

# **Migrant workers' engagement with labour market intermediaries in Europe: symbolic power guiding transnational exchange**

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Accepted by Work, Employment and Society on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2015

Online version available at:

<http://wes.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/09/11/0950017015594968.abstract>

## ***Abstract***

This article explores the strategies of migrant workers from post-socialist central and eastern Europe (CEE) within the process of transnational exchange characterised by transnational labour market intermediaries that have substantially altered the former national bilateral employment relations. By utilising a Bourdieuan conceptual framework it examines Slovenian and Polish workers' migration strategies and struggles to acquire and convert capitals within the process of transnational exchange and upon arrival in the UK. The article uncovers the (self)colonial cultural capital embodied in CEE workers' habitus that drives their strategies to take up various working and training opportunities in the UK in order to acquire (trans)nationally

recognised cultural capital. This labour of acquisition drives Polish and Slovenian workers to seek specific cross-cultural and ethnic-niche intermediary services that can manipulate the most reliable symbolic signs in order to make profits from migrant worker-consumers. In this regard the article also exposes inter- and intra-ethnic variations.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, labour market intermediaries, migrant worker-consumers, neo-colonialism, Poland, (self)colonial cultural capital, Slovenia, transnational exchange.

### *Introduction*

Since the European Union (EU) opened its borders to the first post-socialist EU Accession 8 (A8) countries in 2004, over a million A8 workers have migrated to the UK on either a temporary or a more permanent basis (Home Office, 2009; McCollum et al., 2012; Pollard et al., 2008). Although these workers are now free to move across the EU, their migration strategies are still shaped by market forces and various transnational labour market intermediaries that can take advantage of inequalities among countries and help maintain or deepen these workers' precarious situation (Samaluk, 2014b; Ciupijus, 2011; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009). Transnational labour market intermediaries, such as staffing agencies, have significantly changed the former national

bilateral employee-employer actor relationship into a triangular, transnational one (Samaluk, 2014b; Bonet et al., 2013).

Since the late 1990s temporary staffing agencies have expanded into several post-socialist central and eastern European (CEE) countries by opening offices, establishing business partnerships in those countries and by operating through their websites (Samaluk, 2014b; Coe et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2005). Apart from offering various human resource management services to client-employers, transnational intermediaries also provide specialised services to migrant worker-consumers, who supposedly have a 'free choice' to shop for jobs on the market (Samaluk, 2014b; Bonet et al., 2013; Currie, 2008).

Official statistics shows that A8 workers are one of the non-British groups most likely to use staffing agencies to access work in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2009). This article takes the perspective of Polish and Slovenian recent arrivals to the UK. Although the overall numbers of A8 workers are greatly underestimated, workers' registration, which was in force until 2011, shows that the Poles make up the biggest (626,595) and Slovenians the smallest (930) group (Currie, 2008; Home Office, 2009; Pribersky, 2009). While there are no studies on the strategies of Slovenian workers, research shows that Polish workers increasingly use agencies and the internet to organise their migration (Currie, 2008; Janta, 2011; White and Ryan, 2008). Many Polish workers use agencies

because they perceive them as trustworthy experts that can provide a safe and secure passage to the UK labour market (Currie, 2008).

Agencies also recruit workers directly from Poland, often with exaggerated portrayals of the benefits of employment in the UK, and thus codetermine the temporal, spatial, occupational and sectorial trends of CEE labour migration to the UK (Currie, 2008; McCollum et al., 2012; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Ryan et al., 2007; White and Ryan, 2008; Wills et al., 2010). Although migrant agency workers face various abuses regarding their employment status, pay, holidays, sick leave, training and accommodation, some of them also make strategic use of their temporary status to sustain their life or occupational projects (Alberti, 2014; Fitzgerald, 2006; McKay, 2009; Trade Union Congress, 2007; Wills et al., 2010).

The existing research highlights the transnational expansion of intermediary services and the scope of abuses migrant workers face at the hands of agencies, and explains some of the reasons behind workers' migration strategies. Nevertheless there is still a lack of understanding of those strategies within the process of transnational exchange and upon arrival in the new country. This article aims to explore the symbolic mechanisms that drive Polish and Slovenian workers to move to the UK, why those wishing to migrate and new arrivals use intermediary services, which ones they initially

choose and who profits within this exchange. The article utilises a Bourdieuan focus on the symbolic power struggles that operate among agents in the global economic field for acquisition, control and conversion of different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1987, 1991). It takes the perspective of Slovenian and Polish recent arrivals to the UK to explore their migration strategies and struggles to acquire and convert capitals within the process of transnational exchange and upon arrival.

