Success Stories? Success in Polish Migrants' Narratives about Their Occupational Careers

OLGA CZERANOWSKA
ORCID: 0000-0002-3516-1563
SWPS University[1]

Abstract

While there are many studies concerning different aspects of migrants' occupational trajectories, little attention has been dedicated to migrants' own views on career success. In this paper, drawing on qualitative interviews with Polish migrants, we aim to bridge this gap in migration studies by examining how the migrants themselves understand and experience the concept of career success. We also took into consideration factors contributing to migrants' occupational success, with a particular focus on the role of migration in their occupational biographies.

Our analysis shows that interviewees define success in terms of subjective and objective criteria, focusing on immaterial rewards. Most of the migrants who participated in the study were unsure if they had already achieved career success. Among those who did, internal factors connected with a person's character were mostly pointed out as contributing to career success. Despite the fact that work was the primary motivation for migration for a significant part of our sample, the results of the migration on career and chances of achieving success were varied.

Keywords: career, migration, occupational biographies, success

1. Introduction

Work-related issues are among the primary motivations for migrations between developed countries. Almost all migrants (excluding those moving for education or retirement and other economically inactive groups) need to enter the receiving country's labour market. For the vast majority, geographical mobility means an occupa-

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[1] Contact: oczeranowska@swps.edu.pl

tional change in relation to the job position they held in their country of origin. Moreover, migrants' situation on the labour market in the receiving country is one of the main indicators of successful integration (Aleksynska, Tritah 2013). Consequently, issues related to migrants' occupational lives and experiences on the receiving country's labour market had been one of the important research topics for the migration studies, especially focusing on migrant occupational trajectories (Akresh 2006, Chiskwick et al. 2003) or underemployment (Trevena 2013, Lofters et al. 2014, Banerjee et al. 2018, Batalova et al. 2016). However, little attention had been dedicated to the topic of career success in the migratory context and migrants' own views on career success[2].

This paper's main objective is to analyse how Polish migrants define career success in general terms and within their own occupational lives. We also want to look at what forms career success can take in migrants' occupational biographies, how it is experienced and what factors are seen as crucial for achieving it. We will primarily focus on migration as contributing to career success (or lack thereof).

With the qualitative methodology of in-depth individual interviews, we were able to focus on migrants' individual opinions and experiences and uncover their personal definitions of career success. We engage both with the migration studies literature on the migrants' careers in general and with multidisciplinary research regarding career success outside the migratory context. Our theoretical contribution is to uncover different understandings of career success, the factors contributing to it and its place in migrants' occupational biographies. We especially focus on the time dimension of personal definitions of career success, proposing a position-based model of career success.

2. Theoretical background – defining success in the migratory context

Defining career success

Guzn and Heslin (2005) notice that "while it is certainly interesting to study the factors that lead to career success in the sense of prosperity, it is every bit as interesting, if not more so, to study how people decide that a given outcome was, indeed, 'prosperous.'" (105). Success can be analysed and defined both on the level of general social norms (what is generally recognized as important and challenging) as well as from the individual perspective – what is perceived as success by the particular person (Bednarska-Wnuk, Januszkiewicz 2013). These two definitions can be very different,

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[2] The terms "occupational success" and "career success" are sometimes used interchangeably. In this paper, we use the term "career success" as the wider one, relating to success in work-life, regardless of the possible changes in occupation.

and individuals may be aware of this difference – for example in Nungin and Onken (2010) respondents automatically compared their own understanding of career success with the wider, societal definition.

The difference between personal and societal definitions of success can be linked to subjective and objective success. A person's own subjective perception of their success can be rooted in their own aspirations and feelings (Judge et al. 1995; Zhou et al. 2012), whereas a more objective perception of success would be based on visible, measurable criteria. The criteria of objective success are factors such as income (especially important in societies with experiences of financial hardships – Nugin, Onken 2010), power and prestige (Kirchmeyer, 1998) or the number of promotions in one's occupational history (Judge et al. 1995).

Those objective criteria of success are relatively easier to collect and compare. However, with organisational changes (delayering, outsourcing) taking place on the labour market since the last decades of the XX century, they have become less relevant. Moreover, the possibility of comparing objective criteria between occupations may be limited (Heslin 2005). In the case of migration research, comparisons between different labour markets may also prove problematic.

On the other hand, subjective success can be conceptualised as a psychological phenomenon, describing individuals' feeling of achievement (Gunz, Heslin 2005). The concept of subjective success relates to other psychological phenomena such as job or career satisfaction, although these are narrower terms that do not consider delayed gratification or other aspects of occupational life such as identity or work-life balance (Heslin 2005).

All facets of success (especially those 'tangible', connected with objective success) can be seen by the individual in comparison to 'others' (Nungin, Onken 2010, Heslin 2003). Similarly, as is the case of other social comparisons, social groups are used by individuals as a point of reference to judge their own success – people can situate themselves in comparison to 'others'. Those 'others' cannot be too different from themselves; people tend to compare themselves mostly with individuals they see as similar (Festinger 1954). Again, this makes migrants an especially interesting target of the study, as they have two sets of possible 'others' to compare themselves with: 'others' in the country of origin, belonging to the culture they were raised in, and new 'others' in the country they are staying (and working) in. The choice of the reference group may therefore affect how successful migrants are feeling (Chen 2019, Nowicka 2013). In the European context, economic migrants from CEE countries may be willing to accept lower pay and job standards than EU15 natives as those conditions are still better compared to what their peers can expect in the home country. This phenomenon was discussed in the context of 'social dumping' or 'race to the bottom' (Woolfson 2007, Bernaciak 2014).

