

Liquid migration, grounded lives: considerations about future mobility and settlement among Polish and Spanish migrants in Norway

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ABSTRACT

The 2004 EU extension and the 2008 financial crisis triggered new migration flows within Europe, and subsequent debates about what the novelty of these migration flows consists of. We draw on adult Polish and Spanish migrants' in Norway's considerations about future mobility and settlement, and explore how these situate themselves in relation to conceptualisations of intra-European migration as 'liquid'. Family concerns, economic factors and working life conditions in countries of origin appear as significant in migrants' reflections about the future. This seems to contrast with conceptualisations of intra-European migration as 'liquid' in the sense of increasing individualisation, lifestyles of mobility and a migrant habitus. Rather a 'normal life' is emphasised by migrants' underscoring desires to lead more *grounded lives*, under less 'liquid' conditions. Migrants' already established lives in Norway, together with deregulated labour markets in Poland and Spain, are experienced as reasons not to return. Migrants' considerations about the future suggest that key characteristics of South–North and East–West intra-European migration flows to Norway, appear to be converging: with a trend of transition to longer-term settlement and a wish for more grounded lives, where dignity is central and ongoing mobility is less prominent.

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Introduction

How useful is it to describe contemporary intra-European migration as liquid? The vantage point of this article is the study of intra-European migration (Engbersen et al. 2013; Favell 2008a, 2008b; King 2002; Verwiebe, Wiesböck, and Teitzer 2014), where the merits of describing the new face of intra-European migration as 'liquid' – or not – are currently being debated (Black et al. 2010; Engbersen 2015; Engbersen and Snel 2013). We ask: *how are notions of 'liquid migration' made relevant when adult intra-European migrants talk about mobility, settlement and the future?* We draw on accounts about the future provided by Polish and Spanish migrants in Norway, with a relatively recent migration history (2–8 years), who were either settled and working in Norway, or who

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were engaging in ‘transnational commuting’ to Poland on a long-term basis. Contrary to many studies of intra-European migration (see e.g. Cairns 2014; Jendrissek 2016; King et al. 2015) we have *not* chosen to focus primarily on the life worlds of *young* migrants. Although we have included research participants from their mid-20s to their late 50s, the majority are in their 30s and 40s. This study thus looks at questions of mobility and settlement from the perspective of *adults*, a group of migrants that is probably more likely to have aspirations for a grounded life than younger migrants.

Studies of intra-European migration, and its particularities following from free-mobility, have focused on patterns of individualisation, whether in the form of adventure and freedom, or fragmentation and loneliness (Favell 2008a). Building on Zygmunt Bauman’s work on ‘liquid modernity’ (2000, 2007) and ‘liquid lives’ (2005), ‘liquid migration’ is one way of conceptualising the particularities of legally almost unconstrained intra-European migration, which is characterised by: temporariness, labour migration, legal residential status, unpredictability, individualisation and a ‘migrant habitus’ of open options and intentional unpredictability (Engbersen 2015, 7–8). If ‘liquid migration’ is characterised by increasing individualisation, which is suggested to lead to an emerging migrant habitus, how does this play out among contemporary intra-European migrants? Our analysis of accounts about the future provided by Polish and Spanish migrants in Norway shows how *stability* and working life conditions are framed as matters of high importance to their migration projects.

In the interviews, ambivalence about return migration often centre on reflections about the organisation of ‘working life’ in countries of origin. The lack of opportunities to create predictable futures under the precarious labour market conditions in countries of origin was foregrounded. Although many recently arrived migrants also find themselves in more precarious segments of the Norwegian labour market, accessing a working life that grants more predictability and better conditions is within reach for many. Therefore, the Norwegian labour market importantly stands out as one where escaping precariousness is seen as relatively likely. The fact that a grounded life is *within reach* in this particular context, thus means that Norway provides a particularly good case study for exploring the ways in which contemporary intra-European migration may or may not be seen to be ‘liquid’ when focusing on the questions of individualisation vs. family considerations and the hypothesis about the emergence of a migrant habitus of open options and intentional unpredictability. The Norwegian context of settlement, presents the backdrop for these considerations of the future, often set against the country of origin – Poland or Spain, in evaluations and comparisons made by our research participants. The context of increasing precariousness in the Polish and Spanish labour markets became salient for the analysis, through the ways in which migrants’ themselves talked about their futures. Arguably, in the context of our research, the Norwegian context’s importance lies specifically in the availability of work, in the relative job security, in welfare provisions and in the possibility for intra-European migrants to settle down and establish lives in Norway.