The Bourdieuan framework engages with migrant workers' embodied history and can as such capture their perspectives and strategies in a holistic and non-ethnocentric way (Loyal, 2009; Sayad, 2004). It can expose intra-ethnic and multidimensional social stratification and uncover the symbolic power that enables some agents to profit from mobility and cross-cultural exchange and others not (Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b; Ong, 1999; Ryan et al., 2008; Vershinina et al., 2011). This article contributes by uncovering the symbolic power that guides Polish and Slovenian workers' migration strategies for acquiring (trans)nationally recognised cultural capital by taking up training and working opportunities within the reputed West and seeking specific intermediary services that can manipulate seemingly reliable symbolic signs to make profits from migrant worker-consumers. In the next section a Bourdieuan conceptual framework and its application to the aims of this research is presented.

### *Symbolic power guiding transnational exchange*

Bourdieuian analysis is geared towards uncovering the symbolic power, the power of 'world making' (Bourdieu, 1989: 22). Its form par excellence is that of knowledge production hidden in linguistic exchange that creates seemingly value-neutral objective classifications (Bourdieu, 1987, 1991). Symbolic power is thus also economic exchange that receives its value once it is '*recognised*, that is, misrecognised as arbitrary' (Bourdieu, 1991: 170). This misrecognition is a form of symbolic violence, an 'unperceived form of everyday violence' (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992: 112). It hides within itself a (post)colonial history of subjugation, which legitimises objective structures of governance and guides individuals' agency within everyday practices of social relations (Bourdieu, 1991; Puwar, 2004; Topper, 2001).

In order to transcend both objectivist and subjectivist stances and account for embodied structures that guide subjective misrecognitions, Bourdieu develops the interconnected concepts of field, habitus and different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991; Topper, 2001). The social field is conceptualised as a multidimensional social space in which agents position themselves and are positioned in relation to one another according to the overall volume, composition and relative weight of different forms of capital they possess (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). To explore how symbolic violence guides migrant workers' strategies within transnational exchange, one needs to 'grasp capital and profit

in all their forms and to establish the laws whereby the different types of capital (or power, which amounts to the same thing) change into one another' (Bourdieu, 1986: 243).

In addition to economic capital, which is immediately recognised in the form of money or property rights, Bourdieu develops misrecognised forms of capital, such as cultural and social, which become recognised and legitimised within the field once they have been converted into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1987, 1989; Skeggs, 2004). Cultural capital exists in embodied, objectified and institutionalised states (Bourdieu, 1986). Its embodied state is fundamental, as it presupposes a process of embodiment, which is transmitted through inheritance, upbringing, schooling and/or self-improvement (Bourdieu, 1986). The acquisition of cultural capital depends upon one's habitual history, lived and displayed by the body. Bourdieu conceptualises this embodied history as habitus that acts as a 'sense of one's place' but also a 'sense of the place of others' and that defines 'the sense of one's social worth' (Bourdieu, 1989: 19, 1991: 82).

In order to properly understand the sense of CEE workers' place within transnational exchange, one must contextualise it within the global economic field, which has redefined the former national technical, legal, political and economic boundaries (Bourdieu, 1989, 2005; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In the case of CEE countries, the move to-

wards the global economic field has been characterised by post-socialist transition and the Europeanisation process, in which global actors, such as the EU, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have evaluated CEE countries, advocated for rapid neoliberal transition and imposed conditions for EU accession (Bohle, 2006; Böröcz, 2001; Bourdieu, 2005; Stenning et al., 2010). Many authors view this process through a postcolonial lens that can expose, on the one hand, decolonisation after the end of the Soviet (and also earlier European) empires and, on the other, neo-colonialism that has, under the guise of modernisation, enabled unequal exchange, the export of governmentality and particular geopolitics that have recreated Western capitalist economies as ideal types, as the standardised norm that CEE countries should strive towards (Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b; Böröcz, 2001; Buchowski, 2006; Sher, 2001; Stenning and Horschelmann, 2008).

This process is not only imposed but is also home grown and has dramatically transformed everyday life in the CEE countries in the spheres of work, housing and social care and has enabled the expansion of the global market (Stenning et al., 2010). Moreover this process entails the remaking of the socialist subjects into normative capitalist subjects (Skeggs, 2011). This remaking acts as a new orientalising device that creates winners and losers of transition, wherein the latter are regarded as uncivilised and in need of disciplining (Buchowski, 2006). Contemporary state-run



competitiveness-raising seminars for the unemployed in Riga are, for instance, geared towards the remaking of the helpless, state-dependent and irresponsible post-socialist subject into a proper entrepreneurial, 'modern', 'European' person (Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2015). This remaking imposes a tyranny of choice that makes people feel judged by others based on their individual choices, which creates all sorts of anxieties as well as constant attempts to work at self-improvement (Salecl, 2011). It acts as a form of symbolic violence, making the history of socialism obsolete and in need of transcending and importantly determining the way CEE workers are received in the West and how they see their place therein.

