

Migration and translocal learning: Poles in Reykjavik

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Abstract

The paper analyses learning from the perspective of migration. It is based on a qualitative study of Polish first-generation migrants in Iceland. The theoretical framework adopted is translocal learning and learning from places – which joins the perspective of social learning with learning from the environment. The empirical material was used to construct eight categories showing translocal learning outcomes: practical skills, communicative competences, analytic competence, assimilation of values, self-confidence, independence, living with uncertainty and mobility skills. The findings show that translocal learning has a critical potential of challenging the dominant ideology. Some of the learning outcomes help migrants in further migration. Finally, I suggest a new concept for future research – translocal pedagogy.

Keywords: Iceland; migration; place; translocal learning

Introduction

Iceland, has seen a relatively big migration inflow since 2006, which has changed its demographic structure – from 1,9% of foreign citizens in 1950 and 1990, to 4,6% in 2006, 7,6% in 2009, 6,7% in 2013 and 8,9% in 2017 (Statistics Iceland, 2018). The arrival of so many migrants, most of whom have not decided yet if they wish to stay there, poses new questions to researchers studying adult learning and education. An important one seems to be – what do migrants learn in the process of migration?



Theoretical framework

The research project¹ was based on the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy of place, especially on David Gruenewald's work (2003b). He advocates for making education place-based, that is, becoming more conscious of places in education in order to 'extend our notions of pedagogy and accountability outward toward places' (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 620). He does not explicitly write about adult learners, but his ideas can be translated to other fields of education. He joins the place-based education with critical pedagogy, relating to Dewey's and Freire's works, arguing that both traditions do not exclude each other, but rather – complement one another. Also, Maria Mendel (2006) emphasized the mutual relation of influence between people and places. She argued that places are by themselves pedagogical, they teach people something, they can be emancipatory or socialise people to collective norms. With this framework I was intrigued to study adult learning and education of migrants as place-based. Although studying learning from the perspective of mobility and place together may seem contradictory, both concepts are interrelated (Cresswell, 2006). Mobility does not exist without places, and places are increasingly influenced by the mobility of people, goods, money and ideas (see e.g. Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Places are seen here as dynamic (Massey, 2005), being in constant movement, place is the "situatedness during mobility" (Brickel & Datta, 2011, as cited in Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

I also refer to the translocal approach in social sciences. It joins the focus on place and locality with mobility and movement. Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013) argue that translocality is a promising approach, which emerges from the transnational theory but overcomes its limitations (such as methodological nationalism). The difference between transnational and translocal theories is the importance of particular places rather than countries.

Colin McFarlane (2011) used the notion of translocal learning, although in a different context – related to "learning the city" through translocal networks and comparison with other cities. His idea seems to be perfectly suited for the learning that migrants engage in, as it emphasizes the role of informal learning and learning through experiencing the city. He sees learning as '...a distributed assemblage of people, materials and space that is often neither formal nor simply individual' (McFarlane, 2011, p. 3). This definition stresses the importance of learning through relations rather than individually.

In line with this, migrants not only learn by themselves – they also carry knowledge and share it with others, for example with their families and friends at home. Each migrant is a 'learner, knowledge carrier and knowledge creator' (Williams, 2006, p. 596). What migrants learn has consequence for what others learn – in their places of origin, and in the places where they move. The translocal learning happens both between people and places they inhabit, and between those who move and those who don't. Moreover, with social media's growing popularity, migrants constantly share their knowledge with people who live in other places. In this study, I was interested in how people learn in places and what educational potential places have for migrants.

Design of the study

The research was designed as an ethnographic field study in the Icelandic capital district including semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 women and 18 men who came from Poland, informal conversations with both migrant and non-migrant inhabitants of the city, interviews with representatives of NGOs and public institutions working with Polish migrants, as well as taking field notes from observations of various cultural events or

Polish-community meetings. I also took autoethnographic notes from my own life as a Polish migrant in Iceland. I studied courses offered in adult education institutions, interviewed their representatives, used information provided on their websites, as well as printed booklets. Here, I will focus on findings from the interviews, conducted in 2010 with Polish migrants living in the capital district. One respondent came to Iceland as early as in the 1980's, five came in 1990's and the rest arrived after year 2000 (most after 2006). The youngest was 19 and the oldest was around 60. Some respondents were unemployed, others worked as bus drivers, building constructors, shop assistants, cleaners, kitchen assistants, teachers (mainly kindergarten teachers) and in other jobs, while two were students.

