

Anthropology

CULTURAL INTIMACY, CULTURAL DISTANCE: METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH INTO ROMANIANS IN POLAND

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Abstract

This study focuses on a comparison of two sets of in-depth, face-to-face interviews among Romanians living in Poland about their perceptions of the country and society, and their migrant experiences. The interviews were conducted five years apart, using the same guide, but carried out by Polish interviewers in the first case, and by a Romanian interviewer in the second. Comparative analysis of the material gained in this process reveals that, despite similar content in interviewee responses, the standing of the interviewer was by no means neutral. Crucial for the volume, type, and nature of the collected data – as well as for its interpretation – is the interviewer’s identity. In this regard, the study draws on Michael’s Herzfeld’s concept of ‘cultural intimacy’ to explain the mutual reproduction of different levels of identity and to develop a framework for analyzing the interaction between the social scientists and their interlocutors.

Keywords: Romanians; Poland; anthropology; methodology; ethnic belonging.

1. Introduction: A Sociological and Historical Contextualization

The present article stems from a collaborative project by two researchers of different ethnicities, backgrounds, and disciplines: a Polish sociologist and a Romanian anthropologist. The study at hand offers comparative insight into two sets of face-to-face, in-depth interviews (IDIs) with Romanians living, at the time of our study, in Poland. The focus of the analysis described herein are responses gained through two sets of interviews conducted with the same scripted guide. The variances lie in a temporal gap of five years between the two sets as well as (more meaningfully) in the fact that the first round of interviewing was done by persons of Polish nationality, while the second was done by only one Romanian interviewer. The main subject of analysis is the standing of the interviewers in which concerns the volume, type, and nature of the collected data in this migratory situation, and the way in which the ethnicity of the interviewers impacts the interaction with the Romanian interviews.

The decision to focus on the relatively small Romanian community¹ in Poland was rooted, foremostly, in a methodological challenge. As ethnicity has been, for a long time, a core issue for social scientists studying international migration (Barth, 1969; Baumann, 1996; Brubaker, 2004; Joppke, 2005), we asked ourselves if and how contact between an interviewee and an interviewer of the same ethnicity – versus one of the ethnicity of the host society – affects the course of a research study and its findings. In other words, we aimed to determine to what extent our typical, qualitative, anthropological study was influenced by the ethnic belonging of the researchers, with their different cultural competences and connections.

Romanians are a community not too well known in Poland. Never have they lived in greater numbers in the country, nor have they ever formed a dense regional population like the Belarusians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Germans or Slovaks.² For a brief moment in the interwar period (1918-1939), Poland and Romania did share a common border; there were also more distant periods of history during which parts of the contemporary Romanian state belonged to the Polish crown. Yet Romanians do not constitute an official, ethnic or national minority in today's Poland, although there are 13 such recognized minorities, some of them quite small. A significant number of the Romanians currently living in Poland settled there only after Romania's joining the European Union, hence they do not form a diaspora in the proper sense of the word (see Sorescu-Marinković 2016 for the similar case of Vlachs in Eastern Serbia).

According to data offered by the Romanian Embassy in Poland, in 2014 there were about 500 ethnic Romanian citizens permanently settled in Poland, while Roma with Romanian citizenship who came to Poland briefly (during the migration peak after 2007), numbered about 4,000 persons. This puts the total number of Romanian citizens residing in Poland closer to 5,000. Over the last ten years, the development of globalized, international business has resulted in a significant increase in the number of Romanian migrants staying provisionally in Poland, but the total is still considerably less than 10,000.

Nevertheless, a recent study analyzing patterns of EU labor mobility (prepared for the 2019 Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union) shows that working age nationals who live abroad range from 1.0% of the population in Germany to close to 20% in Romania. In fact, this makes Romania the EU state with the highest number of nationals working outside their home country (Poland comes in second) (Alcidi & Gros, 2019, p. 7).

Consistent with statistics compiled by the Polish government and its migration services, there were 4,818 Romanian citizens registered as living in Poland in 2021. The most numerous cohort was aged between 24 and 35, among whom men (2,930) prevailed over women (1,888). The Mazowieckie (capital city) region was home to the biggest share of Romanians (1,128), followed by Dolnośląskie (701), Małopolskie (641), Wielkopolskie (345), Śląskie (315), Zachodniopomorskie (305), etc.³

One can also differentiate the older immigrants (arriving in Poland during the Romanian communist regime) from the newer ones (encouraged by Romania's 2007 accession into the European Union) and subsequent labor migrations to other EU countries. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Romanian speakers from the Republic of Moldova who

¹ The present paper uses the terms *Romanians* and *Romanian community* interchangeably, and also mentions Romanian Roma and Romanians from the Republic of Moldova. By *Romanians* and *Romanian community* we refer to Romanian citizens coming from Romania and Moldova, and to persons of Romanian declared nationality from Moldova, but not to Romanian Roma.

² <https://www.gov.pl/web/mniejszosci-narodowe-i-etniczne/mniejszosci-narodowe-i-etniczne-w-polsce-oraz-ich-jezyki> (accessed October 10, 2023).

³ <https://migracje.gov.pl/statystyki/zakres/polska/typ/dokumenty/widok/tabele/rok/2021/kraj/RO/> (accessed September 20, 2021).

declare a Romanian identity often take part in cultural events or get-togethers organized by Romanians in Poland. These Moldovan citizens cherish a sense of community on the basis of common language and ethnic identity.

The historical contacts between Poland and Romania and between Poles and Romanians were much more intense than those of the 20th and 21st centuries have been. In addition to the above-described, there was a moment early in World War II, when many Poles (including members of the Polish government) fled German aggression across the border into Romania. Although receiving significant assistance there, these historical facts are almost nonexistent in the collective memory of Polish society today.

