

“We Just Want to Live Normally”: Intersecting Discourses of Public, Private, Poland, and the West

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Abstract

In postcommunist Poland, discourse on “the normal life” provides a view into young Poles’ identity as shaped by processes of democratization, marketization, and globalization. In this article, I compare uses of the term “normal” for a group of urban and rural youths during two periods in the 1990s. I show that normal, like public and private, is a “shifter”—because the same term is used in a variety of contexts to describe various situations, it helps to integrate new experiences in a way that maintains a sense of continuity with the past. This discourse reveals young Poles’ simultaneous attraction and resistance to idealizations of the West, and it also reflects the different opportunities available to rural and urban residents. These factors, in turn, help to shape young Poles’ orientations toward the future within and beyond the borders of Poland. [Key words: public/private, marketization, Poland, globalization, national identity]

“In Poland, times are always interesting. There is never ‘normality’. Rarely is life pretty—there are only pretty moments.” (Krzysiek, a resident of Lesko, age 21, 1993)

“To me, this is a normal country. Whatever we don’t like, we should change. [The country] is moving in a very positive direction.” (Piotr, a resident of Krakow, age 25, 1999)

When discussing their frustrations with everyday surroundings and experiences, high school students in Poland during the early 1990s often made references to “the normal life.” As Krzysiek put it shortly after he graduated from a rural technical high school, “more than anything, I’d like to find a little lady and get married. I just want to live normally (*zyc normalnie*).” Young Poles expressed longing for normalcy within both the public and private realm—they wanted a stable economic and political system that would enable, not hinder, their ability to achieve their personal goals. Several years later, in 1999, discourse

about what constitutes the normal life continued, though urban residents with a university education were more inclined to describe their own experiences as normal than others, who felt the idealized normal life was still impossible to achieve in Poland. In this paper, I show that discourse about “the normal life” functions as a means of evaluating public structures in relation to individual experiences and expectations. Just what the “normal” entails is difficult to pin down—specific uses of the term shift from person to person, and from context to context. Sometimes, it refers to “that which actually occurs most often and is therefore ‘typical,’” but it is used more often to refer to “how things should be” (Wedel 1986:151). Varied characterizations of “the normal life,” shaped by ethical stances that inform and are informed by perceptions of public, private, Poland, and the West, provide a view into young Poles’ identity as Poles. They also reveal the simultaneous attraction and resistance to processes of globalization—increasing long distance interconnectedness across nations and continents (Hannerz 1996)—in post-communist Poland.

I focus on the words of urban and rural youths who were in high school when they first talked to me in 1992 and 1993 about their lives in postcommunist Poland. I compare their earlier comments with those they made in 1999, when they were young adults beginning their own families and professional careers. In the earlier interviews, exclamations such as “we just want to live normally in a normal country,” or “our normal [what is familiar] is not normal [the way things should be]” came in response to my questions about recent changes in Poland. As I became attuned to these phrases, I noticed they were used in casual, unsolicited conversations, as well. Usually, they were said in a tone of frustration, and preceded a litany of problems with the existing system in Poland. Most notably, youths complained about the threat of unemployment and the high cost of living. In my interviews in 1999, I asked respondents whether they think Poland is a normal country. This is consistent with my approach to ethnographic research—I listen for significant themes and patterns that emerge in everyday conversations, and

then build my study questions around those themes. In these later interviews, I noted a marked split between responses of urban and rural residents. Those who live in Krakow, most of whom have attended university, have a greater sense of progress toward the normal, and, however they define it, they feel confident that they can achieve a normal life in Poland. Those in the rural town of Lesko and the adjoining Bieszczady region tend to feel more limited and correspondingly were more inclined to say that Poland is not a normal country and the normal life still eludes them.¹

Little has been written about uses of the term “normal,” with the notable exception of Wedel (1986).² However, because the tension between public and private usually informs Poles’ characterizations of the “normal,” theoretical constructions and more specific meanings of public and private in Eastern Europe and Poland serve as a starting point to clarify conceptualizations of the normal.

The distinction between private and public has been an active locus of theory in a variety of disciplines. Weintraub (1997) outlines four general ways in which the opposition has been defined: the liberal-economic contrast between market and state characteristic of public policy analysis; the classical distinction between the political community of citizens and the institutions of both the market and the state; the sociological distinction between intimate, face to face relations and increasingly impersonal and instrumental relations in public spaces; and the distinction elaborated in feminist theory between the female-gendered domestic realm and the male-gendered economic and political order. Some of these distinctions might appear to be contradictory: by one scheme, the realm of the market is defined as the private relative to the political public, by another the market is lumped with other public institutions that contrast with the domestic private realm. Recently, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000) have looked more closely at the way the categories of public and private operate. Drawing from feminist theory, they point out that public and private are “shifters.” In other words, their meaning is always based on the context in which they are used. As such, they mark ideological distinctions rather than actual places, and can be applied to any number of spatial and conceptual divides (for instance, home and work, market and state, whisper and public announcement). Gal and Kligman (see also Gal 2002) further describe the “fractal qualities” of public and private; like the mathematical concept, the categories can be ever divided into imbedded degrees of public and private. For instance, within the privately

defined space of the home, there are public rooms (the living room) and private rooms (the bedroom), and each of these spaces may be further divided into public and private, depending on specific elements and uses.