Furthermore, it is important to note that both the co-occurrence of objective and subjective success and the lack thereof are possible (Korman et al. 1981; Nicholson,

Andrews 2005). Obtaining a position that is regarded as 'objectively successful' (e.g. high income and high prestige ones) does not automatically mean subjective success for every individual.

It is also important that, apart from the wider society's notion of success, definitions can also be created within occupational groups as part of their work culture. For example, Eith, Stummer and Schusterschtiz (2010) studied the concept of success among geriatric care workers; Lucas and Buzzanel (2004) researched miners' perception of success and Cole (2018) aimed at conceptualising success in the musical career. Those studies show that occupational groups seek to define success, especially when the general societal definition of success does not suit the occupational group's experiences, challenges and the career models.

Success is naturally linked to the concept of career as a temporal phenomenon, something happening over time (Judge et al. 1995). Conventionally, a career is defined as a sequence of job positions with growing prestige and a person is meant to move through them in an ordered sequence (Wilensky 1961; Zhou et al. 2012). In this understanding of a career, success would be a reward at the end of the road. Of course, with new types of careers (the boundaryless career – Arthur et al. 1989; the life-career rainbow – Super 1980; the protean career – Hall 2004; the kaleidoscope career – Mainiero, Sullivan 2005) that do not follow the classical pattern, success can be achieved several times throughout an individual's (occupational) life, not only at its end (Januszkiewicz 2010). Januszkiewicz (2010) argues further that, due to the liberalisation of the term, it can be equated with reaching any kind of a goal, however small and mundane.

Just like the meaning of success changes historically (hence understandings vary in different generations), it also differs between countries and societies, because of their unique cultures and levels of development. As 'people become materially more secure, intellectually more autonomous, and socially more independent', material concerns become less important (Inglehart, Welzel 2005: 24). Success may be therefore conceptualised as not only a temporal but also a spatial phenomenon. With this in mind, migrants present a particularly compelling case, as migration frequently means moving from poorer countries with a lower quality of life to richer, more developed ones, gaining a new reference system which affects the result of comparisons (Nowicka 2013).

Success in migrants' occupational lives

Successful integration into the receiving country's labour market is one of the main indicators of general integration (Aleksynska, Tritah 2013). Still, it may be worth problematizing further what kind of labour market position can be considered a success. From the receiving country's point of view, this will probably mean just finding employment and being able to support themselves. More nuanced approaches take into

consideration whether the said employment is consistent with individuals' needs and preferences as well as their qualifications. There are numerous studies focused on migrants' underemployment, that is employment that is substandard (McKee-Ryan, Harvey 2011, Lofters et al. 2014).

Migrants' career success can be also analysed in the context of their work lives before the migration. Despite the fact that migration is frequently undertaken in order to improve one's labour market situation, large scale quantitative studies show that the immediate result tends to be the opposite (Chiswick et al., 2005; Akresh 2006). In the Polish context, this was also confirmed by Nowicka's (2013) qualitative study, where discontinuity resulting from migration was connected with a lack of success in various spheres of life. Because of imperfect human capital transferability, directly after moving to another country, migrants may be forced to accept a job less attractive (in terms of income, prestige, compatibility with their qualifications) than the one held earlier in their home country, although with time they are able to recover their previous position. Migrants' careers therefore appear to be u-shaped, with initial downward mobility (the 'transition penalty' Lochhead 2003) and regaining the position with time (Chiswick et al., 2005). In the u-shaped model we can assume that success is achieved when a migrant is able to obtain a position similar to one they had in the country of origin (in terms of income, prestige, work conditions, etc.).

In the Polish context, geographical mobility strategies and aspirations were strongly changed after the 2004 EU accession – which is a general tendency in EU10 countries. Those migrations were predominantly connected with labour market opportunities and career strategies. Moroşanu et al. (2021) argues that work is the central factor contributing to migration aspirations, and this tendency was visible among Polish (and other EU10 migrants) moving to EU15 countries (Moroşanu et al. 2021; Vargas-Silva 2017, cf. Zwysen 2019 for gender differences).

Different aspects of Polish migrants' (and return migrants') careers have been widely analysed, especially regarding career trajectories (e.g. Grabowska-Lusińska, Jaźwińska-Motylska 2013, Szewczyk 2014) and career strategies (e.g. Trevena 2013). In a recent study – Kowalska's (2022) study on highly female Polish graduates working in Italy – three scenarios were identified: the positive one (with achieving a satisfying occupational position), the negative one (with disappointment with the Italian labour market) and the intermediate one where family life is a priority over career development. It is crucial to note that this third option is more gender-specific than connected with migration. Importantly, Kowalska's typology is the only one that engages directly with the concept of occupational success, making it part of the positive scenario. There have been, however, some studies (Nowicka 2013; Szczepaniak-Kroll,2018; Szczepaniak-Kroll 2020; Szymoszyn 2020) that analysed migrants' narrations on the general, biographical success/failure, including not only a career but also other spheres of life. In those studies, career success was shown to play a significant role in migrants' definitions of general life/biographical success. In Szymoszyn (2020)

where career success was analysed as a part of general life-success, occupational promotions, job satisfaction, occupational prestige as well as financial aspect of career were listed as its elements.