In contexts with (declining) employment protection, the significance of subjective economic factors, in addition to objective criteria such as wage levels or unemployment, emerges as key to understanding emigration and return migration considerations and decision-making processes. Unpacking accounts about the future thus moves the analysis beyond objective measures, focusing rather on the search for *decent* wages and predictable working lives. Migrants’ return considerations provide a lens to understand the

(economic) choices that migrants make, as the question of return efficiently teases out a set of key aspirations where the economic and the social intersect.

The article is structured in the following way: After describing our analytical framework, data and context, we will move onto exploring considerations about the future shared by Polish and Spanish migrants' we interviewed, starting with their geographic placing of their futures, and subsequently turning to the question of a 'normal' or 'grounded' life. Throughout the analysis, we pay attention to the ways in which considerations about the future narrated by our interviewees may or may not be interpreted as 'liquid migration' in the sense of the development of a migratory habitus of open options and intentional unpredictability, increasing individualisation and weakening family ties. We conclude by suggesting that 'liquid migration' is a particularly valuable concept for describing the *context* of contemporary intra-European migration. In the case of adult intra-European migrants in Norway however, liquid migration primarily seems to represent an opportunity structure drawn on in attempts to create the grounded lives and futures they do not find available in Poland or Spain.

Liquid migration and grounded lives

A special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2008) focused on migration in the wake of EU membership extensions, describing how 'a new East–West migration system [was] being established on the continent' featuring circular and temporary mobility, informal labour market incorporation and transnational networks (Favell 2008b, 702). The field of intra-European migration studies is diverse, and there are ongoing debates as to how to define these flows, using categories such as migration within or beyond Europe geographically, or such as temporariness or permanence. Adrian Favell's ethnographic study *Eurostars and Eurocities* (2008a) offers insights into some of the pressures and possibilities of the freedom sought by predominantly young, intra-European migrants. On the one hand, European mobility offers movers freedom from traditions, from the constraints of national culture and career frustrations at home (Favell 2008a, 7, 64). On the other, the freedom that mobility offers can turn into lives 'adrift, in fragments, with no social or spatial coherence' (Favell 2008a, 211). Favell's ethnographic analysis thus efficiently teases out how the freedom, adventure and self-fulfilment sought by EU movers over time gets inflicted by a range of problems and costs affiliated with increasing age and living a more denationalised life, including loneliness, strains on family life and practical problems with pensions and access to welfare state provisions. We hope to add to Favell's thick descriptions of intra-European movers by zooming in on a dimension that seems to have become increasingly relevant in post-accession and post-crisis migration accounts, namely the human costs of increased deregulation of labour markets (cf. Meardi 2013; Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014).

Engbersen and Snel (2013) rightly argue that what they see as the increasingly 'fluid' forms of migration in contemporary Europe are in some respects similar to the circular migration of the nineteenth century, but the context of fading borders within the EU, new communication technologies and historically cheap and easy modes of transportation makes this pattern of circular and temporary migration considerably simpler. Largely in agreement with Engbersen et al. (2013), Friberg sees Polish labour migration to Norway developing in a stepwise fashion, from circular migrants with no settlement intentions,

to transnational commuters with unclear plans, to settlement migrants intending long-term settlement in Norway (2012a; see also Engbersen et al. 2013; Engbersen 2015). However, he also finds that the case for 'liquid migration' among Polish labour migrants in Norway is perhaps overstated. Intra-European migration may more rightly be characterised by a high degree of *uncertainty* and an *unplanned* nature (see also Drinkwater and Garapich 2015). There is also a category of migrants who continue to show mobility, with back-and-forth migration over time. Some do so by choice; others, apparently, because of a lack of choice (Erdal 2014a). Those migrants who see themselves as 'trapped' in 'liquid migration' could fall within the category Engbersen et al. (2013) describe as 'footloose migrants', whereas those who more freely opt for mobile living might remain in Friberg's second phase, that of transnational commuting (2012a), retaining a 'bi-national' focus (Engbersen et al. 2013). We acknowledge that labelling the internal movements of EU nationals as mobility and third country nationals as migration can serve to deepen the constructed difference between subaltern 'migrants' and white 'free movers', while diverting attention from the challenges, difficulties and racisms that white 'internal' EU migrants are often faced with (Bygnes 2015; Briggs and Dobre 2014; Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2015).

Our analysis of migrants' considerations about the future contributes to the emerging body of work in migration studies that seeks to expand the notion of 'the economic' itself, through an effort to analyse economically oriented rationalities within a broader context, which we frame as 'working life'. This includes desires for a decent salary and sufficient employment security and predictability, which in turn provide a basis for the ability to live a 'grounded life' with emotional and economic attachments and responsibilities. A grounded life presupposes what Grzymala-Kazłowska (2015) refers to as 'social anchoring'. Social anchoring 'focuses on ways in which the individual establishes and maintains different life footholds' in attempts to gain stability in contemporary fluid societies (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2015, 10). We introduce the concept of grounded lives in order to capture the interviewees' search for the sort of stability and predictability that fluid and liberalised working life contexts can hinder. One reading of intra-European migratory flows is that workers are being pushed to emigrate by dissatisfaction with labour conditions following labour market liberalisations (Meardi 2013; Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014).

