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Uncovering 'Invisibility': Identities and Experiences of Exclusion among Highly Educated Germans of Polish Descent

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Despite representing the second-largest immigrant group in Germany, Polish immigrants and their descendants are understudied and have often been described as 'invisible' as they have a reputation of 'becoming German' quickly and unproblematically. Challenging this notion and considering the prevalence of anti-Eastern European racism in the German context, this study analyses interviews with 22 highly educated Germans of Polish descent, focusing on how interviewees talked about being German and/or Polish and their experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination, in both their childhood and teenage years and as adults. In so doing, the study contributes to the literature on how the ethnic and national identities of white descendants of immigrants are related to experiences of exclusion. Specifically, some interviewees (Type 1) said that they felt only German (and not Polish) and denied experiencing stigmatisation or discrimination in their present lives. Other interviewees (Type 2) embraced a symbolic Polish ethnicity while framing exclusionary experiences as a thing of the past. Type 3 interviewees reported a process of re-ethnicisation, arguably enabled by the absence of exclusionary experiences in their present lives. Finally, there were interviewees (Type 4) who reported embracing their Polish identity, which led to experiences of stigmatisation in certain contexts.

Keywords: self-identification, second generation, Polish immigration, stigmatisation, Germany, ethnicity

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Introduction

Polish immigrants and their descendants represent the second-largest group of immigrants in Germany, after immigrants from Turkey (see BAMF 2024). In 2022, more than half (1.3 million) of the 2.2 million people of Polish migrant background in Germany held German citizenship (see BAMF 2024).[1] However, they have been in neither the academic nor the public spotlight, arguably because of their 'invisibility' in terms of their 'unproblematic' and 'quick' integration and their lack of difference from people read as German in terms of phenotype, religion and culture (see, e.g., Loew 2014; see also Boldt 2012; Smechowski 2017, the former of whom coined the term 'quiet integration' with regards to the identities of so-called '*Aussiedler*' – i.e. ethnic Germans who first had remained in what became Poland in 1945 and later migrated to Germany). In addition, Polish first names are not always recognisable as Polish because many of them are common in Germany, too. Immigrants from Poland have also made use of the possibility of surname change (*Namensänderungsgesetz* 2023). Hence, descendants of Polish immigrants who grew up speaking 'accent-free' German may not carry any markers of their migrant background. The group is also 'invisible' in yet another sense: their experiences are rarely discussed in the recently emerging public debate on (everyday) racism in Germany. Indeed, this debate seems to focus on anti-Muslim and anti-Black racism (see DeZIM 2022) and to neglect the experiences of Polish and, more generally, Eastern European immigrants and their descendants (see Pürckhauer 2023).

Despite the group's 'invisibility', however, research on first-generation immigrants from Poland, such as Boldt's (2012) work on the identities of so-called '*Aussiedler*', suggests that their feelings of belonging and identities are not free from ambivalence and friction, nor have they been spared experiences of stigmatisation. Similarly, journalistic work (Smechowski 2017) has vividly described how the strong will of immigrants from Poland and their children to 'become German' as quickly as possible and to climb the social ladder – Smechowski uses the term *Strebermigranten* (careerist migrants) – is motivated by the shame of being 'different' and their experience of belonging to a stigmatised group.

Supporting these descriptions, research comparing recent Polish and Turkish migrants' identification with Germany shows that, while Polish immigrants perceive less discrimination and value incompatibility over time than Turks, they still experience persistent group discrimination, which negatively impacts on their identification with Germany (Diehl, Fischer-Neumann and Mühlau 2016). Moreover, research in the UK has demonstrated that Polish migrants' whiteness does not prevent them from experiencing racism and xenophobia, especially post-Brexit (Rzepnikowska 2019). Thus, Polish migrants have been described as being positioned 'on the peripheries of whiteness', in that they are 'both racialised and able to benefit from their position as "paler migrants"' (Narkowicz 2023: 1534; see also Runfors 2021).

Comparable qualitative studies of Polish immigrants' and their descendants' lived experiences of racism are still lacking in the German context. However, current research exploring racism against Eastern Europeans in Germany more generally (see DeZIM 2022; Lewicki 2021; Lewicki 2023) shows that, although one may be inclined to believe that the image of Poles and Poland in Germany has improved since Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, 'people from Europe's East are distinctively, yet ambiguously racialised' (Lewicki 2023: 1481) by being 'positioned as inferior Others within hierarchies of Europeanness' (Lewicki 2023: 1494). On the one hand, 'Eastern Europeans' (including Poles) are, at times, 'included in global racialised categories of "Europeanness"' (Lewicki 2023: 1483). On the other, however, they are over-represented in precarious jobs in Germany and these disadvantages are flanked by a discourse that invokes 'tropes of backwardness' (Lewicki 2023: 1494), imagining them as 'a lesser breed, carriers of disease, specifically skilled manual workers, a strain on public services, and criminal tricksters' (Lewicki 2023: 1483). Because of their strong desire to assimilate, Polish immigrants and their descendants in Germany are often valued as 'good migrants' in comparison to, for example, immigrants from Muslim-majority countries (see, e.g., Ulrich and

Topçu 2010). However, it is precisely such expectations of assimilation and 'catching up' that constitute their racialisation as inferior (see Lewicki 2021). In addition, although their post-migration status may improve over generations, their racialisation is sticky because of the 'political–economic peripheralisation of the region' (Lewicki 2023: 1494), which has a historical legacy. Indeed, anti-Slavic racism and anti-Polonism are deeply rooted in German history (see, e.g., Kopp 2012).

Thus, although Polish immigrants and their descendants are 'invisible' and have a reputation of assimilating and 'becoming German' quickly and unproblematically, there is reason to believe that, first, they have experienced stigmatisation and discrimination in Germany and, second, that these experiences of exclusion are related to their identities – by, for instance, pushing them towards identification with Germany (Smechowski 2017) or weakening their identification with Germany (Diehl *et al.* 2016). Overall, there is little knowledge about the ethnic and national feelings of belonging and self-identifications of descendants of Polish immigrants, their experiences of exclusion and the ways in which these feelings and experiences are related.

To take a first step towards closing this gap, this study analyses data from qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with 22 highly educated Germans of Polish migrant background. It asks the following research questions: Do they identify as German and does Polish ethnicity play a role in the interviewees' lives and in what ways? Do they experience (or have they experienced) stigmatisation and/or discrimination because of their Polish background – and how can we interpret the relationship between these experiences and their ethnic and national self-identification and feelings of belonging?

