*

Migrants represent 3.1% of the world population (International Organization for Migration, 2013). The number of migrants is expected to rise despite increased efforts by many governments to limit immigration (International Organization for Migration, 2008). Migration of Polish citizens to the UK is considered as one of the largest migration movements in contemporary Europe (Burrell, 2004). Polish immigrants in Scotland are not only the largest non-UK born population but also one of the fastest growing migrant populations, growing from 2,505 in 2001 to 55,231 in 2011 and reaching an estimated 56,000 in 2012 (Packwood and Findlay, 2014; Pietka-Nykaza and McGhee, 2014).

The largest number migrating from Poland to the UK occurred in 2004, when the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden fully opening their labour markets to countries invited to join the European Union (Trevena, 2009). These immigrants left their home country due to a very difficult situation in the Polish labour market, which created a considerable migratory pressure (Trevena, 2009). Reasons for leaving included low pay, the lack of work at home, poor career development and low quality of life (Sim, Barclay and Anderson, 2007).

Immigration is considered by social scientists and mental health professionals as one of the most stressful life events that a person can undergo (Bustamante et al., 2017). Qualitative studies explored sources and consequences of stress among migrants, including Polish migrants, and it was found that immigrants face multiple stressors such as language barriers, new cultural norms, loss of social, familial and support networks, discrimination and underemployment (Gideon, 2011; Guzder, Yohannes and Zelkowitz, 2013; Lausch et al., 2003; Weishaar, 2008). Overall, this evidence suggested that international economic migration leads to negatives changes in psychological, social and physical well-being (e.g. Bustamante et al., , 2017; Weishaar, 2008).

### *Beyond stress: well-being & growth*

Although stress and distress have been extensively investigated in migrant populations (e.g. Bustamante et al., 2017; Huan and Spurgeon, 2006; Lindert et al.,

2009) an exclusive focus on negative mental health has its limitations. Focussing on the negative consequences of migration does not allow for an exploration of positive impact of migration including mental well-being. It is now recognised that mental wellbeing is important for improving quality of life (Diener, Lucas and Oishi, 2002; Keyes, 2005).

It is also evident that immigrants can experience greater levels of well-being than native inhabitants (Bak-Klimek, Karatzias, Elliott & Maclean, 2018). Many quantitative studies have identified the factors which predict immigrants' well-being (Bak-Klimek, Karatzias, Elliott & Maclean, 2014). These include cognitive-behavioural factors such as social support, downward comparisons and circumstantial factors such as language barriers and age at migration.

Nevertheless, no qualitative studies have been conducted exploring migrants' accounts of how migration affects their well-being in a positive way. Existing qualitative studies in migrant populations tended to focus on exploring sources and consequences of stress as well as coping strategies aimed at reducing stress (Gideon, 2011; Guzder, Yohannes and Zelkowitz, 2013; Lausch et al., 2003; Weishaar, 2008). Such studies relied on deficit models and thus, limit the possibility of identifying positive outcomes related to migration. Given that economic immigrants arrive in a foreign land with expectations of, and hopes for, improvement of their quality of life (Sim, Barclay and Anderson, 2007), it is important to investigate how their post-migration experiences affect their well-being.

Furthermore, previous quantitative studies suggested that cognitive-behavioural factors such as downward comparisons are the most important factors to immigrant's well-being (Bak-Klimek et al., 2018). Such findings are not supported by existing theoretical models such as the Sustainable Happiness Model (SHM), which posits that well-being is explained predominantly by personality factors (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade, 2005). This indicates that general theories of well-being might not be applicable to immigrant well-being. There is clearly a need for further research in this area.

Finally, although migration is considered the most stressful life event that a person can undergo (Grillo, 2008), for some individuals it can create the potential for positive change, a chance to re-examine life priorities or develop strong ties with

friends and family (Arpawong et al., 2016; Graff-Reed, 2004). Although there is considerable research on psychological growth and positive changes among individuals who had traumatic life experiences, such as abuse, terminal illness and bereavement, (e.g. Cadell et al., 2003; Hartley et al., 2016; Joseph, 2009), this phenomenon has not been explored in economic migrant populations before. It is argued that 'psychological growth' should not be exclusively referred to positive changes and outcomes associated with trauma but be more inclusive of different types of change and development as a result of other non-traumatic stressors (Aldwin, 2007).

### *Study aim*

Based on first-hand accounts, this study will explore the impact of post-migration experiences on well-being among economic immigrants in Scotland.

### Method

#### Design

This is a qualitative study, which was a component of a wider mixed methods study. The wider study consisted of a quantitative phase, which aimed to identify the determinants of well-being and establish the extent to which the findings are supported by the SHM (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade, 2005). In the quantitative phase, 188 participants were selected by a combination of snowball sampling and advertising. It was found that an earlier age at migration, good health, a proficient level of English, a higher social support, religiousness and tendency to make downward social comparisons were associated with a higher level of well-being (Bak-Klimek et al., 2018).

