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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Returning home: Case study of travelling for work from Czechoslovakia in times of socialism

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Abstract: It is not a new concept to live and enjoy family life in one place and work somewhere else. Travelling to get to one's place of work and living part-time away from one's place of residence is still a lifestyle many choose. During the Communist era in Czechoslovakia many men were leaving their families to work abroad. The struggle to get to the place of work was incomparable to the way it is now. This article presents the story of a man who had been working abroad (in democratic countries such as Germany and Austria) for years and always chose to return home, to a country full of restrictions (Czechoslovakia). The theoretical part will explain the theory of place attachment and provide a historical context for the empirical part. The empirical part represents an insight into life, travel, and work in the Communist era in Czechoslovakia. The purpose of this article is to provide a psychological point of view to labor migration and most importantly an explanation of a desire to return home despite the socialist regime. The focus is on the place attachment theory and an individual case study relating to international labor migration, put in a historical context.

Subjects: Sociology of Culture; Sociology of the Family; Urban Sociology; Historical Sociology; Psychological Science; Cultural Geography; Social Geography; Contemporary History

Keywords: place attachment; life story; communist era; Czechoslovakia

1. Introduction

It is said that a house is not a home. Home is an intimate place (Taylor, 1999) that consists of a physical part (house, apartment) and a social part (household), it is a sociospatial system (van der Klis



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Lenka Krajčiková is a Ph.D. candidate at the university in Czech Republic interested mainly in autobiographical memory. Her projects focus on effects of culture on autobiographical memory, she is currently working on life script research in Czech Republic and Slovakia and on project examining how historical events influence autobiographical memories. She also teaches several courses at undergraduate level at Mendel University in Brno.

The article entitled "Returning home: Case study of travelling for work from socialist Czechoslovakia" is closely linked to author's other projects dealing with autobiographical memory, culture, and history.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The main interest of the study is to provide an example of a labor migration during a difficult Communist era in Eastern Europe in form of a case study. The case and the analysis are based on a life story of a man, who had to travel to work from his home country (Czechoslovakia) to Western Germany and Austria to be able to support his family and despite everything always returned home, the place of restrictions and oppression. The theory of *place attachment* has been used to explain his behavior as this theory is closely linked to an autobiographical memory research and describes factors that play a role in creating a relationship with a certain place.

and Karsten, 2009). What drives us to leave home and equally importantly what makes us go back? As van der Klis and Karsten (2009) said, it is quite common to leave home for work in today's modern society, where commuting to work for long hours every day and losing time this way is often replaced with the model when one partner lives near their work (a commuting partner) and the other partner lives with the rest of the family in a communal family residence (Marjolijn & Karsten, 2009). The commuting partner travels to work and back home every so often to spend time with the rest of the household. But is this concept really a new one? Is it something that is typical for modern society? This article describes and analyzes a case where our participant was travelling to work abroad for a substantial part of the year to provide money for the family even though travelling itself would leave the participant with certain traumatic memories. The reason why this case deserves attention is the historical and demographic context. Travelling for work (and more importantly, returning home) was happening during the Communist era in Czechoslovakia (years 1969–1972 and again in the years 1977–1979) from the Slovak part of the country (socialist totalitarian regime; Klicperova-Baker & Košťál, 2017) to West Germany (democracy). The article focuses on the theory of place attachment and how this concept could explain participant's behavior during the times of labor migration in a historical context of the socialist regime.