The Polish stereotype of Romania is that of a poorer and more backward country than most other European states (Radelczuk & Tomaszewska, 2018, pp. 17-20). The migration of Romanian Roma to Poland between 1995 and 2007, but also before these dates (Kapralski & Lechowski, 2018), correspondingly augmented an undesirable image of Romanian society as a whole and created confusion between Romanians and Roma, as well as transfer of stereotypes. Nevertheless, although the influx of Romanian Roma into Poland has stopped, such confusion still exists due to the presence of those who arrived earlier.

2. The Methodological Aspect of Qualitative Studies: Interview as Interaction

The interview has been widely employed as a method to improve qualitative insight in various types of research. It has been long central to the design of ethnographic studies; nevertheless, it has also been increasingly used in migration studies. Even if in this field the interview as a method rarely stands on its own, being often combined with participatory or non-participatory observation, focus group discussions or oral history and life-story data collection (Fedyuk & Zentai, 2018, pp. 171-174), conducting research with means other than the interview can prove difficult when researching individuals with liminal legal status or undocumented migrants (Anderson, 2000; Ruths & Anderson, 2010). Or, like in our case, small migrant groups, which do not form a real community or diaspora and are dispersed over a wide region.

The anthropological data gathered in the course of interpersonal contact between an interviewer and an interviewee is a consequence of the unique relationship established between the two of them, or, to use a metaphor, of the “power dance” in the research encounter, where “the interviewer is trying to place the interviewee, but at the same time, the interviewee is also trying to position the researcher” (Ryan, 2015). The anthropologist or ethnologist is engaged in a constant interpretation and reinterpretation of the data itself, but also of the idiosyncratic influence of the researcher’s own features, traits, and behavior upon that data. In this dynamic approach, gender, age, class, religion, ethnicity or language are not stand-alone dimensions, but “ingredients in a complex and active mix of identities” (Ryan, 2015).

Taking two stages of interviewing as a case study, we demonstrate that the interviewer is by no means a neutral or transparent figure, but crucial in subsequent interpretation of the material collected. The social scientist’s conceptual work is continuous throughout the study – both during the interview and while drawing conclusions which indubitably germinate in the scholar’s own cultural background. It must nevertheless be stressed here that qualitative research, such as that described herein, is far-removed from classic, quantitative surveying of representative samples; we cannot pretend to offer comprehensive conclusions.

Nevertheless, qualitative studies based upon in-person IDIs offer several valuable advantages: 1) the questions posed are not strict and inflexible; 2) the interview is a conversation adjusted to the interviewee’s way of thinking; and 3) the interviewer strives to

avoid lines of questioning that do not correspond with the interviewee's cognition and expression. Such ethnographic encounters can be interpreted as interpersonal social games with certain fixed rules at the start. The assumed rules and obligatory conventions are crucial for this interaction which is not an everyday experience (Crapanzano, 2010, p. 62). On the one hand, the interviewer intends to investigate the way in which interlocutors think and relate to their somewhat altered environment. On the other hand, however, the interlocutor simultaneously attempts to read the intentions and expectations of the interviewer and to establish a personal connection.

Naturally, our assumptions and expectations varied with reference to the two sets of interviews, conducted by a Polish or, respectively, a Romanian interviewer. Though the premises behind the IDIs remained the same, our initial hypothesis with respect to potential interlocutors was that the information obtained and the degree of interviewee openness would be rather different. We expected a significant disparity in the level of comfort experienced by an interlocutor when responding to a Romanian or to a Pole. Consequently, the depth of the information received and the emotional value added would be lesser or greater depending upon the interviewer's ethnicity and language. Taking into account the subject matter (Romanian reactions to and reflections on life in Poland), it was anticipated, on the one hand, that the familiarity interviewees would sense with a Romanian researcher – a cultural and social closeness – would offer chances for increased sincerity and emotive expressiveness with the interviewer. On the other hand, in interactions with Polish researchers, we supposed that the “playscript” would usher in more elements of formal convention implying politeness and distance (Turner, 1996). In other words, we expected that, with interviewers seen as representing Polish society, certain social conventions affecting the life of a Romanian migrant – especially guest-host relations – would hamper free expression.

The concept of *cultural intimacy* comes in very handy here: it expresses those aspects of cultural identity that are occasionally considered a source of external embarrassment, but nevertheless provide insiders with a sense of a (local, ethnic, national, etc.) “us,” affording comfort, understanding, and self-reflexive, ontological security (Herzfeld, 2005). Cultural intimacy helps illuminate how nation-states present themselves internationally and how they understand themselves domestically. In other words, it explains the mutual reproduction of different levels of identity. Here, the concept is applied not to states, but to individuals in order to develop a framework for analyzing the interaction between social scientists and their interlocutors who are Romanians in Poland.

Sociological and anthropological studies conducted in various contexts provide convincing examples of how the cognitive and interpretative processes of researchers – who are culturally intimate or, to the contrary, distant from the ethnic communities upon which a study is focused – influence the course and findings of that investigation. Such an example is the research conducted among Sakha (Yakuts) or Buryats in Siberia (Głowacka-Grajper, Nowicka & Połec, 2013) where the information obtained differed greatly depending on whether the interviewer was a Pole or a Russian. Judith Okely also wrote about her reservations that her scholarly material about Travelers was mainly the result of her position as a “stranger,” as an outsider (Okely, 1983). Sociolinguistic and anthropological research among Romance language-speaking communities of the Balkans conducted by a Polish researcher (Nowicka, 2021), and by a Romanian one – much closer, linguistically and culturally, to the communities in question (Sorescu-Marinković, 2008) – have also yielded diverse evidence and findings.

A recent anthropological research conducted by a Polish researcher among Polish migrants to Norway explores the significance of *cultural intimacy* in migrants' lives (Pawlak, 2015). In the same time, the study reflects on and tries to assess the position of the researcher

in conducting fieldwork among his co-nationals, expressing subjective dilemmas which entail important elements of objectified cultural recognition: “There is something peculiar and yet very significant in conducting anthropological fieldwork among one’s co-nationals living in a migratory situation, which cannot be simple understood in terms of employed research methods and theories. As an anthropologist of polish background, living and working with Polish migrants, I found myself wondering who am I during this fieldwork? Am I a researcher or perhaps a migrant? How am I perceived by Norwegians? Am I yet *another* Pole? And what about my co-nationals? Am I included as one of them (us)? Or perhaps, in their view, I am rather an outsider, despite the same national belonging?” (Pawlak, 2015, p. 242).

