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## Where do multiple migrants feel at home?

How many homes can one have? Can a home be kept in a suitcase? Or only in one's mind? These are just some of the issues the Multimig team, led at CMR by Justyna Salamońska has been pondering. The first results of their research are discussed in the following pages of the September issue of CMR Spotlight.



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# Multiple homes? What do we learn from exploring a sense of home among Polish multiple migrants

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## The MULTIMIG project

According to classic theories, the concept of migration involves a move from place A to place B of a more or less permanent character. However, settlement in the country of destination is only one of the possible migration outcomes, with some migrants returning to the place of origin, and others moving on to other places. The Multimig project proposes an innovative approach to study the latter case of multiple migrants, that is Poles moving internationally who have experienced living in at least two destination countries for 3 months or more in each. The extensive mobility of Poles, with its broad geographical spread and changing mobility patterns, makes it a particularly useful case study of the multiple migration phenomenon.

Multimig started in 2016 and will continue until 2021. The project follows a mixed-methods strategy. First, it tracks a highly mobile population via an online survey (Web-based Respondent Driven Sampling). The survey has already been completed. The questionnaire concerned migration and work trajectories, life course events, social relations and a series of attitudinal questions. We have outlined the rationale of the survey in a [working paper](#) and described some of the preliminary results in a [report](#) (in Polish).

Secondly, the project follows geographical and life trajectories of multiple migrants across time via a Qualitative Panel Study (QPS). The first wave of

interviews was conducted in 2018-2019. In this Spotlight, we focus on preliminary analysis results with the aim of exploring the 'sense of home' among Polish multiple migrants. We argue that it is in this extreme case of people moving repeatedly over time and space, that we can bring to the fore how they construct their sense of home in the context of multiple mobility.

## Note about the QPS methodology

The QPS will consist of three waves of semi-structured interviews in year-by-year intervals. The longitudinal character of the study means that we will be conducting interviews with the same people over the 3-year research period, having a unique possibility to follow the interlocutors on their way and to analyze their paths as it is in the process of creating, specifying and (potentially) realizing plans. The first wave of interviews focused on life histories and migration trajectories. The interviewees shared with the research team a great complexity of motives and opportunities for migration, as well as a complicated net of paths and life trajectories.

We managed to interview 70 Polish migrants, both men and women at various points in their life courses, with different levels of resources (social and cultural capital, education, qualifications and occupations), diverse family situation and different multiple migration trajectories. Around half of the sample were women and over two thirds of the sample had

university degrees. They were between 22 and 60 years old (with a mean age of 35). At the time of the interviews the QPS participants were located in 30 different countries, mostly European ones. The migration trajectories of the interviewees passed via two up to seven different countries. We were able to reach these mobile Poles at various places around the world thanks to Information and Communication technologies such as Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Signal or phone. In many cases, our interlocutors were at their apartment with a cup of tea, a perfect setting to chat about the concept of home.

### **Where is home in the accounts of multiple migrants?**

The concept of home is highly subjective and multidimensional (see e.g. Moore 2000). Various authors have looked at constructs of home-making in the context of international migration, including accounts on the highly mobile: transnational professionals (Nowicka 2007, Butcher 2010) or Third Culture Kids (Trąbka 2016). The Multimig project contributes to this literature by focusing on Polish multiple migrants living abroad, a very diverse group in terms of demographic characteristics and socio-economic status.

The preliminary analysis of the QPS data relating to the concept of home shows that this was in some cases an issue considered by our informants already before the actual interview meeting. Nevertheless, many people did not have a clear answer and struggled with verbalizing their opinions and emotions on this matter. Our main research aim was to uncover the dimensions involved in home-making processes among

multiple migrants. Among these were understandings of home:

- in a territorial sense, where home is perceived as a “known” and familiar place, often attributed also with symbolic meaning, connected to specific memories or values,
- in a relational sense - home as significant people or pets,
- in a material sense - of a house and objects (such as furniture or plants),
- or, finally, home as home-making practices which do not connote any specific location, people, object or attachment.

In some cases, it was Poland - the starting point of migration - which featured as home and a place missed dearly. Trips back to Poland (even for short periods of stay) were associated with “going back home”, although at the same time this would be accompanied with ambiguous and difficult to grasp feelings of not actually being “in place” anymore:

*It's still somehow inside me that I think about Poland as my home. And I come back (...) but now it happens rarely that I come back to live there, to be there. (Male, lived in the UK, Ireland, Norway)*

For many people Poland was not the same place that they had left. Their parents’ place or the place where they had grown up, changed since they moved, challenging their sense of belonging. In some cases, it was not only the informants who were gone, but also their close friends who had moved elsewhere.

Returning to Poland (their original home) also proved challenging when faced with the reality of actually spending some time there. Being in Poland sometimes entailed missing actual home

in the country of destination, where migrants now lived. In this sense, the trip “back home” could actually become a trip “in-between homes”, which sometimes generated ambivalence and perplexity:

*When I said it earlier I meant Poland, home in Poland. But now I don't know where my home is. I think it's here...* (Female, lived in Switzerland, Netherlands)

Stories became even more complicated as migration trajectories diversified regarding the number of places where people lived. Homes also multiplied on the way:

*Actually, I have three places [which are home] now: X [city in Poland], Y [city in Australia], Z [city in Chile]. And absolutely in every one of these I now have the impression that it is my home. And this is a great feeling, but also a pretty stressful one as my stuff is all over the world.* (Female, lived in Australia, Netherlands, Belgium, Chile)

Crucially, territorial perspectives varied in terms of scale, as the participants referred to home in terms of neighbourhoods, cities, countries and even continents, where symbolic boundaries were drawn in reference to feelings of familiarity, important memories, experiences and events, common values and cultural similarity. However, narratives referred not only to actual places and locations but most importantly also to social relations, including family, friends, acquaintances and/or pets, that make home, irrespectively of where they are based:

*At some point, when you start moving a lot, you start feeling that home is where you are, where the person with whom you live is.* (Female, lived in New Zealand, UK)

For others it was a mobility of objects that they travelled with that made it possible to feel at home. The kilos of luggage that they carried were emotionally charged – with books that made them think of home, with photos of pets or some sentimental jewellery pieces. These objects gave migrants some sense of stability on the go, giving emotional weight to the mobility experience:

*... we had three suitcases, 90 kilos or more, plus rucksacks. I remember I only took 18 books with me just to have a piece of home with me.* (Female, lived in Germany, Iceland)

Among the diverse accounts of home, what stood out were stories of participants who did not feel at home in specific places, but rather saw their home everywhere. Some stressed the internal sense of home, against the attachment to objects, people or places:

*You just create it [home] inside. Not on the outside, you create it inside yourself.* (Male, lived in Ireland, Spain, Montenegro, UK).

In most cases, the sense of home was constructed on the go and on the basis of personal experiences, where multiple migrations featured as important life events. We find one account particularly interesting and inspiring in thinking of home in the context of mobility. One of the participants referred to the Silesian saying which, in a local dialect, distinguishes between trunks, bushes and birds, making the distinction between the immobility of trunks and sedentarity of bushes (which have moved before settling) against the constant mobility of birds. The interviewee remembered only part of this saying (about bushes and birds) and accounted it using the Silesian dialect. This local saying with a new

twist encapsulated how this sense of home is a mix of the way we were taught to think about home and the constant re-construction – on the go – of what home actually is:

*...there are people-bushes [krzaki] and people-birds [ptoki], right? A bush is, you know, you'll plant it in one place and it'll stay there and grow in this place, without moving around. And others are like birds, they keep flying here and there.*  
(Male, lived in France, Netherlands, UK)

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