CEE workers' subordinate class position in the UK is marked by their accents and names that signify cultural inferiority, a lack of recognised embodied cultural capital, which legitimises devaluation and deskilling in the labour market (Samaluk, 2014a). The acquisition of a legitimised form of embodied cultural capital is thus crucial for the use of its institutionalised and objectified state (Bourdieu, 1986). The institutionalised state comes from institutionally recognised credentials, such as official qualifications, while the objectified state comes in the form of cultural goods (books, paintings, instruments) (Bourdieu, 1986: 244). Although CEE migrants are highly educated, their qualifications are often undervalued by UK employers and staffing agencies (Currie, 2007; Pollard et al., 2008).

The devaluation of migrant workers as lacking in capitals imposes a labour of acquisition that demands 'work on oneself (self-improvement)' that, 'insofar as it implies a labor<sup>i</sup> of inculcation and assimilation, costs time' (Bourdieu, 1986: 244). On a world scale, the labour of acquiring legitimised forms of cultural capital falls disproportionately on professionals from peripheral areas, while the cultural capital of those arising from the Western centres is transitionally recognised and immediately grants access to highly skilled jobs (Weiß, 2005). Different agents occupy different positions within a social space, which are defined by the global volume and composition of capital they possess and which they acquire in their trajectory within a social space (Bourdieu, 1987: 4).

The temporal dimensions inherent in the acquisition of cultural capital can also affect the social capital that exists in the form of social networks and connections (Bourdieu, 1986). Although migrant workers can utilise their transnational and co-ethnic networks to find work or embark on their self-employed projects, cultural and social capital should not simply be seen as an ethnic resource, because there are multidimensional variations that determine the amount of capitals and ability to convert them (Erel, 2010; Ryan et al., 2008; Vershinina et al., 2011). Moreover there are various new and emerging transnational labour market intermediaries through which CEE workers access and search for jobs in the UK labour market. Bonet et al. (2013) distinguish between

*information providers* that offer information about jobs/candidates, *matchmakers* that provide recruitment and other placement services and *administrators* that act as professional employment organisations. These intermediaries can also act as *ethnic-niche* and *cross-cultural experts* that target particular CEE countries and nationalities of workers or they can take the form of social media websites for particular migrant ethnic community groups (Samaluk, 2014b; Janta, 2011).

In this regard, there are important differences between Poland and Slovenia that arise from their diverse histories and transitional processes (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012). While Poland has experienced the greatest emigration in its recent history and a boom in transnational employment agencies, Slovenian emigration was, until the current economic crisis, very low, as was the presence of transnational employment agencies (Samaluk, 2014b; Bevc, 2004; Fihel and Okolski, 2009). How these conditions inform Polish and Slovenian workers' migration strategies and their decisions to choose various intermediary services in their search for jobs in the UK labour market – the market with the greatest number of employment agencies in Europe<sup>ii</sup> - is explored further below.

## *Methods and sample*

This study draws upon 36 semi-structured interviews with Polish and Slovenian workers, who arrived in the UK between 2002 and 2011 already equipped with high levels of cultural capital in the form of qualifications and English language skills. Migrant workers with qualifications and linguistic skills are less likely to rely on their co-ethnics and rather use new information technologies and intermediaries to organise their migration and search for jobs in the UK (Janta, 2011; Ryan et al., 2008; White and Ryan, 2008). The sample consists of 16 Polish and 20 Slovenian workers. It includes 23 women and 13 men, between 23 and 42 years old, 31 with a postgraduate or undergraduate degree and five with vocational education. All interviewees, except one, were looking for work or working in the service sector at the time of the interview.

Workers were approached through formal and informal ethnic-niche information providers and matchmaking agencies' websites. This access strategy showed considerable differences in the availability of these routes for Slovenian and Polish workers. The access routes used to approach Polish workers consisted of Facebook groups, ethnic-niche matchmaking agencies' websites and online forums available on various information providers' websites, while only Facebook groups were available for Slovenian workers. These initial access routes were later supplemented with the snowballing technique. Interviews were conducted in and around London, between

May 2011 and April 2012. The interviews explored workers' trajectories, starting with their places of origin and their expectations of the West and the UK labour market, their strategies for looking for work and their work experiences in the UK. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed through the process of coding (Charmaz, 2006; Layder, 1998).