2. Brief historical background

Czechoslovakia as an independent country emerged on the map of Europe after World War I. Before WWI the Czech lands (Moravia and Bohemia) belonged to the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovakia was under the rule of the Hungarian part of the Empire for many years. From the establishment of the country up to 1938, Czechoslovakia was a democratic and economically developed country with self-government (Elster, 1995). During the complicated times before, during and after World War II the Czech lands were part of a German protectorate and Slovakia became an independent state, even though it was still under German supremacy. In 1945 the "Second Republic" was established (with the Soviets taking over). The period between 1945 and 1968 was a time of socialism, where Czechoslovakia was under Communist ideology, but with some autonomy (it was possible to travel, go to church...). This seemed to be a problem for the Soviets and in 1968 Soviet troops invaded and occupied the territory of Czechoslovakia with a new constitution that came into force on January the 1st, 1969. The Communist party gained full control. It was forbidden to travel to non-Soviet or non-socialist countries (with only very limited options to receive permission, sometimes only one or two members of a family could travel while their children or a wife/husband stayed in the country to assure their return; Bednářová, 2016). It was very problematic to express religion or baptize children (Barnovský, 2008). Western countries were presented as capitalist, and capitalism was considered unacceptable and unwelcome (Arts and Gijssberts, 1998). The borders were guarded (Bednářová, 2016) and many people were killed while trying to escape the regime and flee to Western Europe (Mašková & Ripka, 2015). This article will not discuss the political problems of the regime in detail, to this day opinions differ among people in the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the advantages and disadvantages of the regime (in both republics the Communist party to this day still takes part in the election process; Arts and Gijssberts, 1998). In 1989, students organized a demonstration against the regime and it was brutally repressed. This led to protests and the fall of the regime (also known as the Velvet revolution; Elster, 1995) followed by the separation of Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. Klicperova-Baker and Košťál (2017) claim that even though the past regime was predictable and provided certain stability linked to less frustration than today's new democratic system, freedom and globalization that might bring frustration and general insecurity, most of their participants appreciate the individual freedom (e.g. sexual, religious) of the current political establishment and prefer the current state of affairs over the totalitarian past. As the main focus of this article is not to provide historical facts about the regime and its characteristics, the reader could turn to many other sources for deeper historical context.

3. People–place relationship

This chapter provides an introduction to research into place attachment, which represents a necessary basis for understanding the participant's behavior described in the empirical part.

Place attachment is an ideal concept to use when trying to explain participant's behavior during the times of labor migration. Autobiographical memory is a cornerstone of this article and place memory (Lewicka, 2008) is an important part of the place attachment concept. There are other attempts to explain the relationship between individuals and their environment, but they focus on ecology, nature or geography which is not what concerns us here.

Home is a sociospatial system that requires some degree of attachment to it (Hayward, 1975). There are other terms used to describe a residence with different extent of emotional attachment. A purely instrumental living arrangement, where there is almost no emotional attachment to it is called a *space* by Van der Klis and Karsten (2009). Familiar well-known environments without a deep emotional attachment is called a *place* and an intimate residence with certain emotional value is a *home* (Marjolijn & Karsten, 2009). In this article, the author uses Lewicka's terminology (Lewicka, 2008, 2010) and uses the term *place attachment* while referring to attachment to the previously mentioned forms of residence (space, place, and home). Place attachment is an "...emotional bond people create with their places of residence" (Lewicka, 2010, p. 35). Attachment could be felt towards a place of permanent residence, but also to a place of work (Marjolijn & Karsten, 2009), a place of vacation or a summer/winter house (McHugh & Mings, 1996). It could refer to home (house), area or city, region and also country or continent (Lewicka, 2010). Place attachment consists of three components, emotional (affective), cognitive, and behavioral (Lewicka, 2008). The emotional bond to a place is strongly correlated with the sense of history of a place, interest in its history and its past. Place attachment is linked with the knowledge of the place and its history and that is positively correlated with having parents or grandparents born in that place. To put it simply, having one's ancestors born in a certain place enhances one's interest in place history and past and that strengthens place attachment which enhances the motivation to know more about the place (Lewicka, 2008). Also, when place attachment is weak or lacking, there is usually less motivation to gain knowledge about the place and its history. Thus, there is no further strengthening of place attachment. Apart from history knowledge, Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) claim that attachment is formed mostly by neighborhood ties and residence time.

Place identity is another concept that is related to place attachment. It captures those parts of one's personality, which deal with a relationship with a certain place, one's physical environment. It affects one's personal self-esteem, it distinguishes one from others (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Lewicka (2008) takes those two Mašková concepts as different but related and says that one can be attached to a place with a different and specific content of place identity. Place attachment and identity are strongly related to higher identities such as state or country identity or region identity.