The public-private dichotomy has been used to characterize state socialist systems in Eastern Europe by natives and by foreign scholars. The difference was variously described as: the political divide between the state—the institutions of the socialist government—and the nation—the people united by a shared sense of identity (Galbraith 1997, 2000; Herer and Sadowski 1990; Kubik 1994); the centralized, state-controlled economy and what was variously called the black market, gray market, second economy, or private sector (Hann 1985; Haraszti 1978; Lampland 1995; Nagengast 1991; Pine 1993; Sampson 1985-6; Wedel 1986, 1990; Verdery 1996); and the values propounded in state doctrine as opposed to the beliefs expressed at home (Kaufman 1989; Lampland 1995; Ries 1997; Verdery 1996). These tensions led people to characterize their everyday experiences in terms of absurdity (Ries 1997), which is one way of marking typical experiences as abnormal. For instance, state propaganda celebrated the successes of socialist production while factories and citizens struggled to deal with shortages of all kinds of manufacturing and consumer goods. The absurdity arising out of these tensions also became a central theme in Eastern European literature, such as The Polish Complex by Tadeusz Konwicki (1982), the grim and gritty novels of Marek HBasko (1989), Moskwa-Pietuszki by Venedikt Erofeev (1980), and Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s (1963) One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.

In many cases, the distinction between public and private was shaped by ethical stances that contradicted socialist doctrine; the private realm was viewed as the realm of the “good” in contrast to the corrupt public realm. According to Martha Lampland (1995) villagers in Hungary during the 1980s considered home to be the locus of truth and genuineness, while politics were regarded as vacuous. During the same period in Poland, Janine Wedel (1986) observed people applying one moral code to interactions with family and friends, and another to interactions in the public realm. Specifically, networks of intimates and acquaintances engaged in all kinds of informal exchanges of scarce goods and services “acquired” through their official jobs. If, however, people were caught poaching someone’s personal possessions (as opposed to state resources), it was condemned as stealing. Gal and Kligman (2000) point out that, despite

the interdependence between public and private under state socialism, a powerful divide was perceived between intimate domestic relations and public institutional control, most often characterized in terms of “us” and “them.” Katherine Verdery (1996) also contends that identities under state socialism were split between “us” and “them.” In other words, people contrasted the state-sanctioned values exhibited in public realms, to their “real beliefs” and “true self” that they could only express in private. She explains:

Like the second economy worked only in parasitic relation to the first, this “real” self was meaningful and coherent only in relation to the public or official self. In other words, people’s sense of identity and personhood was not independent but required the “enemy” Party, the “them” to complete it. Bipolarity, in short, became constitutive of the social person (1996:94).

These studies show that despite the emphasis on contrasts between public and private, each realm was defined in terms of the other, and both pragmatically and symbolically dependent on the other.

Under state socialism, processes of globalization were mediated by the Soviet Union—most outside influences came from the East instead of the West, and official images of the capitalist world were distorted to support state policies. Following the collapse of state socialism in 1989, influences increasingly flowed from west to east, and the rate and the variety of connections grew rapidly. Correspondingly, the public-private dichotomy became newly configured throughout postcommunist Europe. The initial elation most people felt about regaining civil liberties was quickly superseded by economic concerns. As Verdery (1996) and Berdahl (1999) point out, state socialist propaganda fueled the desire for consumer goods, but it did not fulfill these desires. The post-1989 preoccupation with acquisition of material items, aptly called by Berdahl (1999) a “consuming frenzy,” amounted to the feverish effort to satisfy these long-denied desires. Barbara West describes how the concerns of residents of a small Hungarian city shifted to the nation’s cultural and linguistic integrity and to “the security of their own bodies, jobs, and futures” (2002:9-10). Correspondingly, Gal and Kligman (2000) say that the primary threat to “family” shifted from uncertainty arising from state control to uncertainty about state services and the insecurity of markets and employment. Olt landers in rural Romania told David Kideckel (1993) that one of the best things about the revolution was that it allowed them to be left alone to live their lives as they saw fit. A number of studies

focus on the ways in which the public-private distinction has helped perpetuate gender inequality under state socialism and since 1989 (Gal and Kligman 2000, Gal and Kligman, eds. 2000, Long 1996, Pine 1993). Thus, distinctions between “us” and “them” continued to be made and helped to maintain the perception of continuity, even though the dominant focus of concerns had changed.