Descendants of immigrants' identities and their connection to experiences of ethnoracial exclusion

In the following literature review, I use two umbrella terms: 'identities' and 'experiences of ethnoracial exclusion', terms which I clarify before turning to the central findings in the literature.

I use 'identities' to encompass the concepts not only of (ethnic and national) identity but also of (self-)identification and notions and feelings of belonging. The identity perspective answers the question 'Who am I and where do I belong?' in terms of the characteristics and social experiences that an individual shares with other group members – note that the groups in question can be religious, local, racial or supranational (Verkuyten, Wiley, Deaux and Fleischmann 2019). This perspective is often investigated by asking what kinds of categories individuals use for self-identification (see, e.g., Zhou and Xiong 2005). Importantly, the identity perspective considers not only how individuals think about themselves but also how others view and act towards them (Jenkins 2014). Moreover, individuals can be thought of as having multiple identities that may, at times, be in tension with one another (Verkuyten *et al.* 2019). Although all individuals have multiple group memberships (and thus multiple identities), much (yet not all) research on immigrants' and their descendants' identities focuses on ethnic and national identity. As pointed out by Verkuyten *et al.* (2019: 393): 'For the immigrant, questions about ethnic and national identity (as well as religious, local and supranational group belonging) are almost inevitable and, in many cases, similar questions are raised for their descendants as well'. As will be shown below, many studies use the term 'ethnicity' instead of 'ethnic identity' and the national identity in question usually refers to that of the receiving country.

The notion of 'belonging' goes beyond the concept of identity by including emotions related to embeddedness; belonging is associated with 'spaces of familiarity, comfort and emotional attachment' (Lähdesmäki, Saresma, Hiltunen, Jäntti, Sääskilahti, Vallius and Ahvenjärvi 2016: 237; see also Antonsich 2010) as expressed in the idea of 'feeling at home' (Yuval-Davis 2006: 197). Thus, belonging as a concept focuses the analytical gaze on the emotional and affective dimensions of being connected to a larger community. Notably, there is also a tendency to use the terms 'identities', '(self-)identifications' and 'notions (or feelings) of belonging' interchangeably (see, e.g., Simonsen 2018).

The second umbrella term, 'experiences of ethnoracial exclusion', can be defined as encompassing experiences of exclusion based on 'racial status, ethnicity, nation origin and/or other ascribed characteristics' (Imoagene 2019: 265; see also Lamont, Moraes Silva, Welburn, Guetzkow, Mizrachi, Herzog and Reis 2016: 7). Notably, experiences of ethnoracial exclusion include (but are not limited to) experiences of racism, understood as experiences of being othered, excluded or discriminated against based on biological or cultural characteristics (see Balogun and Joseph-Salisbury 2021). Experiences of ethnoracial exclusion may entail stigmatisation, in which individuals experience 'disrespect and their dignity, honour, relative status or sense of self [being] challenged' (Lamont *et al.* 2016: 7). Stigmatisation occurs when an individual is insulted, excluded from social networks, subjected to prejudice, made the victim of jokes or stereotyped. Alternatively, ethnoracial exclusion may be experienced through discrimination, when an individual is 'prevented [from] or given substandard access to opportunities and resources such as jobs, housing, access to public space, credit and so on' (Imoagene 2019: 265; see also Lamont *et al.* 2016: 7).

I turn now to the literature on the identities of (descendants of) immigrants in Western contexts. This literature has argued that whether (descendants of) immigrants have a choice in how they identify is related to whether they have to deal with outsiders' ascriptions (as is the case if they are non-white) and, relatedly, with experiences of ethnoracial exclusion directed towards themselves or their group. In the US, which has a longer tradition of migration studies than Europe, researchers have contrasted the identities of the white descendants of immigrants with those of non-whites. More specifically, the ethnicity of the white descendants of immigrants has been described as (gradually) losing its social and political significance in processes of assimilation, as outlined in the field's classical accounts of how European immigrants became 'Americans' (see, e.g., Gordon 1964; Portes and Zhou 1993). Additionally, Gans (1979; see also Waters 1990) showed that white descendants of immigrants may still develop a 'symbolic ethnicity' – understood as a voluntarily adopted identification with the ethnicity of their ancestors – through 'symbols', which can involve ethnic food, religious holidays, ethnic festivals and an interest in politics in the old country. Importantly, Gans (1979: 6–7) outlined that 'symbolic ethnicity' is adopted by those who have become non-ethnics, 'who lack direct and indirect ties to the old country' and who do not interact with 'other ethnics in important secondary group activities'. Moreover – and in stark contrast to non-white immigrants – they are neither categorised by members of the majority society based on their phenotype nor discriminated against. Rumbaut (2008: 110) described this mode of ethnic identity formation as 'facilitated by an absence of prejudice and discrimination in the core society'. Thus, in a situation of 'freedom of role definition' (Gans 1979: 8), white descendants of immigrants may search for 'easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity' (Gans 1979: 8) and then choose 'a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country' without having to incorporate that feeling into their everyday behaviour.

White descendants of immigrants may, however, not always retain 'symbolic ethnicity'. As argued by Anagnostou (2009: 94), white ethnicity, too, has 'social valence' and is not just a matter of individual choice, but is socially and culturally produced. Likewise, Anderson (2016: 1451), who studied second-generation Germans in Australia, found that her interviewees' narratives were reflective of 'deeper, subconscious layers of ethnic identity' expressed through emotions such as 'shame and pride'. Importantly, Anderson (2016: 1451) also found that her participants were especially aware of 'the embodied reality of their German identity' when they encountered prejudice or felt out of place because 'Germanness' was ascribed to them by others. Recent research on the descendants of white immigrants has thus started to challenge the notion that these individuals' ethnicity is necessarily symbolic.