#### Interview and procedure

Overall, 17 Polish immigrants took part in a semi-structured interview between November 2013 and March 2014. The interview was conducted in the interviewee's first language. The quantitative study guided the purposeful sampling for the interviews; potential participants were identified according to whether they scored high or low on the predictor variables.

All 17 interviewees lived in Edinburgh, which is a popular destination for migrants in Scotland, significantly ahead of other areas (The Scottish Government, 2010). There were 12 females and 5 males. Females seem to be overrepresented in the present sample; that is, they comprised 70 % of the sample compared to 50% reported for Polish immigrants living in the UK by Home Office, (2009). This may be due the specifics of Edinburgh as a city, where most jobs are in catering and hospitality and more attractive to female workers (Weishaar, 2008). Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 55yrs (mean = 34yrs). Most interviewees were aged between 18 and 34 years which is in keeping with the existing UK data on Polish nationals arriving to work in the UK between 2004 and 2009 (81% were aged between 18 and 34 years) (Home Office, 2009).

Eight interviewees were highly educated (i.e. held a degree or completed postgraduate studies), four completed college or vocational course and five completed education at a Primary or Secondary School level. Overall immigrants' monthly wages were low: 40% participants earned below £1000 a month and only 19% earned above £1416. This is in line with the findings of Drinkwater, Eade and Garapich, (2006) that Polish immigrants are primarily employed in low-paying jobs despite possessing reasonably high levels of education. No clear differences were observed between males and females in terms of wages, employment status or education. Both, in male and female subsamples, there were immigrants who had a primary school and postgraduate level of education, immigrants who were in full-time and part-time employment and immigrants who earned below £1000 a month and above £1416.

Three interviewees were divorced or separated, 10 were single and 4 were married. Although 10 interviewees were fluent in English, 7 did not feel comfortable with communicating in English or did not speak English at all. Most (11) interviewees were employed full-time, five were employed part-time and one was unemployed.

The sample was also diverse in terms of their self-reported health; eight interviewees perceived their health as good/very good and nine reported fair and poor perceived health level. Interviewees' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The semi-structured interview guide was designed in such a way as to demonstrate sensitivity to participants' perspectives through the use of open-ended and non-directive questions. The interview schedule, however, was not followed in any strict or rigid way. A process of probing and reflection was adopted. The researcher utilized prepared probes, for instance, 'Could you give me an example?', 'Can you elaborate on that idea?', 'How did you feel about this?', 'What did this mean to you'? McCracken (1988) suggested that prompts or probes give structure to the interview and allow the participant to use his/her own voice to relate experiences in an individual fashion. This structure enabled participants to respond freely (Wilkinson, Joffe and Yardley, 2004), and to provide rich descriptive accounts of their migration experiences.

The interviews took place in public places convenient to the participant to provide a safe, non-threatening environment, such as a quiet room in the library of a University or small cafes at off peak times. The longest interview lasted 76 minutes and the shortest, 38 minutes (mean= 53 minutes). All interviews were conducted by the first author in Polish (the native language of participants). This allowed for the inclusion of immigrants who do not speak English. Although some interviewees had reported proficient English language in the quantitative phase of the study, the researcher decided to conduct all interviews in Polish. It is argued that interviews in the second language should be avoided (de Zelueta, 1990; Westermeyer, 1990). Usually extra effort is required from participants, especially when emotional or sensitive topics are involved, which can result in impoverished accounts (Westermeyer, 1990), as well as making the grounded accuracy and value of the data uncertain (Marshall and Whille, 1994). Furthermore, when interviewees speak in a second language they perceive themselves as less confident (de Zelueta, 1990).

## Data Analysis

A conventional thematic analysis approach was used in which themes and categories were explored to reveal the experiences and perceptions of participants (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This method is independent of theory and epistemology, and through its theoretical freedom thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed,

yet complex account of data. Since this qualitative study was a part of mixed-methods study, a thematic analysis was ideal due to its relative independence from any specific epistemology (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The stages of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to guide the analytic process (i.e. transcribing the data, generating codes, organising the coded data into meaningful codes, refining themes, establishing a thematic map, final analysis and report write-up). The initial coding was performed in Polish whilst the latter stages were in English, so that peer examination could be possible. Conducting the initial coding in Polish maximised the trustworthiness of the study. We followed the recommendations to stay in the original language as long and as much as possible to avoid potential limitations in the analysis (Van Nes, Abma and Jonsson, 2010). When translating codes at latter stages and participants' quotes, we used support of a professional translator in order to enhance validity of the study (Van Nes, Abma and Jonsson, 2010). A second researcher coded a sample of transcripts to improve the validity of the codes developed.

