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Article

## No(r)way? Language Learning, Stereotypes, and Social Inclusion Among Poles in Norway

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### Abstract

This study recognizes the diversity and heterogeneous nature of a migrant group that long has been portrayed and perceived in a limited way, for instance in Norwegian media, without considering the multifaceted nature of the group in question. Drawing on data from focus group interviews, we apply narrative analysis to shed light on the impact stereotypes surrounding Poles have on Polish adult migrants' striving for social inclusion and professional success in Norway. Being the largest migrant group in Norway, speaking a first language (L1) structurally different from Norwegian, and representing a former Eastern Bloc country, Poles constitute an important case to gain better knowledge of the interplay between language, labour, and social inclusion. Through our study, we aim to gain emic insights into parts of the process of settling in Norway. Our analysis centres on a case study of two focus group participants' reactions to stereotypical portrayals of Polish (professionals) in Norwegian media, experiences with language learning, and the advice they would give to newcomers, as well as the importance of a sense of community for gaining the "small talk" competence necessary to ease social inclusion. The analysis draws on the key concepts of agency, investment, and well-being. We show how the tension that occurs when second language (L2) participants are confronted with stereotypes may create a discursive space for empowerment and agency through the opportunity to contest and re-create (professional) expectancies. The study also demonstrates that there most likely are ways forward to more inclusive practices for Polish migrants in Norway.

### Keywords

agency; investment; narratives; Norway; Polish work migrants; social inclusion; stereotypes; well-being

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Migrants carry with them their own personal stories and a range of experiences and encounters with various actors and stakeholders that in different ways have contributed to secure or inhibit their sense of community and inclusion in a new society. The importance of (researchers') recognizing the migrants' own experiences and emotions while learning a second language has been highlighted for quite some time (e.g., Busch, 2017; Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2013; Opsahl & Golden, 2023; Rydell, 2018), and in this article we aim to gain emic insights into the experiences of settling

in Norway as Polish work migrants. Our analysis centres on experiences with stereotypes and how they may affect (professional) identities and investment in language learning, reflections on integrative practices, and the importance of "small talk" competence to ease social inclusion. We understand "social inclusion" in line with the EU Agency for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions as "a process that ensures citizens have the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live" (Eurofond, 2023).

Being the largest migrant group in Norway, speaking a first language (L1) in many ways structurally different from Norwegian, and representing a former Eastern Bloc country in Europe, Poles constitute an important case to gain better knowledge of the interplay between language, labour, and social inclusion. Despite the relative geographical proximity—you can reach Southern Norway from Poland in less than two hours—we assume that both the linguistic and socio-historical distance may influence the pace and success of social inclusion. Polish immigration to Norway has a relatively long history stretching back to the 1830s. No substantial migration patterns are traceable until the 1980s, though, when 2,000 political refugees arrived in Norway, many of whom were prominent intellectuals and artists who are well established within Norwegian society today (Friberg & Golden, 2014). However, it is only when we reach the phase of modern Polish Norwegian migration history that coincides with Poland’s entry into the EU in 2004, that the Polish presence in Norway becomes particularly evident. Since 2006, the growth of Polish labour migrants to Norway was accompanied by family immigration, and in 2007, Poles became the largest group of immigrants to Norway, something which is still the case. In 2023, among Norway’s approximately 5.4 million inhabitants, 877,227 were immigrants, and among these, 107,442 were from Poland according to Statistics Norway (2023). In the decades leading up to the EU expansion, Polish presence was primarily associated with short-term and circular migration. Bilateral agreements on temporary seasonal, agricultural work, where for instance students supplemented their income with work abroad, were typical during the 1990s. This followed the fall of communism, but scepticism toward Eastern Europe, with its communist past, continued to linger. Even though a small and multifaceted diaspora already existed in Norway, and many Polish work migrants received specialist work permits, an image of the (male) temporary manual worker was reinforced with the opening of the EEA labour market since many Polish work migrants were blue-collar workers within fields such as manufacturing and construction. This image is to some extent still prevalent and pertains to first-generation as well as second-generation migrants (Dyrlid, 2018; Obojska, 2018; Odden, 2020). According to Huang et al. (2016, p. 68), young Poles working in Norway have similar education levels to the Norwegian youth and appear to be better educated than the general population in Poland. Still, Przybyszewska (2021) shows how Polish migrants channel themselves into low-skilled employment, assuming it is “inevitable.” In parallel, Friberg and Midtbøen (2018, p. 1472), in their paper with the telling title “Ethnicity as Skill: immigrant Employment Hierarchies in Norwegian Low-Wage Labour Markets,” show how some Norwegian employers consider Poles and Lithuanians as being “the perfect manual workers.” A tension between the level and type of educational background, and expectations of a certain work moral combined with expertise in manual