These cases point to other categories besides public and private that function as shifters in the postcommunist world, most significantly the concepts of security and normalcy. Because the words stay the same, even when they describe radically different contexts, the terms help to maintain an appearance of continuity, and thus tend to promote the experience of continuity for people who use the distinction (or hear the distinction used). The Poles at the center of my study made use of the terms “normal” and “stable” to characterize an idealized realm of domestic harmony, economic prosperity, and individual and national liberty, often in contrast to their everyday experiences. Many used a mythologized West typified by affluence and order as a point of comparison, while at the same time expressing fierce loyalty to their homeland and reluctance to leave it. By and large, they accepted increased individual freedoms and civil rights in Poland as a return to normalcy. They felt liberated from the extraordinary efforts that had been required to meet basic material needs during state socialism, and freed of the obligation to act as heroes and sacrifice their personal desires for the good of the nation. Rather than celebrate these achievements, however, they tended instead to lament the economic improvements that had yet to be achieved, and the hardships they faced as a result. Similarly, they criticized the freely elected politicians who claimed to be loyal to the Polish nation, but failed to place the best interest of the majority before their own self-interest. Thus, Poland continued to be “not normal” in their estimation, even though the exact nature and causes of the abnormality they identified had shifted significantly. In the next two sections, I present ways in which young Poles’ made use of the term “normal” to describe their experiences, and I consider the affect of these discourses on their perceptions of the future and their identity as Poles. First, I focus on the early 1990s, when they were still in high school, and then I consider their comments in 1999.

The Early 1990s

During the early 1990s, conceptions of the normal were intimately intertwined with perceptions of

the contrast between state institutions and the domestic realm. Despite its official demise, state socialism continued to structure significant portions of everyday life. Most particularly for Polish youths, secondary schools still, by and large, trained students for employment in a centralized economy where jobs were guaranteed. Most students attended technical or trade programs designed to track them into particular specialties such as electronics or agriculture, while fewer than 25% attended college track lycea. Nevertheless, the very state industries they were being educated for were in the midst of being dismantled, and were laying off large numbers of workers. This disconnect between public institutions and personal expectations contributed to concerns about instability and expressions of frustration that a normal life was so difficult to achieve in Poland. "Normal" was variously used to describe living in a country that was not always fighting some enemy, or occupied by some foreign power, where economic policies lead to industrial productivity and stable employment with reasonable salaries, where consumer goods were easily available (in contrast to the old system) and affordable (in contrast to present conditions). On a more personal level, a normal life typically meant marriage, children, and enough money to set up an independent household (eventually) and perhaps even to have a car. Most felt they would be glad to work, as long as their job was reasonably profitable, interesting, and not too time consuming. Work was seen as a means to the more highly valued goal of a stable, comfortable home life. I was most struck by the modesty of the aspirations young Poles expressed. They emphasized their desire to live during "normal" times when no national cause demands extraordinary sacrifices of them, thus allowing them to focus their energies on face to face social groups—family, friends, and neighbors—without being accused of self-interest or lack of patriotism.

Discourse on the "normal" also reflects the relation between aspirations and expectations of respondents. Where aspirations and expectations correspond, people are more likely to view Poland as a normal country. In the early 1990s, people did not know what to expect of the future because new political and economic institutions were still being established, and the relationship between the government and citizens was being redefined. Some high school students called themselves the "lost generation" because they had been raised to live under state socialism, but suddenly the old models were discarded. Instead, they were being told that they should think for themselves and innovate,

but there were no established pathways to employment and no clear role models for negotiating the changing educational system and job market. As one lyceum student in Krakow remarked, "I don't know how to be independent at this time." This instability was particularly critical for young adults who were supposed to be choosing career paths. Because unemployment rates for recent graduates hovered around 50%, many decided to stay in school as long as they could. At worst, this would postpone their entrance into the ranks of the unemployed, and at best they might actually learn some skills that would enable them to get a job in a more stabilized economy a few years down the line. Young Poles said they prefer not to think too seriously about the future, and in this way maintained a generalized sense that conditions were bound to get better (they have to get better, some would interject, because they can't get any worse). Many adopted a "wait and see" attitude, hoping that once they finished school or university, conditions would stabilize and a normal life would follow.

When she was in her final year of lyceum (college preparatory high school) in Krakow, Ewelina told me, "It's hard to live normally in Poland. If my mother's family who went abroad didn't help us, we couldn't live normally, that is at a certain level. Father had to emigrate, too, for a while." She attributes her ability to live at an acceptable level of affluence to material help provided by an aunt who lives in Australia, and because her father sent money home when he worked abroad for two years. Specifically, it allowed them to renovate their apartment and buy a large television and fancy stereo. Their apartment is small—two rooms for her parents, her brother, and herself (and in recent years her grandmother, as well)—but it compares favorably with those of her neighbors. She lives in a working class neighborhood where many have had a hard time finding jobs in the new economy and have been unable to do basic upkeep on their apartments, let alone improve them. In 1993, Ewelina viewed economic and political changes in Poland favorably. Her father had been active in the Solidarity Trade Union, and had come under hard times during the 1980s. His experiences may in part have contributed to Ewelina's strong support of marketization. "I think things will change," she told me while she was still in high school, "it won't be so horrible as long as everyone helps each other." She told me she wants to be a lawyer, and she hopes that just as one would normally expect, "if she is good at what she does she will succeed."