I will especially focus on the participants' answer to my question about what they feel they have learned from living in Iceland. I did not define learning for them, so they used their own understanding of the word. They understood it in different ways, as will be shown below. They also struggled with the concept of "life in Iceland", sometimes discussing if the concept of "life" includes people around. Mostly, because of the question's content, they talked about informal learning, but in some cases they associated learning with intentional learning and education, as one woman who said she had learned some English, although she had never actually *learned* it, that is, she had not taken courses in it.

Although learning from life is a process and should be analysed as such, the nature of the question I asked inclined the participants to talk about the outcomes of this process, self-assessed at the specific time of the interview. Some participants noted that they were in the process of learning something, while others could already see the results of this learning – new abilities and competences, which is why I will use the language of "learning outcomes" further in the paper. It is important to remember that these "outcomes" are seen here as moments in the process, not as its end; they are evaluated, using Doreen Massey's words, in the given "here and now", in "a moment within power-geometries" and just like place itself, they are an "unfinished business" (Massey, 2005, p. 131).

The answers were coded using a QDA programme, which produced 53 different categories under a general code "learning from life in Iceland". Moreover, there were 13 additional categories coded as "personal change", where I collected cases where respondents talked about how they changed their attitude or character due to the migration. All these categories were grouped thematically, and later categorized. Struggling to find relevant names for the categories emerging from the data (which formed clear groups but did not necessarily include any common keyword), I decided to use some concepts from the literature. I found the concept of "transnational competences" described by Koehn and Rossenau (2002) particularly relevant. Although these authors' work was mostly focused on transnational elites and workers of NGOs or transnational organisations, they also address the broader issue of transnational migration and do not exclude other migrants from their analysis. The transnational competences they described are: analytic competence, emotional competence, creative/imaginative competence and behavioral competence. Although their study has different focus and scope, and it might emphasize more cognitive dimensions rather than broader learning from life, some of these categories still describe well the data found in my research.

Basing on the interviews, I created following categories showing migrants' learning outcomes:

1. Practical skills
2. Communicative competences
3. Analytic competence
4. Assimilation of values
5. Self-confidence
6. Independence
7. Living with uncertainty
8. Mobility skills

Below I will describe these learning outcomes in detail.

Practical skills

Two respondents mentioned learning such practical skills as fishing and paragliding. They both said they learned it by themselves, but later explained that they learned it from other people. Two women mentioned practical skills they learned at a course (knitting), but they did not treat them as something important, this information was given by the way, while trying to recall if they had taken any course.

As it comes out from some interviews with migrants and with labour union representatives, Poles often passed a driving license test in Iceland. Some learned the skill of driving a car, while others might have known how to drive before, but had problems with passing the exam in Poland. In Iceland the exam was easier and cheaper – some costs were refunded by a labour union. A supermarket assistant said: 'It [Iceland] has given me this, that I got my driving license (...) because in Poland it is difficult to get, and here you could say that even dummies have it.'

Interestingly, all these practical skills have an additional meaning, which is probably why respondents considered them worth mentioning. In the first two cases the skills were related to a hobby, as well as to nature, which shows the importance of taking nature into consideration, while analysing learning from places. For M4² the skill (paragliding) had a huge importance for his lifestyle, he said that it was for him like a drug – he could not stop doing it and was thinking about paragliding all the time. Even driving does not simply mean another skill. As John Urry (2000) argues, driving a car is a part of a certain culture, where it means freedom, flexibility, privacy of being at home even during mobility. Several respondents either learned to drive or finally bought a car in Iceland – for some it was a tool helping them travelling around the island, for others it meant freedom ('We didn't have a car before and one could survive. Now we can't imagine life here without a car [...] it would be as if you were closed in a cage' [M13]). Others treated it as a major progress in their life ('I have become more self-confident, because I achieved something [...] In Poland I couldn't pass the driving license, while here I did it in a month and I bought a car after two months.' [M14]).

As in the case of the driving license – learning new skills was something people could finally afford to do after financial hardship in Poland – one respondent said that her willingness to learn new practical skills was stronger due to migration and the improvement of her economic situation:

I got my driving license. (...) Maybe because you earn some money and in some way it is easier to invest that money in your own pleasures. For example, I started knitting recently.

It's just easier to pursue your dreams, because you have a financial backup. (...) In Poland people earn less, so they realise themselves less. And if you don't realise yourself, then you are less happy. (W11)

Communicative competences

Koehn and Rosenau treat language skills as an important part of the communicative facility, which involves 'proficiency in and use of counterparts' spoken/written language', as well as skills of good communication – such as engaging in a meaningful dialogue or understanding nonverbal cues and codes, which one does not necessarily have even if one speaks the foreign language fluently (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002, p. 110).