labour, is present in our data as well. Hence, the de facto multifaceted aspects of the Polish-Norwegian community still seem affected by stereotypical images, echoing descriptions of EU (and post-Soviet) migrant experiences elsewhere in Europe (e.g., Kingumets & Sippola, 2022; Odden, 2020; Young, 2019).

Stereotypes play an important role in the present study. The term has been used broadly in research for more than 100 years, with a variety of definitions (cf. Kanahara, 2006). In this article, we adopt the simplest definition proposed by Kanahara (2006, p. 306), where stereotypes are “a belief about a group of individuals.” With this definition, we recognize that stereotypes are not “truths”: They are “ideas that circulate as truths” (Reyes, 2016, p. 312). Moreover, they are not inherently “good” or “bad,” nor are they necessarily discriminatory or prejudicial (Creese & Blackledge, 2020, p. 422; Opsahl & Golden, 2023, p. 113). To tease out the different meanings of stereotypes, more judgmental and determinable adjectives can be attached when necessary, according to Kanahara (2006, p. 318), like “positive stereotype, inaccurate stereotype, cultural stereotype, ethnic stereotype, and gender stereotype.” Reyes (2016, p. 310) further highlights the relational aspect of stereotypes by calling them a “widespread typification that links attributes to entities.” Creese and Blackledge (2020, p. 422) build on Reyes (2009, p. 43) in their description of stereotypes being “typical features, approximate descriptors that individuals *need* to move about in the world.” This last quote resembles what cognitive linguists would call “prototypes,” needed in the conceptualization of artefacts as well as ideas as “same” or “different.” Hence, stereotyping can be constructed both as an interactional resource in order to position oneself in a meaningful way, and as an oppressive practice (Reyes, 2009). A view of metapragmatic stereotypes as being “circulating resources that can be creatively recontextualized in interaction” (Reyes, 2009, p. 59) has been essential for our analysis.

This article reports from a larger study where we among other things explore to what extent the stereotypes and discrimination the migrants (directly or indirectly) have encountered, have reduced their potential for living the professional and/or social lives they imagined (cf. Olszewska, 2022; Opsahl & Golden, 2023). In the case study we present here, the participants give voice to “another way of seeing things” when confronted with stereotypes, while at the same time maintaining a sense of well-being. We discuss whether and in what ways the Polish migrants are affected by the stereotypes surrounding Poles in their striving for language learning, social inclusion, and success in the labour market. Moreover, we recognize the diversity and heterogeneous nature of a migrant group that long has been portrayed and perceived in a limited way, i.e., ignoring the multifaceted nature of the group in question (e.g., Sapieżyńska, 2022, p. 16).

## 2. Investment, Agency, and Well-Being

We base our analysis on three main theoretical constructs: the notions of agency (Ahearn, 2001), investment (Norton, 2013), and well-being (Mercer, 2021). In addition, we recognize the future-oriented nature of language learning in our analysis, seeing learning as an opportunity to gain access to resources linked to a future prospect of being part of an imagined community (Norton, 2013; cf. Anderson, 1983). The notion of agency, formulated by Ahearn (2001, p. 109) as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act,” can help us to describe and understand the interplay between the abilities and opportunities available to the migrants in a given context (cf. De Fina, 2015), for instance, whether they are *assigned* or *enabled* to create a space for inclusive actions. In narratives, agency is also related to the “characters’ reaction to troubles and difficulties” (Relaño Pastor & De Fina, 2005, p. 41). As agency is “defined on a continuum” it goes from “lack of reactions to conflicts” to “active attempts to solve problems” (Relaño Pastor & De Fina, 2005, p. 41). Such continua or agentive spaces are socioculturally mediated and interwoven in complex ecologies, highlighting an important discursive and relational dimension of agency that is of particular importance to us (cf. Reyes, 2016, p. 314). Certain agentive spaces may provide opportunities for increased agency, enabling better circumstances for investment in the new language. The concept of investment was initiated by Norton Peirce (1995) drawing on Bourdieu’s power analysis (see also Darvin & Norton, 2023), and it is understood as the learners’ relationship to the target language, a relationship that is socially and historically constructed. It includes the learners’ often ambivalent desires to master the language in question and “seeks to make a meaningful connection between a learner’s desire and commitment to acquire a language, and the language practices of the classroom or community” (Norton, 2013, p. 6). Learners’ investment will depend on a variety of factors and it is dynamic. If learners feel marginalized in a community, for instance, due to being affected by negative stereotypes, they may not be invested in the available learning contexts, despite high levels of motivation: “Investment therefore signals the tension between agency and structure, the freedom of learners to choose, and the limitations of the choices made available to them” (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 31). It follows from this that both the migrants’ agency and desire for investment will include power relations. Moreover, investment is a relational concept that is “discursively constructed, negotiated, and enacted” (Ennser-Kananen, 2019, p. 88). Our understanding of “well-being” is also relational and ecological, whereby the concept “can be seen as a sense of happiness, satisfaction and meaning which emerges from the dynamic interplay of personal characteristics and sociocontextual factors” (Mercer, 2021, p. 20). Hence, well-being is both individually and socially defined, “emerging from a per-