Since the qualitative study was a part of a sequential explanatory study, the qualitative study was best served by a deductive approach (Trahan and Stewart, 2013). Cognitive-behavioural factors such as comparisons, social support & networks and religiousness which were identified as significant factors in the quantitative phase, served as a pre-existing main frame. Guided by these predetermined concepts, text sections were coded. Nevertheless, we also used an inductive approach and allowed new themes to emerge from the data. Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form and Debriefing Form were developed for participants (both Polish and English versions). Ethics approval was sought and received from the Research Ethics and Governance Committee at Edinburgh Napier University.

## Findings

The following section outlines one master theme and subthemes, which capture how different experiences in Scotland helped interviewees rebuild their sense of self-worth and achieve 'mental peace' after living a demanding and burdensome life in Poland (See Table 2 for a summary of themes & subthemes). Upon arrival in

Scotland, immigrants experienced the improved living and working conditions, an advantageous lifestyle, multiple opportunities for personal growth and meaningful relationships with their close ones. The interviewees appeared to appreciate all these positive experiences and strongly contrasted them with the challenges and struggles they faced in their home country.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

### *Life Conditions & Standards*

Interviewees reported that Scotland, as opposed to Poland, offered them independence, financial stability and many opportunities to enjoy their life which seemed to have played an important role in rebuilding their sense of self-worth. It appears that not only their basic needs could be met but they could also have a more extensive and luxurious life. Immigrants felt appreciative of the Scottish environment for giving them financial independence which they could not achieve in Poland. This is vividly illustrated by the following quote by Karolina where she contrasted her financial status in Poland (dependence) versus Scotland (independence):

*I'm really grateful to this country for giving me an opportunity of being independent. In Poland this was not possible at all...although I had many jobs I was always dependent on my parents, I lived with them...and here I feel I am responsible for everything myself. I pay the bills etc. In Poland my mum helped me financially...my uncle paid for my dentist and now I help my family financially. I send money, gifts. I can afford it...I'm financially independent. I feel really good about it. [Karolina, age 39, full-time employee].*

What is significant is that Karolina highlighted how she was previously dependent on her family – for example, ‘*I lived with them... my uncle paid for my dentist*’ but in Scotland she achieved a sense of role reversal where now she is independent and able to give money to her family, e.g. ‘*now I help my family financially. I send money, gifts*’.

Finally, what is important is that Karolina tied this new sense of financial

independence to positive feelings of self-worth, for example: 'I *feel really good about it*'. Being in a position to help her family living in Poland generated a sense of pride and achievement.

Not only did immigrants appreciate a sense of independence but they were also grateful for their financial stability. Interviewees stressed that in Poland they had a constant feeling of financial and material insecurity, which was no longer experienced while in Scotland. When living in Poland they were constantly worried about not being able to meet their basic needs, such as having enough money to pay for bills, food or clothes. This is best illustrated by the following quote by Bogusia, where she highlighted how she had '*enough...more than enough for normal functioning*' and contrasted this to hardships in Poland where basics were unaffordable:

*I'm so happy that I have achieved this mental peace and comfort. Although I still don't have so many hours at work as I wish because I work part-time...I have money for bread, to pay for gas, electricity. I have enough...more than enough for normal functioning, and in Poland even if you have a full-time job...well...then you have 20 slices of cheese and bread every second day...but when you have to buy toilet paper then this is - Oh my God - stupid toilet paper costs 20zł (£4) and you earn about 6zł (1£) per hour...I remember it all. [Bogusia, age 42, part-time employee].*

Thus, it seems that Bogusia was not able to afford the most primitive, basic, taken-for-granted things that are considered as 'normal' in Scotland. In the UK her job helped her meet her basic needs to a greater extent, which gave her 'mental peace and comfort'. Although she was not able to find a full-time job, which could be perceived as disappointing for Polish migrants who migrated mainly for economic reasons, she looked at it from a positive perspective. She recognised that a part-time job in Scotland seemed to give her a greater mental comfort than a full-time job in Poland.

In addition, immigrants recognised that a new salary not only enabled them meet their basic needs and achieve financial independence but it also ensured a more extensive and luxurious lifestyle, which permitted them to enjoy their life more fully. They clearly highlight the difference between the two countries: While in Poland

immigrants led 'boring' lives due to their limited budget, in Scotland they felt they had many opportunities to enjoy their life such as 'going on holidays or buying nice clothes' as this comment from Przemek illustrates:

*Although you do miss your friends in Poland I realise that I have opportunities for a better and more enjoyable life here. Wages in Poland are really low, the minimum full-time wage is about £200, £300 per month...similar to the costs of living...so this is really not enough. Many people have been living dull, poor, boring lives...they cannot enjoy their life: afford to go on holidays or buy nice clothes. In Scotland, I can buy TV, play station and I have lots of money left for parties, clothes, holidays...*  
[Przemek, age 30, full-time employee].