3. Methodology

In the spirit of social anthropology, our research was conducted via the classic, qualitative technique of face-to-face interviews. All of these – both in the first and second stage of the study – were of a similarly casual nature and followed the same interview guide. Questions were open-ended and concerned the reasons for and circumstances of interviewees’ moving from Romania to Poland, their motives for settling in Poland, the image they had of the country and its inhabitants before arriving, how that changed once they were in Poland, their interactions with Poles, perceived differences between the two cultures, and acquisition of the Polish language.

Substantively important for our analysis is the longitudinal aspect (a half-decade interval), but especially the ethnonational aspect (Polish interviewers in the first phase; a Romanian interviewer in the second). On one level, we will present and analyze the views expressed by interviewees, but on another level and to a greater extent, we will be delving deeply into the effects of the interviewer-interviewee relationship on the results of a qualitative study. Further into the text, we will compare the images drawn as a result of both sets of interviews – again, conducted with the same technique and guide, but in different languages and by a person of different or the same ethnicity.

In the earlier research, interviews were conducted either in English or, less often, in Polish, always by a person of Polish nationality, either by the first author of this text or one of four sociology students from the University of Warsaw. The interviewees were Romanian immigrants, usually working and/or studying in Poland, although sometimes settled and living in this country longer.

Thus, twenty recordings (none exceeding an hour) were made during the 2013/2014 academic year, with twenty persons aged 22 to 35 at the time. Five years later, in 2018, six recordings were made in Romanian by the second author. All interviews in this second phase of our study lasted between 1.5 and 3.5 hours. The six interviewees were aged 28 to 40 at the time, were of different educational and professional backgrounds, and came from different regions of Romania or the Republic of Moldova. They had been living in Poland for 2 to 14 years, but only two were considering a permanent stay.

4. Comparative Analysis

It has been shown that, in a migratory situation, national identity strongly intersects with social class, producing different social and cultural sets of migration practices and constructing different kinds of habitus (Pawlak, 2015, pp. 245-246). Even if our interlocutors come from diverse cultural backgrounds and belong to different social classes and therefore their pragmatic choices and views on life in the new environment greatly differ, we will not focus on these important differences in the present study, but will discuss the interviewee responses to questions posed by the interviewers in both stages of this study. The focus will

be on the differences in the answers provided at the time – discrepancies stemming from the interaction of interviewees with a researcher of the same or different ethnicity, speaking in the mother tongue or a second language.

It is important to add that the two surveys were conducted in completely different political environments (different governments with different immigration policies and therefore a different public discourse on immigrants), which could have further influenced the interpretations and responses of the interviewees. Nevertheless, it is beyond the scope of our study to delve on this topic, which might become the focus of a separate paper.

4.1. Stage one Interviews: Polish Interviewer, Romanian Interviewee

The reasons given for temporary or permanent migration to Poland were myriad. These included education, an employment offer, the encouragement of friends, simply chance, or, sometimes, love and marriage. Many of our mostly young interlocutors had already traveled extensively, mostly in Europe, but also in the United States; some had even stayed longer outside Romania. Nevertheless, student exchanges manifested a bit differently than moving for employment:

Yes, I am here with an Erasmus grant. You know, mostly through friends. Several of my friends have already been to Poland on Erasmus. I heard a lot from them about your country, a lot of interesting, cool things. That's why I decided: 'Why not, why not Poland?' And that's how I chose Poland.⁴ (I1, EN, 2014)

The Erasmus program was also the reason for the extended stay in Poland of an interlocutor specializing in genetics:

I have been living here for two years, hmm... I live here, I study and work. I found myself in Poland thanks to Erasmus; I liked it and stayed here for longer. I had some friends here before, they told me a lot about the country, and finally I decided that it would be the best place to go on an Erasmus grant. Poland is different from Romania, you can't hide it. I mean, the culture is quite similar in my opinion, but in general our countries are different. I am also not far from home in Poland, I can go to Romania from time to time. So overall I like it here. It is different, but there are also many similar things. I like Poland. (I1, EN, 2014)

The geneticist also pointed out that, upon arrival, she knew nothing about Poland:

My friends from Poland persuaded me and I came here without any special preparation. As you can see, I stayed longer, so my friends were right and I think I made the right decision, even though I knew almost nothing about Poland before. (I2, EN, 2014)

This lack of prior knowledge about the country surfaced in all the interviews, without exception. One interviewee claimed that, for the average Romanian, Poland is a northern country – located somewhere very far away, like Finland. He chuckled, calculating the distance between Oradea (northwest Romania) and Bucharest (the capital city) at 600 km, and then between Oradea and Warsaw, the capital of Poland, at 700 km. And yet, in the perception of Romanians, the first city is relatively close, while the second is very far away.

⁴ The interviewees were anonymous; the interviews were not published anywhere except this article. In the brackets at the end of each interview transcript the following information is given: number of the interviewee as assigned by the interviewer, initials of the interviewer, and year of the interview.