son’s subjective personal relationships with the affordances within their social ecologies,” and the way an individual responds to these conditions (Mercer, 2021, p. 16). We see how an individual responds to the conditions and contexts of their lives as closely related to their agency and to agentive spaces characterized by the notion of well-being. Taken together, then, our theoretical point of departure underscores the interplay between personal abilities and sociocultural opportunities; that is, the processes underlying constructions and perceptions of social inclusion. Such relational processes have been shown to play a significant role in the conceptualization of the language competence of adult migrants, “on the challenges involved in learning a new language and how being recognized as a competent language user is a desired subject position shaped in intersubjective processes” (Rydell, 2018, p. 108).

## 3. Data and Methods

An attempt to depict the interplay between the migrants’ abilities and opportunities across agentive spaces calls for a certain type of data that captures the specific time-space configurations associated with the lived experiences of the participants (Busch, 2017). This spatio-temporal dimension is also relevant to the relationship between language learning and investment, as pointed out by Ennser-Kananen (2019). As researchers, we must “consider language learners’ multiple displays of investment at different times for different aspects of and beyond the language learning process” (Ennser-Kananen, 2019, p. 88). Narratives extracted from focus group interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2014) have proven to be suitable for this purpose, where the participants often readily share experiences and ideas “that are partial or incomplete, trying them out with various degrees of assertiveness and tentativeness” (Cameron et al., 2009, p. 10). According to Golden and Lanza (2013, p. 299), “this form of conversation is dynamic in that it enables the participants the possibility to react to one another, to be challenged by one another, to compare experiences and values, and to be reminded of similar or contrary experiences.” When the participants speak in their second language (L2) and discuss sensitive topics, it is preferable with a smaller focus group, as it provides a safe space with less competition for occupying the floor and better conditions for participating and speaking freely. Narratives and small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007) are co-constructed and unfold more easily, and the speakers typically reach for agreement (De Fina, 2009; Opsahl & Golden, 2023).

Our study is based on five focus group interviews collected during late 2020. The interviews were performed in the participants’ L2 Norwegian at the Socio-Cognitive Laboratory at the University of Oslo, with one additional interview taking place on Zoom due to pandemic restrictions. The participants were all highly educated Poles who worked in places relevant to their level of education.

For the sake of preserving their anonymity, we cannot reveal more about their backgrounds. The focus groups consisted of two to three participants in addition to the authors, and the interviews followed the same procedure with a short interview guide to be able to check that the desired topics were covered in all the interviews. Participants were recruited through social media, through acquaintances, and through the “snowball method” whereby one participant led us to another. They were all notified about the goal of the project in an information letter before meeting with us. The interviews were videotaped, transcribed, and coded manually to identify the main themes that emerged during the interaction, with a special focus on narratives and small stories. The excerpts below are presented in English, using translations made by the authors. The analysis is primarily data-driven, but inevitably informed by our previous research experience and acquired theoretical understanding (cf. Smithson, 2010). The presence of majority language-speaking adult female researchers in the interactional co-construction of meaning is important to take into consideration, not only in the analysis but also in the interviews themselves (De Fina, 2009). We recognize the interplay between the different levels of the storytelling process: “the storytelling world” and “the story world” (De Fina, 2003). The storytelling world is the “here and now” when the story is told and includes all the participants in the focus group, as well as the time and place of the storytelling. The story world is the “there and then,” and thus includes the time and place in the story that is being narrated and the people present within it. Reported speech, or constructed dialogue, as it is sometimes also referred to, serves as a particularly important resource to “accentuate the lived experience of language [and] bring reported experiences to life” (Rydell, 2018, p. 107; see also Lanza, 2012; Lanza & Golden, 2022).