When it comes to language courses in Reykjavik – the main reason for participation was learning to communicate at work and develop professionally, but more educated migrants seemed to like language learning as such. The most common reasons for non-participation in such courses were lack of success at first attempts of learning the language, as well as working long hours. Some migrants considered language courses to be useless, either because they did not believe in their own ability to learn, or because they were dissatisfied with teaching methods. These were often evaluated as inadequate and boring – with too much focus on grammar, too few chances to speak, too few tests and too little homework. They pointed to some teachers' lack of experience and teaching competences. Thus, some chose learning Icelandic informally, from colleagues or other social contacts. Those who did not stop at one course saw a bigger variety of teachers and teaching methods and often valued those who were more demanding and who motivated the students.

Interestingly, although learning Icelandic was the respondents' main intentional educational activity, none of them mentioned learning the language as a crucial learning outcome of their stay, apart from a 23-year old woman, who stated:

First of all, I've overcome this language barrier. This for sure, because although I learned English at school and even in some college, I came here [to Iceland] and there was this fear, I couldn't say a word... But I've overcome this barrier. And... I got to know their language, their culture, there are many things I will remember from Iceland. (W5)

Surprisingly, the most important learning outcome for her related to English. She did learn some Icelandic – from a course and her colleagues, but she did not consider it important for her future:

I generally try not to speak Icelandic too much. Because it won't be useful anymore for me, so I try to improve my English and I speak English more. [...] I just wanted to get to know it [Icelandic], to be able to say something. Just a kind of curiosity. (W5)

None of the respondents could see how they could use Icelandic skills when they return to Poland or move somewhere else. They did, however, imagine using English or, as M1 – Chinese. M1 wanted to study it at a university in Poland, but failed at an entrance exam, and applied to an Icelandic university after two years of working in Reykjavik. He was determined to learn Chinese and stopped learning Icelandic to have more time for his studies. Before, he lived in Ireland and learned English there, which helped him study Chinese in English. But the language he learned in Ireland was mostly spoken, resulting in severe difficulties with writing essays and passing exams. This reminds us that language competences developed abroad may be incomplete – covering only some skills. This case proves that migrants will often learn a language considered more universal,

useful (English, Chinese) or important for their future – some said they wanted to learn Norwegian or French, as they planned to move to other countries.

Analytic competence

One transnational competence listed by Koehn and Rosenau is the analytic competence. It means ‘Understanding of the central beliefs, values, practices, and paradoxes of counterpart culture(s) and society(ies) – including political and ethnic awareness’, and the ‘ability to link counterpart-country conditions to one's own circumstances and *vice versa*’ (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002, p. 110).

The analytic competence, based on cognitive learning and analysing the reality was probably easiest to develop, comparing to other translocal learning outcomes of migration. Many migrants developed this competence – they talked extensively about differences between Iceland, Poland and other countries they visited. Their analysis regarded culture, society, but also nature – weather and landscape. They talked about the Icelandic financial and political situation, and about their own situation in the crisis – unemployment, closing of the building projects, the impact of the currency exchange rate on their plans (more in: 'deleted for anonymity'). While describing Iceland, they compared it to Poland and, thus, learned about their own country from this comparison and from the distance.

Some differences pointed by migrants included:

- better social security in Iceland (‘The subsistence level is secured for everyone, the basic needs, that you won't be hungry or cold, or thirsty, the necessities, so it's OK’, M4),
- less stress in the society (‘they don't worry about tomorrow’, W8; ‘they have time for everything, we are [on the contrary] stressed all the time’, W10; ‘life is somehow slower here’, M6),
- more safety and ability to be who you are (‘What I like most is this peacefulness, this safety. [...] I go for a walk and there are no people [...] nobody bothers you in this freedom of movement. [...] You can be yourself, of course without breaking any rules.’, M2; ‘[In Poland] there is this view that you cannot be different, otherwise people would talk about you, they would point their fingers at you’, M4),
- cleanliness of air and water,
- smaller social inequalities (‘[the life in Iceland] has taught me to appreciate that [...] it's a very fair and social society.’, W8; ‘there is no upper class and lowest class, in Poland there are both. Here everybody goes together, the president and I, we buy in the same shop’, W7),
- the way people are treated in Iceland regardless of their job or origin (‘they are Protestants and they respect people who work well [...] it doesn't matter if one is a manager or a cleaner’, W9; ‘It doesn't matter what your job is [you are still respected]’, W15; ‘I've met many people who have loads of money, education, they are lawyers, bankers, but when you get in touch with them, all of this is unimportant’, M4; ‘people are very nice, I've noticed it right away, they are helpful and it doesn't matter if you are an Icelander or a foreigner’, M1).