Thus, interviewees' salary in Scotland gave them a sense of freedom and exploration, a sense of living life to the full, as opposed to simply surviving. It was easier to fulfil their everyday wishes and desires. This experience seemed to have helped them achieve their 'mental peace' and build their sense of self-worth. It generated a sense of pride and resulted in a shift in their attitude; their negative 'I cannot' attitude they adopted in Poland seemed to have changed to the positive ('I can do') attitude.

Interviewees also noticed that their working conditions in a foreign country were more humane and advantageous. They observed that the work atmosphere was friendlier, financial rewards much higher and jobs much more secure than in Poland which further helped them rebuild their sense of self-worth.

### *Work Conditions*

Interviewees reported that there is a difference in the way employees are treated by Polish and Scottish employers. They felt respected by Scottish employers, which boosted their confidence. Immigrants valued the relationship with Scottish managers, who were perceived by them as approachable, friendly and motivating. In contrast, they perceived Polish employers as 'abusive' explaining that Polish employers tended to show disrespect to their employees, spread alarm and despondency and expected their employees to constantly prove they deserved a given position, as this comment from Ela illustrates:

*I am a cleaner but I feel respected here, I am treated fairly. This means higher self-esteem. I feel more confident. I don't need to try to prove myself because I get respect at work, unlike in Poland. There is not such a big gap: I'm your boss and you are my employee...managers try to treat you equally; they are friendly, say hello, 'how are you'. The relationship with managers is different and I like it here more. In Poland we were scared of the manager, we panicked when she approached us. Over there the way of treating employees is just horrible, unacceptable... [Ela, age 42, full-time employee].*

Interviewees not only appreciated a different nature of the relationship with their employers but also their financial recognition. Although some interviewees did a lower-level job in Scotland they perceived to receive a decent, which they found motivating. In Poland their wages were low even if they worked long hours as an example from Karol illustrates:

*In Poland I occasionally worked a 20 hour shift in the bar and I was paid about £1 per hour, so £20 for 20 hours...and here I have financial recognition although I earn the minimum salary and I do the same job; working in the bar I can earn so much more money. [Karol, age 35, full-time employee].*

Thus, although doing a lower-level and low-paid job in a foreign country tends to be perceived as a negative aspect of migration, the quote above illustrates that immigrants may not always think this way. Instead, they can appreciate it when comparing it to the wages earned in Poland.

A greater sense of job security also seemed to play an important role in rebuilding interviewees' sense of self-worth and achieving 'mental peace', which they did not experience in Poland. Due to high unemployment levels and 'unfair deals' in the workplace in Poland, they were constantly worried about the possibility of losing their job. Living with a constant state of uncertainty was likely to be mentally exhausting. However, in Scotland they experienced a greater sense of job security; they believed recruitment processes are more fair and it is more difficult to lose a job if you work hard. This was likely to bring a sense of mental peace into their life as they no longer had to worry about losing their job, as reflected in the comment below:

*In Poland people kept saying there is a high unemployment rate... you can lose your job at any moment...you can't be sure that you will stay in your job...you need to have connections, 'unfair' deals. You do not know the day nor the hour when you can lose your job. In Britain if you are doing a job it's difficult to fire this person based on...oh, a relative of the boss will get your job. Here you don't need to have relationships, connections. Here it is normal, you get a job and you work, you feel secure. [Bronia, age 47, full-time employee].*

The 'living and working conditions' themes show a comparison and contrast of two countries: Poland and Scotland. They illustrate that immigrants' quality of life back in Poland was poor due to lack of independence and stability associated with low pay and the lack of work. In addition, the quotes about unfavourable environment at work such as lack of positive feedback, disrespectful or even abusive treatment by managers indicates that immigrants might have been victims of workplace mobbing in Poland. Since only female interviewees reported the experiences of harassment at work in Poland, this may illustrate that Polish females may be at a higher degree at risk of mobbing in a workplace setting. Clearly, the adverse living and working conditions in Poland seemed to have a negative impact on immigrants' self-worth; immigrants seemed to have felt devalued, unappreciated and hopeless.

Importantly, regardless of gender, interviewees consistently perceived the new living and working conditions in Scotland as positive. Interestingly, despite doing a lower-level and low- paid job or inability to find full-time employment, they highlighted with a sense of pride and achievement that they could afford a more enjoyable and luxurious life. Improved living and working conditions seemed to help them find 'mental peace' and regain their self-respect.

It is also clear from the theme below that moving to Scotland meant embracing a different lifestyle, which also helped them achieve mental peace.