Such reactions are also associated with surprise and an otherness sensed in both the external appearance of the cities, as well as in the customs and character of the people. Poland sounded like an interesting country, but the decision to come was also influenced by practical considerations. For some of our interlocutors, Poland was attractive because of the lower cost of living, and, at other times, by the relative territorial proximity. Sometimes it quickly turned out, while a student was already in Poland, that it was possible to take up work in his or her academic field, and that the level of development in that discipline was much higher in Poland than in Romania:

I chose Poland because I heard a lot of good things about it, the school here had a program that interested me and it was cheaper here than in other countries. (I3, EN, 2014)

Indicative plans for the future – thoughts about leaving or staying – seem to be important for the adaptation process in Poland. How important it is to feel rooted in the workplace is evidenced by following statement:

I don't know, I can't say right now [whether I will stay]. It depends on several factors. For now, I work here, I have a contract, I've been working here for a year – we'll see how things develop. I do not rule out that I will stay in Poland for longer if I can still count on a job here. (I3, EN, 2014)

The first contact with Poland was sometimes described as shocking. As one young scholar described it, the shock concerned the sound of the language, on the one hand, and the climate, on the other:

I must admit that, at first, I was very surprised by the language and, above all, by the weather. I don't like the Polish weather; I think it's terribly cold here. Coming back to the language, at first, I had great difficulty distinguishing any words. For me everything sounds the same in Polish: one big word, from start to finish [laughter]. I remember my first arrival in Poland. It was August, I flew from Romania quite lightly dressed, and it turned out that it was only 15 degrees Celsius in Poland. It was a real shock for me. I was really very cold; I never thought that I would need a jacket during the summer holiday. I had to borrow warmer clothes from friends quickly. So my first day in Poland is mostly associated with cold. (I4, EN, 2014)

Romanian workers employed in Poland, whose coming to this country was a last minute decision, emphasized their complete lack of knowledge about the country before their arrival:

Poland was a black spot for us, we knew virtually nothing about it. Apart from that, we found out that we had a job in Poland just before Christmas, and two months later we were already in Poland. Everything happened so fast. (I11, EN, 2014)

At other times, the will to better prepare for the trip, an interest in the country, and even a desire to learn Polish were emphasized:

I had little time to move – actually, after a month I found myself here. I didn't have time to prepare; it's impossible to learn Polish in a month. I didn't speak any Slavic language, so I bought a course in Polish online, but I didn't have time to study the culture for that. (I4, EN, 2014)

The first difficulties appeared upon arrival and were primarily connected with communication (i.e., misunderstandings, lack of language fluency), as well as with idealization of Poland as a highly developed country (i.e., inflated expectations):

I already had a bachelor's degree and was looking for a job, and I didn't panic. At first, I said to myself, I know German, English, Spanish, French, for God's sake. This is a European city. And yet it turned out that it took me several months to find a job. (I8, EN, 2014)

The language barrier was frequently assessed as particularly unpleasant and a hindrance in everyday life:

I had no idea that the language barrier would have such a big impact on my life. I think that's the hardest thing for a foreigner. (I4, EN, 2014)

The fact that older Poles generally do not know English was sometimes considered a reason why they were not as helpful to foreigners as young people:

Older people in Poland, if they hear that you only speak English, usually just run away [laughter]. That is, they will usually smile, say they don't speak English, or just yell 'I don't know' and run away. (I12, EN, 2014)

Precisely with regards to helpfulness to foreigners, this same interviewee pointed further to a significant difference between Polish and Romanian society:

In Romania, on the other hand, if you ask an elderly woman for directions, she will stop. Regardless whether you only speak English, she will start speaking Romanian, sometimes even half an hour. And even though she knows you don't understand her, she will explain anyway because she just wants to help. (I9, EN, 2014)

Numerous sources of problems in communication with Poles and Polish institutions were also pointed out. The myth of high development envisions a place where everyone in society is perfectly fluent in English. The poorer than expected level of English – treated by our interlocutors as a gauge of a country's civilizational level – was reflected in some bitterness. Situations were described in which a lack of contact and interaction were seen as not simply rooted in a lack of English on the part of a Polish person, but intentional ill will:

Not that many people speak English. Or they don't want to speak English. We've seen it more than once, for example, in a shopping mall. You go and ask: 'Do you speak English?' and the answer is: 'No, I don't speak English.' Exactly. And it's in very fluent English, so it's clear that it's a lack of desire to talk in English. (I15, EN, 2014)

In this description of an unpleasant situation, intuited was an aversion to foreigners in general, xenophobic tendencies, but also a malicious reaction to the client's question.

Romanians who have lived in Poland for longer shared advice for newcomers:

First of all, let them leave the house and not sit on Skype all day long. It depends, but anyone who stays here for more than two years should start learning the language, you cannot do without it. There are people who have lived here for over two and a

half years and still cannot speak a word of Polish. It won't get them anywhere. (I20, EN, 2014)

Our interlocutors also pointed directly to unpleasant psychological features among Poles, mainly the distance Poles maintain vis-à-vis foreigners. A consequence of that is difficulties in establishing contact and friendship. There are reasons why Romanians living in Poland seek out other Romanians:

Sometimes I feel lonely here, even if I talk to Romanians every day or meet Romanians. (I19, EN, 2014)

Relations with Poles were rated (at best) as proper, but far from turning into friendship:

There are a few people with whom I have a good relationship, but I can't say that we are friends. Few people here speak English well. My Polish is also not good enough for me to have a relaxed, fluent, fun conversation. (I11, EN, 2014)

Another recurrent topic in the interviews was ignorance in Polish society about Romania and Romanians, including an identification of Romanians with Romani people:

I am aware that this stereotype still exists in Poland, but in my opinion, it comes from the Poles' little knowledge about Romania. I have the impression that Poles attribute all the bad features of Gypsies to Romanians, and in most cases, they do not even distinguish between us. But fortunately, not everyone. Besides, I started noticing that, in a way, I educate Poles. I got used to the fact that I constantly have to explain that a Romanian woman is not the same as a Gypsy woman. (I5, EN, 2014)

Over decades, at the level of Polish society, the ethnonyms *Romanian* and *Roma* (*Rumun* and *Romowie* respectively, in Polish) have become interchangeable, most probably due to the fact that the majority of post-1989, Romani immigrants came to Poland from Romania and, at the same time, that the majority of Romanian immigrants in Poland were Roma.

The stereotyping of the Romani people therefore transferred to the Romanians as a nation. This has persisted into the present, and many Poles are still confused as to the difference between Romanians and Roma. Still, another interlocutor saw differences in the perception of Romanians in Poland among the educated people with whom she worked, and among beauty salon employees who typically identified Romanians with Gypsies.