Interestingly, despite the wealth of research on migrant's occupational lives and integration into the receiving country's labour market, there aren't many studies regarding migrant's own definitions of career success. Our study aims to bridge this gap in the migration literature by examining how migrants themselves define career success, how they experience their own success and what factors they attribute as crucial for achieving it.

3. Data and methods

Our analysis is based on the qualitative data collected for project "(IT)Mobility. Immobility of the mobile, mobility of the immobile – migrants in the times of pandemics and new information/communication technologies" (Institute of Social Sciences, SWPS University)[3]. The project's objective was to analyse the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the forced immobility faced by migrants, focusing on different kinds of mobility (geographical, virtual, occupational). We aimed to see how those mobilities are connected and can supplement and replace each other and how geographical immobility forced by the pandemic affected other types of mobility.

This paper uses data from the project's qualitative component, consisting of individual in-depth interviews with migrants. Due to the fact that Interviewees were located in different countries, interviews were realised via a video conferencing tool (Google Meet). Interviews were conducted in Polish, audio recorded and transcribed. Informed consent had been obtained from the participants prior to starting the interview.

All interviews were coded by one coder (PI). We used Atlas.ti for the qualitative analysis based on the systematic text condensation (Maltreud 2012). Initial themes identified in the data and elaborated based on the literature were then translated into codes. Fragments coded with the same code were then analysed together in order to find shared elements of meaning in the Interviewees' experiences. In the last step, synthetic descriptions were prepared, and quotes were found to illustrate them.

Occupational success was one of the themes analysed in connection with occupational mobility and migrants' careers. In order to gain a holistic view of the Interviewee's occupational biographies, we also asked them about the last job they held in Poland and their careers in their country of current residence.

Sample

Purposive sampling was used, a strategy typical for qualitative studies, based on selecting information-rich cases – individuals with knowledge and experiences specifically valuable considering the research questions (Patton 1990). The recruitment occurred via social media (Facebook groups for Polish migrants) and Researcher's networks. Throughout the recruitment process, we controlled the characteristics of the participants in order to obtain a diversified final sample.

The interviews took place from December 2020 to February 2021. The sample consisted of 30 Polish migrants, currently living in 9 different countries (mostly in the European Union, which is consistent with general trends in migration from Poland). The sample was balanced in terms of gender (15F, 15M). The youngest person was 24 years old at the moment of the interview, and the oldest was 62 (the mean age in the sample was 34 years). The length of the current stay abroad varied from 1 year to 44 years, with a mean of slightly over 6 years.

We were also able to obtain a sample which was relatively diversified in terms of occupational attainment: slightly over half of the interviewees had a higher education diploma. At the time of the interviews, the vast majority of respondents were employed, with three people being furloughed, one studying (PhD studies), two having their own companies and three being economically inactive and receiving social assistance. Detailed characteristics of all Interviewees are presented in Table 1 in the Appendix.

4. Results

Defining career success

Interviewees were first asked how they define career success in general, without directly linking to their own experiences. One visible trend in respondents' definitions of career success was connected with feeling passionate about their work – the belief that a person achieves career success if they like and enjoy their job. To some extent, this could be linked to the concept of work as a calling. In terms of causality, some kinds of jobs are more likely to stem from previous hobbies or interests (e.g. artistic ones). It is therefore more probable that the interviewees meant passion in a more abstract sense.

> *I think that success in occupational life is doing what one likes. This is a success for me.*
> (Mariusz, M, 29, warehouseman, Norway)[4]

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[4] All quotes are described with Interviewee's pseudonym, gender, age, occupational position and country of residence during the study

For these Interviewees, success means positive emotions associated with occupational duties. Notably, some people in their narratives referred to positive feelings in response to the prospect of another day in the same job. Achieving a successful job position would be a remedy for the boredom and fatigue resulting from the relative repetitiveness of most lives. What is intriguing, is that the subjective, emotional facets of career success that the interviewees mentioned were much more connected with the 'doing' of the job than the achievements. They focused, therefore, on their everyday work life, not on the 'moments of glory' when a person meets some particular work-related goal or is given recognition.

It is that you want to wake up every day to go to work, you are even quite happy that you are going there. (Piotr, M, 26, locksmith, Germany)

Material rewards were also taken into consideration, with some Interviewees focusing on the possibilities of spending and saving connected with achieving career success. Interviewees did not focus on the money itself, but on the tangible ways in which a better economic standing can make a person's life easier and more comfortable. In the quote below, this state of well-being is defined by juxtaposition with the opposite state, which is constant anxiety about money.