### *(Self)colonial embodied cultural capital*

This section uncovers how neo-colonial symbolic violence had determined the way the informants viewed the West, their place within it and their initial migration strategies. Although the Polish workers' migration strategies were to a greater extent impacted by the deteriorated socioeconomic conditions in their places of origin, all informants viewed the West and the UK as offering better opportunities for personal or professional self-improvement. Prior to migration, Maria (Lecturer, Polish, 31, PhD, Arrival: 2004) thought of the UK as a 'paradise' offering better and more equal opportunities for professional and personal self-development. Phillip (Associate Solicitor, Slovenian, 31, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2008) perceived the UK labour market as more 'efficient and meritocratic'. This imagined Western superiority also entailed self-inferiority.

Ewa recalled that, prior to migration, she 'was convinced that Polish people are poor, uneducated' (Project manager, Polish, 30, bachelor's degree, Arrival: 2004). Similarly, Andrej explained that 'Slovenians look at the world and [think that] everything that's north and west from Slovenia, whatever it is, it must be better and we're really fascinated by it' (Banker, Slovenian, 26, bachelor's degree, Arrival: 2004). These examples show how symbolic violence embodied in CEE workers' habitus defined their self-positioning in relation to the West. In this regard, Kiossev (2010: 2) talks about 'self-colonising cultures' that colonise post-socialist subjects' consciousness and make them adopt their own inferiority towards the West.

Within transnational exchange, this colonisation of consciousness had turned into a (self)colonial embodied cultural capital that guided the CEE workers' migration strategies and their initial choices. Nina initially went for a lower-skilled job, because she felt she was not up to UK standards: 'I was afraid, I would say anxious. I didn't feel I was up to the standard in the UK' (Social worker, Slovenian, 33, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2005). Nina chose self-deskilling because she wanted to adjust to the overall system and improve her English. Izabela, an experienced teacher, saw migration West as an opportunity to get to know the 'superior UK standards' in her line of work: 'I thought it might be a good opportunity for me to come here and try to find a job within

my field. I think, you know, this country is...the level of physics is better than in Poland' (Au-pair/carer, Polish, 37, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2006).

New arrivals and those wishing to migrate perceived the West as superior to their embodied (post)socialist history that is yet to become the West through the labour of acquiring (trans)nationally recognised capitals. Due to that many informants had initially aimed for lower-skilled service jobs in order to gain UK experience and to improve their standard of English. Moreover, 25 had taken additional degrees, language and/or other courses or training. These work or training-related self-making opportunities are also provided or promoted by various transnational intermediaries.

*Transnational intermediaries offering opportunities to acquire (trans)nationally recognised cultural capital*

The Polish informants without personal networks in the UK tended to use placement or matchmaking transnational agencies, which have found a new market in Poland since the 1990s (Samaluk, 2014b; Ward et al., 2005). Dawid explained how an agency in Poland was, through various means, promoting work at a UK call centre as an attractive opportunity for Polish workers:

'This employment agency in Warsaw made a very nice, colourful advertisement in the biggest Polish daily.... The impression I had and that is the impression of many

people in Poland, is that obviously after communism our companies were working in a lousy way and not effective. I expected that in the West many things were organised better...and [because of] the name...of the company, which is a known brand, I thought it would be very professional and they mentioned training... It was a great disappointment when I saw the reality.' (Account manager, Polish, 32, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2006)

Dawid's habitual history led him to see the opportunity of being trained within this Western capitalist organisation as an investment in his future. He never perceived the call centre job as his final destination, but as an initial step towards the self-making process. Migration West was a strategy based upon the (self)colonial anticipation of future profits that imposes a labour of acquiring (trans)nationally recognised cultural capital. In this regard, Ong (1999) proposes that location should also be perceived as cultural capital that can bring the mobile subjects certain symbolic profits. Gita, an experienced teacher, also initially used an agency to get an au pair placement in the UK, where she hoped to gain local experience and improve her English:

'When I was working as a teacher I really wanted to get out of the country because of poor wages and I found this agency of au pairs in England and they had a special base in [Poland]... I paid them to find me a family...in England (...) I thought I would be with a family for a year, get experience. My English was not that brilliant



at that time. I just wanted to improve.’ (Customer advisor, Polish, 35, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2003).

Gita purchased an ‘expert’ matchmaking agency’s service in Poland, because she wanted a safe and secure passage to a live-in working environment, which she perceived as an initial stepping stone to acquire the legitimised forms of cultural capital.