Place attachment and identity have undeniable but unclear relations with autobiographical memory (Lewicka, 2008). What affects memory of places (place memory) are the so-called "urban reminders". These reminders (old buildings and statues, streets, memorable objects at a certain place) help us remember and also describe a certain place. This might be one of the reasons why after regime change new leaders tear down old statues (Thum, 2003) and all urban reminders of the past (e.g. the demolition of Catholic churches on the borders between the Soviet bloc and Western Europe during the Communist era in Eastern Europe – this border was called "the Iron Curtain"; Mašková and Ripka, 2015). Urban reminders might influence one's curiosity to find out more about a certain place and that historical knowledge subsequently strengthens place attachment. As Lewicka (2008, p. 218) said:

"Memory contents are shaped by official ideologies transmitted through media, history lessons in schools and the school textbooks, circulated legends and songs, architectural and urban traces, family stories, and finally by numerous psychological factors that facilitate curiosity and stimulate interest in the history of the present place of residence."

4. Autobiographical memory and life story research with link to a place attachment theory

To understand one's life and the memories of one's life it is necessary to look at the story that this person tells us when talking about his/her life. Life story research began to move more into focus

of psychological research (McAdams, 2001) in the form of life script research (Berntsen and Rubin, 2004; Bohn and Habermas, 2015; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003; Rubin, Berntsen and Hutson, 2009) or research of transitional personal and historical events (Brown & Lee, 2010; Brown et al., 2009; Nourkova & Brow, 2015). A life story, or a life narrative, is the way people talk about their lives (Berntsen and Rubin, 2004). On the one hand it is an episodic knowledge which describes one's life, events that occurred and all the memories. On the other hand, a life script is a semantic knowledge; it is the way people expect their life to be according to the culture they are part of or what their parents taught them to expect from life (Berntsen and Rubin, 2004).

An interview presented later in this article was based on McAdams's Life story interview (McAdams, 2001) and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. A life story interview is a method of collecting qualitative data. It is structured into several parts that should all together collect a meaningful and deep life story. Only some of the parts of the life story interview were used in the present analysis. This method was used by Šolcová, Stuchlíková, and Guščin (2014) who interviewed the participants of the project Mars 500, who were isolated in an underground imitation of a spaceship and simulated a flight to Mars. The authors call their altered interview a "flight story interview" and did not collect data from the participants' lives as a whole, but only from the time they spent in isolation.

5. Method

5.1. Participant

In the following, the life story interview of a 75-year-old man (J.M.) from a rural area of Slovakia, currently living in a village in the middle part of Slovakia with his wife (73 years old) in a house and small estate. He has one daughter and two sons (also six grandchildren). Two of his children live in the area, one lives 100 km away in the west part of the country. He has been retired from work for about 20 years. The participant was originally interviewed as a part of a different project ("*Living in History*" project), while these memories surfaced. His life story, particularly the life period concerning labor migration, was so interesting it was worth a separate analysis.

5.2. Procedure

The interview conducted with J.M., in the following called participant, (in the native language of the participant and the interviewer) was based on life story interview (McAdams, 2001), but only some parts were used. Specifically life chapters (where the participant is instructed to talk about their life as a book with chapters, in this case about the period of time he was travelling abroad for work), critical events (peak event, nadir event and turning point, also from the time of travelling and living away from home because of work). This "*Travel story interview*" was recorded and transcribed. Some parts of the interview were not transcribed verbatim, because they did not refer to the life period of travel for work and living abroad or they were anecdotes with no information value. Also, some reactions of the interviewer were not transcribed verbatim because they did not add any informational value to the analysis. After the transcription of the interview, the story was read and reread, commented and the main themes were found. More about the themes could be found in the next section.