High school students in the early 1990s described the free market and privatization as “normal” in contrast to state socialism that didn’t work. For instance, one lyceum student said, “It’s normal for people to want to profit personally.” The free market exemplifies for most an important domain of freedom, as well as an economic system based on a realistic vision of human nature. People need the promise of personal gain to motivate them. Despite the general support for marketization of the economy, these reforms introduced new problems. Many complained about the abnormality of the job market. A technical school student in Lesko said “it’s not normal to earn as much on unemployment as you do as a forester. Therefore, I’m going to university.” Reflecting the “wait and see” attitude that was so predominant at the time, he did not consider university an opportunity to gain marketable skills so much as a place to spend a few years until wages caught up with the increased cost of living.

Another technical school student from Krakow said, “It’s not normal that people become politicians to earn money, and even the educated don’t find work. What would be normal is decent pay for work, and an education that leads to work in your area of study.” He, too, emphasized the importance of fair compensation for labor, but he also expressed the desire for education to pay off. Students in technical and trade programs were particularly frustrated that they were not being taught skills that would be directly applicable to the jobs they would find upon graduation. Most of the students I spoke with had chosen these schools when getting a job in their area of specialization right after graduation was still a reasonable expectation. Indeed, this was the main purpose of technical and trade education under state socialism. The complaint about politicians’ wages was also a common one in the early 1990s, when elected officials were one of the few groups that earned eight times the average national wage. This was also at a time when numerous political factions made it difficult for representatives to agree long enough to pass legislation or implement reforms. With the exception of a few politicians such as Jacek KuroD, who really seemed to have the best interest of the people in mind, most politicians were criticized as opportunists. KuroD spoke plainly, favored everyday clothes rather than suits, and was the main proponent of the program of unemployment compensation that became known as the *kuroniówka*.

Other comments by technical school students made it clear that they feared they would not be able to find work and thus the normal life would be denied

them. “We want normal work, but if we can’t live normally, we’ll have to finagle something,” said one. Another said all he wants to do is “survive like a normal person. Now after school, what? I’ll end up on the *kuroniówka*. Either that or finagle something (*kombinowa*). I’d earn far more if I were to emigrate.” These students felt they would have to resort to abnormal means to achieve the material conditions they associate with a normal life. *Kombinowanie* refers to figuring things out, making do, or achieving a desired goal. Significantly, the exact means by which the goal is achieved remains vague. This is because *kombinowanie* usually involves recognizing and making use of unofficial pathways, social connections, and chance opportunities. More often than not, the means cannot be spelled out clearly, nor can it be anticipated. Also, *kombinowanie* can involve illegal activity, or more commonly, activities whose legality is ambiguous. Under state socialism, *kombinowanie* was viewed as a necessary means of compensating for shortages. On one hand, it was associated with cheating or stealing, but on the other, people expressed pride in the ingenuity with which they managed to acquire goods and services.³ The students’ comments above reflect a growing unease over the observation that market reforms should make *kombinowanie* unnecessary, but instead growing unemployment makes it more necessary than ever.

The question of what is normal was also raised in relation to the construction of national identity. In school, students learned the characteristics of the romantic tradition in literature that developed during the 19th century when Poland ceased to exist as a country and was divided among the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian empires. Polish romanticism emphasized love of the captive nation whose only chance of liberation was through poetry, divine deliverance, and waging battles that seem destined to fail. In a Polish class at a technical school in Krakow, for instance, students were introduced to romanticism through the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, one of the key Polish patriotic writers. Students were asked to identify the characteristics of romanticism they found in their reading—the emphasis on emotions, passion, hypersensitivity, and even insanity, in contrast to reason. Their teacher told them that the term “*lud*” (folk) is used 495 times in Mickiewicz’s writings, illustrating his interest in the common people. She also joked that the romantics are sometimes called the “Gallery of Lunatics” (*galeria wariatów*) because of all the crazy characters who do crazy things. She made the point that it is not normal

to die for love (whether it be love of another person or love of the nation). Romanticism, however, places feeling before knowledge and intellect. This lesson was meant to convey that sometimes extraordinary, even foolhardy actions were the only way to regain national autonomy, but the teacher also poked fun at the crazy romantics. Students also made the point that now is not the time for romanticism in Poland, but rather for responsible work toward pragmatic (economic) goals.

Although the romantic path (conceptualized as not normal) helped bring about social transformation where reason and patience had failed, the demise of state socialism and the introduction of democratic reforms was seen by most as a return to a kind of normalcy (the way things *should* be) in Poland. Nevertheless, most felt disoriented once this long-desired goal was achieved (it was not normal, in the sense of familiar), and frustrated that material conditions seemed to have gotten worse instead of better. Some attributed this state of affairs to Polish national character, commonly talked about in terms of mentality (*mentalność*). As Janek explained shortly after graduating from lyceum, “under normal circumstances, Poles can’t mobilize. In difficult situations, they can and do.” Others insisted that Poles are normal, just like any other European people. “Normal” was used to justify stances toward other ethnic groups, also—one person in Krakow said it is not normal to see German signs in Silesia; by contrast, a technical school student from a rural village in southeast Poland said, “it’s normal to have Ukrainians in my village. They just have different holidays. In a larger place, each group would close into its own circles. But such isolation is not automatic.”