### *Lifestyle*

Interviewees felt that the pace of life in Scotland is slower and more peaceful, which had a positive impact on them, as this allowed them to slow down and 'live their life' as illustrated by comment from Aneta:

*I think in this country there is some kind of peace...unlike in Poland...us Polish people are always rushing, we always assign some goals which we want to achieve and the truth is that we are like that all the time and we forget we need to live in this life...I cannot imagine living in Poland again...I feel so much better here. I often say to my mum, family: 'Poland would destroy me mentally'. There is a huge gap in mentality, world-view. Poland would be a mental burden for me. [Aneta, age 55, full-time employee].*

It is interesting that Aneta contrasted 'peace' that the Scottish environment offered her with a destructive 'mental burden' she believed she would have experienced in Poland if she had stayed there longer. Such perceptions of Poland might have been related to difficult living and work conditions experienced by the interviewees in Poland, as reflected in 'Living and Working conditions' themes. It is likely that the mental peace she felt in Scotland was related to greater financial security. Aneta secured a full-time job which might have given her increased wages and possibly offered better quality of free time, as reflected in previous themes. It seems that the mental 'peace' Aneta was referring to is related to new 'mentality and worldview' in Scotland. The narratives of other interviewees; Mariola and Olga appear to offer possible explanation of what this new 'mentality and worldview' may mean.

For instance, Mariola clearly stated that Scotland is 'more liberal'. She perceived Scotland to be more accepting and open-minded and valued respect in Scottish society. She reported that there is less pressure to have children at a younger age, as reflected in the comment below:

*I can see we have different lifestyle, culture... for example, they don't commit to family life...it's all for themselves which I find difficult to get used to...but what I appreciate is that this country is more liberal... Most of my friends in Poland are already married and they have children. I'm not married myself but I can live with my boyfriend and nobody looks at you and talks to you disrespectfully...Also, I'm 26 and don't have children yet...this is not perceived as something bad...they don't call me 'a spinster'. I'm sure in Poland they would start doing this already. [Mariola, age 26, unemployed].*

It is interesting that Mariola perceived that Scottish people 'do not commit to family

life' which she found difficult to accept. It is likely that this results from her being brought up in a more conservative country where women are encouraged to focus on family life (Hryciuk, 2005). On the other hand, however, she seemed to have liberated herself from the conservative understandings of gender as she was influenced by gender dynamics prevailing Scotland. In Poland she was likely to be called a 'spinster' but the boyfriend is not called a 'spinster' so these narrowly defined gender norms exist for women.

While Mariola focussed on the Scottish society respecting the young women's decision to not to have children, Olga, on the other hand, provided a different example of how the Scottish environment shows respect and tolerance towards Polish migrants. She appreciated Scottish people's patience and understanding towards immigrants not speaking English. She was grateful for their willingness to adjust their language pace and accent to be more understandable by immigrants as this quote illustrates:

*I cannot speak English well but Scottish people have so much patience and they are not angry if I don't understand what they are saying, they say - 'don't worry' and they try to speak slower, and Scottish employers respect you for hard work, not for your ability to speak English. I cannot see this is happening in Poland...never! [Olga, age 38, part-time employee].*

Thus, a language barrier which tends to be perceived as a source of stress for immigrants seems to be discussed from a different perspective in this study. Immigrants who experienced language barriers focussed on Scottish employers' positive attitudes towards it. They noticed that employers in Scotland respect the interviewees despite a lack of English skills. Olga's statement '*I cannot see this is happening in Poland...never!*' emphasises that the Polish society would be very unlikely to show the same level of tolerance and understanding.

The above quotes of Mariola and Olga may not only further explain why Scotland offered immigrants 'mental peace' but also seem to help better understand why interviewees perceived Poland as a destructive 'mental burden'. Such perceptions seem to result from an overall lack of tolerance and acceptance for difference in Poland as well as difficult living and work conditions experienced by the interviewees

in Poland.

In addition to a new lifestyle, it appears that a strong Polish community in Edinburgh as well as their partners who stayed with them in Scotland also played an important role in achieving their 'mental peace' and enhancing a sense of self-worth.

Interviewees reported to gain a sense of security and belonging by having an easy access to the Polish community services and being in meaningful relationships with their close ones.