Nevertheless, one can also find elements of a positive image of Poland and Poles in the stage one interviews. A perceived similarity between Poles and Romanians was sometimes emphasized. Generally, however, Poland was presented as a country several years ahead of Romania in terms of development. For example, the exactness of a bus timetable in Poland and the lack of it in Romania were pointed out. There were also traces of a very high assessment of Poland as a whole as well as the city in which the interviewees lived. Sometimes these positive differences outweighed the similarities:

As for the city and the country, I really liked it. Compared to Romania... Of course, that's not a good thing for us as Romanians, so to speak, but it is just a much more developed country. Much cleaner. We like a lot of things here. (I11, EN, 2014)

I was delighted, I was in Gdańsk, can you imagine? I couldn't believe it, it was so beautiful. We don't have such places. Maybe Braşov, but that's just one city. (I22, EN, 2014)

In addition to the higher level of civilization, modern, healthy habits (e.g., a lot of people riding a bike or jogging), as well as the diligence and helpfulness of Poles were pointed out, too:

Poles work really hard, and they take work very seriously. They are very open, friendly, although some say that Poles are introverts, that the Polish society is very closed. I think that if you make friends with them, they will be very helpful, friendly towards you. (I19, EN, 2014)

Distance and an initial aloofness were repeated several times in Romanian opinions about Poles. This occasionally became a dominant narrative:

At first, I thought that our cultures were very similar, that we have a lot of similar traditions. However, the serious differences start when we talk about people. In my opinion, Poles are very closed, distrustful of others. In Romania, we make friends very quickly: we like to cuddle with other people, we kiss on the cheek to say hello, everyone seems to be much more open. In Poland, yes, people are rather positive, but they need to get to know the other person well. At the beginning, Poles keep their distance, but once they get to know someone well, they are extremely friendly. It's completely different than in Romania, but I'm used to it and I find Poles to be nice people. (I8, EN, 2014)

Certain characteristics of Polish behavior evoked admiration. Modesty was one virtue, especially when compared to boastfulness among Romanians:

I mean, just because you have something it doesn't mean you have to show it. (I10, EN, 2014)

Another positive Polish feature mentioned by the young Romanian wife of a Pole are the family ties that are still maintained, by young people as well:

At least from what I've seen, family is very important. I mean, even the way you organize your holidays and all that, the family has much more to say than in Romania. I think that my generation in Romania is more independent and individual; people go to college and they don't care. Here people still come back to their families to visit grandma and grandpa; it is very important. I don't know how many of my friends visit their grandmas, but here it's very important. I don't know where it comes from [laughter] and how you do it, but it's amazing. (I7, EN, 2014)

As for some Polish customs, Romanians found it difficult to attune themselves to a few:

Something I had to get used to was the cold handshake for a greeting. In Romania, only the president or the mayor shakes hands; in Romania we kiss [on the cheek], you come very close and... Here I was surprised, I never thought that I would shake hands with friends and friends of friends. (I16, EN, 2014)

Another young interviewee liked the custom of kissing a woman's hand in Poland, similar to that in Romania. She emphasized a certain, attractive type of male politeness on the part of Poles:

I just remembered one more important thing: Polish men are, in my opinion, much more polite than Romanians. I'll give you an example. In Poland, when I go somewhere with someone, I can always count on the man to open the door for me and let me in first. This also happens in Romania, but rather in formal situations, at official meetings. However, there is nothing to count on when you go somewhere – for example, with friends from the university. Then guys tend to go in first [laughter]. And not because they are rude, it's just the way it is in Romania. (I15, EN, 2014)

Finally, at the end of the earlier-cited response that implied a seemingly hostile (especially towards foreigners) nature among Poles, there was a softening of that opinion, and an indication that this woman was getting used to these less desirable features in her personal life. A Pole's wife, living in Poland for several years, gave advice to her compatriots living in Poland:

There's no point in missing home because we can't avoid this longing. We have to get used to the fact that we live here, and we can do more than talk on Skype with mom and dad, we can go outside and discover new things. For example, I started taking pictures of smaller and bigger cities in Poland, and people look at these pictures and say, 'Oh my God, have you been there? How did you get there? Is it expensive? What can you eat there?' and so on. But it also gives information that there is a good festival or that there is a good concert. (I18, EN, 2014)

4.2. Stage Two Interviews: Romanian Interviewer, Romanian Interviewee

As pointed out earlier, when the person conducting the interview was also Romanian, our interlocutors enjoyed a sense of cultural intimacy in speaking with her. Both partners in the conversation shared the same ethnicity, national identity, and language; raised in the same country, they shared the same cultural heritage, too. Moreover, encountering each other in Poland, they could relate to one another on yet another level: they are both strangers in a strange land, something that minimizes differences (e.g., education, political views etc.). Finally, interlocutors often discovered other parallels with the researcher's life which acted as a trigger for conversation. Establishing a bond were factors such as similar age, having a small child, coming from the same place in Romania, having a spouse of another nationality, having studied or worked abroad, being interested in the same cultural events, etc.

The reasons Romanians mentioned for coming to Poland were again diverse, ranging from following one's partner to starting a university program. However, the majority of interviewees admitted that the dynamic labor market of this country enticed them to choose Poland. Typically, they were offered a well-paid job here:

I spent two years in the Netherlands until I finished my studies and tried to find a job abroad, I didn't want to come back home. After sending in 1,100-1,300 applications, I found this job [in Warsaw]. So, I struggled a lot to arrive here in Poland and this was the first serious job I got. (I1, ASM, 2018)

Nevertheless, a dynamic labor market also has its downside. Some Romanians here felt as though they were "living at an airport," where people constantly come and go. Such a situation renders long-term relations rather difficult.