Sometimes, they were critical towards Iceland, e.g. saying that people rarely cook on their own, cannot fix things at home, are not spontaneous, work more slowly and cannot cope

in conflict situations. Some migrants faced a difference and did not know what to think about it. One kindergarten teacher did not know what to think about the fact that children call adults by first names:

Their idea of upbringing... [...] I've only seen one danger... I don't know if it is all right... that they say "you" [instead of Sir/Madam]... if on the child level... or maybe I'm narrow-minded? Maybe I'm old-fashioned? Should it be this way... how much... when to allow them call you "you"? Doesn't it blur, you know, the question of mutual respect to the older person? But on the other hand, it's in a way... like friends, right? While in Poland you hear about various aggressive behaviours or lack of respect towards teachers. (W1)

Here we can clearly see an analytical thinking process.

When it comes to nature, there were some negative opinions, especially about the weather ('It seems to me sometimes that it's our second country, but I wouldn't like to be here, because the weather scares me. I prefer my Poland.', W16; 'I don't see my future here in this country, absolutely not. [...] First of all because of the weather. [...] Most of the year it's dark, it rains, I feel bad, I have awful headaches.', W8) and a few positive ones about the summer or the landscape ('The sights are fantastic here, especially in the summer', M13; 'the landscape is rough [...] you feel you get more in touch with nature. [...] there are places here untouched by human feet', M4; 'When it comes to the climate and the landscape, it's a very different and original country. So interesting. Beautiful on the one hand and, on the other hand, scary sometimes', M6)

What do these opinions mean for learning? They suggest that migrants not only observe people and society, but also nature, which is an important element of a place. Doreen Massey wrote that "'nature", and the "natural landscape", are classic foundations for the appreciation of place' (Massey, 2005, p. 137), while for David Gruenewald ecology and the natural environment are some of the "dimensions of places" (Gruenewald, 2003a). When migrants assess nature (the climate, weather or landscape), they learn something about themselves, about their own preferences – where they would be able and willing to live, and where they would not – and about the importance it has for their lives. Before migrating they probably knew something about the climate, but they might not have expected that it would matter so much for them, as they had not experienced it physically.

The analytic competence was something migrants gained by living in Iceland and observing it, as well as by experiencing life in the country. Iceland was seen from a perspective – always in comparison to Poland and sometimes also with other countries. This way, migrants learned to understand and handle their situation in Iceland, but also about differences between places; they learned to expect a difference if they move again, which means that it also prepared them for future migrations.

Assimilation of values

Just like the place-related skills and competences described before, migrants adapted to the new place by observing values, attitudes and behaviours in the Icelandic society and assimilating them. There were many aspects of life in Iceland, which impressed my respondents and were considered to be better than the relevant characteristics of Poland – social security, safety, cleanliness, etc. They were related to certain values in the Icelandic society. Altogether my respondents named over 50 values which they observed in Icelanders' behaviour or in the functioning of the state system, which could be summarised as: respect, trust, helpfulness, openness and politeness towards other people

regardless of their origin or socio-economic status; justice, equality, social security for all; freedom, lack of control from the state or other people; peacefulness, distance to life events; honesty of the simple people (but dishonesty of the ones who had power and caused the crisis).

Subsequently, some migrants claimed that they changed and assimilated these values. They described learning in Iceland as changing some parts of their character, their personality. This is an important element of learning, emphasized by Wenger: ‘learning [...] is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but also a process of becoming – to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person’ (in: Williams, 2006, p. 598). These new personality traits were related to values found in the Icelandic society and to the idealised vision of Iceland. Migrants felt they learned patience (since Icelanders “don’t hurry”, M1), and decency (understood as “being OK” towards other people, M6). One young man compared his learning to what he had learned in England before:

I calmed down here [...]. In England [...] I got more courage. Before... I wasn't able to stand up to people. Now I know that if somebody wants to mess with me, I'd confront him right away. [...] So I was loaded with courage and then I came here and – maybe it hasn't disappeared – but it got balanced. I started thinking that I don't want any trouble. (M2)