Magdalena explained how she too entered the UK labour market through an English placement agency that offered self-making opportunities to Polish worker-consumers:

‘When I was still in Poland I found an agency which provided English courses for Polish people, but also opportunities to get practical experience in an English company, so they found a job placement for me....My first nine months were formally a training contract for which the employers could pay if they wished... My employer chose not to pay. I had to support myself, I had to work Monday to Friday in the office and weekends in the pub.’ (Tax advisor, Polish, 33, bachelor’s degree, Arrival: 2002)

This agency’s offers consisted of English courses and job placements in the UK that were branded to Polish worker-consumers as an opportunity to acquire legitimised forms of cultural capital. This ‘opportunity’ was, in fact, nine months of voluntary work that cost Magdalena considerable time and money, which she had to earn by taking up

an additional weekend job. This labour time needed for the acquisition of recognised forms of cultural capital fixes workers, at least temporarily, in low-skilled jobs.

This fixation in place was also found to have arisen from agencies' misinformation about the conversion of capitals across transnational fields. Martina explained how an agency recruiting students from Slovenia had provided false 'expert' information about the possibility of obtaining work corresponding to their skill level in the UK labour market:

'There was an agency for social workers that made a presentation at the faculty [in Slovenia]... when they made the presentation, it was like, everything goes really smoothly and it's not a problem at all...when I started applying it was like, it's really hard to get work if you are not registered with the general social care here...'

(Bar staff, Slovenian, 28, bachelor's degree, Arrival: 2011)

Although this was a solitary case of an agency luring Slovenian workers directly from their place of origin, it indicates how industry-specialised agencies are perceived as trustworthy information providers regarding the conversion of migrants' institutional cultural capital within transnational exchange. The agency from the example failed to mention that workers from other EU member states still need to register with the Health and Care Professions Council<sup>iii</sup> in order to be recognised as qualified social workers in

the UK. The conversion and acquisition of capitals cost time and money, which had led Martina to end up working in a bar and, at the time of the interview, to be looking for lower-skilled carer jobs. Due to this additional labour time needed, a quarter of the informants stated that they felt old in comparison to native workers who were applying for the same jobs. More than two-thirds of the informants were, at the time of the interviews, already over 30 years old. Although the majority of them had eventually managed to achieve professional mobility, eleven were still doing lower-skilled work, and among them, six had already been in the UK for more than three years.

While matchmaking agencies and information providers had lured these worker-consumers from their places of origin, most of the informants who had started using administrator agencies upon arrival in the UK reported that those agencies were either not keen on registering them if they did not have at least six months of UK experience or initially demanded free labour until they had acquired the recognised experience. Administrator agencies act as employers that are, according to the Agency Worker Regulations 2010 (AWR), obliged to provide equal treatment to workers regarding pay, holidays and working time entitlements, making them keen to have 'ready-made' workers to service clients' needs (Trade Union Congress, 2011). However, AWR does not apply to information providers or matchmakers, which can best utilise their symbolic power to make profits by servicing migrant worker-consumers.

Apart from the already mentioned routes, the informants also used various types of matchmaking websites, where they could find job advertisements or post their Curriculum Vitae (CV) online. While this strategy had brought most of the informants some initial, temporary and precarious placements to acquire UK experience, it also allows agencies or employers to target recently arrived migrants for their own profits, as explained by Sylwia:

‘They were saying to me: “Well, your education was in Poland, that's not really relevant...” They told me: “You have to sign up on a £15,000 course for a year... after that we will be able to get you a job.”... I really started thinking about it...maybe he's right, maybe this is why I can't get an office job.’ (Accounts assistant, Polish, 27, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2009).

Hence, evidence was found of staffing agencies utilising their cultural intermediary ‘expert’ role to sell new arrivals courses that would supposedly help them acquire the legitimised form of institutional cultural capital needed to access work. Also, Iwona explained how the online posting of CVs gave intermediaries access to migrant workers’ information, allowing them to target workers as consumers of self-making services within an unfamiliar field:

‘Someone found my CV on Monster and I was called by one of the agencies and, despite my three degrees and my experience and my years here, I was treated like

a complete beginner... They were trying to push some kind of course: "We're going to train you and then you'll get an office job and you are going to be a manager".' (Community manager at social media website, Polish, Female, 30, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2005).

Iwona was actively targeted by an agent because she is a migrant and, as such, is a suitable candidate for the conversion of embodied cultural capital. Unlike Sylwia, Iwona was able to immediately resist the agent, because she had already spent several years in the UK and had had the time to acquire legitimised forms of capital and knowledge of UK labour practices. The examples presented above show that transnational and cross-cultural intermediaries are in a much more powerful position to convert capitals across transnational fields and make profits from those who have not yet had the necessary time to learn about local labour practices and institutions.