Clearly, discourse on the normal life is a commentary on the existing social order. In the early 1990s, criticism of state socialism transformed into criticism of the state for abandoning social services and letting loose the worst offenses of the free market. Similarly, outrage over uncertainty arising from the threat of political persecution was replaced by outrage over economic uncertainty. Even though they expressed positive feelings toward their place of birth, high school students told me things were not the way they should be, and the fault lay with larger social institutions that were beyond their control. Satisfaction with the expansion of the free market was tempered by concerns about the loss of job security, and pleasure over the increased availability of goods was dampened by the prohibitive prices. Young Poles in secondary schools were the first generation in forty years to face the

possibility, and in many cases the likelihood, of unemployment when they finished school. This very real source of uncertainty had significant impact on attitudes toward capitalist reforms. While few wanted to return to the former state socialist economy, and even fewer believed such a return was possible, fear of unemployment and associated uncertainties made young Poles equally skeptical about marketization. Laments and litanies of complaint abounded about old and new system alike.

The late 1990s

The good sense of young Poles’ “wait and see” approach to the future has been confirmed by my visits to Poland since 1997. By the late 1990s, most of my respondents had already faced the difficult challenges they anticipated several years earlier. Despite varying degrees of success finding their place in the new system, overall, they no longer had the sense that the ground had shifted under them. Urban youths in particular expressed a complacency about their future, in marked contrast to the uncertainty that plagued them just a few years earlier, and even those whose prospects remained grim seemed more oriented toward coping with what was available to them. The market economy was taken for granted, and they had grown familiar with the kinds of jobs available and the expectations of employers. They were also more mature as individuals, with a better sense of their abilities, interests, and opportunities. In the private realm, many were married, and were managing to juggle parenthood together with school and work. In the public realm, the political system became more stabilized; Aleksander Kwasniewski has proven to be a popular president, reelected by a strong majority, and prime ministers have remained in office for years instead of just months as they did in the early 1990s. At the same time, I observed a widening divide between the experiences of urban residents, most of whom feel that their goals can be achieved by living and working in Poland, and many rural residents who continue to struggle with the problems associated with a weak local economy. Correspondingly, urban residents were more likely to assert that Poland is a normal country than were rural residents. Below, I focus on reflections I recorded in 1999 about what it means to live normally.

Most of the comments I quoted in the previous section were made during formal interviews, but respondents made use of the term “normal” by their own initiative. In 1999, by contrast, I asked specifically whether respondents think Poland is a normal country. When asked what I meant by normal, I explained that I have often heard Poles say that Poland is not normal,

and I would like to know what that means. Significantly, few people hesitated before answering my question, but in contrast to what I had heard so often in 1992 and 1993, only about a third of my respondents asserted Poland is not normal. Equal numbers said Poland is normal or described both normal and abnormal aspects of life in Poland. The continued predominance of negative assessments of conditions in Poland in unsolicited usage of the term “normal” suggests it is used in a formulaic way, as part of the genre of laments about what is wrong with everyday life in Poland. When asked directly, however, the term takes on different associations. I suspect that, because I am a foreigner, when asked directly, some were more inclined to defend their country than they were to criticize it. The range of responses also shows that assessments of normalcy are a vehicle for remarking on social conditions in Poland, and they reflect idiosyncratic and contextual stances. The question of normalcy continued to provide a means of contrasting the ideal and the familiar in Poland, and acted as a vehicle for remarking on the affects of capitalism and representative democracy on individuals’ goals, aspirations, and expectations.

When assessing their country, respondents tended to use metaphors of transition. Micha³, who runs his own real estate rental agency while completing a law degree, said “Poland is moving in the direction of normalcy.” Marek, who studies public administration at night while working with computers during the day, emphasized, “Poland can’t be a normal country right now because of the changes it has undergone in recent years—it is neither a normal capitalist country, nor is it a normal socialist country.” These university educated urban residents nevertheless feel that Poland will eventually attain the stability and affluence of Western nations. Indeed, urban and rural alike use Western capitalist systems, such as the US and Germany, as their standard of measure. Many explained, “Poland is getting closer to the West.” For instance, Staszek, who grew up in Lesko, went to university in Krakow, and now lives with his wife and son in the southeastern city of Przemyśl, told me “the value of work in Poland is becoming equal to the West.” He used himself as an example, saying he enjoys spending long hours at his job as a computer programmer. His employers have recognized his efforts. They send him on business trips abroad, and pay him enough that he will be able to buy his own house soon.

Ewelina, a law student in Krakow, struggles to sort out the positive and negative aspects of state

socialism. She suggested that Poland has become more normal, but that people’s expectations are out of line:

People think that a normal country is one that provides everything. But the state should insure peace and order, and that is all it should do... Ways of thinking need to change. [The state] shouldn’t meddle with what I do as long as I don’t harm others.