All the interviewees stressed that they had not specifically intended to come to Poland, but had arrived in this country more or less by chance:

I did not necessarily want to come to Poland. No. I just wanted to get a job. A workplace. (I4, ASM, 2018)

It doesn't mean I personally chose Poland because all my life I have dreamed of going to Poland and working there, living there and so on. It was rather a pleasant surprise, in the end. (I2, ASM, 2018)

As was the case in the first set, a complete lack of knowledge about the country was a motif repeated in all these interviews without exception: "I knew there was a country called Poland with a red and white flag. That was all I knew. Nothing more about Poland."

None of them chose Poland because of the place itself, but because the possibilities it offered:

No, I didn't come because of the country, I simply came because the MA program was here. I applied for the Masters. I was not interested in the place, you know. (I4, ASM, 2018)

Some even went so far as to say that nobody would willingly and with forethought choose to come to Poland:

Well, I don't think that somebody can come with his luggage: I leave for Poland, I want to settle there. They only come because they know somebody; they come because they have something already arranged. I don't think it ever happened that somebody came here to visit and liked Poland so much as to want to stay. (I2, ASM, 2018)

Furthermore, some of our interlocutors admitted that, apart from not really knowing any facts about Poland, they only had a stereotypical image of it before coming:

Zero! Zero. I didn't know a thing, I have never been to Poland until I first came here. I knew what everybody who only has stereotypes in his head knows: I knew it was cold, I knew vodka, I knew Pope John Paul II, Copernicus and Lewandowski. (I1, ASM, 2018)

I thought it was a post-soviet country, that it looked like all other post-soviet countries, probably not too far away from Romania, maybe a bit like Serbia, something like that. So not too far away, I thought. But when I arrived here, I saw it was not like that. (I2, ASM, 2018)

The cooler climate, mentioned in the first stage interviews as one of the greatest shocks upon arrival, was also raised by most of the second stage interviewees. Contact with cold weather is presented by some interlocutors as a real, initial shock:

The first year when I arrived here, I remember it was so cold [laughter]. In 2011 it was extremely cold. I tell you honestly, on July 17, I will never forget it, on July 17, I wanted to turn the heating on. (I5, ASM, 2018)

Apart from the weather, another shock (this time, cultural) noted by interviewees was experiencing Polish habits they found puzzling. Such an example is heavy drinking, be it at weddings or outings:

Polish weddings are totally different [from Romanian ones]. You drink from night till morning, from the afternoon till morning. It's not like with us, with menus. You have only one menu. Let's say there are some appetizers, ok? After that, you drink. No, first you drink when you arrive there. Then you have the appetizers, then you drink again. (I4, ASM, 2018)

In the first place, they drink a lot. That you must know. Vodka. So, this is a standard thing. Vodka is a must. (I1, ASM, 2018)

In speaking of difficulties and obstacles associated with life in Poland, most interviewees again mentioned the language barrier:

I went to private classes, but it didn't work. I bought some books, but it's more difficult alone. I bought Duolingo, but I learn from my girlfriend the most. (I1, ASM, 2018)

I didn't have the ambition, I lacked a serious motivation from the start to learn Polish at a high level and now, to be honest, I am sorry. I started feeling sorry after three years already. (I2, ASM, 2018)

Even if this seems less serious a problem today, one interviewee went on to explain that, at the multinational company which was her workplace, she had heard complaints from Polish employees that everybody should speak Polish, and no job announcements should be made in English. Another interviewee felt that she was rejected during all job interviews because her knowledge of Polish was imperfect.

In any case, there are several other, more serious hardships about which interlocutors spoke. As one man described, he moved to Warsaw due to a promised position at a university. Yet, after working for a few months, he was not compensated financially:

After three months of working without a salary and sending letters which were rougher and rougher... I did not speak Polish by then and the negotiations were ever tougher. A bunch of lies, a bunch of promises. After that, we started sending letters with the help of a lawyer, we started suing them. It was the most difficult year of my life. I think it was a very tough encounter with reality. (I3, ASM, 2018)

Another person noted that it is very difficult for foreigners to get employed in Polish academia. His criticism, however, went even further and became more general and cutting:

Poland is a very ethnocentric and xenophobic country. And xenophobia is part of the public discourse. Even their left wing is frequently ethnocentric and nationalist. [...] Foreigners are invisible in Poland. In fact, the Poles make them invisible. (I4, ASM, 2018)

Notwithstanding the above, positive impressions about Poland prevail. Several interviewees claimed that life is more comfortable in Poland (at least for families with small children), the living standard is higher than in Romania, and things are generally less expensive:

As far as the development level is concerned, Poland rather reminds me of Germany, of the big cities in Germany. A totally different level. My first impression. Then, when we started to live, to make a living here, it continued to be a pleasant surprise [laughter]. Life is very comfortable here, I would say. I have also visited the country, so I am not only talking about Warsaw, which I find to be a very comfortable city, although it is very big. If you look at it like that, it is a very big city. But you don't feel you are living in such a big city. It doesn't give you the feeling Moscow or Bucharest gives you. (I2, ASM, 2018)

Interlocutors also praised Poland's natural environment, very diverse landscape, and touristic sites. Some interviewees were shocked to discover a country much more beautiful than they imagined:

I was too far away to be interested in Poland in any way because I had this wrong impression that Poland looked like Romania, I didn't think it was any better, a post-soviet country, full stop. I would have not come to Poland, even as a tourist, because I thought there were so many other countries I needed to visit first. But when I arrived here and found myself on Plac Zamkowy, with this view over the city, over the river, with this big stadium, Narodowy, it took my breath away. It took my breath away. I said: 'It's a different city from what I was expecting to see.' (I2, ASM, 2018)

When it comes to expressing an opinion about Poles themselves, social distance and a reluctance to open up to foreigners were, as in the first stage interviews, observed by all interlocutors. However, one remarked that drinking opens Poles up:

They are much more open when they drink. Because generally, as a nation, they are, how shall I put it... they are more closed. And they have this social distance. You should speak in a certain way, address in a certain way, you know. After that, they open up, when they drink. While the people from the South are different. They speak a lot all the time. (I4, ASM, 2018)