Since 1970s, deregulation of labour markets has affected many workers across the globe (Doeringer and Piore 1971; Piore 1979), and the resultant group of workers on casual or short-term employment contracts have been dubbed 'the precariat' due to the precariousness of their working conditions (Standing 2009). The emergence and ongoing existence of 'the precariat' in countries like Poland and Spain, and the implications of such physical, legal and relational conditions of working life, are a necessary part of the analysis of migrants' considerations about return migration, since migrants' own reflections describe these factors as a key hindrance to living what we conceptualise as 'grounded lives'.

Long before the crisis hit Spain, the country had Europe's highest share of temporary employment, reaching one-third of the Spanish workforce (Polavieja 2003). In the European context, the Spanish case is an example of a particularly deregulated labour market, characterised by workers in various 'atypical' employment relationships and low levels of employment protection (Golsch 2003). In the wake of the crisis, record-breaking unemployment and austerity measures have further weakened the position of Spanish workers, particularly young workers (Clauwaert and Schömann 2012). During the

post-communist transition and the process of European integration, Poland also saw a rapid increase in the proportion of workers ‘performing work under contracts that do not ensure stable employment’, reaching 26.9% of the workforce in 2013 (Arak, Lewandowski, and Żarkowiecki 2014, 4). Developments in the Polish labour market with regard to unstable forms of employment are increasingly compared to conditions in Southern European countries such as Spain. Contracts described as ‘junk contracts’ or ‘trash contracts’ (Baranowska-Rataj 2011; Meardi and Trappmann 2013) have come to symbolise this turn in the labour market.

Guy Standing (2009) has argued that precarious working conditions have a particularly severe impact on societies’ most vulnerable groups, including the young, the poor and immigrants. This is also true in the case of Norway; however, Norway stands out internationally for providing a higher level of protection for workers in a range of categories (Olsen and Kalleberg 2004). Although such protections have decreased in the past decade, the comprehensive Working Environment Act and key welfare state provisions still serve as important employment protection frameworks, even for individuals on temporary contracts.

In migration studies, theories of labour market liberalisations have to a large extent been used in analyses of how migrants fit into the labour markets of receiving countries (Friberg 2012a, 2012b; McCollum and Findlay 2015). Analyses of the effects of labour market segmentation in migrants’ countries of origin have predominantly focused on links with emigration, rather than on considerations about return migration (for an exception, see Cieslik 2011). Thus we draw on a well-developed field within migration studies, applying it to an analysis of considerations about return migration, focusing on labour market contexts in migrants’ countries of origin and more specifically on working life conditions there.

Data and context

We draw on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a total of 69 recent intra-European migrants living in Norway: 23 from Poland and 46 from Spain.¹ Interviews were conducted as part of two different research projects ‘Possibilities and realities of return migration’ and ‘Labour Migration in uncertain times’. The research participants were all recent Polish or Spanish born migrants who had spent less than eight years, and often only a couple of years, in Norway. The research participants were *adults* ranging from their early 20s to their late 50s, both women and men. The demographic make-up of the participants was spread across these age-ranges, among both Polish and Spanish participants, with more people in their 30s and 40s, than the younger and older cohorts. The sample includes people with higher education, working within their professions or working below their qualification levels, as well as individuals with vocational training and lower education, either working within their professions or performing other, often menial tasks. Some of our interlocutors had families (see also quotes in text), others did not have families; some had families in Poland or Spain, others in Norway. Thus there was significant diversity within our sample of Polish and Spanish migrants, across a number of different characteristics. Our research was conducted during the period 2012–2014 in the Norwegian cities of Bergen, Oslo and Stavanger.² About two-thirds of Polish migrants in Norway are male, and this rate has been stable despite family

reunifications. Polish men continue to work in the construction sector, and on short-term contracts, hired by both Norwegian and Polish companies. A practice of continuing transnational commuting in segments of the Polish migrant population, predominantly among men, presents a gender-divided picture of Polish migration to Norway. However, in our analysis, we find that men's and women's perspectives both on the temporality of migration projects and on the role of working life conditions in Spain and Poland often converge.

Our research participants largely fell into one of two groups, in terms of their lives in Norway and considerations about the future: either they were settled in Norway, often with partners and children, apparently with a mid-to-long-term plan, or they were settled in Poland or Spain, with families there, in circumstances of 'transnational commuting' which they were more or less happy about. Thus most of our interlocutors' considerations about the future in Norway, were indeed already based on a degree of settlement, and lived experience of life and work in Norway, over time (for some 2–3 years, for many 4–5 years, and for some of the Polish migrants up to 7–8 years).