*New arrivals' strategies for seeking guidance regarding the acquisition process within an unfamiliar labour market*

Informants revealed that upon arrival they also looked for information about local labour practices and institutions that could inform their recruitment and self-making strategies. Since, prior to migration, most of the Slovenian informants had had no cultural social capital in terms of personal ethnic networks in the UK, they had been

particularly drawn towards the emerging online ethnic-niche social media groups. This channel enabled these new arrivals to connect with other Slovenian migrants in the UK and to gain information on the practical and legal aspects regarding relocation and strategies for finding work in the UK. Through this channel, Veronika had learned about the strategy of using staffing agencies to find work: 'We were chatting on Facebook and he was the first person who actually mentioned recruitment agencies' (Various temporary jobs, Slovenian, 33, bachelor's degree, Arrival: 2010). Except for Marta, none of the Slovenian informants had been approached by agencies or had used them prior to migration. Therefore, they had yet to learn that agencies played a crucial intermediary role in the UK labour market.

Due to the UK's immense variety of intermediaries, which are non-existent in Slovenia, most of the informants did not know how to tell diverse intermediaries apart and some even experienced an anxiety of choice, as explained by Lija: 'You have the job shop, you have agencies, you have online advertisements...I am just losing myself in these choices.' (Au pair, Slovenian, 27, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2010). Due to a lack of knowledge of local practices, these workers were looking for additional information providers. This is explained by Maja, who initially used Facebook to learn about local labour practices:

'We asked them how to start living here...official things that need to be done, but about the job we did not get a lot of suggestions, because most of them studied here and they were able to find a job like that...I would really appreciate it if there was an agency for other countries, where you could get support and also suggestions about where to look for a job, what kind of job is the best to look for at the beginning...it would be quite useful to have a Slovenian agency' (Shift leader in a hotel, Slovenian, 26, bachelor's degree, Arrival: 2010)

Maja's example shows that these self-organised groups are useful to a certain extent but that new arrivals still need very specific work-related advice that might not be provided in these groups or by migrants who have entered the UK through different routes. Maja imagined that an ethnic-niche agency would be particularly suitable for providing guidance on the foreign labour market with regards to job-hunting strategies and local labour practices. A quarter of the Slovenian informants thought that an ethnic-niche agency would be a useful work-related information provider. This conclusion arose from new arrivals' completely logical expectation that ethnic-niche intermediaries would embody the same habitus, the shared history, which would enable them to provide exact advice on the labour needed to acquire legitimised forms of cultural capital within an unfamiliar field. These new arrivals' strategies thus consisted of 'the manipulation of the most reliable symbols of social position, those which sociologists

are fond of using as indicators, such as occupation and social origin' (Bourdieu, 1987: 12).

Research on Polish communities also shows that, in addition to personal networks and agencies, social networking sites can serve as an initial source of knowledge or advice when job seeking (Janta, 2011). There has also been an increase in the number of web-based transnational labour market intermediaries specialising in CEE workers, particularly Poles (Samaluk, 2014b). Furthermore, post 2004 Polish entrepreneurs in the UK utilise mainly ethnicity-based social capital consisting of tight family and social links in Poland that can be appropriated as co-ethnic labour or customers (Vershina et al., 2011). Moreover, the present study shows that recent arrivals can, in their self-making strategies, also become ethnic entrepreneurs, providing various intermediary services that operate online and cater for new arrivals and those wishing to migrate. Although these new entrepreneurs can be of use to migrant workers, they can also strategically target new arrivals for their own profits. In this regard Iwona, who had previously worked for a Polish-owned ethnic-niche information provider website in London, explained how her employer had started targeting those wishing to embark on their self-making journey West:

'Now it's more hiring people from Poland. They think that it is a great jump to come from Poland and work in London on a Polish website...now they have a guy



and he doesn't speak a word of English (...) [Another] Polish company,...a website as well, they recruited him from Poland, they said: "We're going to find you anything, don't worry about anything". He came here and the guy told him: "Well I don't have a job for you".' (Community manager at social media website, Polish, 30, postgraduate degree, Arrival: 2005).