Even though people were used to the security of the social safety net provided under state socialism, she believes the disadvantages of an overly controlling centralized system outweigh these benefits. Therefore, she supports smaller government and less economic regulation, which requires that Poles take more responsibility for their own well being.

Residents of the rural Bieszczady Mountains, by and large, are more negative about the degree of normalcy that their nation has attained. Bogdan, a Bieszczady native studying in Krakow, told me, “our normal is not normal.” He voiced a sentiment that was often repeated to emphasize the strange commonplaces of everyday life under state socialism. He gave examples of behaviors that continue from the state socialist period—the rudeness of bureaucrats in administrative offices, and the habit of stealing from the workplace—to illustrate the continued strangeness of everyday life in Poland. Joasia, a school librarian in the Bieszczady region, emphasizes that changes occurred too quickly. Rural residents and farmers, in particular, were not given the time to adjust to the new ways of thinking necessary to earn a living.

Janek, who works as a bartender, also emphasizes the lack of stability in Poland:

For me normal would be that I could work and earn enough for basic expenses, a hobby, and a place to live. I don’t require luxuries. But you can’t do that in Poland. This is not normal. For example, Anka [his wife] has to go to America to work. I can’t even afford to buy compact discs or books. Tell me, is that normal? If the standard of living improved, I would stop saying that it’s not normal.

Since graduating from high school, Janek has tried a number of occupations. He went to college for a while, worked in Italy, found a job in Warsaw, and opened a bar in the village where he lives. None of these endeavors worked out for him, and the only steady job he has been able to find is bartending in a local resort hotel. He and his wife live in a room on the top floor of Anka’s grandmother’s house. A separate household occupies each of the three floors below them—those of Anka’s grandparents, sister, and aunt respectively. Since high school, Anka has spent part of each year in

Chicago with her mother who moved there when Anka was fifteen. More than anything, Janek and Anka want to settle in a place where they can live together and find work that pays a living wage. They have decided this will be easier to achieve in the United States than in Poland. Janek explains, “[the US] is a more normal country because you can still go there with nothing and earn enough for basic expenses, a place to live, and still save something. Here [in Poland], unfortunately, I can’t imagine that.” Recently, a former classmate of Anka’s told me that Janek finally was granted a visa to the US and he was planning to join Anka in Chicago where she recently gave birth to their daughter. In sum, Janek and Anka define normalcy in terms of (public) economic conditions and the effects they have on their (private) personal lives. They have decided that a normal life is not achievable in Poland, and so they have fallen back upon a tactic chosen by generations of Poles before them—migration to a more stable and economically developed country.

Primary claims Poles make to demonstrate the abnormality of life in Poland include low wages and limited employment opportunities, in contrast to the supposed normal countries where Poles can go, either temporarily or long-term, and earn a decent living. Continued reliance on migration contributes to the ongoing sense of instability in Poland, but at the same time, it helps to mask some of the weakness of the Polish economy by making possible a middle class lifestyle for some while keeping others from abject poverty.⁴ The possibilities and windfalls from migration also contribute to a general faith in the unexpected, the atypical, and even the miraculous. Particularly in impoverished rural areas, the ongoing examples of migrants who return home having earned enough over a few years to build a house and buy a car reinforces for those who do not leave the sense that Poland is somehow behind, and that life is easier and better in other places. In people’s conceptions, the instability brought about by migration tends to be underplayed. Many, like Janek, return from abroad with less than they had when they left. In fact, Janek described the life Poles lead in Italy as abnormal because of poor working conditions, exploitation by employers, and the inability to speak Italian. Others, in order to maintain the house and car obtained through migrant labor, must continue to travel abroad periodically, thus disrupting households and families. Disruptions in the families of those who choose not to return are even greater, as with Janek’s wife Anka, whose mother left her in the care of her grandmother when she was a young teenager.

Pajo (2001) makes the point that because nationness and belonging are social constructions, the territory in which one is born and raised may not always be perceived as the “natural” homeland where one belongs. Rather, as in the case of Albanian discourse, the West can be referred to as “fatherland,” “motherland,” or “home,” which helps to explain why 20% of the Albanian population have emigrated since 1991, and why most of those remaining in Albania say they would emigrate if they could. Basch, Schiller and Szanton Blanc’s (1994) characterization of transnationalism, the phenomenon whereby migrants establish a sense of connection and belonging in two or more places, seems to better describe the process of migration in Poland. Most economic migrants feel a great deal of ambivalence about leaving their native land, and most say they would not choose to leave if they felt they could earn a decent living in Poland. Migrants’ continued attachment to Poland is supported institutionally, too; Poland allows dual citizenship, and even makes it difficult to revoke Polish citizenship. Also, migrants are encouraged to vote in Polish elections, and to maintain emotional and economic ties with Poland.