Koehn and Rosenau mentioned an “emotional competence”, including ‘Motivation and ability to open oneself up continuously to divergent cultural influences and experiences’ as well as ‘sense of transnational efficacy’ (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002, p. 110). It is important, they say, to ‘avoid judgmental attributions based on perceived cultural difference’ (p. 112). Similarly, life in Iceland not only taught migrants that things can be different, but it also influenced their attitude towards others and themselves, e.g. on the axis of closed/opened attitude. Some said that life in Iceland taught them more tolerance towards others, such as to people of other origin, or that they got rid of some pre-conceived notions:

It [life in Iceland] has taught me a different attitude to life, it has made me get rid of some pre-conceived notions, for example, my colleague is gay [...], there is right to abortion, what else... in-vitro and so on... and nothing bad happens. They have the highest population growth in Europe, everybody is happy, and in Poland they are trying to scare us that people will stop procreating, they will kill all the children, but nothing like that happens. (...) There is a lot of diversity here. (M3)

Another man, a bus driver, described how he first learned more racist and xenophobic views from a drunken passenger and only later, after four years he started seeing black people in a less stereotypical way. Initially, stereotyping others might have been used to feel better in a situation where one could be stereotyped by Icelanders because of one's nationality.

Although some learned openness towards others, there were also accounts of learning the contrary – to be more cautious. All of them were related to the vulnerability of migrant life, when one can be cheated, not knowing who to trust. This was related in two situations to lending money to someone untrustworthy. One respondent said:

One learns throughout the whole life, that's what people say. What has it [the life here] taught me? Maybe not life... although people around me are also my life, right? I think I'm more cautious towards other people. [...] I know that I will never lend money to anybody. Not a chance. (M2)

One woman learned cautiousness towards men, after being harassed by another migrant – a Polish criminal trying to escape justice in a small town in Iceland, where she had lived before. Such “negative” learning, making one more cautious and less willing to act (as in “deleted for anonymity”) can be a powerful experience related to migration – since migrants are vulnerable, they often cannot rely on their friends and family and can become victims of abuse. This respondent moved to Reykjavik and said that she was trying to “unlearn” what her previous experiences had taught her, that is, that she should not trust people. She said that she stopped being afraid later, learned “unbelievable openness”, and started feeling there like home. ‘There are very few things I’m afraid of right now’ – she said (W4). Also one couple remembered being treated badly by other Poles (“with psychological disorders”, M4) – their landlords. This experience did not, however, cause important changes in the respondents' attitude (according to them), and with time they said they learned to be more friendly towards others:

W11: I think I also [learned] that it is good to be nice to others. M4: Yeah! I think I had noticed that before. It's worth it... No matter how people behave towards you, it is worthwhile to have a positive attitude and to be nice. (...) In Poland I also tried to be nice, but it was more difficult, because you would meet more negative attitudes everywhere.

It would be interesting to see if the new attitude is transferable to other countries, or if the respondents would have to “unlearn” it, when/if they return to Poland. Research shows that return migrants often feel lost and experience culture shock again (e.g. Niedźwiedzki, 2010).

The respondents above said that people were nicer and more open in Iceland, and they related it to general lack of stress and smaller inequalities between people in Iceland. Together with other migrants they have created a powerful vision of an island of peacefulness, where there is equality, everybody is respected, people are open, friendly and helpful (although lazy, some claimed) and where one does not need to be overly ambitious, because it does not really matter what one does. This ideal vision of Iceland seen through the eyes of Polish migrants was not shared by the Icelanders I talked to and who considered themselves to be hard-working and stressed. It was a translation of reality, in the sense described by Czarniawska, who discussed travelling ideas (in: Williams, 2006, p. 593). Migrants were translating the reality, creating knowledge about Iceland and sharing it with others, also back home. This translation sometimes included factual mistakes, but migrants were not aware of the distortions. When they described Iceland to others – in Iceland or Poland, the translation became an unreal vision of the country. Their learning was more than individual, they shared stories and experiences, through which they were learning the city (see McFarlane, 2011).

In some cases, we can talk about a perceived change of one's attitude towards oneself. Sometimes it was related to the described relaxed atmosphere, especially at work:

I think... I learned... maybe I don't know if I learned it or I got used to it. To more calm and peace, to respecting myself, my working time. Icelanders have taught me that. They said that a break is a holy thing. How can you not want to have a break? I wouldn't say that I learned laziness, because some say that they have become more lazy because of all these breaks, because Icelanders do something more slowly... [...] sometimes I just relax, I have it imprinted that I never fool around, just the opposite. (W1)

Comparing Icelandic and Polish attitude towards work was a common thread in the interviews. The difference influenced some migrants' behavior, although others used it to show the superiority of their approach (see more in: deleted for anonymity).