As for the non-white descendants of immigrants, it has been in the wake of the so-called 'new era of mass immigration' to the US that migration scholars have become increasingly aware that these individuals' identities are not primarily a matter of choice but are strongly influenced by the majority society's ascriptions

(see, e.g., Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). Moreover, 'in the face of perceived threats, persecution, discrimination and exclusion', studies have found that these individuals develop a 'reactive ethnicity' – that is, increased ethnic consciousness and ethnic identification in reaction to perceived exclusion based on their ethnicity (Rumbaut 2008: 110; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Recent empirical research – especially on second-generation immigrants in Western Europe, the context of the present study – has provided further insight into the relationship between identities and experiences of ethnoracial exclusion. Within this context – and especially with regards to Germany – it has been pointed out that 'the boundaries between national and ethnic identities can be regarded as "bright", forcing members of the second generation into an uncomfortable choice between national identity and parental heritage' (Alba and Foner 2015: 199). However, in Germany, there is also evidence that hyphenated identities such as *Deutschtürken* ('German Turks') are gradually increasing in presence (see Schneider, Chavez, DeSipio and Waters 2012a: 215–216), testifying to the boundaries between national and ethnic identities in Germany becoming porous and less 'bright' and 'the dwindling centrality of single ethnic belongings' (Crul and Schneider 2010: 1249).

On the other hand, it has also been pointed out that, as in the US context, the second generation may develop a 'reactive ethnicity' (see Çelik 2015; Skrobanek 2009). Studying the ethnic identities of second-generation Turkish immigrant youth in Germany, Çelik (2015: 1652) found that his interviewees neither defined themselves as German nor referred to a hybrid identity; instead, they 'displayed a strong emotional commitment to a pro-Turkish identity'. He further showed that their reactive ethnicity was strongly linked to perceived discrimination.

Focusing specifically on the national identity of the second generation in large European cities, Schneider, Fokkema, Matias *et al.* (2012b: 290) remark that this 'feeling of belonging is complicated' because of '"othering" that range[s] from simple remarks to overtly xenophobic treatment and [is] quite frequent for persons considered to "come from somewhere else"'. Drawing on quantitative survey data from the second generation from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia in Berlin and Frankfurt, they showed that the respective comparison groups (respondents who were the children of native-born parents) showed much stronger feelings of national belonging than the second-generation respondents (Schneider *et al.* 2012b: 291), although most second-generation respondents still reported having either 'strong' feelings or an 'ambiguous or neutral' position. Likewise, Simonsen's (2018) qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews conducted with second-generation immigrants of Middle-Eastern descent in Denmark, outlined different types of feelings of belonging to Denmark: dis-identification (rejection of Danishness), non-identification (lacking a feeling of Danishness), ambivalence and identification. Moreover, Simonsen differentiated between *belonging in* (understanding Denmark as home) and *belonging with* (self-identifying as Danish). Importantly, Simonsen's interviews also showed that whether or not interviewees self-identified as Danish was dependent on their experiences of stigmatisation and how they interpreted them.

Overall, the literature on second-generation identity has shown, firstly, that experiences of exclusion have an important influence on the kind of identity that members of the second generation develop and, secondly and relatedly, that different paths are taken by white and non-white descendants of immigrants. Against this background, the study of the descendants of Polish immigrants in the German context is particularly interesting. Not only have their experiences of exclusion and their identities not yet been studied but the case of these individuals – positioned on the periphery of whiteness and as racially 'in between' (Narkowicz 2023) – can also provide a new perspective on the ways in which the relationship between second-generation identity and experiences of exclusion may be realised.

Sample characteristics, methods of data generation and analysis

Empirically, the study is based on 22 semi-structured interviews with 11 male and 11 female interviewees who live (or, until recently, lived) in Hamburg (see also Piwoni 2024, which is based on this and two other samples but which analyses the data from a different theoretical angle). All interviewees were either born in Germany or went there before starting primary school. In the literature, the second generation is defined as children born in the receiving country to at least one foreign-born parent – and this category often includes persons who were born in a foreign country to at least one foreign-born parent but arrived in the receiving country in early childhood (see, e.g., Imoagene 2019). The interviewees all spoke German without a non-German accent and had either an MA or BA degree (or equivalent). One had a PhD and two were MA students at the time of the interviews. Overall, the interviewees can be regarded as belonging to the 'middle class', operationalised as encompassing individuals with tertiary education who are typically professionals or managers (see Lamont *et al.* 2016). The youngest interviewee was 24 at the time of the interview, the oldest was 45 and 17 were in their 30s.

In sampling, I focused on individuals who live and work in a 'multicultural' city context, who formally belong in Germany (since they hold German citizenship) and who are well integrated according to parameters such as knowledge of the German language, educational attainment and/or integration in the job market but whose membership may still be contested in daily life. In addition, in the literature on the 'integration paradox', it has been argued that more highly educated minorities perceive higher levels of discrimination, which has been explained by their greater exposure to it, derogatory messages (through the media and greater contact with majority members in the labour market) and their greater awareness of the negative climate with which immigrants are confronted, which makes them more sensitive to discrimination (see, e.g., Steinmann 2019; Verkuyten 2016). Interviewing highly educated members of the second generation is therefore particularly well suited to eliciting experiences of exclusion. Table 1 provides further information on the interviewees. Please note that pseudonyms were chosen to reflect the interviewees' real names, using either Polish names/spelling or German names/spelling depending on the individual's background.

To recruit interviewees, I used multiple points of entry, including personal contacts, professional networks such as LinkedIn, local groups such as the German–Polish association and a specialised recruitment company for immigrants and their descendants. The goal was to capture as many different ways of self-identification as possible. Nevertheless – and as is typical for qualitative research – the number of interviewees informing each of the types I am going to present in the 'Findings' section should not be taken as representative of the actual distribution of these types among second-generation descendants of immigrants from Poland.

The two interviewees recruited through the professional company received compensation for their participation, while others were offered 10€ vouchers for online (book)stores. However, not all interviewees accepted the vouchers and, in some cases, I refrained from making the offer to avoid potential discomfort. Before the interviews, informed consent was obtained. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The entire research process was implemented according to guidelines that were approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Passau.

Interviews were described in advance as focusing on 'everyday experiences' and 'identity' and took place between 2018 and 2021, either by phone or (VoIP)-mediated technologies (Skype or Zoom). Online communication has become extremely common for members of the middle class and I was able to establish a rapport and generate trust with the interviewees (for similar experiences with regard to the advantages of Skype- and Zoom-interviewing, see, e.g., Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey and Lawless 2019). The interviews lasted between 45 and 160 minutes (average length 90 minutes).