Our analysis focuses on migrants' considerations about return migration – reflections that were shared with us as part of our research about their migration projects, life in Norway and the possible prospect of return or onward migration in the future. Other aspects of our research, focusing more specifically on migrants' sense of belonging and migration motivations have been published elsewhere (Bygnes and Flipo 2016; Carling and Erdal 2014, Erdal 2014b). We approach the data and analysis with the aim of exploring migrants' own future considerations, adopting an interpretative style. While our qualitative data set neither is, nor seeks to be, representative of the substantial population of Polish and smaller population of Spanish migrants in Norway, we have sought to include a wide range of different experiences, migration histories and perspectives on return migration, and are thus also able to draw out some analytical generalisations.

We use the concept 'return considerations', which is a different term for 'return intentions' (Carling and Pettersen 2014). We choose to use 'return considerations' to underline an open approach to what these considerations might entail: first, to avoid presupposing whether or not any future mobility is at all intended, and second, to stress the fact that these are thoughts, dreams, fears and reflections – they need not be realistic plans. Return considerations in this article are used to describe not only migrants' reflections about potential future mobility, back to the country of origin or onward to third countries, but also their reflections about non-mobility.

Our analysis was initially triggered by some unexpected similarities between the stories and reflections of Polish and Spanish migrants working in Norway which countered assumptions about difference, based on differing historical–political contexts and different trajectories of economic development in Poland and Spain. Poland, on the one hand, is a post-socialist country and a relatively new EU member, which since its democratisation has experienced long-term economic growth alongside a rise in social and economic inequalities and increasing insecurity for its working population, though unemployment numbers have remained relatively low. About 2.1 million Poles are living outside Poland, constituting a substantial post-EU accession emigration. Return migration levels to Poland have remained relatively low, despite government return policies; yet with the volumes of emigration, there are also return migrants' seeking to re-establish

themselves in Poland (Fihel and Grabowska-Lusińska 2010; Grabowska-Lusinska 2010). Nevertheless, emigration is a significant social force in Poland, both caused by and effecting labour market conditions (Kaczmarczyk 2011). Polish nationals represent the largest immigrant group in Norway, currently comprising nearly 100,000 individuals. Spain, on the other hand, has been a democratic country since 1975 and a member of the EU since 1986. During the decade-long economic boom that ended in 2008, Spain became a significant immigrant-receiving country and boasts an extremely well-educated population aged 24–34 – a cohort particularly prone to migration (Gonzalez-Ferrer 2013). After the global financial crisis struck, the overall unemployment rate rose to 26%, and for people under 25 years it rose to a staggering 56% at its peak in 2013 (Eurostat 2013). Calculations suggest that about 700,000 people left the country between 2008 and 2012, and 5000 of these now reside in Norway, forming part of a small Spanish community that was virtually non-existent before 2008 (Gonzalez-Ferrer 2013; Statistics Norway 2014). The relative number of Spanish people leaving Norway has remained quite stable since 2008, amounting to 15–25% of the number of Spanish citizens entering Norway each year.³

Migrants' own considerations allow the analysis to move beyond the expected, thus enabling a critical approach to existing theoretical assumptions in migration studies (Botterill 2014; Lawson 2000). Our aim in using migrants' own reflections and stories about their return considerations as an analytical lens for this article is twofold. First, it provides an empirical grounding for our understanding of how migrants originating from different contexts narrate, or frame, or present their (onward) migration considerations and decisions in the intra-European context. Second, through this we contribute to unpacking the meaning of economic motivations, as articulated by migrants themselves, thus expanding the scope of 'economic' considerations in migrants' decision-making processes.

Considering return migration

Migrants' return considerations are reflective both of geographic considerations (where the future lies) and of considerations about the nature of the desired future, which we discuss in terms of migrants' quest for a normal life.⁴ The analysis and discussion start with geographic considerations, and subsequently turn to the quest for a normal life. Here we draw on and explore notions of liquid migration, and the ways in which the quest for a normal life intersects with migrants' ideas about what constitutes decent working conditions, including physical, legal and relational dimensions.

Where does your future lie?