At the other end of the spectrum, urban educated Poles are more likely to say that Poland is, indeed, a normal country, and that a normal life is attainable within its borders. Correspondingly, they show little interest in long-term migration, but rather go abroad for vacations and school. Some say that Poland has achieved stability, and they point to transformations in the city in which they live to illustrate it. Krakow has been reinvigorated by an influx of shops, cafes, and tourist services while still maintaining its artistic, historic, and academic flavor. As in other major cities, the unemployment rate is 5% or below, in contrast to a national average that has fluctuated between 9% and 15%.⁵ Ewelina, a law student, says that the changes that have occurred give Poles a chance to live normally. She also pointed out that Poland is safer than France or Germany, where there is more crime. Others attribute Poland’s normalcy to the existence of free speech, freedom of information, democracy, and respect for state laws. Grzesiek, a technical school graduate who works as a computer repairman, said Poland is the same as any country—it has its own laws and its own culture. Aneta, who quit university to become a television producer, said in a tone somewhere between sincerity and irony, “you have the freedom to do what you want and make money.”

Others describe Poland as normal because what actually occurs from day to day is not nearly as absurd nor extraordinary as it was in the past. When I asked him if he thinks Poland is a normal country, Wojtek, a doctoral student, responded:

I think it is. There's nothing here that could be considered abnormal. The state is developing. We have an economy and democracy, such as it is. And we have normal people. They know more or less the principles of economy in the world. They don't close themselves off from other cultures. Though, of course, there are some exceptions such as Fascists, for example. But such people are everywhere.

Wojtek takes a pragmatic stance here. Economic and political ideals have been achieved, more or less, despite remaining imperfections. Still, these flaws are normal because they also exist in other developed countries in the West.

In sum, discourse about "the normal life," while far from uniform, reveals understandings about social changes in Poland since 1989. As the public realm stabilizes, it becomes clear that greater opportunities are concentrated in urban areas. Discourse about the normal life also reveals ways in which the public-private dichotomy is being reconfigured in Poland. Poles still differentiate between the public realm dominated by the state and, increasingly, by market forces, and the private realm that remains the realm of personal relations, but public and private are no longer conceived of as so sharply in opposition. Indeed, it is through changes in the public realm that most see the possibility of achieving the normal life they desire.

Portraits of the West in relation to forces of globalization

The role given to the mythologized "West" deserves closer consideration because Poles usually define what *should* be normal in relation to the standard of living in more developed capitalist democratic systems in the West. As such, discourse on the normal can help to reveal important dynamics that have come to define globalization, in particular the impact of contrasts between societies characterized as modern and traditional.⁶ Globalization is often portrayed as marginalizing traditional cultures. Liechty (1995) identifies what he calls a "self-peripheralizing consciousness" among urban Nepalese youths who adopt an international standard of value based on economic development and foreign consumer items. Modernism and dependence "converge to provide an 'education' for young people that is alienating," making youths feel marginalized as members of their own

society, especially if their access to the things they desire is limited (1995:187). Berdahl (1999), in her study of a village on the former border between East and West Germany, notes that the hegemony of the West conveys a sense that Easterners are or should be moving in a particular direction. At the same time, she makes the point that interactions with the imagined West are variously interpreted "through a dynamic and subtle interplay of imitation and resistance" (Berdahl 1999:9). Correspondingly, just because Poles express admiration of the West does not mean they accept it as a model uncritically. On the contrary, the West must compete with people's sense of attachment and loyalty to their place of origin, and, significantly, it must compete with Poles' idealized vision of the West itself.

Polish history and literature has long portrayed Poland as unjustly kept from its rightful place in the heart of Europe (Davies 1984, Mucha 1999). This geographic metaphor has been used to protest the peripheral role Poland has played in world politics. Unlike the Albanians described by Pajo, whose attachment to the West seems to replace their attachment to Albania, the West is not conceptualized as "other," but rather as the proper home of Poland. My interviews reveal, and surveys conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) confirm, that most Poles are proud of their nation. Indeed, in the fall of 2001, fully 51% of those surveyed responded that they are "very proud to be Polish," while 37% said they are "proud enough" to be Polish (Cybulska 2002). When I asked young Poles in 1993 if they are proud to be Polish, most said yes. Some attributed this pride to Poland's long history, the beautiful countryside, and the bravery of Poles in battle. Others expressed a self-peripheralizing consciousness when they told me they feel pride just because of the fact of their birth as Poles, even though they don't have any good reason for being proud. They were taught to be proud of their nation, but when viewed from the perspective of world power dynamics, theirs is neither a strong nor a wealthy country. Below, I focus on youths who seek to both imitate and resist influences from the West in a variety of ways.

Ewelina and Micha³, both of whom study law, voiced criticisms of some of the models that are being adopted from the West by remarking upon negative changes that accompany some of the positive reforms. The cost of normalcy, they say, is that some achieve a higher standard of living, while others end up in poverty. Micha³ also emphasizes the danger of aggressive business practices that threaten everyone's right to make

their own fortune if they want to. Many of my respondents express uneasiness at the growing income inequality in Poland that, in turn, leads to other kinds of social inequality. Such ambivalence about economic reforms may be seen in differing assessments of the free market versus capitalism. When I asked them about these two, most support the movement toward a free market economy because it provides individuals with the freedom to improve their material conditions through their own effort and ingenuity. Capitalism, by contrast, tends to be associated with corrupt business owners who manipulate the wealth they already have to exploit others. Thus, they conceptually separate the positive outcomes of marketization from the negative.