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Born in Germany (b) or age of arrival	Citizenship	Age	Educational status	Occupation
1	Magdalena	F	b	German + Polish	In her 30s	Equivalent to BA	Team leader in finance
2	Tamara	F	b	German + Polish	25	BA	MA student
3	Maria	F	5	German + Polish	35	Diploma/ MA equivalent	Manager in advertising
4	Luisa	F	under 1	Only German	In her 30s	MA	Manager
5	Leonie	F	b	Only German	24	BA	Professional in real estate
6	Jessica	F	2	Only German	32	PhD	Junior manager in urban municipality
7	Karolin	F	under 1	German + Polish	35	MA	Project manager in communication
8	Anna	F	under 1	German + Polish	37	BA	Professional in big firm
9	Emilie	F	under 1	Only German	34	BA	Assistant to the executive board
10	Alicia	F	b	German + Polish	33	BA	MA student
11	Christoph	M	3	Only German	36	MA	Manager in real estate
12	Mark	M	2	Only German	34	MA	Professional in marketing
13	Izabela	F	6	Only German	45	Equivalent to MA	Teacher (high school)
14	Piotr	M	2	Only German	36	Equivalent to MA	Federal official
15	Jan	M	b	German + Polish	35	MA	Entrepreneur
16	Jonathan	M	b	Only German	29	MA	Teacher (private school)
17	Christian	M	b	German + Polish	29	BA	MA student and advertising professional
18	Jakob	M	b	German + Polish	30	MA	Researcher
19	Johannes	M	6	German + Polish	37	Equivalent to MA	Consultant/ technical officer
20	Karol	M	3	Only German	34	Equivalent to BA	Key account manager
21	Konstantyn	M	b	Only German	32	MA	PhD student
22	Slawomir	M	4	German + Polish	34	MA	Communication designer

Interview questions, interviewing style, and interviewer's positionality

The interview questions were designed as open questions to elicit extensive accounts and narratives from the interviewees and included questions about the interviewees' self-understandings and feelings of belonging in general – and in regard to their Polish background and Germany in particular. I also asked whether and in which situations they felt that their migrant background mattered in their daily lives and whether they had had experiences of exclusion, such as being discriminated against. Overall, the interviewing style was receptive, in that interviewees had a large measure of control in answering the relatively few questions I asked (Brinkmann 2013: 31).

I, myself, conducted all the interviews, with the exception of three that were conducted by trained student assistants. I am a middle-aged German mother with a Polish migrant background (second generation), a fact that I revealed to the interviewees right from the start. As I shared a Polish migrant background (and a comparable class and generational position) with the interviewees, they may have relied on me to know 'what things are like' for a German of Polish origin; mothers, in particular, may have felt 'understood' and more at ease than male interviewees. Nevertheless, I found that both female and male narratives were rich and the rapport which I was able to establish was reflected in the interviewees' deep reflections.

Methods of data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using the software programme MAXQDA in several rounds of coding. Initially, I used the strategy of 'themeing the data' (Saldana 2013), in which I coded units of meaning as presented by the interviewees. Next, I interrogated these meaning units in terms of the concepts on which my research questions are based: notions of self-understanding, feelings of belonging and experiences of exclusion (see Kvale and Brinkmann 2015). Comparisons were made across interviews to identify similarities and differences between meaning units and to discover patterns in the co-occurrence of specific ideas. This process led to the identification of four different types of interviewee in terms of their ethnic and national self-identifications and feelings of belonging, as well as the ways in which their identities were related to experiences of exclusion. Finally, I analysed my findings in light of the literature on second-generation identity. The main findings are presented below, with quotations taken from transcriptions of the recordings, which have been translated from German to English and occasionally edited for clarity or context. Interviewee pauses ('...') and omissions in quotations ('(...)') are used where appropriate.

Findings

As outlined above, the literature on second-generation identity has suggested differentiating between feelings of 'belonging in' (understanding a place as home) and feelings of 'belonging with' (self-identifying as a member of a nation/culture) (see Simonsen 2018). In the case of the 22 Germans of Polish descent interviewed for this study, it was – for all of them – self-evident and unquestionable that they felt at home in Germany, in that they felt 'most "in tune" with society's values and how life is lived' (Simonsen 2018: 134). As in Simonsen's (2018: 133) study, the interviewees' feelings of 'belonging in' were motivated 'with reference to the fact of having been born and raised in the country and always [having] lived there' and many described being German in a 'matter-of-fact way', for instance by referring to their German citizenship and to German as their language or by identifying with what they perceived to be the German way of 'doing things' (here interviewees sometimes referred to stereotypical German traits such as being organised, appreciating structure and punctuality, etc.).

However, with regards to their feelings of 'belonging with', only three interviewees (Type 1) self-identified as only German, whereas the majority of the remaining interviewees said that they were both German and Polish and elaborated extensively on their feelings of belonging to Poland, Polish(-speaking) people and Polish culture – and the reasons for these feelings. Importantly, their Polish ethnicity was not accompanied by a dis- or non-identification with Germany, which aligns with Crul and Schneider's (2010: 1249) finding on 'the dwindling centrality of single ethnic belongings'. However, as will be shown, there were important differences between interviewees in terms of whether and, if so, to what extent these feelings were relevant to how they organised their lives in the past (childhood and teenage years) and present (adulthood). As for experiences of exclusion, the majority of the interviewees recalled experiences of stigmatisation and/or discrimination when they were children or teenagers, such as name-calling and being confronted with Polish jokes or stereotypes (for example, that Poles steal cars) but also receiving bad grades or facing a double standard in school; in particular, several interviewees said that teachers tried to prevent them from going to the *Gymnasium* (a selective secondary school that prepares pupils for university study). As for their adult lives, a few interviewees spoke about being confronted with stereotypes and stigma.

In addition, many interviewees said that they felt that the societal changes which Germany has seen in recent decades, such as the acknowledgement that Germany is an 'immigrant nation' and the appreciation of a pluralistic notion of nationhood (see, e.g., Piwoni 2012), have affected their personal and, more generally, Polish-immigrant position in German society in a positive way. Moreover, with the exception of those interviewees who also felt stigmatised in the present (Type 4), many others said that other groups of immigrants were more 'in the spotlight' with respect to stigma and discrimination. As Leonie said:

> *Of course, when you are from Poland, you have this reputation of 'People in your country – they steal cars and they will steal just anything'. But this has changed a lot. I feel that this was much worse in the past and that, today, other nations are focused on and* [people of] *other nations are* [confronted with comments], *like 'Your compatriots are all thieves'. Well, yes, today, this is* [for Poles] *not the case anymore.*

When trying to make sense of why they were subject to less stigmatisation in the present than in the past, interviewees would either point out – as Leonie does above – that Poles' image and standing in German society has changed for the better or they would argue that this is because of their position in society. Piotr combined both arguments as follows:

> *Well, yeah. I would put it like that: my time at school was not easy for me. I had difficult teachers. And then I was told – or they told my parents – that I should leave school and go to a Polish school. Even though I cannot read or write in Polish. (…) These were different times. (…) Today, it does not really matter where you are from. Today, if you belong to a certain circle of people – or, let us say, to a certain status group – and then you talk to people, then one's descent does not play a role. That's quite interesting and, as I said, an ice-breaker even. But back then, in school, it would be like, 'Oh, here comes the Pole'. And people would be a bit, a bit, prejudiced. Funnily enough, it was the older generation – teachers and so on.*

Finally, I found that interviewees were reluctant to label their experiences of exclusion (past or present) as 'racist' and instead spoke of 'stigma', 'prejudice' (as in the above quote) or 'stereotypes' with which they were confronted. As outlined in the introduction, there is ample evidence that anti-Eastern European racism is a reality in Germany, although this type of racism receives limited attention in the German media compared to anti-Black or anti-Muslim racism. Eastern Europeans' avoidance of describing experiences of exclusion as 'racist' may therefore reflect the general use of the term 'racism' in society and in the media (see Piwoni 2024). Similarly,

they may not feel 'entitled' to use this description because they are white. In what follows, I introduce four types of interviewees, who differ first in regards to their identities and second in the ways in which these identities are related to their experiences of exclusion.

Type 1: Feeling German

Three interviewees – Johannes, Karol and Konstantyn – said that they felt primarily German and that they did not have any strong emotional attachment to Polish people or Poland as a country. Karol, for instance, stated the following:

> *I feel German. For me, those* [my Polish roots] *are my roots and I accept them but they are… emotionally, I would say, I don't have much of an attachment to them, to be honest. I think it would be terrible if something bad happened there* [in Poland]. *There is no question about it. But maybe it is not necessarily worse than in another country. Yes, I grew up here* [in Germany]. *I consciously never lived there* [in Poland]. *And I can't imagine living there either.*

Type 1's strong identification did not mean that they were denying their Polish roots but was, rather, a recognition of how 'German' their upbringing had made them. Another interviewee, Konstantyn, said: 'I grew up Germany and I actually feel quite German but I also have Polish roots'. Furthermore, Johannes pointed out: 'So I can speak Polish and I know the people. I also like the mentality very much but, yes, I am somehow indeed German. And, I don't know, if I had to choose between German and Polish citizenship, it wouldn't be difficult for me'. When asked about experiences of exclusion, Johannes, Karol and Konstantyn all stated that, in their present lives, they have never felt excluded or treated unfairly because of their Polish roots. Konstantyn even denied recalling any such experiences when thinking about his childhood.

> *Er,* [because of] *my background, disadvantages? No, I think I can give a blanket negative answer. I can't think of anything and I can't imagine why* [this would have happened]. *(…) I'll say that the obviousness that I'm Polish isn't really there. And I* [thus] *don't see how I could have been disadvantaged because of that.*

While Konstantyn did not offer deeper reflections on his 'invisibility', which he depicted as fact and as something that has always been there, Johannes elaborated on his parents' conscious attempts to assimilate and become invisible:

> *And my parents tried to adapt very quickly. And they also tried to adopt German, yes, German characteristics (...) and somehow internalise that very quickly. I am sure about that. Also, my father always told me, 'Behave correctly here, we mustn't draw attention to the fact that we're from Poland'. (…) These days,* [this] *is not my credo. It was my parents'.*

Importantly, Johannes also recalled that his parents' efforts were a reaction to widespread stigmatising stereotypes about Poles:

> *And he* [interviewee's father] *said, 'Hey, we have to get involved here'. My father is involved in the church; he was a parent representative both in primary school and the Gymnasium, for example. So he has always*

tried to get involved everywhere. To show that we are also hard-working, even though we come from Poland. And then, because it was more like (…): the lazy Pole maybe [versus] *the hard-working Germans.*

Here, Johannes framed his parents' engagement as an attempt to counter the stereotype of 'the lazy Pole' and to show that they were 'also hard-working'. In the literature, 'working hard' has frequently been described as a strategy that minorities adopt to respond to racism, stigmatisation and discrimination (see, e.g., Imoagene 2019). In the case of Johannes' parents, however, this strategy was part of a broader goal, which was to 'adapt very quickly'. Indeed, Johannes recalled his father's credo of not drawing attention to their Polish ethnicity. In addition, at another point in the interview, he recalled him saying, 'We have to behave like our neighbours, the Germans'.

Johannes described the result of his parents' attempts as his current feeling of being culturally more German than Polish – a fact about which he was ambivalent: 'Of course, it is right to adopt things. But I think it's a pity – and that's also an important point– that the Polish, yes, values, that is, characteristics, have been completely shaken off. In other words, that you completely give up the culture you come from'.

Type 2: Embracing symbolic Polish ethnicity

When I asked Christoph about his identity, he answered, 'So, first of all, I am a Pole' (note that this identification did not prevent him, like all the interviewees, from identifying himself as German in a 'matter-of-fact way'). He elaborated as follows:

Even though Poland is in the East, I feel drawn to it because they are relatively open, communicative and warm-hearted, which is maybe not the case with Germans. And every time I go to Poland, even though I didn't grow up there or anything, there's a certain air, a certain smell – everything that somehow reminds me of home, even though it was never my real home.

Here, Christoph ascribes positive characteristics to Polish people – they are 'open', 'communicative and warm-hearted'. In addition, he associates his stays in Poland with feelings of nostalgia and a sense of being at home. However, as it emerged later in the interview, Christoph only travelled to Poland to visit his family no more than once a year and had no Polish friends at all. Moreover, he did not speak Polish in his everyday life and his contact with Polish culture was limited to occasionally reading Polish books and watching Polish movies for nostalgic reasons. When asked why he had no Polish friends, he even explained how distant he felt from Polish culture in general: 'I often notice with Poles I meet that they partly adopt the values of their parents or grandparents – which are so typically Polish – but I can't really relate to them myself'. Thus, although Christoph had not hesitated to self-identify as 'a Pole', his Polish ethnicity did 'not affect much in everyday life' (Waters 1990: 147), as is typical for symbolic ethnicity. His symbolic ethnicity was also 'costless' in another dimension. As outlined by Gans (1979) and Waters (1990: 147), it did not determine 'whether [he would] be subject to discrimination'. The two interviewees who subscribed to symbolic Polish ethnicity both rejected the very idea that they were being stigmatised or discriminated against because of their Polish descent. If anything, they located experiences of being othered or receiving stigmatising comments in the past. Indeed, Christoph recalled being socially excluded and confronted with stigma and even briefly considered using the term 'racism' to describe his experiences:

I was not thwarted as such. But I know… early childhood memories… that in kindergarten and in primary school… that we used to live in this square area with row houses and kindergarten and school were right

around the corner and there was racism. Yes, I don't know whether this was really racism but you could feel that one tried to keep a distance because one has been 'the Pole', you know. In kindergarten, I know, I was excluded – and those memories, I do have.