Many of our research participants told us that their imagined future was no longer to be found in Poland or Spain. Even when the initial plan had been to return, such plans were often revised after a short period in Norway. For Polish and Spanish migrants in Norway, questions about future plans were answered with uncertainty and ambivalence. Migrants' considerations echo existing scholarship on 'the myth of return' (cf. Anwar 1979) and research suggesting that *uncertainty* is the most characteristic feature of intra-European migrants' future plans (see also Drinkwater and Garapich 2015; Friberg 2012a). Among Polish migrants, a trajectory from initial temporary migration, to more long-lasting

migration, to permanent settlement in Norway (at the time of the interview) was particularly common. However, for some migrants a sense of temporariness continued for many years:

I'm not here permanently, in Norway, but just for some time ... it's hard to say for how long, but simply ... I don't know. I'm here only temporarily, even though that temporariness has lasted for a long time already ... I've been here for six years.⁵ (Darek⁶; a Polish electrician, in his 40s, working in construction and as an electrician in Bergen, his wife remained in Poland but visited often, they did not have children)

For several Polish research participants, the idea of going abroad for a few years in order to save money and then return to Poland had in practice become cluttered with attachments in Norway, and with a changed perspective on the prospect of less desirable working life conditions in Poland. This experience of an interruption to their initial migration plans led some migrants to postpone return migration, whilst others eventually concluded that Norway had become their home, and return was postponed until their retirement, or indefinitely (see also Erdal 2015; Erdal 2014a; Erdal 2014b).

Interviewed Spanish migrants articulated slightly different perspectives concerning both length of stay and the prospects of a possible future in Spain. In line with Polish research participants, most Spanish migrants described their future as uncertain, but many still agreed about one thing: although they might not stay in Norway forever, they were not going back to Spain. Although this was not the case for all the 46 Spanish interviewees, it was striking how often the door to Spain was described as entirely closed, and how return migration was seen as entirely out of the question. Adela (aged 36), for example, who had a law degree and two additional master's degrees, had tried everything in order to stay in Spain, working in precarious jobs in attempts to get by. However, eventually she left to work as a nanny in Norway. Although her position was severely 'deskilled' at the time of the interview, she concluded that going back was not an option: 'I cannot create a life for myself in my own country. I have no possibilities. No future. I have nothing'. In the case of many Spanish migrants, the disillusionment with Spain is very strong, and several have lost all hope for a future there (see Bygnes 2015 for a discussion on societal anomie as a motivation for migration).

When asked about the future for himself and his family in Spain, Ángel (in his mid-40s), who was doing manual work in Bergen, answered:

Spain becomes a place for holidays, you understand? Because Spain has an economy that, to put it visually, [has] a lot of ups and downs; there's no smooth ascending curve and no smooth descending curve ... you never get stability.

Many Polish migrants in Norway still engage in temporary migration and could be described as transnational commuters, dividing their time between work in Norway and time with family and friends in Poland (for parallels elsewhere in Europe, see e.g. Engbersen et al. 2013). They described themselves as working in Norway and living in Poland (cf. Garapich 2009 on common discourses of *non-emigration* in Poland). This group of migrants are a contrast to the trend whereby many Polish migrants settle with their families (and children) in Norway.⁷ Some transnational family arrangements were also found in the Spanish case. In addition, many participants still engaged actively with relatives and friends in Spain and Poland during the time of the interviews. Their

transnational ties to (elderly) parents and other significant others were upheld by international travels, long Skype and telephone conversations. When our participants, most of whom were not in their 20s, told us about their lives and future plans, they seldom emphasised freedom and individualisation. The presence of an emerging migrant habitus of open options and intentional unpredictability only to a very limited degree came to the fore in our material.

Most research participants either had a strong desire to stay in Norway, or found themselves in circumstances where prospects for return faded a little more with each year spent in Norway. Some were trapped within a context of ‘liquid migration’, not in the sense that there were regulatory constraints enforcing their mobility, but rather that their ability to provide what we have conceptualised as more grounded lives for themselves and their family depended on continued mobility. Some chose a life of continued mobility. However, for the majority of our research participants, ‘liquid migration’ mainly describes the context of their emigration, which has subsequently developed into settlement in Norway. There is limited resemblance to the notion of ‘liquid migration’ as a migrant habitus in the reflections our research participants shared, for instance, or in terms of far-reaching individualisation, changing the role of family (cf. characteristics of liquid migration described in Engbersen 2015).

Interviewing migrants about their prospects of return serves to map out key factors that make them want to stay. Many find themselves on a quest to establish more grounded lives, which is indicative of the significance of qualitative measures of economic factors. Here, the relevant economic factors are not restricted simply to having a job – or an income – but rather extend to the ability to lead what some interviewees called a ‘normal life’ (see also McGhee, Sue, and Trevena 2012), and what others described as a decent life, or living with dignity. This notion encompasses a decent ‘working life’ (Galaśńska and Kozłowska 2009). The perspectives on a ‘normal life’ or living with ‘dignity’ are drawn from the stories, reflections and considerations of our research participants, whose rationalisations of emigration and whose considerations about return migration did not fit neatly within the box of ‘economic’ factors, yet were highly intertwined with considerations about working life conditions. In the following, we explore some of the reasons why settlement in Norway was narrated as the outcome of many migrants’ ‘liquid migration’ projects – often framed as their quest for a normal life.