As stereotypes surrounding a specific migrant group are a challenging and sensitive topic to approach, we chose to present this indirectly, starting by showing three short video clips. This way the participants could comment on the experiences of others rather than their own, and later expand to their own experiences when (or if) they felt comfortable. The selection of video clips was collected from Norwegian national television and concerned cases where Poles (and Norwegians) were portrayed in an exaggerated, stereotypical way: Poles mostly as male, low-skilled blue-collar workers with weak language skills and questionable degrees of law-abidingness. The videos were originally part of comedies or comedy shows and intended to be funny. As mentioned above, stereotypes are not inherently positive or negative, and previous research on migrants’ narratives has shown that stereotypes may serve as a metapragmatic resource to negotiate identities in socially meaningful ways (Creese & Blackledge, 2020). The conver-

sations were based on reactions to the video clips and continued to touch upon other issues related to Polish–Norwegian encounters at work and in the participants’ personal lives, including experiences with learning Norwegian. We also paid attention to their feelings of belonging (or not), and how they dealt with comments made by Norwegians about their integrative success or about the behaviour of Poles in general. Since our study is concerned with emic perspectives and data suitable for exploring the lived experiences of our participants (e.g., De Fina, 2009; Obojska, 2020), we have chosen to concentrate on one case which highlights many of the recurring themes that emerge from the data set. In the analysis, we meet Jana and Marek (both pseudonyms), who know each other well, are both in their thirties and forties, hold higher education degrees, and have approximately eight years of residency in Norway.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Addressing Stereotypes

We start with Jana and Marek’s perception of how Poles are conceived in Norway, based on their reactions to the stereotypes they saw portrayed in the video clips. Their attention is especially drawn to one of the clips, which portrays a carpenter with what seems like an excellent work ethic and a “I fix everything” attitude, but who ignores laws and regulations and has a limited knowledge of Norwegian. Like many of the participants in our study, and in alignment with previous research, they highlight that Poles are presented rather one-dimensionally in the Norwegian media (Dyrlid, 2018; Obojska, 2020). Holding a higher education degree, for instance, a PhD, is not to be expected, and if you do, you are considered “a totally different kind of Pole,” according to some of our participants (Opsahl & Golden, 2023). Marek does not like to be associated with manual workers just because he is Polish, and he shares stories of how he is often asked to help recruit plumbers and carpenters, something he considers “irritating.” At one point in the conversation, he calls it prejudice: “It’s prejudice if someone asks me if I know an electrician.” He distinguishes clearly between more practically oriented and theoretically oriented occupations. Moreover, his experience of being associated with a “normality” different from the one he envisions himself as being part of, threatens his sense of well-being. The way Jana responds to these conditions is strikingly different concerning agency. She is not threatened by such questions. On the contrary, Jana states that “we are not the group that experiences a lot of prejudice,” and despite not considering the image of the Poles in the video clips to be very positive, she does not dwell on this negative view, as we see in Excerpt 1 (see Table 1 for transcription conventions).

Excerpt 1—"I usually turn it around"

1 Jana I have also been asked sometimes if I know any electricians or Poles. But...I  
 2 didn't really take it negatively. There is nothing (.) negative. I understand  
 3 where it comes from. And I know you might want people not to...associate Poland  
 4 ((where)) there are only jobs and only electricians and carpenters because  
 5 there are of course all kinds of different [people].  
 6 Marek [Same as] in every country, right?  
 7 Jana Yes, but I usually turn it around a bit (.) reverse it. That now lately there  
 8 were actually two people who asked me or talked about building something and  
 9 I just "yeah, yeah just use Poles they are good." And then like "Yes, I've  
 10 heard that, yes." So, it's like you can also turn it around perhaps in a  
 11 different way. [All]=  
 12 Marek [I don't]=  
 13 Jana =use in fact,  
 14 Marek =know. I don't bring it up myself because I actually thought it is a bit  
 15 annoying and that's how it is, everything (.) everything depends on the  
 16 situation and such, right?