As Leonie explained: 'So, discrimination is a very strong word. I have never experienced that, so the only thing you could say I have experienced are jokes or sayings. But I don't think they were ever said to me in a bad way. (...) But, yeah, that has changed a lot, too'.

Now living in a multicultural, urban, middle-class environment, both Christoph and Leonie were convinced that prejudice against Poles was a thing of the past. Moreover, given their accent-free German and the fact that other people did not recognise them as Polish, it was up to them whether or not they raised the topic of their Polish descent. Leonie, who neither spoke Polish nor had Polish friends and regretted that she was 'not that much connected' to Polish culture, said that she had a 'positive feeling' when talking about her background and that it makes for interesting conversations 'when people come from different cultures and have something to tell'. Although Christoph's and Leonie's symbolic Polish ethnicity was based on associating 'all things Polish' with 'spaces of familiarity, comfort and emotional attachment' (Lähdesmäki *et al.* 2016: 237), these feelings did not motivate them, for example, to establish close contact with other Poles. This 'costless' identification with Polish culture is in stark contrast to Type 3s' efforts to 'regain' their Polish ethnicity.

Type 3: Re-ethnicisation as a corrective

Across all the interviews, there were 5 interviewees, all women, who told me that they had rediscovered – or were in the process of rediscovering – their Polish ethnicity after a period of being 'out of touch' with their Polish roots. Izabela's story is ideal-typical in this regard. Having arrived in Germany before starting primary school, she remembered having lost touch with the Polish culture and language in her youth.

I have to say that, when I was a teenager, [my Polish origin] *kind of faded into the background a bit. I didn't have any Polish acquaintances, friends or anything else. The only people I spoke Polish with were my parents – who also lived in Germany – and my grandparents, who stayed in Poland. (...) I left home when I was 20 and, after that, I spoke* [Polish] *with my parents when I spoke* [to them] *on the phone but, otherwise, Polish didn't play any role at all in my life. I have to say, in all honesty, that I wasn't that interested* [in my Polish roots].

When I asked her whether other people had pointed out her Polish origin (for example, by asking about the origin of her name), she replied that she had been 'invisible' because both her first name and her surname had been changed to a German variant by the German authorities when her family arrived in Germany. Only recently, in connection with the birth of her first child, did she initiate a reversal of this administrative act. At the time of the interview, both her first name and her surname were spelled in Polish again – her first name with an 'a' at the end and her surname with an 'sz' instead of the German 'sch'. She reflected, as follows, on why she had initially (in her youth and early adulthood) accepted the German spelling and why she now preferred the Polish spelling:

Of course, the people who knew me back then knew that I was [Isabell]. *I let myself be called that because I wanted to be as German as possible. And, at some point, I returned to* [Izabela], *that is, to my actual name. And that was a bit strange – that the people who have known me for so long should then call me*

[Izabela] *and no longer* [Isabell] *(...). But I feel much more comfortable with it because, at some point, I actually had the feeling that I was not* [Isabell] *at all.*

Having wanted 'to be as German as possible', Izabela said that she had been okay with having a German name. Now, however, she feels that she is not Isabell at all and feels much more comfortable with having a name reflective of how she self-identifies – as a 'German with a Polish core', as she said at another point.

As a child, Izabela lived in a small village. There, she experienced severe stigmatisation. She recalled that the other children did not want to play with her because she was from Poland and that she had been called a lot of names. Furthermore, she remembered that the landlady had a key to her family's flat and, when the family was not there, she would go into the flat and check what 'the Poles' were doing and whether everything was 'in order'. However, she also experienced that the better she spoke German and the better a pupil she became, the more she was accepted and respected: 'Then I was no longer a "leper" but simply belonged'. Looking back, Izabela believes that her status as the best in her class meant that her Polish roots were 'forgotten', as she put it – sometimes even by herself.

However, as an adult, and especially around the time when she had her first child, the feeling that she needed to change her name because she could no longer identify with it became very strong. In consequence, she started learning Polish, which she had almost forgotten, to 'gain the language back'. She joined a group for young Polish mothers to improve her language skills and to be able to speak with her children in Polish. She also contacted her relatives in Poland and started to travel there to visit them. Overall, the process was by no means – and, in contrast to what Gans (1979) and Waters (1990) describe with regard to symbolic ethnicity – 'costless'. Instead, there were many challenges: meeting relatives was neither easy nor always pleasant, as some of them supported rightist politics in Poland; she also found learning Polish – forcing herself to read exclusively Polish books and teaching her children the language – at times 'exhausting'. However, she felt that she needed to take this route because of deeply rooted emotions:

These interpersonal relationships between grandparents and children or parents and children, [for me] *take place in Polish. Well, that's somehow..., I've never experienced it any other way. I don't have a language for it in Germany. Well, of course I have a language for it* [German]*, but I don't get the same feeling* [when using it]*. That's why I have to speak Polish with my children if I want to convey a certain feeling to them (...). That doesn't work in German.*

In recent literature, it has been argued that white ethnicity, too, may not always be purely symbolic and that emotions make people aware of the embodied reality of their ethnic identity (see Anderson 2016). For Izabela, this embodied reality became particularly important and 'unignorable' when she was about to become a mother. Moreover, the feeling that she actually had 'a Polish core' was related not only to positive experiences regarding 'relationships between grandparents and children or parents and children' but also, as shown above, to vividly remembered negative childhood memories of being othered because of her Polish identity. As a result – and as in Anderson's (2016) interviews with descendants of German immigrants – feelings of shame contributed to Izabela's late acceptance of her 'Polish core', even though these feelings had first led her to strive to demonstrate her being German. Importantly, her Polish ethnicity came to the fore in a situation in which she had achieved social status as a well-educated, middle-class German in an urban milieu that valued bilingualism and multiculturalism. Now, standing up for her ethnic feelings is no longer linked to experiencing stigmatisation. On the contrary, she experienced that people '[were] very excited that my children are growing up bilingual'. Furthermore, in the rare situation when people would stare at her because she was speaking Polish to her children, she said that she would switch to German to make people aware of her actual status.