#### *Social support & meaningful relationships*

Despite living in a foreign country, all interviewees reported experiencing a sense of a strong Polish community in Scotland due to a high number of Polish people living here and the availability of different services for Polish people, for example the Polish drop-in centre. It appears that the Polish community enabled interviewees to keep continuity of Polish culture and language, which appeared to be very important for Polish immigrants but also provided them with support with social resources such as language. For example, Roza talked about the Polish community in a positive way; she reported feeling as if she was in her home country, which gave her a sense of cultural continuity. She also mentioned how attending the Polish drop-in centre allowed her child mixing with other Polish children and learn Polish:

*There are so many Polish people there. Although I miss Poland, what I left there, sometimes I feel here as if I weren't in a foreign country. This gives me - somebody without a language - a sense of security. I attend the Polish drop-in centre. I meet other Polish parents regularly. We do something together. Our children can play together, they can learn Polish. [Roza, age 30, full-time employee].*

Interviewees also reported that in moments of homesickness they made a phone call or Skype conversation with their family and friends in Poland. It appears that in order to keep regular contact with people in Poland, an additional effort and commitment was required. The contacts, however, alleviated their distress and uncertainty and made them feel closer to them. Interestingly, they emphasised that not only their relationships with their family and friends survived but they became stronger as migration-related barriers were lifted. This is best illustrated in the following quote:

*I have two friends who live in Poland. Our relationship survived. I can phone them at night and they will listen to me, support me. I also phone my mum every few days...I'm just telling her what happened, even if nothing happens, I phone her. I feel better then...I even think that our relationships have improved, we appreciate each other more...we have to make an effort and we all do...* [Maria, age 30, full-time employee].

It appears that migration also contributed to the strengthening of the relationships with their partners who stay with them in Scotland. Improvement in quality of personal relationships might also have played an important role in rebuilding their sense of self-worth and achieving 'mental peace'. Interviewees considered their close partners to be a reliable source of emotional support, which was likely to bring them mental comfort. For instance, Julka admitted that in difficult moments she could rely on her partner in Scotland, whom she shared a deep bond with. She seemed to have somebody to confide in and recognised that her life in a foreign country without her partner would not have been the same; rather it would have been much more difficult and possibly even unbearable, as the quote below illustrates:

*I cannot imagine living here without my husband. It would have been very difficult without him. I can cry over his shoulders, let out all my frustration or anger. He helps me so much...In fact, I think our relationship has improved since we migrated.* [Julka, age 29, full-time employee].

Interviewees also noticed that moving to Scotland contributed to their personal growth and self-realisation, which were likely to help them regain their lost self-worth. They became more religious, spiritual and felt that the new country offered them more opportunities for their self-fulfilment, as illustrated below.

#### *Personal growth & discovery*

Some interviewees noticed that they achieved their self-fulfilment by pursuing their hobbies and passions. Apparently, Scotland provided them with necessary resources such as money and time to pursue their hobbies. For instance, Witek, a keen photographer, did not have an opportunity to get fully involved in his hobby in Poland due to lack of money and time, while Scotland provided new opportunities for him:

*For me self-realisation is very important;... to do what I love doing. This country helped me with this. I am a photographer, and I don't have to worry about anything in relation to this, money for equipment, research...In Poland, I was not able to pursue this hobby, no access, time, no money...[Witek, age 33, part-time employee].*

Some interviewees also recognised that they achieved 'mental peace' and self-fulfilment through their faith. For instance, for Patryk, faith was more important than anything or anybody else. It gave him a sense of life meaning and mental comfort. It empowered him with strength to cope with everyday difficulties. Patryk also appreciated having opportunities to attend Polish services and belonging to a religious community in a foreign country, where he could experience spiritual connectedness with others who share similar values with him as described in the following quote:

*Faith makes me a better human being...I feel more religious since migrating here. Faith strengthens me when I'm sad, stressed or angry. It helps me accept my decisions. It has a great impact on my life. Faith is more important than people. I feel kind of spiritual fulfilment, balance...It is meaningful...I put faith in first place. I'm also glad I have an opportunity to enhance my faith. Every Sunday we meet during Polish mass and some of us also stay afterwards to discuss religious matters, read the Bible. [Patryk, age 31, full-time employee].*

Given that Poland is considered a more religious country than Scotland (Coutinho, 2016) it may seem surprising that Patryk reported higher levels of religious belief and practice since migrating to Scotland. It is likely that a more relaxed pace of life after migrating to Scotland might have given him more time and energy to nourish his faith and connect with other religious people, as discussed in the previous theme 'lifestyle'.

The quote below seems to support the proposed explanation. Although Maria described herself as a 'very spiritual' rather than religious person, she clearly admitted that her sense of enhanced spirituality might have resulted from a slower and less stressful pace of life. She was able to notice and enjoy the beauty of Scottish nature; she admired unique landscape of lakes, mountains and woodlands and used the numerous opportunities to be close to nature. This seemed to have a

soothing effect on her and helped her find 'mental peace', which she lacked in Poland due to being absorbed and overwhelmed by everyday stresses, as the quote below illustrates:

*I don't believe in God, but I consider myself as a very spiritual person. I've learnt to stop to admire the nature...I don't have to be in a constant hurry as I was in Poland...I seek opportunities to be close to the nature... these mountains, lakes, woodlands..in fact I go camping very often. I don't remember doing this in Poland although we also have a lovely country...I just didn't have time & energy for that [Maria, age 30, full-time employee].*

Thus, although the interviewees are economic migrants who came primarily with the aim of improving their well-being through better working and living conditions, other factors also seemed to help them recover from the burdensome and demanding life in Poland. A more accepting and open-minded lifestyle in a new country, having more meaningful relationships and multiple opportunities for personal growth also contributed to the achievement of their 'mental peace' and rebuilding their sense of self-worth.

## Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the post-migration experiences and their impact on well-being among economic immigrants in Scotland. Upon arrival they experienced the improved living and working conditions, an advantageous lifestyle, multiple opportunities for personal growth and meaningful relationships with their close ones. Most importantly, these experiences seemed to have improved their well-being through helping them enhance their sense of self-worth and achieve their mental peace. It was revealed that although immigrants faced some adverse circumstances such as language, cultural barriers and feelings of homesickness, they all experienced positive psychological states. All interviewees expressed positive feelings (e.g. 'I'm feeling really good, happy') and appeared to derive a pleasure from what they perceived as a luxurious life which are all indicators of hedonic well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001).

Such data from a migrant sample make an important contribution to the available literature on migrant populations. The data suggest that migration is not merely a

stressful life event but it has a positive impact on many aspects of immigrants' life including their work, social life, and personal development. Most importantly, they indicate that economic immigrants are capable of experiencing enhanced quality of life. Thus, they build on the existing qualitative evidence that focusses on the negative impact of migration (Gideon, 2011; Guzder, Yohannes and Zelkowitz, 2013; Lausch et al., 2003; Weishaar, 2008). The present data suggest that previous research has painted an incomplete and misleading picture of adjustment following economic migration and ignored positive changes that immigrants are capable of experiencing. The present study also finds that a cultural gap is not a barrier to experiencing positive psychological states. Although Scotland was perceived as less collectivist and family-oriented than immigrants' home country (Poland) which is in line with previous evidence (Hofstede, 2001), all immigrants expressed their happiness and appreciation of life abroad. This responds to the literature calling for an examination of psychological growth among immigrants who relocated from more collectivist societies to individualistic cultures (Joseph and Linley, 2008). Importantly, the data also add to the emerging research on psychological growth; since immigrants found multiple benefits in economic migration, this indicates that a major life event such as economic migration can offer the potential for individuals' growth.

In the present study it seems that enhanced well-being of immigrants after migration was influenced by their comparison processes. All interviewees constantly compared their life in Scotland to what they left behind in their home country. Immigrants seemed to escape from poverty, unemployment, workplace mobbing and a conservative ideology and worldview in what they perceived as a 'less liberal, tolerant and accepting' country. All these experiences appeared to cause significant 'mental burden'; immigrants reported mental exhaustion, a loss of self-esteem and self-respect. Indeed, the literature suggests that poverty and mobbing are common problems in Poland and are likely to influence each other (Blicharz, 2014). Poor economic situation leads to constant competition between employees which leads to tension and conflicts and as a consequence often results in mobbing (Blicharz, 2014). In Poland, many employees are under financial pressure, and they work for wages below the official minimum, on 'junk' contracts and under conditions, which do not comply with the provisions of the Labour Code (Zuk, 2017). In addition, it seems that it in the present study only females reported to be victims of workplace mobbing

which is line with the literature that females are to a higher degree at risk of mobbing in a workplace setting and they also incur higher psychological costs of harassment (Brudnik-Dąbrowska, 2014).

A perceived lack of tolerance and acceptance in Poland noted by some interviewees may result from the fact that Poland is considered one of the less diversified societies on the globe (Buchowski and Chlewińska, 2012). After the Second World War (WWII) the country was made practically homogenous ethnically (Poles) and religiously (Roman-Catholics). Furthermore, Catholicism as the main religion in Poland has had an impact on the area of gender; encouraging women to focus on family life rather than on the employment outside of the home (Heinen and Portet, 2009). Although Poles' views of gender now seem to be changing and becoming more liberal (Siara, 2013), our study suggests that in British context the approach to gender may still be more liberal than in the Polish context. The present study indicates that Polish women in the UK may liberate themselves from the conservative understandings of gender as they are influenced by gender dynamics prevailing in the UK. This is in line with the study on the construction of gender in the migration space suggesting that Polish women become emancipated as a consequence of their migrating to the UK (Siara, 2013).