The first thing is having an income that enables you not to worry about anything, being able to save up quite a lot. (Sandra, F, 28, programmer, Czech Republic)

However, some Interviewees noted that material rewards should not be the sole motivation for pursuing a career path. Making money-motivated choices in one's occupational life would lead to general dissatisfaction. Some of the interviewees talked about this 'money-measured' success as a concept present in society, which they themselves do not share, focusing more on the subjective, immaterial aspect of the phenomenon.

It depends on what someone cares about, because if someone cares about money then (…) they will be happy, but will discover after 10 years that money is not everything. (Krystyna, F, 57, office job in installation company, Austria)

Some definitions joined these two elements, describing success as a sum of material and immaterial rewards for the work. Therefore, it would be ideal to find a job one loves which is also well paid. These more complex definitions include both subjective and objective facets of success, and success itself is conceptualised as achieving both aspects in the same occupational position. It may be stated that according to this definition, success itself lies in being able to reconcile one's passions and interests with what society values enough to grant a high salary.

Doing what one wants and what one likes, and for the job not to be tiring; and also having income that is good enough, so that one can afford everything and there is still something more to save. (Adam, M, 27, food delivery man, UK)

Another set of answers was focused on the possibilities for constant self-development. Interviewees felt that success means achieving a position that opens up new possibilities for learning and investing in themselves. This perspective on career success conceptualizes it more in terms of self-perpetuating possibility than a concrete goal that one can achieve. It can also be linked to the enjoyment of every working day and lack of boredom at work, which was listed among immaterial aspects of occupational success.

> *Mostly, having possibilities of self-development. Not staying in the same place, but the possibility to move forward.* (Monika, F, 34, quality controller, UK)

In addition, other responses referred to job characteristics such as working for oneself (running a business, being self-employed), having good interpersonal relations in the workplace and performing work that is useful. What seems to be crucial, is that all these definitions of career success describe it in terms of achieving a certain job/occupational position that is ascribed with desired characteristics. The definitions, therefore, treat success in terms of a (more or less) permanent state, not an event. This approach to the time dimension of occupational success means that not only can a person achieve success multiple times in their lives, but each 'occurrence' of achieving success can last multiple years.

It is worth noting that some sectors and occupations have their own measure of success. Two of the Interviewees working in gastronomy gave examples of such measures, and how they can be used in goal setting for individuals and organisations. Those can be seen as tools for operationalising and objectivising success and contributing to an occupational group's prestige. Still, those kinds of awards need a relatively strong, established culture of the occupational group to be recognised and valued. Importantly, those were the only definitions of career success that were of a more 'time-point' character, as they related to achieving a specific award on a place in the best restaurant lists.

> *Michelin stars or other culinary (…) renowned awards, where no one can undermine their reliability, this award is a kind of certificate of quality of what you are doing in the kitchen.* (Przemek, M, 52, chef, Germany)

Almost all personal definitions of career success were complex and include numerous elements. In about half of the cases, those 'elements of career success' represented both subjective and objective dimensions. Interviewees were, therefore, conscious that subjective and objective success could coincide (which was the most desired situation). The objective elements were mainly connected with financial remuneration, while subjective ones varied from doing work consistent with interests to feeling useful or having the opportunity for self-development. The second type of definition was strictly subjective, mainly including having a job consistent with

one's interests ('doing what one wants to do'), but also work-life balance or being appreciated by others in a work environment. Interestingly, only two persons' definitions of career success were purely objective, both working in gastronomy. This sector has established several internal awards and other kinds of prestigious recognition.

Regarding the interviewee's characteristics, women focused more on subjective elements, while mixed definitions prevailed among men. Interestingly, objective criteria were slightly more visible among people with tertiary education. There was no clear link between age and ways of defining career success. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the limited size of the sample, it was impossible to formulate even tentative conclusions regarding different definitions of career success among people staying in different countries or working in different occupations/ sectors (other than gastronomy).

Narratives about own success

After the general question on the definition of occupational success, we asked our interviewees whether they thought they had achieved career success themselves. Out of the sample of 30 migrants, 11 persons responded in the affirmative, while only 3 gave a definitive negative answer, which means that the majority were unsure if they had already achieved success in their occupational life. Attempts to avoid a straightforward answer, which may be due to social norms concerning modesty, were also present in semi-positive answers.

> *When one thinks about it, I'm certain that there are people who could say that I've achieved success.* (Edyta, F, 40, specialist in video games production, Portugal)

Another subgroup of interviewees felt that they had not yet achieved career success, but saw the possibility somewhere in their future. This option was more typical for younger interviewees, in the beginning of their occupational trajectory, but not limited to them. It was also more frequently expressed by people who did not have tertiary education. They were able to appreciate the way towards success and what they had been able to achieve up to that point. This hopeful strategy of situating career success in the future may result from thinking about success more in terms of a direction than a place that a person really arrives at. In Piotr's quote below, we can also see that situating success in the future may be considered a self-motivating strategy as admitting that one had already achieved success may be seen as an excuse to stop self-development and rest on one's laurels. As Piotr has been working as a locksmith throughout his career, both in Poland and in Germany, we may assume that this orientation does not have to be connected with frequent career changes.