She knew that many Germans still hold negative stereotypes about Poles but said that she, personally, was not affected by them because of her education, her status and her accent-free German: 'I think it also depends a bit on what you do as a Pole. I think there is also a difference between someone with an academic degree –perhaps working as a doctor or something else – and coming to Germany for six weeks to look after old people'.

Izabela's story certainly stands out, as she went to great lengths to 'regain' her 'Polish core'. However, four other interviewees – Tamara, Jessica, Karolin and Anna – also reported rediscovering their Polish identity in connection with feelings of authenticity and the notion of 'standing up' for what they 'really were' after a phase in which they had tried to assimilate and become invisible in reaction to childhood experiences of exclusion and discrimination.

Type 4: Remaining Polish – and the costs that come with it

About half of the interviewees said that, although they had grown up and felt 'at home' in Germany, they had always had a strong sense of belonging to Poland as a country – Polish(-speaking) people, Polish culture, Polish traditions, Polish food, the Polish language and values they framed as Polish, such as hospitality, creativity and spontaneity. Antonsich (2010: 647) pointed out that 'a sense of feeling "at home"' is often generated by language, 'which resonates with one's autobiographical sphere' but also 'other forms of cultural expressions, traditions and habits' as well as 'cultural practices like, for instance, food production/consumption'. In that sense, the interviewees' Polish ethnicity was an additional and emotional 'home' to them.

In terms of self-identification, most of them, like the Type 3 interviewees, emphasised that they felt both German and Polish, describing themselves, for example, as 'German with Polish roots' (Slawomir), as having grown up in Germany 'but with strong ties to Poland' (Christian), as 'German–Polish' (Alicia) or as 'German with a Polish migrant background' (Jonathan). Magdalena and Maria stressed their strong emotional attachment to Poland through metaphorical self-descriptions, thereby reflecting how much of an emotional 'home' their Polish ethnicity was for them: 'I'm Polish at heart, but in reality or, let's say, in my everyday life, I'm more German. But this gut feeling, or this feeling of belonging, is often very Polish' and 'I am actually Polish. I am a German constitutional patriot (...), but somehow my heart, as they say, is very attached to Poland'.

Moreover, these feelings of belonging and their Polish ethnicity played an important role in their everyday lives. They all had at least a few Polish-speaking friends, and very often their best friends were also of Polish origin. Some had Polish spouses or were married to Germans of Polish descent, and the mothers raised their children bilingually. They also said that they travelled to Poland as often as possible and tried to keep up to date with Polish politics and culture. Clearly, these interviewees did not 'resort to the use of ethnic symbols' (Gans 1979: 1); rather, their ethnicity was practically relevant 'in action' and not only in 'feeling' (Gans 1979: 8).

Maintaining their Polish ethnicity over the years came, as many reported, with stigmatisation and even discrimination in different contexts. Of all the interviewees, the Type 4s reported such incidents the most frequently and many went into great detail when recalling specific situations in their childhood and teenage years.

As for their current lives, whether they still experienced exclusionary incidents depended on the interviewees' concrete social milieus. While some interviewees said that they would no longer have such stigmatising experiences given the cosmopolitan milieu in which they now lived (see, for example, Piotr, who is quoted at the beginning of the 'Findings' section), others reported that living out their Polish identity would, at times, necessitate having such experiences. Luisa, who was married to a Pole working as a car dealer, asked me, referring to the widespread stereotype of Poles stealing cars: 'How often do you think I had to hear: "Oh, a Pole, and then also a car dealer at that?"' Furthermore, Emilie, a mother raising her son bilingually, said that,

when she met other mothers, they were surprised when she switched to Polish when talking to her son and that they then sometimes made hurtful comments:

> *'Oh God, are you Polish?' Really, they say 'Oh God!' And* [I answer]: *'Yes, I am Polish'.* [And then they go:] *'Oh, I've got to make sure my pram doesn't get lost'. And then they laugh and leave you alone with these thoughts, yes.*

Moreover, Emilie was married to a German whose family happened to be very prejudiced against Poles. Spending time with her in-laws meant having to deal with all sorts of derogatory comments. Living out one's Polish identity and thus voluntarily becoming visible as Polish was therefore fraught with the risk of being personally racialised, depending on the situation and context. However, for Type 4 interviewees, their Polish identity was so important that they accepted the stigma that came with standing up for their descent. In consequence and, as with other stigmatised groups (see Lamont *et al.* 2016), they developed behavioural strategies to cope with such situations. Luisa, who said that she had to endure comments about her husband being a car dealer, said:

> *In the meantime, I'm completely over it and he's just an entrepreneur for me (...). He just deals in goods. And that just happens to be cars. And I sometimes laugh about it,* [and] *I respond with a joke myself. I don't let it get to me like that. It doesn't affect me at all when someone says something. But 10 years ago, I remember, it really upset me when someone said something* [like that].

The literature has described in detail the emotional toll of being denied recognition and respect and of having to develop strategies to cope with stigmatisation (see, e.g., Lamont *et al.* 2016). Similarly, Luisa describes, firstly, how she developed a strategy to frame her husband's job as 'respectable'; secondly, how she reacts to the stigmatising situation itself by either de-escalation or humorous confrontation (countering with a joke); and, thirdly, how she has developed a shield over the years to protect herself. Despite downplaying the costs associated with being visible as Polish, Type 4 interviewees' experiences in particular illustrate the reality of anti-Eastern-European racism in Germany.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study conducted with a group located 'on the peripheries of whiteness', who are 'both racialised and able to benefit from their position as "paler migrants"' (Narkowicz 2023: 1534), contribute to the literature on second-generation identity by demonstrating that there are multiple ways in which this position can play out in terms of ethnic and national identities. Descendants of Polish immigrants may, as classic accounts of white identity would have it, resort to identifying exclusively as German (Type 1) or to a symbolic Polish ethnicity (Type 2) but not necessarily so. They may also rediscover (Type 3) or maintain (Type 4) their Polish ethnicity (alongside a German national identity) and accept the costs associated with identifying as Polish in terms of experiences of exclusion such as stigmatisation. Types 3 and 4 demonstrate that the second-generation ethnic identities of whites are not always only 'symbolic', 'playful' and 'costless' (see Waters 1990) but can also be complex and deep and have far-reaching effects on behaviour (see Anagnostou 2009; Anderson 2016). Furthermore, this paper has shown how these identities are linked to interviewees' experiences of exclusion – past and present. While Type 1 and Type 2 interviewees said that they did not experience exclusion in the present (although some recalled having experienced it in the past), Type 3 interviewees adopted a 'reactive' Polish ethnicity after a period in their lives when they had tried to distance themselves from being Polish in response