Unpacking what constitutes a ‘normal life’

To unpack how typical components of ‘economic migration’, such as higher wage levels and better prospects in the labour market, are intertwined with qualitatively assessed components such as ‘working conditions’ as well as broader family considerations, we will use research participants’ notions of a ‘normal life’ as an analytical lens.

A normal life is described as a safe life – living without fear of what the future will bring. The notion is closely interwoven with the prospects of a normal *future*, which for many means being able to establish an autonomous living unit and eventually to have children. To do this, they need to earn enough to sustain themselves and their future family, as well as achieving a certain degree of predictability about future earnings. The possibility of having time for family is also a key concern in many descriptions of a normal life, and according to many of our research participants, it is difficult to secure enough family

time in Spain and in Poland. The theme of appreciation, as well as striving, for free time and a healthy work–life balance was also present in our data. Having a normal life, which includes prospects for what was described as a normal future, is at first glance very much about money. However, these economic considerations are significantly intertwined with key social and emotional factors, which emerge through a qualitative unpacking. Together, these characteristics of a normal life make up a critical reason why many of our Polish and Spanish research participants do not see return migration as a realistic future plan.

Earning ‘enough’ money was a key dimension that was highlighted as a characteristic of the desired normal life. Migrants juxtaposed ‘earning enough’ with the lack of decent salary levels for work in their countries of origin; salaries in migrants’ countries of origin were often described as too low to pay for basic expenses, such as housing, bills and child care. Not being able to earn enough in Poland or Spain was frequently brought up when discussing why return migration was difficult or no longer an option:

I think the most important issue is about the earnings – that people can’t afford a normal life, that people have to borrow money to live from one payday to another, that thinking about a holiday with your family is almost impossible ... (Ania; a Polish engineer in her early 30s in Bergen, no partner, and no children, but parents and siblings living in Poland)

Many people know something about Poland, and they ask me about the situation in Poland, and when I tell them what the average earnings are, they often don’t believe me. My sister earns very little, they have four children, and they’re somehow managing, but it’s ‘somehow’. (Justyna and Marek; a Polish couple, both with higher education and working as administrative support staff (de-skilled), in their 30s, in Bergen, no children)

The experience of, or fear of, not earning enough to sustain oneself or one’s family was a core issue at stake in the desire to lead a normal life. In addition to Katia (cited below), several women in our selection also described the potential for combining motherhood with a career as a central reason for not wanting to return. The different gender order in Norway compared to countries of origin was highlighted both by high-skilled and low-skilled women and made relevant regardless of whether they had children or where considering motherhood in the future.

In Spain, to be in research is harder because it’s completely insecure whether you are going to get a position or whether you can survive between one and another one, and you have to change your ... in Spain, it’s quite difficult for example to be a mother and continue [working]. ... In Spain, it’s so uncertain whether you have a future: you have a job now and you don’t know what will be going on in two years; then, for people as young as our age, we don’t know if we can buy a house or obtain a loan for a car or have a family. (Katia; a 32-year-old Spanish researcher in Bergen, no partner, no children)

Not earning enough is closely associated with another key factor impeding people’s ability to lead a normal life and to plan a normal future – the lack of predictability produced by the frequent use of temporary contracts or ‘trash contracts’ in both Spain and Poland. Temporary contracts provide very little predictability and limited access to social security. As Ernesto explains, the highly competitive milieus in which such contracts are currently drafted provide a breeding ground for further decreases in wage levels and worsening working conditions for the highly educated:

If I have to, I would probably work in another country, but maybe not in Spain ... The thing is, now in Spain, everyone has an education, so you can find one million architects in Spain,

one million biologists, two million lawyers, and so it's a lot of competition, so we work more hours for less money. An architect in Spain works like 12–14 hours and the salary is like 600 euros [a month], so you can imagine it's very different. The good thing here is that [it is not all] about work but all besides work, no [private life is accommodated by employers]? All the social [protection] that the government gives you, all the parental leave, and yeah, it's perfect. (Ernesto; a Spanish architect in his mid-thirties working in the private sector in Bergen, partner in Norway, no children)

Similarly, other research participants, such as Darek (quoted above), link their negative experiences in temporary employment in Poland with their search for a more predictable life and access to social security if something were to happen to prevent them from working:

I think ... getting back to the issue of work ... there's this stability, because in Poland there were only 'trash contracts' ... they can get rid of you at any moment. Here, there's work, and even if there's no work, there's help, and you can survive somehow, not like in Poland.