> *I'm still at the beginning of my occupational career and a lot is still ahead of me. If I said now that I had already achieved success, then probably I would not work on myself.*

I think that I haven't achieved success yet. It's all ahead of me, but it is all going in the right direction. (Piotr, M, 26, locksmith, Germany)

Moreover, some migrants who felt that they had achieved career success in one sector/specialisation/occupation were now hoping to achieve it again, in some other career path. This type of answer was given only by women (however, this may be due to the limited sample size). Those ambitions are linked with the new career types, where the individual's work life is not limited to one workplace or even one occupation. Individuals who feel they have succeeded in one occupational path may want to move to another specialisation or occupational group to achieve it again. Sometimes those changes occur because of personal interests – Julia, who worked as a gaming industry project manager before the migration, felt that in this specialisation, she has already achieved success and is ready to move to the next field. At the time of the interview, she was working as a PR specialist in the design agency. Sometimes, those changes are more externally-driven – Klara who was working casual 'students job' before migration, was unable to work as a physiotherapist after the migration due to country-specific regulations regarding the nostrification of her diploma. Still, she found a job as an artistic gymnastics trainer and feels she has succeeded in this occupational path, but still looks forward to achieving success as a physiotherapist.

I think that I achieved career success in one sector and now I'm looking for it elsewhere, because if we are talking about the video games industry, I've done everything I wanted, I've seen everything I wanted (Julia, F, 33, Account manager/ PR specialist, UK)

I've achieved success in my sports trainer career, but in my physiotherapist career – not yet. (Klara, F, 27, trainer/ physiotherapist, Norway)

Julia's and Klara's cases contribute another layer to the definition of career success, showing that not only can it be achieved many times during a person's occupational life, but each of those instances can also happen in a different occupational context. This concept can be tied to the emergence of new career models that include changing sectors and specialisations. It also means that occupational group-specific indicators of success (like a place in restaurant rankings mentioned before) can gain and lose their meaning for the individual as they change their occupational path. In order to be permanent, personal definitions of success need to be more general, which is visible in the definitions given by our Interviewees.

How does success feel?

Apart from defining success, we could also look at how those who feel they have achieved success characterise it. One way in which interviewees described the 'feeling of success' was in terms of responsibility and independence. Responsibility is strictly

connected with trust given to the individual by their supervisor and co-workers. Consequently, success is connected with being able to make one's own decisions and being trusted by the employer or clients that those decisions will be good.

They gave me cases, those cases I was managing from the beginning, I was responsible for them. (Karolina, F, 26, shop assistant in a vintage fashion shop, Netherlands)

Trust and responsibility play out in relations within the team of a company. Success can be therefore linked to the position in the organisation and the high opinion that others hold of an individual. The feeling of success is built and supported by a friendly work environment and positive feedback from colleagues and other work contacts.

I've always felt appreciated and respected (…) I've felt this success. (Karolina, F, 25, shop assistant in a vintage fashion shop, Netherlands)

Interestingly, all those points differ from the Interviewee's 'abstract' definitions of career success. Their personal experiences are described more in terms of feelings, while the 'abstract' definitions focus on the situation or position in which success happens.

Two interviewees also characterised their success in relation to their starting point. Both Monika and Sabina were able to overcome various obstacles in securing themselves positions in the labour market of the receiving country. Both began their migration trajectories (respectively – in the UK and Germany) without fluent knowledge of the country's language or personal networks. They were able to overcome those obstacles and establish themselves in the receiving countries' labour markets. Again, in this kind of narrative, there is a strong focus on being independent and self-reliant.

When I came here [UK] *I spoke only basic English, I did not know the language so well. Now, I've graduated from language college, so I know the language, maybe not perfectly, but well. I've come here with this small skill and I've started to develop it and I was able to establish myself, so yes,* definitely [I've achieved success]. (Monika, F, 36, quality controller, UK)

I think that success was learning German, getting work without any intermediary company or contacts. (Sabina, F, 23, dental assistant, Germany)

In Monika and Sabina's stories, success is conceptualised and described in comparison to the place where they were after moving to another country. By comparing their present occupational situation to the time point immediately after their migrations, they focus on the distance between the two as well as the challenges and obstacles they had to face along the way. Importantly, while Monika was a machine operator in a workwear service before the migration, Sabina left Poland as

a teenager and only worked in Germany. Monika was therefore restarting her career in a new context, while Sabina's comparison considered an even earlier phase in her biography where she felt she was behind (she needed to repeat two years of school due to language skills).

Factors behind success

Interviewees were also asked about what factors contributed to the fact they were able/ not (yet) able to achieve success. Both in the case of those who felt that they had achieved success and those who did not, the factors can be divided into internal and external. The former include personal characteristics, choices and behaviours, and the latter – circumstances that affect a person's occupational life

Internal factors were more frequently listed as reasons behind achieving career success than in the opposite situation. The first factor was personal ambition – aiming high in the occupational life, setting ambitious goals.