Overall, Ewelina feels that changes in Poland have given Poles a chance to live normally. Indeed, she studies law, as she told me she wanted to when she was in lyceum. However, she feels frustrated by the continuing power of social networks that make certain opportunities such as admission to Law School easier for some than for others. She believes that she did not get into the day program at her university because others with lower test scores were admitted through bribes and family connections. Talent is still not enough to get ahead in the market economy, despite the new public rhetoric. Put another way, the old rules of private connections as a means to public opportunities continues to be maintained within the capitalist economy. Thus, the actual experience of market reforms does not match up to the ideal of a system where opportunity is based on merit.

Aneta, who works as a television producer and aspires to be a film director, embodies the contradictions between the desire to imitate and resist influences from the West. She alternately criticizes Poland for being backward and messed up, and expresses passionate loyalty to her homeland. Aneta speaks flawless English, which she perfected while living with her aunt in the United States during her freshman year of high school. She says that she used to want to live in the US, but not anymore. In fact, she attributes Poland's problems to a misguided tendency to look to the West for models: "We [Poles] don't govern ourselves normally because for fifty years of beating the Polish soul, everyone believed that America was better." Aneta produces edgy, youth-oriented television shows, and does not need to travel to America to accomplish her goals. Rather, she wants to write and direct what she calls "Polish films." Aneta thus cultivates her Polish identity, but at the same time makes use of media-related opportunities that are a direct outgrowth of opening to the West. She explains,

"If the system hadn't changed, I wouldn't have been able to do what I do. I probably would have been some kind of horribly desperate television journalist. I wouldn't have been able to work with Americans, nor to do an independent film. I would have had to escape from here to do these things." Here, she suggests that the economic and political changes allow her to live a normal life in Poland.

Jurek, an architect, has also benefited from the social transformation of Poland. He goes so far as to suggest that Poland could act as a model for Europe:

We could have a large influence on Europe where there is no faith, and where life is uninteresting, as far as family matters are concerned. There is so much freedom and lack of values that I think it will be difficult for the world to survive this way for another 100 years... We have a chance now. For fifty years we haven't been threatened by war. We haven't had such a chance for 300 years. Every time we started to do something good, war came. For the moment, there is no war, and this is a chance. We never had the opportunity to develop entirely. No one has seen what we are capable of. And now we can show them.

Jurek puts into practice his optimism in his own life. He is taking full advantage of the increasing demand for resort homes and tourist services in the Tatra Mountains south of Krakow. His projects are particularly popular in this region because his innovative designs blend traditional features with contemporary needs. He says the quirks and imperfections of his nation are what make it unique. This "incorrectness," as he calls it, is what also can make Poland a model for the rest of Europe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, discourses of the normal, public, and private in Poland provide insight into the ways young Poles position themselves and their nation in relation to global influences. Although these terms act as shifters, and express a variety of opinions, they tend to be used to emphasize what should be rather than what is. Young Poles' views are shaped by globalization in a variety of ways: through comparisons with other nations, the influences of global political and economic systems, and the ongoing flow of migration. Young Poles' words reveal both attraction and resistance to an idealized West, and express both attachment to and criticism of Poland. They also reflect the more limited opportunities for rural residents compared with university educated urban residents, which contributes to different orientations toward the future within and beyond the borders of Poland.

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- Endnotes:**
- 1 The predominance of college students and graduates in my sample can be attributed to a number of factors. When I first conducted group interviews in high schools, administrators tended to steer me toward the college-track classes. The students I interviewed who were in three year trade school programs tended to have very little to say in response to my questions about Polishness and recent changes. I also tended to choose the students who had the most to say within the group interviews for in-depth individual interviews; generally, these students continued their education beyond high school. It seems fair to infer, then, that my original research questions were posed in such a way that people inclined toward more academic pursuits were more interested in them and better able to answer them. Whereas most of my urban respondents went on to university, fewer than half of my rural respondents did. This reflects national trends; urban Poles are indeed more likely to pursue a higher education than rural ones, even though the percentage of university graduates in both my urban and rural sample is higher than average.
 - 2 In addition, a recent article by Fehervary (2002) considers the relations between discourse of the normal and material culture in contemporary Hungary.
 - 3 See also Wedel (1986) and Hann (1985:91) for a discussion of kombinowanie. Hann only considers the negative connotations of the term, but I have found that meanings are far more complex and varied, as I describe above.
 - 4 Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc (1994) make the same point about transmigrants generally.
 - 5 These were the rates between 1991 and 2000. Since 2000, national unemployment rates have risen as high as 18%.
 - 6 Philip Thomas (2002) asks similar questions about attachment to place in relation to postcolonial distinctions between modern and tradition in Madagascar.