**Table 1.** Transcription conventions.

(.)	short pause
[ ]	overlapping speech
=	latching
“ ”	(quotation mark) constructed dialogue
<u>Word</u>	(underscore) strong emphatic stress
[...]	indicates short segments removed in the transcription
,	(comma) continuing intonation
.	(full stop) falling intonation
((word))	uncertain transcription

Jana regards the “I fix everything” attitude as being a positive image, reporting that the Poles are considered “very efficient, work hard and fix everything fast.” Unlike Marek, she is not offended by the Norwegians assuming that “all” Poles are manual workers. In claiming both to know *why* this is the common view of Poles (lines 2–3, “I understand where it comes from”) and that she—when somebody was talking about construction work—says enthusiastically “yeah, yeah, just use Poles they are good” (l. 9), she portrays an empowered agency. In a way, she distances herself by using the 3rd person pronoun (“they”) and she takes a position as a mediator. Jana even points to Marek’s reluctance to be asked about manual workers (l. 1), but *her* self-image is not threatened by such questions. On the contrary, she uses this to turn the conversations about Polish workers around (l. 7) and reverses the image by highlighting the competence of Poles (“they are good”). In doing so, she claims to receive positive remarks back from her interlocutors in the story world: “Yes, I’ve heard that, yes” (lines 9–10). By using reported speech, Jana underscores the authenticity of the comment of others, we “hear” the Norwegians’ voices, and, by consequence, Jana strengthens the impression of highly skilled Poles as a general fact. Jana positions herself in line with the (Norwegian) majority

in their evaluation of Poles. This way, she positions herself as a member of a majority group, while at the same time alluding to inside knowledge about—and shared experience with—a minority group that possesses certain coveted skills. Regarding the image of Poles as not always being law-abiding and paying attention to rules and regulations, she comments on this in a swift and general way, claiming that the Norwegians just mentioned this as a general recommendation. Marek, who previously in the conversation has expressed strong opposition against the stereotype of the “perfect manual worker,” is still a bit annoyed (l. 15), but he recapitulates somewhat, in agreeing that it all depends on the concrete situation at hand. This extract illustrates how perceptions of social inclusion are negotiated, constructed, and relational. Later in the conversation, the stereotypical image of the not-always-law-abiding Pole is revisited. Confronted with the question of where these stereotypes in the video clips come from, Jana replies (like Marek in Excerpt 3) that they come from “reality,” and that she would not have been surprised if she had heard that some Poles had been caught stealing. However, she immediately elaborates, once again turning things around (cf. Excerpt 2, l. 4, “But”).

Excerpt 2—“You can imagine the situation he is in”

1 Jana But if you think about it as a profile for that person—that is a craftsman who  
 2 may have a rather low level of education (.) a lot of practical skills,  
 3 Marek Except,  
 4 Jana But yes (.) you can imagine a bit like what kind of situation he is in (.) why  
 5 he does what he does. Not to excuse him, but you ((may)) always work out where  
 6 it comes from. Maybe he has a superb financial situation (.) and goes to the  
 7 country where he thinks...he will be doing so well. Much better financially and  
 8 thinking yes that,  
 9 Marek Yeah, but it's not just that either, right? Because...being so negative towards  
 10 the rules in general and kind of the State and such (.) it's kind of typical  
 11 Polish.

Echoing Marek's claim that “everything depends on the situation” (Excerpt 1, lines 15–16), Jana expresses strong solidarity with a fellow human being in distress; she relates acts of stealing to people in desperate need of money, and not to the fact that they are Polish. Marek once again agrees and even expands the perspective a bit (l. 9, “but”) by re-instating an aspect of “typical Polish”: A tendency of being sceptical or negative towards rules and regulations is related to “the State and such” (l. 10), deeply rooted in the Polish collective memory of once being members of a totalitarian regime. The historical consciousness is something Marek turns to several times during the conversation. Mercer (2021) describes well-being as emerging from the dynamic interplay of personal characteristics and

socio-contextual factors. In this case, we see how a sense of meaning emerges from the shared lived experiences and collective memory of a migrant group. In the story-telling world, i.e., the specific time-space configuration of the present, such experiences add additional layers of meaning to the notion of law-abidingness among Polish work migrants. The fact that stereotypes are ideas that circulate as truths, and not truths themselves (Reyes, 2016, p. 312), offers Marek and Jana an agentive space for elaborating on and challenging the notion of a lack of law-abidingness. A similar agentive space appears in Excerpt 3, where Jana elaborates further on the positive aspects of the stereotypical “I fix everything” attitude associated with Polish workers.