Self-confidence

Changing one's attitude meant becoming more self-confident or believing more in one's abilities. It was possible because of what one achieved thanks to migration (getting a driving license, a car, or finally getting a job).

Two migrants said that they had become less shy or more courageous, which can be interpreted as gaining confidence. A kindergarten teacher claimed:

Life in Iceland has changed me a lot. Maybe... frankly speaking, the work has changed me. [...] when I started work, I was very quiet and... very shy. The job has taught me here. Not life so much, but the work, the people. (W10)

In Koehn and Rosenau's words 'The self-confidence, or a sense of personal transnational efficacy, constitutes the culminating emotional skill.' They quote Conolly and Bruner, who say that transnational self-confidence 'involves learning that one can do things with a certain likelihood of success and, moreover, with a fair likelihood of being able to run the course again should one fail' (in Koehn & Rosenau, 2002, p. 112). Migration –often giving people hope that they can achieve something in life – is, thus, a way of achieving the emotional competence.

Independence

Becoming more courageous can be linked to personal development and “maturing” – the respondents who talked about gaining courage were in their twenties when they moved to Iceland. Some participants who left Poland at this age mentioned learning independence. Moving to Iceland served the same purpose as simply moving out of home – they became more independent, had to take care of their finances, started their first full-time. One 23-year old woman said: '[Life here taught me] independence for sure. Thriftiness maybe as well, managing my own funds.' (W5). Another answered: 'Responsibility. I've grown up here. My whole family is in Poland, so I had to take care of everything by myself.' (W6). Even though this change could have happened elsewhere, it would be more difficult in Poland to find a job allowing the respondents to move to their own place quickly, because of high unemployment at that time and relatively low wages. One man said:

It's not about money, but maybe when I say it, it will seem like it's about money. There is generally no work for me in Poland as a teacher [...] The teachers' salary is such, that I could not work as a teacher. [...] My mum says that my room is always there for me, but she's... how to put it... she's crazy, right? Now after 2,5 years of managing my life by myself, I just do whatever I want.... When I wanted to go to a concert to London, I did.[...] I've travelled the world a bit and now she says I could go to my old room and work as a teacher for 800 PLN [appr. 200 Euro]?! (M3)

He exaggerated the difference in salaries to prove he could not live independently in Poland. He stated that it is impossible for a single person to work and rent an apartment, so one would have to live with their parents. Migration helped him become independent and learn to live alone. Two other migrants (aged 19 and 23) stated they learned something about themselves – about their talents and what they wanted to do in life, and decided to move elsewhere in order to study. They had come to Iceland either because of their family or friends who were also moving, but in Iceland they grew more independent

and self-directed, and decided to move again – now because of their own educational needs.

Living with uncertainty

While some migrants felt they became more independent, others said they lost control over their lives. It usually started with changing one's initial migration plan – those who wanted to come for limited time, stayed longer and could not decide when to leave. The uncertainty grew stronger with the events that were beyond their control. The most important one was the onset of the economic crisis, which changed the economic foundations of their stay (they started earning less, when calculated in Polish zloty, sometimes lost half of their savings and were for some time unable to transfer money to Poland). But also nature, especially the Eyjafjallajökull's eruption in 2010 increased their instability and led them to a feeling that they cannot control their life. Asked about his plans for the future, one building constructor answered:

Well, I don't know what the situation is now after the crisis with all the loans... A lot of people, a lot of Poles lost money [...] I don't know, maybe the volcano will change something. [laughter] It will change everybody's plans in the whole Iceland. I have heard that Americans said they could evacuate the whole island. [...] If Katla erupts... [M18]

He analysed the change in the currency value, the situation in case other volcanoes erupt, but could not answer the question about his plans. Some other respondents said that they could not plan anything, because it never turned out the way they had planned. W1, who first worked as a cleaner and then slowly progressed to work in a kindergarten, said:

... when my situation had just normalised and I changed my job [...] then suddenly came the crisis. [...] I started feeling a bit insecure. [...] What will happen next? Nobody knows [...] Will I end up homeless? I have such visions and I am afraid myself [...]. I can't answer the question about what will happen and how it is now. I am here now [...] We'll see... (W1)

She decided to focus on what is now rather than be bound with any plans. Similarly, another teacher said that the crisis had a role in changing the way one looks at life:

Since the crisis... suddenly people stopped throwing away everything, they started respecting [things]. Maybe it's very sad, but I think that [the crisis] was necessary. Not only for them [Icelanders], but also for us. For everybody, in a way, in order to really wake up. We have today and we'll see what will happen tomorrow. (W4)

The experience of the crisis, when people learned that their money can just disappear – changed some people's attitude. As W4 claimed – if you cannot be sure of the future, you start respecting things, and stop throwing them away. Interestingly, those who saved money for a couple of years, spending as little as possible (e.g. never going to restaurants) and lost much of their savings (as M13 and W15), decided to quit saving. The crisis had, thus, a powerful effect on one's attitude to life and to the part of life spent in Iceland. Nevertheless, the effects of the crisis or other unforeseen events were not mentioned while answering the question about learning in Iceland – they appeared in other parts of the interview, suggesting that learning may have been regarded as something positive and not associated with difficult events in life.

Mobility skills

All the learning outcomes described so far could be useful both in one's life in Iceland, and elsewhere, if one moved again. Some respondents talked explicitly about the effects of their learning on their future mobility. Especially in relation to learning new languages ('If I were to change the country of my stay for a longer time now, I would be able to learn this country's language in a year' [M3]), becoming less afraid of moving when one had learned some English; learning to fight for one's rights in a foreign environment, and learning to cope abroad ('For sure it [life in Iceland] has taught me something – how to live among foreigners, how to cope' [M16]). One man talked about learning to cope in a local perspective – he had to learn 'how to live, how to function in their climate, in their so to say everyday life, going to the office...' (M6) – this was something needed for adaptation in Iceland, but learning to cope abroad could also be used later, if he decided to move.

Learning because of the change

As described above, learning changed my respondents in some way. But they also stated it was change as such that facilitated learning. One woman who studied in Poland and worked there for some years said that change brings more self-confidence:

[I learned] to fight for myself and I feel more self-confident. And I got more... When I took the decision to leave, I had to resign from my job. And [I had to] come here, start everything anew, I do it all the time. I'm a mobile person, so I say to myself jokingly that I don't know how long I will stay here, what it will look like. I like changes and sometimes after living for a couple of years in one place I say that I'm bored... [...] the first time is most difficult, when you have to resign, make the choice, start something anew. Then it gets better. And it was a kind of a lesson. That the world doesn't end at one thing, the one in which you are at the moment. [It teaches] The easiness of making decisions, cutting something off. Taking challenges, making changes... (W1)

Some said they were bored with their old job and needed something new, where they would learn more, instead of getting bored ('I wanted change. [...] Not just in my work, but I wanted to change something in my life. I needed new stimuli, new impetuses.' [M4]). One bus driver quoted a known phrase that travelling broadens the mind, saying that he couldn't travel during the communist times, even though he wanted to. Change and migration were seen as learning opportunities in one's life. They changed the perspective – said one young woman:

Now I look differently at going abroad, I think that every journey teaches, it opens perspectives, I look at many things now from a totally different perspective... I'm somehow still the same person, I make the same mistakes all the time, but it's a totally different point of view. (W4)

Migration was also a challenge – after copying with it, it might be easier to cope with other challenges. Another respondent said:

It's a huge challenge to move somewhere, to find yourself in a country where no one understands you, where you don't understand... I've noticed one thing, that if you don't understand, it also has positive sides, because you are left alone with your thoughts and you don't get involved with these people's emotions, you relax. [...] For me it's relaxing, I talk to somebody, only as much as I need to get an answer, but I don't get involved too much. (W11)

This suggests that migration may lead to more reflexivity, and can serve as a refuge, as time to think over one's life. For some, Iceland was, however, just a moment in life, preceding other changes:

I'm getting bored a bit. Although there happens something all the time in terms of cultural life. But I've been to every museum (...) I've seen all Icelandic bands, nobody comes here. I got bored a bit and there really is nothing to do on weekends. (M2)

The man planned to move to another country, and he actually did it later. He had been living in England before and it seems that he had a strategy of learning intensively in one place, participating in the cultural life there and then moving further like a nomad. He used a network of his friends in order to take part in concerts all around Europe. Learning through constant travelling bears reminiscence of the concept of nomadic learning, described e.g. by Piotr Kowzan (2008), although it lacks the political and anti-systemic consciousness described in Kowzan's research.