This example showed how two ethnic-niche online information providers were utilising their owners' cultural capital as social capital in order to convert the (self)colonial cultural capital of those wishing to migrate into profits. On the one hand, these intermediaries were achieving this by acting as employers themselves and offering self-making opportunities even to those lacking basic English language skills. On the other hand, they were acting as placement agents offering cross-cultural services with regards to job placements and migrants' overall relocation. Dyta, who had also started working for a Polish information provider upon arrival, confirmed this and explained that she had left because of bad management:

'The Polish company I left...I didn't really like how it worked...we were very much controlled by the manager...They were recruiting newcomers...they knew they would put up with much more than the people who already knew the situation with jobs here and who knew what they wanted and what to expect from a

proper workplace.’ (Account partner in marketing company, Polish, 26, bachelor’s degree, Arrival: 2007).

While workers with sufficient linguistic skills are able to gradually acquire knowledge of local labour practices and institutions, allowing them to escape ethnic-niche markets, those with no English language skills can remain locked within them (Janta, 2011; Ryan et al., 2008). The Polish informants in this study were not only working for ethnic-niche information providers, but were also using ethnic-niche matchmaking websites to look for work, as explained by Sylwia:

‘I registered with ...[Polish website], which I think is a really bad website. Not the website, but the jobs that are advertised there... I got the job via that website... I had the impression that the company basically wanted to have cheap labour.’

(Accounts assistant, Polish, 27, postgraduate degree Arrival: 2009).

Sylwia’s example shows that ethnic-niche matchmaking agencies might, rather than assisting workers, be offering a platform for client-employers who are looking for cheap migrant labour. Piotr had also looked for jobs through an ethnic-niche website, where he had found an advert for an employer looking for ‘hardworking sales people’, but then initially took a friend’s advice to go to the UK and look for work there: ‘I was angry at my friend because he was so irresponsible...this friend of mine told me, “there

are plenty of jobs”...I had depression...when I didn't get the job.’ (Door-to-door sales representative, Polish, 30, bachelor’s degree, Arrival: 2006)

Piotr explained how the rosy picture about job prospects in the UK painted by his friend had caused him problems upon arrival. After several unsuccessful attempts to get more permanent and better paid work, he had finally taken up the sales representative job he had found through the ethnic-niche website. Most of the Polish informants, who had not entered the UK through agencies, stated that they used their personal networks to get the advice the Slovenians obtained on Facebook. These personal networks mostly proved useful, but the large size and diversity of the Polish community in the UK also provides more scope for the manipulation of seemingly reliable symbolic positions within transnational exchange, where diverse actors struggle or compete for the appropriation of scarce goods.

Migrant workers’ devaluation in the UK can also be compensated by the symbolic worth their newly acquired cultural capital brings within their places of origin (Kelly and Lusia, 2006). Since, for CEE workers, migration West represents a strategic move towards self-making, their ‘success’ can also be judged by those who stay at home, which can sometimes result in these migrants hiding the true conditions and providing misleading information to those who are yet to migrate. Ewa also recalled how her

friends had misinformed her about the true conditions in the UK labour market. This had eventually led her to use an illegal agency that had sent her to an employer who, apart from bar tending, also expected sexual favours from her:

'Before I came to the UK my friends told me there were jobs everywhere in London... It wasn't quite like that. I had a contact... He ran an illegal job agency... he got me a job as well... it was a Café... as it turned out this guy wanted me to go to his house and do his cleaning and catering...He wouldn't let me go, so I had to actually run away from him... He thought that this guy from the agency is sending...a Polish person, who is just going to go to bed with him.' (Project manager, Polish, 30, bachelor's degree, Arrival: 2004)

The presented cases show how (self)colonial cultural capital can also determine the value of social capital that those wishing to migrate or new arrivals have at their disposal through their personal social networks, as well as the dangers that await them when they seek alternative channels. All three examples also indicate how agencies or the employers using them have the power to convert CEE workers' embodied cultural capital into profits within transnational exchange. Apart from the ethnic aspect, this conversion also has important gender and age dimensions. Similarly to Ewa's case, research into employment agencies' websites shows that CEE women are assigned a racialised and sexualised 'price-tag' in the UK labour market by being portrayed either

as objects of desire branded for front-line service work or as traditional and docile workers suitable for domestic and care work (Samaluk, 2014b).

These neo-colonial appropriations can be particularly harmful for young, newly arrived CEE women, who have not yet had the necessary time to familiarise themselves with structural racisms and the accompanying sexism that drive the UK's transnationalised and super-diverse labour market (Samaluk, 2014a). Similarly to Ewa, other female informants were also unaware of the neo-colonial appropriations awaiting them in the UK labour market. Due to (self)colonial perceptions of a seemingly 'meritocratic' UK labour market they were often bewildered by them and completely unprepared to protect themselves from abusive relations. Although Ewa's case was the most extreme found in this research, it indicates how the trafficking of migrant workers might begin as their revalued selves are consumed by the actual clients at the end of the chain.