I am very ambitious, I pursue my goal, and I have to… it is hard to say actually, because I'm hardly ever content, so I have very high standards and I do everything to achieve my goal. And I think it helps that I put all my heart into it [work]. (Klara, F, 27, trainer/ physiotherapist, Norway)

Achieving those ambitious goals is connected with hard work – determination and perseverance were also listed as personal characteristics linked to career success. A professional and courteous attitude and willingness to work hard were seen by the Interviewees as another positive internal factor that decided on their career success. Interviewees saw this high work ethic as something natural to themselves, an innate part of their character.

I think a sort of honesty and will to work (…) Those are characteristics I have, they are innate. It worked in this job. And also a kind of courtesy that is important in client work. (Oliwia, W, 26, bakery employee, Netherlands)

The third personal characteristic which helped Interviewees achieve success was the ability (and will) to learn. This applies both to the period of initial occupational socialisation and latter occupational life. Again, similarly as in the case of being hardworking and diligent, Interviewees saw this willingness to learn as a part of their character, something that comes to them very naturally.

I was a diligent person during my university studies (…) *I've always read a lot, was interested in it, I was active during courses, I participated in legal conferences, talked with instructors about interesting cases.* (Karolina, F, 25, shop assistant in a vintage fashion shop, Netherlands)

Meanwhile, the only person who gave internal reasoning for their (subjective) lack of success was Patryk, who had changed workplaces and specialisations many times (both in Poland and after the migration), partially due to disappointments with places he worked in and misunderstandings with his co-workers. Patryk sees his very careful attitude and not taking risks in his occupational life as reasons behind not achieving career success.

> *Probably, it* [the reason why he had not achieved success] *is that I'm a bit scared to go into the unknown, I'm worried I will fail. I'm just afraid of risk, maybe I did not achieve career success because I'm afraid of taking the risk, because I just have this mental blockage.* (Patryk, M, 32, cafe employee, UK)

In the case of positive external factors helping migrants achieve career success, interpersonal relations seem to be crucial. The organisation or particular team where one is employed were seen as influencing learning opportunities and chances of reaching one's full career potential. In contrast, interpersonal problems in the workplace were seen as a factor preventing a person from achieving success.

> *It's lucky that I got into this company with a professional work culture. It is only a bakery, but I feel a lot of respect here, employees are cared for.* (Oliwia, F, 26, bakery employee, Netherlands)

> *Unfortunately, my supervisors are the kind of people with whom you can't reach agreement. They don't even try to hear me out, and even if they do, they ignore what I have to say.* (Piotr, M, 26, locksmith, Germany)

The effect of migration on chances of achieving career success

Migration itself is obviously a very important factor influencing migrants' careers, although its relations to chances of achieving career success seem to be diversified. Firstly, it is worth noting that about half of the Interviewees decided to move to another country for work-related reasons. However, the effects of migration seem to be not only positive. Some of the Interviewees felt that moving to another country delayed achieving their career goals and/or career success itself. They needed time to integrate into the receiving country's labour market and gain new professional connections. Their careers were, therefore, temporarily frozen.

> [Before she left Poland] *I already had this whole professional network of people working in, let say, professions close to what I wanted to do. And after moving here* [Netherlands] *I was practically starting from scratch and I still don't have many acquaintances in my profession.* (Oliwia, F, 26, bakery employee, Netherlands)

A lot depends on the institutional context in the particular country – whether and how credentials can be transferred and acknowledged and what formal processes

need to be observed. For example, Klara, who is a physiotherapist, feels that it was more difficult for her to be able to work in her occupation in Norway than for her university colleagues who moved to other countries.

…it took me almost three years to start working as a physiotherapist again and for sure it [migration] *stopped my professional career for quite a long time. I've talked to other people after* [physiotherapy] *university studies, with whom I studied and who went to other countries, and really, they had so much more help in organising… and to start working right away, they could enter* [other countries'] *labour markets and I had to go through all this bureaucracy and waiting and it was difficult for me. I think that three years is quite a long time and I could have forgotten a lot during that time.* (Klara, F, 27, trainer/ physiotherapist, Norway)

Klara's story has a happy ending as she was able to finally get a job as a physio-therapist. Moreover, in the meantime, she was able to work as an artistic gymnastic coach, which was also consistent with her qualifications and interests. However, some migrants are forced to choose job offers below their qualifications. Eliza, who also holds a diploma in physical therapy and was physiotherapist in Poland, during her stay in Norway has been working in cleaning services. She is however still hopeful about re-starting her career after a (planned) return to Poland.

I feel as if I've gone backwards or stayed in one place; many things I certainly don't remember after these two years. Then [before the migration] *I was up to scratch… but I think I haven't ruined my chances for a career, I think that it can be rebuilt, I can go further. I think that all will be alright once we go back to Poland*. (Eliza, F, 26, cleaner, Norway)

As for the positive effects of migration on individuals' occupational lives, some Interviewees spoke about their financial situation being much better than in Poland. Working and living abroad, in more developed, more prosperous countries, they can live more comfortably, without the financial struggle and worrying about covering all necessary expenses. Moreover, they can help loved ones should they be in need. Migration seems to enhance at least the chances of achieving the objective, the financial side of occupational success.