Excerpt 3—“He had a slice of bread in one hand, painting with the other”

1 Marek I feel that it is rooted in reality. It's not just (.) yes (.) it's not just  
 2 that people say it and then deliver crap afterwards.  
 3 Jana No no, [that]=  
 4 Marek [Yes, some] of course as always, right, but most just "yes, yes, yes"  
 5 Jana =finding solutions,  
 6 Marek And then the job is done, right,  
 7 Jana Absolutely, and I have experienced that many times here. That I have heard  
 8 from people that "no, Poles do it cheaper and faster and better." It is  
 9 actually very positive.  
 10 Anne Is it positive then?  
 11 Jana Yeah, yeah. It is positive.  
 12 Anne It's because it's solution-oriented somehow?  
 13 Jana Yes, efficient and I heard a (.) like a quote "yes he had a slice of bread in  
 14 one hand, painting with the other hand, didn't take a break to eat lunch once.  
 15 So efficient," and ((I'm)) just thinking: "yes how nice" (.) yes that people  
 16 get a positive impression that it is hard they work hard and do what they're  
 supposed to.

Here we see that Marek also highlights the realistic realm of the “I fix everything” attitude (l. 1) Polish workers deliver, and both Jana and Marek end up expressing that Polish male manual workers are effective and solution-oriented. In the first part of the excerpt, the pace of the conversation increases; both are engaged and they consecutively evaluate the positive aspects of a “typical Polish” work ethic, which is not only super-

ficial, but real, and of high quality (lines 1–2). Jana once again turns to reported speech when underscoring Marek's claim about quality. In line 8, she says “no,” answering to an unarticulated expectation of low quality, sometimes accompanying the stereotypical image of the Polish worker, portrayed in the video clips. It is not only cheaper and faster, but also better, Jana has heard, concluding that “it's actually very positive” (lines 8–9).

When challenged with a direct question about the true positive nature of this stereotype, Jana gives an immediate, positive response (l. 11), and when the interviewer wants her to elaborate through suggesting a candidate answer (l. 11, “solution-oriented somehow?”), Jana again provides a preferred response; immediate agreement, including a small story that illustrates the efficiency of the worker in an almost extreme way (lines 12–13, “he had a slice of bread in one hand, painting with the other”). The interplay between personal characteristics and socio-contextual factors is present also in this case. Jana turns to reported speech not only to portray the efficient painter but also when portraying her own reaction, as inner speech (l. 14, “just thinking ‘yes how nice’”). Rydell (2018) connects a preference for other-attributed speech among language learners to a perceived limited agency in becoming a competent language user. Hence, Jana’s self-attributed reported speech or thought (cf. also Excerpt 1) reflects her empowered agency. The way in which she positions herself in another time-space configuration allows her once again to choose the 3rd person pronoun “they” (l. 15). The oscillation between different subject posi-

tions offered in the narratives and in and through the act of narration makes it possible to create a context where the stereotypical notions of “typical Polish” is explained or re-interpreted in an alternative way, which includes a sense of pride and well-being.

#### 4.2. Language Learning and the Importance of a Sense of Community

When it comes to learning the dominant language of a new country, many studies highlight the immigrants’ own voices expressing how the understanding and use of this language is a sine qua non (cf. Simpson & Whiteside, 2015, p. 4) to succeed. Jana and Marek are no exceptions; they both emphasize the importance of learning Norwegian as a key factor for social inclusion. It is, in fact, the best advice to give newcomers, Marek claims: “That’s the one sure thing, isn’t it, for all countries, really.” However, both Marek and Jana highlight the two-way relation between language learning and inclusion factors in underscoring the importance of a sense of community for language learning (cf. Excerpt 4).