The stories, reflections and considerations shared by Polish and Spanish migrants underline that they do not envisage a normal life in their countries of origin, because of the lack of predictability and economic security. For Spanish migrants, this leads to a rejection of the option of return. For Polish migrants, there are two patterns: some settle in Norway with their families and postpone their return to the distant future or indefinitely, while others continue to work in Norway and live in Poland. For some of the latter group, this was their own preference thus echoing the scholarship describing the freedom that might underlie liquid migration (cf. Favell 2008a). Others were trapped in this continued mobility, as salary levels and precarious working conditions in Poland played prevented their desired return migration (and re-unification with families in Poland).

Without sufficient and stable enough earnings, for most of our Spanish and Polish research participants, neither their lives nor their imagined futures in Poland or Spain were considered normal. Though the lack of what these migrants saw as normalcy in their countries of origin largely centres on work-related issues, concerns about working life are often of a deeply social character (cf. Meardi 2013). It should perhaps also be noted that some of our research participants idealised the working conditions in Norway. This was not reflective of the experiences of all research participants, as concerns about working conditions in Norway were also expressed.

Finally, the nature of working conditions was important, and extended beyond the nature of legal employment contracts (temporary or permanent) to include both physical and relational dimensions. Physical dimensions of working conditions included issues such as the provision of health and safety equipment and training at construction sites, which was stressed by our Polish research participants. Relational dimensions were mentioned by both Polish and Spanish research participants, as illustrated by Miguel's story about his experience as an engineer at a large multinational company in Madrid:

[W]hen I was working at [company name excised] in 2003, I was working at 2 o'clock in the morning and [my wife] called me and told me I have one kid with fever and the other kid is throwing up and we have to go to the emergency room because ... but I cannot do that because I am alone and I have two children and it's 2 o'clock in the morning, so I told my boss that I have to go because I have an emergency at home, and the first question I got was: 'and who is going to publish the channel' [who will do your job]?; that was, you know, he didn't care about anything but his stupid little objective, and it was stupid, it could be done the next [day], the day after, but that was the mentality and I don't like

that kind of mentality. (Miguel; a Spanish engineer in his mid-forties, working in the petroleum sector in Stavanger, wife and two children in Norway)

Relational dimensions of working conditions and bad experiences in previous jobs were frequent in considerations about a return to Poland or Spain. Of course, bad experiences in workplaces occur everywhere. However, the relational dimensions of working conditions in Poland and Spain, experienced by our interviewees as overly authoritarian and hierarchic, contrasted with the more egalitarian characteristics of Norwegian working life, and this jointly affected the ways in which our research participants evaluated working conditions in their countries of origin and in Norway. These qualitative assessments of the relational nature of working conditions were often subtle, but important, and underlined the ways in which working life involves so much more than just having a job and the salary level.

Like Miguel, other Polish and Spanish research participants stressed the significance of being able to sustain a family life. Here, the possibility of being actively involved in their children's lives was seen as crucial. Beyond emergencies, such as the one Miguel described, the ability to be involved with one's children in everyday life was a key component of migrants' considerations about return migration and working conditions; for example, being able to see their children every evening and to pick them up from kindergarten or school in the afternoon, while still performing their expected tasks at work, which the Norwegian working week of 37.5 hours largely allows for. Some migrant considerations included reflections on conversations with relatives in Poland, noting the contrast between the ways in which everyday family life is organised – managing the logistics of work, home, child care and leisure activities – in Poland and Norway. While parenting and life–work balance is a challenge across contexts, migrants underlined how they felt that there was space to negotiate a manageable balance in the Norwegian context, whereas in Poland managing everyday life was referred to as *haruĵa*, literally meaning 'slaving'. Statements that emphasise the possibility of reconciling one's private life and working life show that intra-European migrants are more than 'workers on the move'; they are human beings with attachments that complicate economic calculations and liquid aspects of free movement.

A normal life for our research participants thus focused both on the here and now, and on the future. One key dimension was the salary level, in terms of earning what was seen as 'enough', as one might expect in an intra-European labour migration context. However, physical, legal and relational dimensions of working life, which were qualitatively assessed, were also very prominent in return migration considerations. Important considerations included safeguards not only against precariousness in terms of the predictability of contracts as well as tasks and working hours, but also against relational precariousness in terms of authoritarian work cultures. As a backdrop for all these concerns, the desire for a healthy work–life balance, with time to spend with one's family or on leisure activities, was present in migrants' reflections and constituted a core part of the grounded lives many envisioned for themselves.

Conclusion

Many studies of intra-European migration (see e.g. Cairns 2014; Jendrissek 2016; King et al. 2015) have focused on the life worlds of *young* migrants. Meanwhile, a few studies

of intra-European migration (notably, Favell 2008a) have suggested that the freedom sought by some within this framework of mobility can get inflicted by a range of problems and costs with increasing age, reflective of the salience of life course perspectives (Andrucki and Dickinson 2015; Findlay et al. 2015; Erdal 2015).