### *Discussion and conclusions*

This article has explored Slovenian and Polish workers' migration strategies and struggles to acquire and convert capitals within the process of transnational exchange and upon arrival in the UK. The article uncovers the neo-colonial symbolic power that guides the strategies, of those wishing to migrate and new arrivals to acquire

(trans)nationally recognised forms of cultural capital by taking up training and work opportunities within the reputed West and by seeking seemingly reliable intermediary services that could advise them in the acquisition process.

This article has departed from studies that extend the view of migrants as mere homo economicus or as victims of precarious employment and instead point to their strategic use of mobility, transnational links and various cultural resources (Alberti, 2014; Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b; Ong, 1999; Ryan et al., 2008; Vershinina et al., 2011). Similarly, this article demonstrates that CEE workers' movement to the West is a strategy aimed at improving their working or personal lives. Its specific contribution, however, lies in uncovering the symbolic power and violence that guides transnational exchange and workers' strategies. The article shows that migrant workers are also consumers of the neo-colonial normative idea(l)s and of various transnational intermediary services that have been recreated with the neo-colonial expansion of the market in order to offer the opportunities and advice to worker-consumers to achieve these normative ideals.

Theoretically and methodologically, the article contributes to a Bourdieuan conceptual framework in migration and postcolonial studies (Erel, 2010; Kelly and Lusia, 2006; Loyal, 2009; Ong, 1999; Puwar, 2004; Sayad, 2004; Weiß, 2005). Specifically, it extends the understanding of the political economy of time and space captured within the

concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Ong, 1999). In this regard it proposes the concept of *(self)colonial cultural capital* that shapes peripheral subjects' imagination of the West and guides their migration strategies aimed at acquiring (trans)nationally recognised capitals, based upon the anticipation of future profits. Although this study is limited by its scope and sample size, it provides important new insights on symbolic, epistemic violence that maintains a postcolonial binary logic that characterises the post-socialist world and that guides contemporary symbolic and material practices between and within the European East and the West (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008).

By uncovering that the labour of acquisition at least temporarily fixes workers in low-skilled jobs and enables various hybrid types of cross-cultural and ethnic-niche intermediaries to convert new arrivals' capitals into their own profits, this article supplements existing research on various transnational labour market intermediaries (Samaluk, 2014b; Bonet et al., 2013; Currie, 2008; Janta, 2011). It demonstrates that those wishing to migrate and new arrivals despite already accumulated cultural capitals, seek advice on the labour needed to acquire (trans)nationally recognised forms of cultural capital and to familiarise themselves with UK labour practices and institutions.

This article exposes how workers' (self)colonial strategies for self-improvement can serve transnational intermediaries to make profits by manipulating the most reliable

symbolic signs and utilising their cultural social capital that comes in the form of their ethnic and/or temporal proximity to those wishing to migrate or new arrivals. In this regard, it exposes commonalities and differences among CEE workers, emphasises gender and age dimensions and demonstrates that temporal, spatial and cultural dimensions play a key role in the power struggles among agents within transnational exchange. By pointing out the dangers that await the migrant workers who have not yet had the time to familiarise themselves with local labour practices and institutions, this article supplements existing research that exposes intra-ethnic and multidimensional variations in the amount of capitals and possibilities for converting them (Samaluk, 2014a; Ong, 1999, Ryan et al., 2008; Vershinina et al., 2011). Moreover, the focus on Polish and Slovenian workers' strategies also demonstrates inter-ethnic variation among diverse CEE groups. Particularly, the article contributes by providing original findings on the strategies of Slovenian recent arrivals to the UK.

Given the sample size and its characteristics, this study cannot claim general representativeness, but rather shows various strategies used by Slovenian and Polish recent arrivals with good language skills and qualifications. It would be worthwhile also to look at transnational exchange from the perspective of CEE workers who lack cultural capital prior to migration and of migrant workers arriving from other peripheral locations, as well as that of transnational labour market intermediaries.



Future research should also focus on how neo-colonial symbolic violence affects reflexive resistance and the emergence of new collectives and social movements within contemporary post-socialist peripheries.

## *Notes*

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<sup>i</sup> The American spelling of the word 'labor' comes from the text in which it appears.

<sup>ii</sup> Agency work key indicators. International Confederation of Private Employment Services (CIETT) website: <http://www.ciett.org/index.php?id=162> (Accessed 12 February 2013)

<sup>iii</sup> International - EEA mutual recognition rights. Health and Care Professions Council website: <http://www.hcpc-uk.org/apply/eeaandswitzerland/> (Accessed 15 February 2015).

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