Touching on more detailed perceptions of the Poles as a people, as well as similarities to and differences from Romanians, opinions varied considerably – ranging from approval to irony, from openly positive to negative attitudes. One interviewee observed that, in his opinion, Poles and Romanians are very similar with regards to their mentality which he saw as affected by comparable historical circumstances:

They are very close to Romanians. They, the Poles, were like us, Romanians: between Germans and Russians. So even mentally we understand each other. I look at a Pole and we talk about something, this topic on the news these days, the Holocaust. We resonate. We understand each other. We are two storm-beaten people. Hardened. Which have endured many hardships. But we arrived here and we understand each other. (I1, ASM, 2018)

When I arrived here [after the Netherlands], the change was amazing, I felt like home. The people are like us, they have similar holidays, the food is similar, they have the same style. They meet, go out, rejoice together, call you to join them; they accept, if you invite them at your home. I threw parties in my house, so house parties, not to go out in town. I went to my girlfriend's tens of times. With everything it implies: her grandmother, kissing each other. I also had her over at my place, in Cluj, it was all the

same. So we are very similar and this is something I have felt a lot of times. (I1, ASM, 2018)

One man mentioned the civic spirit and attitude which characterizes both peoples, and which he admired:

I also lived in France, I studied there as well. Both they [the Poles] and we and the French have this thing with the protests. If we don't like something, we go out on the streets. (I3, ASM, 2018)

Another interviewee assessed differences between Poles and Romanians in favor of the Poles – praising a national pride he felt was absent in Romania:

The Poles have a much better-established national pride. In the public discourse, as well. In their public discourses you don't see that much of what you see or hear [on] the radio with us, for example. (I4, ASM, 2018)

Nonetheless, other interviewees were highly critical of Poles in comparison with Romanians. In one opinion, Romanians are much more resourceful and skillful, which is why they represent an important work force in Europe, while Poles are not that inventive and quick-witted:

We, Romanians, educated or not, are an important work force in Europe. If this thing is round and you are not educated, you just make it round yourself. When the Poles work and you explain them something, [...] they do as they know, even if it's wrong. They do as they think fit. Never differently. They cannot use their brain to simplify their work. (I6, ASM, 2018)

The critical attitude towards the Poles was sometimes extreme, while the Romanian self-image was very strong:

[The Poles'] brain functions until a certain moment and after that it stops. You can try to teach them anything, they don't have the capacity to absorb it. I have a Pole who's been working with us for about two years. He couldn't learn to do more than one thing. Even though he had the possibility to learn. While we [Romanians] are universal. (I5, ASM, 2018)

Curiously, the same man who expressed the most critical opinion about the host society (considered dimwitted and unresourceful) also pointed out a general flaw in the Romanian nation (seen as the most jealous on Earth):

The disadvantage is that 90% of Romanians are envious. They have envy in their blood. From my point of view, Romanians are the most envious nation [laughter]. (I5, ASM, 2018)

Continuing, this interlocutor criticized Romanians living abroad for not teaching their children the homeland language, and those living in Romania for their obsolete mentality and lethargy, lacking the desire or drive to fix wrongs. In fact, this line of criticism towards Romanians and Romania was, in fact, a theme running through all the stage two interviews. Speaking to a Romanian researcher, it was a given that details of corruption affairs and about the Romanian mentality required no explication. It was easier to express such things.

This same interviewee, married to a Polish woman, spotlighted vast differences in mentality between Romanians and Poles – something he saw as the reason for a high rate of divorce among such couples. He further suggested that Polish culture is all-encompassing and highly conservative; he characterized Poland as ethnocentric and xenophobic.

In contrast, when speaking of the way Romanians are perceived in Poland, the experiences of our interviewees differed greatly between themselves. One of them said that Romanians are well regarded in Poland – unlike in other countries where Romanians have a bad reputation:

Here, in the worst case, you are regarded as something exotic. Because not many of us come here. Here we do not necessarily have a reputation of thieves. Many times, Ewa [his girlfriend] tells me that I have the tendency to become defensive when I talk about Romanians. And I always feel the need to take the side of my country. And she tells me: ‘Relax, there’s no need to do it.’ (I1, ASM, 2018)

Another interviewee blamed Poles for stereotyping Romanians:

I’ve been repeatedly trying to get documents here. To no avail. Because nobody wants to help you, no landlords... When you want to rent housing, when they hear you are Romanian, they hang up on you. Because Romanians in Europe, or, better said, in the world, have their history. When a foreigner hears you’re Romanian, they say: ‘He’s a thief.’ (I6, ASM, 2018)

Interestingly, even if nearly all the interviewees mentioned the differing state religions of the two countries – Orthodoxy in Romania and Roman Catholicism in Poland – this was not considered an obstacle by anyone. On the contrary, interviewees highlighted the many similarities between the two confessions; driven by curiosity, they sometimes visited a Catholic church. The one thing which came as a surprise was that in nearly every household in Poland a portrait of the Pope hung on the wall:

There is not a single house in Poland which doesn’t have a picture of Pope John Paul II. Either above the fireplace, or in the kitchen. He is everywhere. There isn’t a single village in Poland which doesn’t have a street called Pope John Paul II. (I1, ASM, 2018)

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Despite a number of resemblances in the content, the responses in the two sets of interviews illustrate that the position of the interviewer is by no means neutral and transparent. Indeed, it is crucial for the volume, type, and nature of the material collected; it is also key in the interpretation of that data. Social scientists are, in a sense, singular “data processors”: possessing emotions built upon the cornerstones of an individual socialization and life experience, they also possess the general values and customs drawn from their own culture and ethnicity. Experienced researchers know how to control their reactions, nevertheless their interpretation of the same culture, behavior or relationship might greatly differ.