to childhood experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination. Type 4 interviewees reported many incidents of past and present stigmatisation and discrimination. While previous literature has acknowledged that experiences of exclusion influence the identity development of the second generation, it has mainly done so with regards to the non-white descendants of immigrants. This study on the descendants of Polish immigrants in Germany shows that experiences of exclusion are of relevance to the identities of individuals positioned 'on the peripheries of whiteness' (Narkowicz 2023: 1534), too. Moreover, the study outlines particular forms which this influence may take: while Type 1 interviewees' development of an exclusively German identity can be interpreted as a reaction to past stigmatisation and/or Polish immigrants being negatively stereotyped, Type 2 interviewees' symbolic Polish identity was enabled by the perceived absence of such experiences and stereotypes in the present. Type 3 interviewees' rediscovery of their Polish ethnicity can be interpreted as a belated reaction to prejudice, stigmatisation and discrimination, while Type 4s' experiences demonstrate that standing up for one's Polish identity is associated with experiences of stigmatisation.

Type 3 interviewees' re-ethnicisation, in particular, requires further discussion. In previous literature, 'reactive ethnicity' is applied to non-white individuals and groups, who reaffirm their ascribed ethnicity in reaction to feeling 'othered' (Çelik 2015; Rumbaut 2008). Type 3 interviewees also recalled experiencing stigmatisation. However, in response to this experience, many of them had, at some point, chosen to be invisible and thus to escape stigma. At a later stage in their lives, however, they recovered their Polish ethnicity and began to openly identify with their Polish roots. Notably – and in contrast to the groups described in the literature to date – this recovery occurred in a context in which they no longer perceived stigmatisation or discrimination. I therefore suggest interpreting their re-ethnicisation as a corrective response to their initial approach to coping with stigma, which involved assimilating and possibly even hiding their roots. Future research could explore this type of 'reactive ethnicity' – which we may call 'corrective ethnicity' – in more depth, for example by asking whether it is also common among other groups positioned 'on the peripheries of whiteness' (Narkowicz 2023).

While this study focused specifically on interviewees' ethnic and national identities, their experiences of exclusion and how these phenomena are related, it is important to point out that, first, individuals may develop identities and feelings of belonging beyond and aside from their ethnicity and national identity. As previous research on the second generation has shown, they may, either additionally or instead, have feelings of belonging to a city or a neighbourhood or develop identification on the supranational level such as 'European' (see, e.g., Schneider *et al.* 2012b). Furthermore, identities are fluid, flexible and unfixed (Lähdesmäki *et al.*, 2016), which means that we should not conclude from interviewees' statements about their identities in the situation of an interview that these identities are static and stable or an 'achieved' and never-changing state. Second, many factors aside from experiences of exclusion can be assumed to influence the ethnic and national identities of members of the second generation, as this study indicates. These include upbringing, generation, gender, age, neighbourhood and milieu. In terms of the impact of upbringing, for example, Johannes, a Type 1 respondent, pointed out that it was his father who had taught him not to draw attention to his Polish background and, as a result, he now felt more German than Polish. With regards to Type 3 interviewees, it could be argued that their rediscovery of their Polish ethnicity was enabled by their social status (class and educational background) and the environment in which they now work and live, which values multiculturalism. Moreover, the interviewees' striving for authenticity, self-expression and being in touch with their 'real self' – arguably typical concerns of members of the educated middle class (see, e.g., Méndez 2008) – appeared to be important motivators of their efforts. Thus, in line with recent research demonstrating the impact of class in the context of migration (see, e.g., Barglowski 2019; Barglowski and Pustulka 2018), one could argue that a certain class position – or the regaining of a certain class position after migration and the associated self-esteem and self-confidence – may be a favourable condition for the rediscovery of ethnicity. In addition and, as shown

in research on recently arrived Polish migrant mothers, mothering seems to be related to processes of constructing ethnic difference – and ethnicity is particularly salient in narratives on child-rearing (Lisiak and Nowicka 2018). Notably, all of the Type 3 interviewees who engaged in rediscovering their Polish identity were women and for one of them, Izabela, it was the birth of her first child that triggered the process. Likewise, the expression of symbolic Polish ethnicity (Type 2) was enabled by a milieu that valued multiculturalism; those who had retained their Polish identity (Type 4) were specifically well equipped, by status and education, to respond to stigmatising experiences. Future research could build on these insights and study the impact of additional factors in detail, possibly through an intersectional lens.

Importantly, given the popular and stereotypical notion of the 'invisibility' and smooth integration of Polish immigrants and their descendants, the findings point not only to past experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination among Polish immigrants and their descendants but also to the fact that becoming German as quickly as possible is often a reaction to stigmatisation and discrimination and is thus not entirely voluntary.

Finally, the case of the Type 4 interviewees reflects that, even today, when public discourse is dominated by the idea of Germany as a 'country of immigrants' and even if one is safely located in the educated middle class and in a multicultural milieu, standing up for one's Polish identity and thus deciding against 'invisibility' is associated with experiences of stigmatisation. Thus, the findings call for further research on the racialisation of Polish immigrants and their descendants in particular and, more generally, on those groups who are lauded for assimilating quickly, 'catching up' and being 'invisible' (see Lewicki 2021) – a topic which, to date, has been largely neglected both in academic discourse and among the German public.

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Note

1. Polish migration history to Germany dates back to the Middle Ages and increased significantly in the 19th century when, due to industrialisation, workers were needed in Prussia's coal mines and steel industry (Loew 2014). After World War II, people from Poland arrived either as 'ethnic Germans' (*Aussiedler*) or as workers or students for political and economic reasons (Nowosielski 2019). Following Polish accession to the EU in 2004, Germany restricted labour migration from Poland until

May 2011. Since then, however, the number of immigrants from Poland has increased, with a decline between 2015 and 2021; in 2022, Poland was the third most important country of origin of immigrants to Germany, with 107,060 people moving to Germany (BAMF 2024).

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