Absolutely, when it comes to finances, there is no comparison, because in the same posi-tion as I had in Poland, or even in theoretically lower positions, I earn much more than in Poland, which gives me mental comfort. (Julia, F, 33, Account manager/ PR specialist, UK)

However, migration can also be motivated by more immaterial gains, such as possibilities for career development and fulfilling occupational ambitions. In some cases, like Ania's (with an international academic career, she was a PhD student before leaving Poland), this was connected with the fact that the sector or sub-discipline

they were working in was not well developed in Poland. By moving abroad, she could meet and work with the most prominent specialists in her discipline and obtain a position with good work conditions (permanent contract), which she thinks would not be feasible in Poland.

I left [Poland] *because I knew that I really wouldn't have the chance to develop my career in the specialisation I'd chosen, and in Germany* [first country she moved to] *things are completely different.* (Ania, F, 39, academic, Sweden)

In other cases, it was not the work content itself, but other social or cultural issues connected with society's worldview that were problematic for a person's career in Poland. For example, Paskal's occupational opportunities in Poland were limited due to homophobia (his last job in Poland was in a hostel). In Germany, he feels he has a much greater scope for developing his career, especially as he works with small children.

In Poland I couldn't work in preschool as an outed gay, I would have been afraid of the stigmatization by co-workers or the children's parents. In Germany this was much easier and that broadened my field and my professional opportunities. (Paskal, M, 33, on income support, Germany)

Moving to another country can also result in meeting new people, which can be important for one's career. An inspiring environment in the workplace and opportunities to consult and work with figures of authority can be influential in career development and help achieve occupational success. This finding is consistent with the importance of interpersonal relations in occupational life and the atmosphere in the workplace as external factors influencing the chances of occupational success.

Thanks to migration I have met all the most important people in [her specialisation]. *I've worked with them on many projects, I have publications with those first league authors, so leaving Poland was the best thing I've done in my life. (*Ania, F, 39, academic, Sweden)

Finally, migration was seen as a source of new opportunities for career development in the future, both in Poland and other countries. With international experience and new skills (e.g. language fluency), migrants see more opportunities for the future development of their careers.

I'm applying for a job in a quite prestigious PR agency, here, nearby, and I think that if I had applied from Poland I wouldn't have had any chances even to get an interview, even if Great Britain was still in the EU. And now, I'm already on the second level of recruitment, so there are more opportunities. (Julia, F, 33, Account manager/ PR specialist, UK)

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis of Polish migrants' narrations on career success confirm that this term is complex, ambiguous and difficult to define, not only for academics, but also for people active in the labour market. Both subjective and objective (Judge et al. 1995) criteria of success appeared in the ad hoc definitions proposed by the migrants during the interviews, with about half of the definitions including both (some interviewees also mentioned that situations when only subjective/objective success is achieved as problematic, cf. Korman et al. (1981), Nicholson and Waal-Andrews (2005)). Interviewees' subjective understandings of career success were going beyond the job/career satisfaction (Heslin 2005). As for objective success, material rewards were the most frequently mentioned aspect. This is consistent with Nugin and Onken's (2010) argument about post-communist societies placing a special emphasis on the financial aspect of career success, with gradual change towards post-materialist values. The other possible objective criteria, such as the position in the organisational hierarchy and promotions were mostly not mentioned, which may be connected with organisational changes (delayering, outsourcing) leading to less focus placed on the hierarchical progression (Heslin 2005).

Both in the subjective and objective meanings, success was described by the interviewees more as a state than as an event. Interviewees' descriptions and operationalization focused more on the longitudinal experience of having a job position with specific desired characteristics than on achieving more concrete goals such as finishing a project or receiving a professional award. This is consistent with how career success (Kowalska 2022) and general life success in the migratory context (Nowicka 2013; Szczepaniak-Kroll,2018; Szczepaniak-Kroll 2020; Szymoszyn 2020) was generally described in some earlier qualitative studies on Polish migrants. Moreover, no one among our Interviewees operationalised career success as a final, conclusive evaluation of a person's career.

Based on our data, we would like to propose a position-based model of success in which achieving career success is connected with characteristics of occupational position. Those characteristics include elements relating to both subjective (job satisfaction, work consistent with interests) and objective (income, position) facets of success (Judge et al. 1995). While one or the other may be prioritised in an individual's definition of career success, achieving both is generally the most desirable situation. Thinking of career success as a state (versus a time point) connects it more closely with work-life balance, good work conditions and general life satisfaction. Another important implication of this model of career success is the focus on satisfaction with the (present) moment, not on the career as a whole or long-term planning. As the aspect of 'time dimension' of success was not very visible in the existing literature and could be one of potential research topics for future studies.

The question regarding the person's own career success proved to be even more difficult than the question about the general definition of success. About one third of the interviewees gave positive answers and about half were undecided. Some (especially younger Interviewees), saw success in their occupational future and at the same time were content with how far they had already come. Moreover, some of those who thought that they had already achieved career success were looking for the opportunity to achieve it again, but in a different context, which can be linked with new models of career such as a protean career (Hall 2004) or kaleidoscope career (Mainiero, Sullivan 2005) in which a career path is defined by individual's aims and values.