6. Results and discussion

J.M. worked for a company (original name in Slovak language: Banské Stavby, Prievidza) that provided jobs in coal mines in Slovakia, later on he worked in the Czech Republic and the main focus of the interview was his work for Austrian and German coal mine companies. His Slovak employer arranged these tours, the participant refers to the management of the Slovak company as "smart men," who could arrange such a thing ("The company employed very smart people, who arranged the interviews for a new job in Austrian mines."). The reason for Austrian and German companies looking for workers from Eastern Europe was their low salary requirements. This practice of making deals with other European countries and inviting workers to work for German companies for a certain time period is known as "Gastarbeiter" (Bhagwati, Schatz, & Wong, 1984).

Even though Czechoslovakia did not have a contract with Austria or Germany under the “Gastarbeiter” treaty (Burkhardt and Seifert, 2012), it probably worked on the same premise. The labor migration in this particular region in Slovakia was more typical for men, because it was usually a hard manual labor (e.g. coal mines). Women were part of a labor migration in fewer cases. Their work usually included care-taking (e. g. babysitting, taking care of elderly) or jobs in agriculture. For the first time, he left for this job in 1969, he was 27 years old at that time. Many times during the interview, J.M. referred to crossing the border to Austria or Germany as a breaking point, that manifested itself in culture and overall lifestyle. (“How did I perceive it [*the travelling*]? Well, it was something fascinating. It was a shock, like a dream”...“you cross the borders and it’s a new sort of shock, here one feels like they are under surveillance, like a prisoner, bullied”...“suddenly the train is quiet, fast, everything is clean, in order.”). The theme of cleanliness and order is repeated throughout the whole interview. The participant compares affairs in Czechoslovakia, where he lives, and abroad where he works. (“The difference! Here it was shabby, undeveloped. The staff in the trains did not have very clean uniforms. There it’s clean, you can set your watch by the train schedule. Even the little rocks between the train tracks look like they were put there personally by someone. [*Abroad*] when there was a state holiday, people seem to speak even more quietly.”). McHugh and Mings (1996) see a tendency to perceive time and space differently among travelers. The time seems to be divided into “then” and “now”, space into “there” and “here.” We can see our participant referring to the place of work (abroad) as “there” (see the previous citation) and his home country as “here.”

He decided to stay home and work in his place of residence after two and a half years of working abroad in Austria. The reason was the upcoming birth of his third child. (“In April of 1972 I was there the last time, Ivanko [*third child, a son*] was supposed to be born.”). After some time, he and his family moved from an apartment building in a town to a house in the village, where J.M. and his wife have been living to this point. They needed money to finish the house so in 1977 he started working in Germany, again thanks to his employer who got a job for a couple of workers. At this point of the interview, the problem of travelling from soviet Czechoslovakia to Western Germany surfaced. The participant talks about hard times with all the travel documents and bullying at the customs office on the frontier. He recalls that they needed many permits and documents from different offices that allowed them to travel across the borders. (“It wasn’t easy to get to the West, what if you wanted to stay there?” ...“The customs office, it was the whole investigation, they took our passports on the German side, like we were prisoners.”). When he was asked about emigration, a strong sense of apathy, inactiveness appears in his story. (“To stay there? For what? Listen, really. In all those years only one man I knew got divorced and stayed there, out of all the people who worked there.”...and again “For what would I stay?”). Here we can see the discrepancy between the positive culture shock, the dream that the Western world represented for people in Czechoslovakia and a desire to return home, disinterest in staying in that Western “dream.” J.M. did not have any interest in the history of the place (Lewicka, 2008), in its urban reminders. That could be why there was almost nonexistent place attachment and a strong desire to return home. When asked about the peak experience during his travel, he recalled the travelling itself, mainly the trains in Austria and Germany and the land he could see from the train. (“The speed, punctuality, comfort.”...“it seemed every piece of land belonged to someone, it was taken care of.”). And talking about the nadir experience, the loneliness of this lifestyle was mentioned (“...it was a lonely life, we have to arrange everything for ourselves.”). The second nadir experience that was also mentioned before was the recurring event of crossing the border and dealing with the customs office on the Czechoslovak side of the frontier. This theme is very strong throughout the interview, again and again it surfaces and the words like prisoner and bullying are repeated (“they check everything, your belongings, the way of communication, only yelling, like we were less than them.”...and again “at least three hours we spend at the customs office every time” [*on the Czech side of the border*]). J. M. talked about bad dreams he still has about the customs office and about fear of the investigation there (“The horror dreams I still have about the customs office, do I have the documents okay, are they going to let me cross the border? Because it happened from time to time, that one doesn’t have the documents all right and they did not let him cross, he was turned