Confronting our initial hypothesis – that the material obtained would significantly differ between the two cases – it was only partly proven right. In fact, the material we gathered from responses to the same questions, but posed five years apart by researchers first of Polish and then of Romanian ethnicity, was relatively similar. There are lots of resemblances in the reflections concerning what is inherent in Polish nature, the behavior and attitudes of Poles towards foreigners, as well as comparisons of life in Poland and Romania. Frankly, the

consistency of information and opinions was not surprising, given that the interviews were carried out according to the same guide during both stages. Conversations piloted (more or less) identically elicited analogous responses.

Nonetheless, what was at variance when comparing the two stages was the emotional atmosphere during the interviews. In the first set, information was provided in a matter-of-fact and descriptive form; in the second, a cultural intimacy with the interviewer colored the information with a clearly emotive tint. The degree of openness was relatively lower during the stage one interviews. After all, they were conducted in English or Polish (neither being the interviewees' mother tongue), by Polish researchers who were members of the host society. In the course of the stage two interviews – conducted in a shared mother tongue with an interviewer of the same ethnicity who was also outside the homeland – interlocutors were (expectedly) much more open and ready to confide in her.

Evidencing this was that the stage two interviews were generally much longer. Moreover, interviewees were keen on asking questions of the researcher herself. The cultural intimacy between (in this case) two Romanians turned interviews into dialogues, into conversations: the exchange was not one-way, but reciprocal. The emotional content of these interviews was very high and included many personal, even intimate details, which the interlocutors felt at ease to disclose to the anthropologist. Interlocutors wanted to talk more about home, about Romania, and less about Poland – even if the topic, which was earlier communicated to them, was their experience in Poland.

The “play script,” as the interview guide was originally designed, anticipated more elements of convention implying politeness and social distance. Nevertheless, even if the image of Polish society offered by stage one interviewees was somehow limited by the conventional rules of guest-host relations, there were, in the end, relatively few elements of politeness. Poles were described as cold, indifferent, and requiring much time before entering into a friendship. These characteristics appeared without exception, even if the criticism was present in a more mild form in the first set of interviews, and more emphasized in the second set.

As expected, the critical attitude of the interviewees towards the host society was more pronounced in the second set of interviews. Nevertheless, a more critical stance towards Romania (the homeland) and Romanian compatriots was also present – something absent from responses in the first set. This might point to Romania continuing to be (noticeably) more important for our interviewees than a likely temporary migration to Poland. The fact that the interviewees and interviewer shared a cultural background made explanations and clarifications unnecessary as much was acknowledged and understood by both parties. Thus, although the duration of the stage two interviews was longer, the pace of the conversation was faster and the details provided were much richer.

One observable difference between the stage one and stage two interviews is reproachment of the Polish, host society for misperceiving Romani people as Romanians – and thus negatively stereotyping Romanians as a nation. Such a critique emerged clearly in the first set of interviews, but transmuted in the second set into a general reference to xenophobia among Poles, without a single, explicit mention of Romani people. On the one hand, this might be due to the different time frames of the interviews, and the fact that, by the time of stage two, Romanian Roma were not as visible in Poland as before. On the other hand, the general, European identification of Roma with Romanians after the fall of the communism was so pregnant and debated in Romanian public discourse in the first decade of the 21st century that interviewees did not find it necessary to raise the issue with a Romanian interviewer, but did feel a need to explain with a Polish one.

As noted earlier, social anthropology studies have proved that the interviewer is never perceived neutrally by interviewees. Yet there is a spectrum: the researcher can be seen as

someone socially closer or more distant, somebody more or less nice, pleasant, and helpful; the anthropologist can be culturally similar or strange. Ethnic or national closeness and intimacy play a special role – particularly when dealing with disempowered groups such as emigrants. On the one hand, as we have shown herein, a cultural intimacy between the interviewer and interviewees – in this case, dialogues conducted in Romanian, by a Romanian – leads to more resonant emotional content. On the other hand, the different ethnicity and social context in stage one – interviews conducted in English or Polish by a Pole inside Poland – were apt to stir assumptions that the interviewer is more knowledgeable about internal, Polish affairs. Quite naturally, interlocutors in the first set tended to provide more detailed answers on Polish topics. Therefore, although the responses gathered were relatively comparable across both sets, subtle, yet observable differences surfaced depending on the interviewer.

Finally, one last observation should be made. Though Poland and Romania are territorially close, have even shared a border at points in history, and did experience communist absolutism that lasted long decades after 1945, actual knowledge about each other is extremely limited, bordering on ignorance. The highly formulaic image and the dearth of background information that Romanians have before they migrate to Poland shatter the stereotype (which Westerners might hold) of a single, culturally homogenous Soviet Bloc. This is one more piece of evidence that the watchword behind the Iron Curtain was not always uniformity: the countries in the Eastern Bloc were not only cut off from Western Europe and the world, but also from each other. That seclusion and separation is reflected in the responses we collected. Polish opinion generally maintains that communist rule was less strict and sharp in Poland than in other communist countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Romania; Poles are generally aware of the more intensive political opposition in their homeland than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Awareness of the plight of other Soviet Bloc states, however, did not, by and large, translate into a more profound interest in those countries. The most knowledgeable about Romanian history and the presence of Romanians in Poland are Polish mountaineers and tourists, who have always delighted in the wonderful landscapes, ethnographic diversity, and cultural richness of Romania.

All things considered, however, despite variances in the quality of interviewer-interviewee relations, a fundamental level of communication was established in both situations. Similar basic information, as well as interesting, particularized material concerning the Romanian emigrant experience in Poland was imparted: migrant adaptation to a foreign society through generalization and interpretation of discrete experiences, and subsequent adjustment to increasingly better understood collective circumstances. This goes to show once more that a single identity is not sufficient to secure a special position for the interviewer and speaks against oversimplified categorizations of insider/outsider in migration research (Fedyuk & Zentai 2018: 189), advocating for a more nuanced approach to the position and identity of the researcher. This is valid especially in situations like this, which imply and where the interview touches upon extremely complex social, political, cultural and historical factors.

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