Translocal learning - discussion

Although in my initial question I asked what the respondents learned by living in the new place, most answers indicated that people not only learn about places, but also through comparisons of places, such as their hometowns or other places which they had visited. The findings show a kind of translocal learning – that is, learning from many places simultaneously, learning from changing places. The prefix “trans-” comes from Latin and means “through”. Likewise, I would argue that migrants learn by going through places – they learn in the movement. My respondents’ learning was translocal when we look at the totality of their life – spent in several places. Many did not plan to stay in Iceland and some actually moved after the interview – mostly to Norway.

In my research I asked about Iceland, which is probably why I got many answers comparing Iceland and Poland. Still, some participants said they learned something else in Reykjavik than in another Icelandic town they had lived in (e.g. trusting people in Reykjavik but not in another). Moreover, another man clearly limited his experiences to certain places, saying that he felt safe in Reykjavik, but very unsafe in his hometown. He did not want to talk about Poland as a whole, saying that he had never lived in other places in Poland than his hometown, so his remarks are limited to this place. He described his experiences in England as specific to the particular city. Therefore, the learning was translocal rather than transnational, which proves that the concept of translocal learning could be more useful than looking at learning from a transnational perspective.

McFarlane’s (2011) definition of translocal learning stressed the importance of collective learning. Contrariwise, my respondents talked about their individual learning outcomes and what living in Iceland meant for their individual lives. While learning was considered an individual process, migrants had a shared view on Iceland and its values. Their migration stories were similar and formed patterns, e.g. there were many similarities between migration stories of five female respondents who came to Iceland in the 1990's. Some of the most common perspectives in migration studies analyse migration from a perspective of waves, networks and chains – that is, collectives of people. This study shows that many migrants learned by assimilating similarly perceived Icelandic values, which suggests that we can look at migrants’ translocal learning as a collective process. In McFarlane's (2011) definition, people learn not only from social contacts, but also from contacts with materials, systems, rhythms and routines. My respondents talked, however, mostly about learning from other people and from work – the latter including not only

other people or “communities of practice”³ (Wenger, 2009), but also routines or the rhythm of work, such as breaks. Arguably, migrants learned something from such events as the onset of the economic crisis or the volcano eruption. The crisis – although caused by humans, cannot only be attributed to certain people, but rather to financial systems and global financial markets, whereas the volcano eruption was a natural catastrophe. Thus, migrants’ learning was not only social, but related to other dimensions of place, such as nature, the political and financial system and ideology, which are important in place-conscious education, especially in the concept of “critical pedagogy of place” (Gruenewald, 2003b). The study shows that migrants’ translocal learning can actually be critical, in terms of challenging the dominant ideology. This could be seen in the extract from the interview with M3, who said that he learned that what he was told about homosexuals or abortion was not true. One could say that he empirically verified opinions about alternative social models and became more conscious of misleading ideologies.

The translocal learning was powerful – migrants changed the concept of self (from seeing oneself as shy, to being self-confident, willing to undertake new challenges), emotional response patterns (being more patient, tolerant and calm), as well as schema and stereotypes. They said e.g. that they had become more open to other people, they changed their pre-conceived notions about homosexuals, foreigners or people of different race. Their personality traits might have changed, too – they felt that they had become more independent or more decent.

Translocal pedagogy – suggestion of a new approach

The translocal perspective in studies of adult education and learning could be an interesting approach showing the educational potential of place rather than just time (as in theories related to learning in certain life stages). Apart from the concept of translocal learning, I would like to propose here a concept of translocal pedagogy – pedagogy understood here as a scientific discipline, studying educational processes and educational discourse. The translocal pedagogy, unlike the concept of translocal learning could study not only educational processes happening between places and “through” places, but also educational discourse related to translocal learning, as well as the policies related to such learning. It could also study specific educational programmes and their local and translocal aspects (as I tried to do in 'deleted for anonymity'). It would be, e.g., interesting for future research to see if any educational initiatives could enhance the translocal learning and produce something that migrants would remember as a significant learning outcome of their stay. In other words, studying the relation between place, mobility and education promises interesting results and is needed in the contemporary world, where places are not fixed and bound anymore, and neither are their inhabitants. Apart from learning, also teaching needs to be taken into account, as well as relations between formal, non-formal and informal education conscious of places and mobility. Thus, the concept of translocal pedagogy can prove useful for future research.

Notes

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² Transcripts are coded with M/W for man/woman and a subsequent number.

³ Østerlund and Carlile criticised Wenger's theory as static and too much focused on interactions within one community rather than between various communities. There are other studies, emphasizing cross-communal relations, but mostly focused on the managerial perspective (2003). It seems, thus, that more focus on space and translocal relations could benefit the practice theory.

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