Such experience of living a difficult and burdensome life in Poland has encouraged immigrants to perceive new living, working conditions and overall lifestyle in a positive life. For instance, although doing a lower-level and low- paid job in a foreign country tended to be perceived as a negative aspect of migration in the previous literature (e.g. Weishaar, 2008) in the present study immigrants appreciated it when comparing it to the wages earned in Poland. They emphasised with a sense of pride how new wages helped them lead a more luxurious life (e.g. afford to go on a holiday or buy a new car). This may indicate a shift in their social class position and status. Indeed, class has been described in the previous literature as 'a cultural identity and subjective experience' (Bettie, 2003, p. 38) and it has been proposed that migrants can 'use several reference points (...) to construct their social class position'. For example, they could see low paid work abroad or ability to buy a new car as improvement of their class position (Bettie, 2003; Garapich, 2008).

Overall, such findings indicating the importance of comparison processes in

immigrants' well-being, support previous research in general population which suggested a positive relationship between downward comparisons, enhanced well-being and psychological growth (Gangstad et al., 2009) (Psarra and Kleftaras, 2013; Santos et al., 2012; Steger, Oishi and Kesebir, 2011). The present study findings can be explained by the Multiple Discrepancy Theory (Michalos, 1985) which views well-being as resulting from evaluations of the present self in relation to multiple standards of comparisons e.g. what the best one had in the past (past comparison discrepancy), and what relevant others have (social comparison discrepancy). The study findings can also be explained by a Multidimensional Model of Benefit Finding, which is used outside of the field of chronic illness, disability, and severe trauma and regards growth as a consequence of general life stress (Cassidy, McLaughlin and Giles, 2014). Lifestyle changes, family closeness, community closeness and spirituality, which were reported by the interviewees, are all indicators of the 'process of growth'.

Such data are also in line with the recent findings indicating that cognitive-behavioural factors (i.e. thought processes and behaviour patterns) significantly contribute to immigrants' well-being (Bak-Klimek et al., 2018). They also build on these findings by demonstrating that thought processes of immigrants may be deeply embedded in their culture and socio-economic background. This may explain the findings indicated that these factors contribute to immigrants' well-being to a different extent than in general populations (Bak-Klimek et al., 2018). Thus, this study adds to the preliminary conclusions recently drawn in the literature that the SHM of well-being discussing the role of cognitive-behavioural factors, based on general populations, may not be applicable to migrant populations (Bak-Klimek et al., 2018). This highlights the importance of considering differences in background between natives and migrants when developing theories of well-being.

#### *Study strengths, weaknesses and implications for future research*

The main strength of this study is an exploration of positive aspects of migration as opposed to treating migration as a negative life event, which was the main focus of the previous qualitative literature. The present study findings contribute to a better understanding of what it means to be an economic immigrant in a wealthy country, and how their post-migration experiences affect their well-being. Since the present

study suggests that economic migrants experienced growth and enhanced quality of life, future quantitative research should investigate psychological growth and its relationship with well-being in samples of economic immigrants. Another strength of this study is also the diverse sample in terms of participant characteristics such as language proficiency skills, socio-economic status, age at migration. This allowed us to capture a picture of how their well-being was maintained despite common stresses associated with migration. Nevertheless, it is important to note that all interviewees were living in Edinburgh and the investigation of this problem among migrants living in other cities or rural areas might have produced different results. There are many facilities and services available in Scotland to support the Polish community. These include churches providing services in Polish, the Polish Consulate, FENIKS support services, which provide psychological support for the Polish community in Scotland, 'Swietlica' - a Polish Drop-in Centre supported by Edinburgh Council, Polish Schools. Furthermore, previous literature suggests that the Scottish public, Scottish employers included, are more open towards immigrants, and may be less hostile to immigration than is the case in many other parts of the UK (Bromley, Curtice and Given, 2007). Thus, specific characteristics of Scottish society, labour market and the forms of official support offered to Polish migrants, might have had a significant impact on the findings of this study. It would be recommended to explore Polish migrants' experiences in other parts of Scotland or the UK to add credence to our findings.

## Conclusion

This is the first qualitative study to explore the well-being in a diverse sample of Polish immigrants. The qualitative data indicate that immigrants seemed to escape mainly from poverty, unemployment, workplace mobbing in what they perceived as a 'less liberal, tolerant and accepting' country. Such experiences led to mental exhaustion, a loss of self-esteem and self-respect. Migrants' experiences upon arrival in Scotland, however, seemed to have contributed to rebuilding their sense of self-worth and achieving their 'mental peace'. The study suggests that migration is not merely a stressful life event but it can provide the context for migrants' growth and development. This builds on the existing qualitative literature treating migration as a negative life event and focussed predominantly on exploring sources and

consequences of stress.

The study also demonstrates that thought processes of immigrants may be deeply embedded in their culture and socio-economic background. This offers possible explanation for the recent quantitative study finding that cognitive-behavioural factors contribute to immigrants' well-being to a different extent than in general populations.

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