As the analysis shows, very few of our informants envision a free-moving lifestyle, which would uphold ideals of open options and intentional unpredictability; rather, most are looking for the possibility of settling down and living grounded, secure and stable lives. We suggest that this finding must be seen in relation to the life course, where most of our informants are no longer in their 20s but also in relation to the specific destination context of Norway, as a country where establishing a grounded life is perceived as a likely scenario. In our analysis, we found very few descriptions of 'liquid migration' in the sense of a move towards individualisation and an emerging migrant habitus of open options and intentional unpredictability, where family plays a lesser role (cf. Engbersen 2015). We acknowledge that 'transnational commuting' may in some instances be a chosen strategy to ensure a 'grounded life' for oneself and one's family. In such cases, 'liquid migration' seems to enable family life in a grounded sense, and thus lends little support to assumptions about individualisation, decreasing importance of family nor to the notion of a migrant habitus interpreted as open options and intentional unpredictability.

As a concept and analytical tool, we argue that 'liquid migration' is particularly valuable for describing the legal and regulatory contexts of contemporary intra-European migration where legal constraints and the need for planning is less necessary than in many other contexts. We also acknowledge the presence of an emerging migrant habitus of open options and intentional unpredictability among young Europeans described in the research literature. We do however suggest that life course, together with the scope of opportunity to lead a grounded life provided in the Norwegian context studied here, play key roles for understanding the near absence of this migrant habitus in our sample. Furthermore, there is a need for additional scrutiny of what might in fact be the entrapment in liquid migration of so-called 'footloose' migrants, and the consequences of such protracted mobility, including its human costs.

In our analysis we find more similarities than differences between Polish and Spanish migrants to Norway. However, our Spanish research participants were generally more definite in their rejection of a prospective return to Spain, and articulated more clear-cut disillusionment with the political system in Spain as a whole, compared with the Polish interviewees. We argue that this difference can be understood in light of the combined effects of the deregulated labour market and the financial and political crises in Spain. By contrast, the Polish experience of deregulation of the labour market, while currently comparable to that of Spain, has a shorter history. Furthermore, Poland's economy was not as severely impacted by the financial crisis, and Poland has a very different prior history of political economic management: first, the transition from communism, and second, the recent integration into the EU. Liberal economic policies have also been met with resistance and disillusionment in post-communist countries such as Poland, but the forms of resistance are more explicitly politicised in Spain and among recent Spanish migrants (Bygnes and Flipo 2016).

Working life conditions can affect mobility and return migration considerations, as well as actual migration decision-making processes. While it may be argued that migrants are

‘voting with their feet’ (Meardi 2013; Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014), the fact that most people do not migrate complicates the picture of the emergence of the ‘precarariat’ as a motivation to leave.

Although the rationalisations of mobility and return described in our analyses were closely related to economic considerations, the informants’ rationales did not fit neatly within the box of ‘economic’ factors. By drawing on migrants’ own bottom-up iterations of economic motivations for migration decision-making, whether about emigration, settlement or prospects for a possible future return migration, the fact that ‘economic’ considerations are not separated from the totality of ordinary people’s life worlds becomes apparent. While we subscribe to perspectives that foreground social, cultural and political factors in migration decision-making processes, we argue to combine these within a holistic framework, where ‘the economic’ is central. An analysis of rationalities and rationalisations of migration decision-making must encompass a broader notion of the economic, one that reflects its interconnectedness with other dimensions of people’s lives and one which sees the economic itself in a more holistic way (see also Dannecker 2013; Gupta and Tope 2012). This leads us to argue for the need to integrate economic dimensions into analyses of qualitatively and subjectively evaluated factors of migration decision-making, including working life conditions in migrants’ countries of settlement and in their countries of origin.

Notes

1. The data was collected as part of two Projects funded under the Research Council of Norway’s Work, Welfare, Migration programme: Possibilities and realities of return migration (Poland) and Labour migration in uncertain times: Migration from Spain to Norway (Spain).
2. The data set on Polish migration originally included further migrants who had lived in Norway longer. In order to match the length of stay among Spanish migrants, and focus on recent migrants, this article draws on a subset of these data, focusing on those who had lived in Norway eight years or less.
3. <https://www.ssb.no/statistikkbanken/selectout/pivot.asp?checked=true> (Accessed March 11, 2016).
4. In Polish, for example, ‘*żyć prosto normalnie*’ (simply to live normally) or ‘*żyć godnie*’ (to live with dignity). There are conceptual and normative discussions about these aspirations in Poland (cf. poverty and income levels and the cost of everyday life).
5. All quotes have been translated by the authors, interviews were conducted in Polish and Spanish, respectively.
6. All names used are pseudonyms.
7. Poland has been the top country of origin for family reunifications in Norway since 2010.

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