#### Excerpt 4—“It is a key to society here”

- 1 Jana Yes, but I think the most important thing is if there are some people who are  
 2 completely new and need networks eh, (.) so I would have recommended joining an  
 3 association or (.) because that's how one (.) I think it is such a key to  
 4 society here that you must have something in common (.) you can't (.) it is not  
 5 a country where you meet people [eh]=  
 6 Marek [randomly]  
 7 Jana =randomly at a bar or. People stick together. They must have something in  
 8 common. So if you're all alone, new in the country so sign up for whatever, is  
 9 it a Frisbee association or is it the Hiking Association (.) where you  
 10 actually meet [people. Do the]=  
 11 Marek [In particular, particularly sports].  
 12 Jana =same. Yeah (.) Yeah (.) preferably sports or chess or yes. Whatever. Because  
 13 people look at you, I think it's natural in a way too (.) that if you're just  
 14 a stranger it's kind of out. But if you are a stranger who is doing the same  
 15 thing then it is something else (.) completely different. I believe it's the  
 16 easiest ((way)) to feel included and just do something, find people to do  
 17 something with. Like activities or,

Jana highlights the need for a social network (l. 2) and the importance of people interacting as a remedy against suspicion. It is the “key to society” (lines 3–4), she claims, but society is also the key to language use. Jana’s point is that learning Norwegian happens in a social context, with people doing the same thing (lines 10–12). This aligns well with the sociocultural approach to learning a new language, where the participants’ search for meaning in a social context is key to learning. Jana also sees joint activities as a means to avoid the general suspicion towards the stranger (l. 14), and, importantly, it is the “easiest way to feel included” (l. 16). While reflecting on these processes, she alludes to critical voices, which she

once again handles in an inclusive and acknowledgeable manner (l. 13, “it’s natural in a way”), echoing her own “understanding where the negative stereotype comes from” (Excerpt 1).

Interestingly, it is not the language skills as such that are the “key to society” one may interpret from Excerpt 4; it is “that you must have something in common” (l. 4). A sense of community is in itself an important step towards social inclusion, maybe more important than language skills. If finding people “to do something with” (lines 16–17) is the easiest way to feel included, the process of learning the language may be the opposite, i.e., challenging. Jana and Marek both admit that it has been



hard work; it took time, and it was a difficult and stressful process. Jana remembers how demanding it was to be with friends and just listen to small talk in Norwegian

at parties. Marek immediately recognizes the experience and supports the implicit evaluation of the small story (cf. Excerpt 5, l. 5).

Excerpt 5—“It was kind of demanding on the brain”

1 Jana No (.) it was kind of demanding on the brain when you suddenly had to sit at a  
 2 party because then I knew some, so they suddenly spoke Norwegian. (.) And it  
 3 was after two hours that I was completely exhausted from just listening to  
 4 [the language].  
 5 Marek [You get] very tired of it.

The interviewer Anne asks further about their experience with small talk compared to professional talk at work.

Jana recognizes a specific feeling and elaborates on the cause (Excerpt 6):

Excerpt 6—“You are only supposed to talk about nothing”

1 Jana I think I can ((relate)) to this. It's easier. The more confident you are in  
 2 what you talk about, the easier it is to speak about (.) regardless of the  
 3 language. But if you have a pause and maybe are not so comfortable with people  
 4 and everyone else, you are the only foreigner, then you are supposed just to  
 5 talk about (.) nothing. So (.) yes, it can be a bit more demanding and there are  
 6 also lots of more such slang words that you may not know or abbreviations  
 7 or (.). So yes, if you don't know people well, it can be worse because then you  
 8 have to just (.) then you're just yourself, you're not a professional (.)  
 9 I don't know, researcher or doctor or. You are yourself and then it's a bit like  
 10 wow, it's a bit more pressure, maybe.

Talking in professional settings with colleagues, while sharing the same references and being familiar with the expected style, is less demanding. Such well-known situations scaffold language production. This relates to the different “selves” presented in psychology and further developed in connection to language learners by Kramsch (2009). The way we know ourselves is connected to the way we perceive, construct, and make sense of others. As we have different identities in different contexts, we also construct different selves. To talk about something you know well, like your work, carries less emotional load because it affects “the professional-self.” But to talk about “nothing” is emotionally demanding, and Jana relates this to her identity, she feels that she unveils herself, she cannot hide behind her expertise (“her professional-self”) or her experience (“her mature-self”). She is left with herself (l. 8), what we interpret as “her vulnerable-self” that is present in personal relationships. Small talk is a relational activity with the purpose of connecting people. Not responding, or responding in an awkward manner (lines 5–6), might make it difficult to connect to other people and get acquainted. Moreover, it is the opposite of well-being. “Talking about nothing” is the opposite of interacting in a club or association where people are doing things together (cf. Excerpt 4), and the opportunity to talk about *something*, like in the professional setting. When reflecting on her professional-

self later in the conversation, Jana admits that she still is somewhat afraid of speaking in professional contexts too, and of making mistakes, but she relates this to her new job and her own expectations and demands on herself. But she feels that she is improving, she imagines herself progressing in the future, and this makes her work with—i.e., invest in—the language. She sees herself as a future confident speaker who can ask casually when she does not understand something and keeps assuring herself, again through self-attributed reported speech or thought: “It’s going well, it’s going to be fine.”