Interestingly, there were no spontaneous mentions of groups of reference used by the Interviewees to establish whether they had achieved success. The only 'quasi reference group' present were interviewees themselves, in narration where they compared their occupational life before migration or immediately after it to their present situation. The second type of narration, comparing the difficult beginnings in the receiving country's labour market to the present state, is consistent with the theory of u-shaped migrants' careers (Chiswick et al. 2003), especially as the upwards occupational trajectory was possible due to migrants' investments in their human capital.

The effects of migration on occupational trajectories and chances of achieving success were ambiguous. For many Interviewees, work-related issues were an important motivation for migration, but the results of migration on their occupational lives were not only positive. For some interviewees, the loss of a professional network and the need to establish themselves in the receiving country's labour market meant an initial downward occupational trajectory and underemployment (McKee-Ryan, Harvey 2011, Lofters et al. 2014, Aleksynska, Tritah 2013). As was mentioned above, some were able to rebuild their previous positions or even surpass them (consistent with Chiswick's, Lee's and Miller's, 2003 u-shaped careers hypothesis), while others hoped to be able to do so in the future (in the receiving country or back in Poland). Nevertheless, even in the case of downward occupational mobility in terms of a job's prestige or skill level, working aboard was connected with higher incomes than would have been possible in Poland (cf. Trevena 2013).

Our study is not without limitations, mostly those characteristic for the qualitative studies: as the sample is not-representative, the findings cannot be generalised. However, we were able to invite Interviewees with different demographic characteristics, educational attainment and work biographies, living in multiple countries. This sampling strategy enabled us to include different perspectives and a wide range of migrant experiences. Still, the present study was of the exploratory character. Moreover, due to the limited sample size, only tentative assumptions can be made on differences between different demographic groups, migrants staying in different countries or interviewees representing different occupations. In the future research on the career success in migrants' careers, some of the topics may be deepened

such as narrative strategies in talking about career success and migrants' group(s) of reference. Another potential direction of analysis would be to analyse individuals' definitions of success in the detailed context of their occupational trajectory. It could also be potentially interesting to corroborate qualitative findings with a larger scale quantitative study.

This paper's main objective was to analyse how Polish migrants define career success. We looked at the general, abstract definitions and ways in which career success is achieved and experienced in migrants' occupational biographies. Our contribution is twofold. Firstly, we bridge the gap in migration studies by analysing the place of success in the migrants' occupational careers and migrants' own understanding and experiences of success. Secondly, we provide a theoretical contribution to the sociology of work by exploring the definition of career success. We examine its temporal character, factors contributing to achieving it and how it is situated in relation to the concept of career. We propose the position-based model of career success, which can be a starting point for further research and theoretical reflection on career success in migrants' occupational biographies, especially its time dimension.

Appendix 1. Characteristics of the Interviewees

no	Pseud-onym	Country of residence	Gender	Age	Educational attainment	Labor market status
1	Adam	UK	M	28	Primary	Employed, food delivery man
2	Ania	Sweden	F	40	PhD	Employed, academic
3	Antoni	UK	M	30	MA	PhD studies
4	Arek	Germany	M	41	MA	Income support
5	Daria	UK	F	27	Secondary	Employed, order picker
6	Edward	Portugal	M	35	BA	Employed, graphic designer
7	Edyta	Portugal	F	41	MA	Employed, specialist in video games production
8	Eliza	Norway	F	27	MA	Employed, cleaner
9	Julia	UK	F	34	MA	Employed (furlough), Project manager in graphic design agency
10	Karolina	Netherlands	F	26	MA	Employed, shop assistant in a vintage fashion shop
11	Kasia	UK	F	49	MA	Employed (carer) + self-employed (translator)
12	Klara	Norway	F	28	MA	Employed, trainer/ physio-therapist

no	Pseud-onym	Country of residence	Gender	Age	Educational attainment	Labor market status
13	Kornelia	Germany	F	27	Secondary	Employed, office job in produce company
14	Krystyna	Austria	F	58	MA	Employed, office job in installation company
15	Krzysztof	Mexico	M	62	BA	Self-employed, company selling software and hardware for fuel industry
16	Marek	UK	M	41	MA	Employed, lawyer
17	Mariusz	Norway	M	30	Vocational	Employed, warehouseman
18	Michał	Netherlands	M	28	MA	Employed, Tax specialist
19	Monika	UK	F	37	Secondary	Employed, quality controller
20	Nikodem	Germany	M	26	Vocational	Employed, cook in a hotel restaurant
21	Oliwia	Netherlands	F	27	MA	Employed, bakery worker
22	Paskal	Germany	M	33	MA	Income support
23	Patryk	UK	M	33	Secondary	Employed, works in a cafe
24	Piotr	Germany	M	27	Secondary	Employed, locksmith
25	Przemek	Germany	M	53	Secondary	Employed (furlough), chef
26	Robert	UK	M	35	BA	Income support
27	Sabina	Germany	F	24	Vocational	Employed, dental assistant
28	Sandra	Czechia	F	29	MA	Employed, programmer
29	Sara	UK	F	26	Secondary	Employed, Office job in public institution
30	Wojtek	UK	M	26	Secondary	Employed (furlough), cook in a restaurant

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