back and then what?"...“After we went through the customs office we would tell ourselves *It’s over.*”). The negative experiences of the customs office might be the reason for his not going on holiday or basically anywhere if it was not absolutely necessary (“No, no, we weren’t anywhere, maybe except for Slovakia a little bit. It did not even tempt me.”).

One of the strongest themes that appeared in the interview was a tendency to compare what J.M. knew from home and the new world of Western countries. He talks about “them” and “us,” about “there” and “here.” He compares the tidiness and cleanliness of the Western world with the seediness of Czechoslovakia he knew. He saw the world across the border as a dream but at the same time he did not see the point to stay there, as he said “For what would I stay?”. This is interesting finding. Even though he saw the Western country as culturally and economically more developed and compared it to a dream, he still wanted to return home. A lack of place attachment would have a negative effect on one’s decision to stay in a certain place. J.M. did not develop any sort of place attachment to his place of work and he had a strong place attachment to his home in Czechoslovakia, where he left his family. As McHugh and Mings said “...the concept of ‘home’ is geographically elastic, ranging from dwelling to neighborhood, community, region, and nation” (McHugh & Mings, 1996, p. 530).

It could be that even though J.M. saw the Western world as a dream, he still had a strong place attachment to his country, because he experienced the times, when Slovakia (and Czechoslovakia) was not under communist supremacy. He is strongly attached to the place of his ancestors and his family, he feels attachment to landmarks, nature and people. Concerning this, it is not all that surprising that he wanted to come back under any conditions.

6.1. Limitations and future research

One of the limitations of this study could be the translation of all the quotes from J. M.’s native language into English. It is possible that some meaning could have been lost in translation. Also the article is based on a single case study, which is always a limiting factor. For a future investigation it could be interesting to find a participant, who emigrated to a Western country from Czechoslovakia in times of socialism, find out the reasons and compare them with J.M.’s story of returning home

7. Conclusion

The main interest of this article was to examine questions of labor migration in Europe in times of socialism and try to explain the psychological processes behind an attitude towards a certain place (in the case of J.M. the place of work, which was different from the place of residence). As Lewicka (2008, 2010) describes in her articles on place attachment, there are several factors, that affect a person’s relationship with a certain place. On the one hand, it is an interest in the history of the place, certain feeling of connection that could be based on the fact that our ancestors were born or lived in a certain place. Other authors claim that the most important factor in forming a bond with a certain place is the time spent in a particular place and also the feeling of being part of a neighborhood, a community (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974). What could be seen here in the case of J.M. is the lack of almost all of the crucial factors that help create place attachment. There was no need to find out more about the place of work for J.M., about its history, no neighborhood bonds, no feeling of connection with it, even though he spent a considerably long time there. That might have played a certain role in a strong desire to come back home for J.M. and not consider staying abroad despite the oppressive regime in his home country (of course together with his strong bond with the family living in his home country). His strong negative attitude towards travelling abroad even after the regime fell could be linked with the negative experience of crossing the border from the Eastern Bloc to Western Europe during socialism and all the stressful memories of the customs office checks. To conclude J.M.’s experience with travelling abroad in times of restrictions in crossing borders to the West and working abroad far from home, we can find several themes, which repeat themselves in the story. The first and the most obvious theme that appeared throughout the interview is the difference that could be observed when crossing the border from a socialist country to a Western democratic country such as Austria or Germany. It almost felt like a dream for J.M. Also, the order of things, tidiness, and overall culture and lifestyle in the Western country was a strong theme we could see in the story.

On the other hand, a desire to return home was observed in J.M.'s storytelling. The reasons were his children, family and we could assume that place attachment (or a lack of place attachment with the place of work) played a role in his desire and final return home.

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