## 5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this study we met two well-educated Polish adults, Jana and Marek, who shared stories of their own and others’ lived experiences as immigrants in Norway, and we have seen how stereotypes about what is considered “typical Polish” can be recontextualized creatively in interaction (cf. Reyes, 2009, p. 59). The participants have different reactions to and ideas on how to deal with stereotypical images such as Poles being “perfect manual workers.” Marek is sometimes offended by being associated with plumbers and carpenters, as they do not share his level of education, and he considers it prejudiced. Jana, on the other hand, can “turn things around” (cf. Excerpt 1) to highlight the qualities of being

a hard-working person. As for another stereotype, the image of the “not-always-law-abiding-Pole,” they both agree that it to a certain extent is rooted in “reality,” but Jana again explores the agentive space made available in the story-telling world to turn this around, reflecting on the difficult financial situations some workers are in, and their imagined future in a new country. She manages to make Marek reflect further as well, leading to his claim that this is deeply rooted in the Polish collective memory of once being members of a totalitarian regime. It is the circumstances that have brought them there. In both cases, we see how Jana’s strong degree of agency gives her the means not only to react but also respond and enact, by expanding the agentive space and envisioning an alternative subject position relevant for Polish professionals in Norway. Her actions resemble other migration accounts involving stereotypes or type-characters, for instance, described by Creese and Blackledge (2020, p. 437), as these contribute to “retained authorial control in the message they represented.” Young (2019) points to similar effects in her study of Polish-born adolescents in the UK, who use their narratives to re-establish themselves as something other than passive victims: “As they do so, they appropriate other, more positive discourses which serve to reinforce their sense of themselves as agentive beings” (Young, 2019, p. 124).

When it comes to language learning, Jana and Marek agree that it is important, but Jana also admits that it has been, and still is, hard work. She points to the value of networks, to be part of something, both to deal with and hopefully lower the scepticism towards strangers, and to get opportunities to have something to talk about. This is the best path to inclusion. Following from this, and recognizing the interplay between the personal and social, it also makes perfect sense that the participants highlight language use in their professional lives as less demanding than informal social gatherings. Language use is a meaningful activity where human beings exercise their agency; hence, this should also be the case for language learning (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 164).

With reference to the title of this article—“No(r)way?”—we might say that Jana’s ability to explore an agentive space and “turn things around” is a way of saying “No way!” while negotiating her social inclusion in Norway. She is not willing to give up on the ideas that circulate as “truths” about Poles. Rather, she reframes these ideas as something beneficial to her, and which involves a sense of pride. This speaks to her level of agency, but it does not reveal exactly *why* she is able to position herself as a successful immigrant who is not threatened by the negative stereotypes surrounding her. One answer may be related to gender; the images of Poles in the presented video clips (and in much of the media discourse on Poles in Norway) were all male. Another answer may be related to her employment, which matches her educational background and her imagined future where everything “is going to be fine.” On the other hand, she seems able to turn things around

also for Marek, who reconsiders some of his experiences as the conversation unfolds. The agency expressed by both of them, and especially by Jana, is instantiated in and through the act of narration, which opens up the path to investment. In turning things around, the desire to invest in the new language increases. Jana’s professional experiences and sense of well-being connected to language use in a meaningful context seem important. Darvin and Norton (2023) remind us that learners need to negotiate their resources and assert their identities in order to invest in their learning. In our data, we see how Jana and Marek in and through the act of narration create a context where notions are re-interpreted or explained in an alternative way. Well-being emerges from the way a person makes sense of and interacts with their social contexts, and “any meaningful interventions for well-being must ideally promote individual development and personal strategies as well as systemic change and structural support” (Mercer, 2021, p. 16). In this intervention, both agency and investment are important components. We recognize the same need for promoting individual development and structural support in securing meaningful language learning and social inclusion for work migrants, and one step forward to more inclusive practices is—as banal as it might seem—doing something together.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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