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Actualisers, Believers, Workers, and Harvesters: The Nuances of the Identity Potential of the Transnational

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Abstract:

In this article, I introduce the phenotypes of Transborder-Actualisers, -Believers, -Workers, and -Harvesters in an attempt to differentiate and add nuance to the understanding of who, and under what circumstances, uses the identity potential of a transborder space in developing a transborder identity. These new categorisations of border-dwellers derive from a qualitative study of 32 people who live and work across the Polish-German border, asking in what ways people who live transnational lives experience and describe their life and identity, and in what ways and for whom a border can become a constituting identity source? Any crisis amplifies what is invisible in daily life, such as inequalities, inefficiencies, structural problems, or identifications, making them more describable and thus available for empirical analysis. I conclude that a transborder, transnational identity, while theoretically available to all who live across a border, is not automatically adopted by all transborder dwellers but is an identity source mainly for a specific subset of people.

Keywords:

transnational identity, transborder life, Poland, Germany, Covid-19 pandemic

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Introduction

After Poland officially entered a state of epidemic threat, it closed its border with Germany on March 15th, 2020 (Kajta and Opiłowska 2023; Opiłowska 2022). Before the crisis was over, there would be two distinct periods of border closures. The first one, which excluded commuters and the border population from border restrictions, lasted a total of 89 days. The second, which lasted 37 days, was much more restrictive and also prevented those from commuting to their work, families, or places of education (Abraham-Dieffenbach 2020; Cyrus and Ulrich 2021; Ulrich 2020, 2021), effectively making transborder life close to impossible.

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The literature on border-space inhabitants has used categorisations that distinguish persons living at or close to a border (conceptualised as bordersurfers (Terlouw 2012a) or regionauts (Löfgren 2008)) from persons who do not live near a border and do not share the experience of frequent border crossings with different languages, currencies, economic, and cultural opportunities, or the intercultural social contacts as part of their daily lives.

The study presented in this paper explores how a crisis like an epidemic (re-)amplifies an awareness about a border and thus clarifies how the transborder space may or may not have become a constitutive element of the borderlanders' identity. The findings presented show that the group that can broadly be classified as borderlanders is highly diverse, and further distinctions within this group can increase our understanding of who, and under what circumstances, actually integrates the empirical fact of living across a border into their identity and thus becomes a borderlander (or bordersurfer, or regionaut, etc.).

Background

To understand the methodological approaches used, it is important to be aware of the complexity of the Polish-German borderscape (and the concept of borderscape), and the phenomenon of identity, as defined for this study.

Borderscapes

The concept of borderscapes takes a wider perspective on borders than the terms used in everyday discourse (such as borderlands, borderspaces, or simply borders). It steps away from the dividing line between two political territories. It focuses on the diffusion and hybridisation of the social, linguistic, cultural, and economic webbing that spans a geographic region around and beyond its borderline. Borderscapes conceives of the border as a 'fluid field of political, economic, social, and cultural negotiations, claims and counter-claims; as a geo-political-cultural margin that is never marginal but rather the engine of social organisation and change' (Brambilla 2015:28). The processual etymology of the concept understands a border always as a result of individual and collective practices of construction (bordering), deconstruction (de-bordering), and reconstruction (re-bordering) (Cassidy, Yuval-Davis, and Wemyss 2018; Jańczak 2015, 2016; Jańczak, Trosiak, and Seyfried 2011; Perera 2007). In this sense, the line that separates Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany is a great example of the processual character of any border.

The suffix scape has been used elsewhere to express the fluid and uneven forms that certain phenomena entail. Arjun Appadurai defines his five dimensions

of global cultural flows as ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes (Jańczak 2016:2024). The scape component indicates a space, place, or area with frayed edges and does not necessarily need to exist in the physical realm. Similar to this is a borderscape that's not merely the physical space in and around state-borders, but includes the thoughts, economic interweaving, and contingent forms of relational considerations at the intersection between globalisation, European integration, and localisation (Appadurai 1996).

Until very recently, the Polish-German borderscape has been in a constant process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. European integration has explicitly accelerated the de-bordering processes and enabled the creation of borderscapes, 'places of transition, where time and space interact and where cultures and languages underline a cross-border hybridization' (Brambilla 2015:28).

The Polish-German Borderscape

Compared to other European border regions, the German-Polish borderscape has undergone unprecedented and incomparably rapid European integration processes (Gierczak 2017). Beginning in 1989, when the Iron Curtain fell, the German Democratic Republic integrated with its western sibling, the Federal Republic of Germany (and became a member of the European Union, which West Germany had joined in 1958), and Poland became the fully independent Republic of Poland. Visa-free border traffic subsequently started in 1991. Poland became a member of the European Union in May 2004, joined the Schengen space in December 2007, and Polish citizens were given unrestricted freedom to enter the German labor market in May 2011.

The German side of this borderscape belongs to an economically strong nation-state marked by severe structural and demographic challenges. Besides large cities such as Dresden, Leipzig, Magdeburg, and the German capital Berlin, many towns and communities experienced a population decline of up to 30% compared to the early 1990s (Europäische Kommission 2015), high levels of unemployment, and general economic and social stagnation. One estimation predicts that the number of inhabitants of the German side of the Polish-German borderscape will have fallen by approximately 15% by 2030, compared to 2010. Almost 40% of the German population in the eastern regions of Germany will be over 65 years of age by 2030 (Jańczak 2018:10).

Paradoxically, the Polish side of the border has been experiencing comparably greater prosperity since 1989, with population increases and many Poles taking advantage of the asymmetries that exist in this borderscape. In some

areas, especially near Szczecin, Poles live on the German side but work in Poland (Malkowska 2016). Löcknitz in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, to name one example, has been revitalised by Polish settlers moving into empty apartment buildings, buying houses, filling the kindergartens, and staffing shops and hospitals (Łada and Frelak 2012).

Transborder Identity

A transborder identity could be characterised as a 'spatial identity,' as it relates to the space of the border region, integrating a territorial spread on either side of the border into a trans-border unit that has 'space related boundaries' (Schmitt-Egner 2012). A transborder identity may, however, also be a social identity, as it may lead to a social 'we' amongst those actively engaging with the transborder space by utilising social, cultural, and economic opportunities on either side of the border, differentiating this group from those that may live in the borderspace, but never quite engaging with it.

A transborder identity could also, particularly in the Polish-German context, have a strong 'historical identity' (Schmitt-Egner 2012), given the deep saturation of historical trauma, experiences of reconciliation, and continued resurfacing of grievances or power dynamics grounded in the shared history of the border space.

In cross-cultural research, important points have been made about the situational salience of specific identities in individuals raised within multiple cultural reference systems (Choi and Nisbett 1998; Kettle 2019; Liou and Lan 2018). This research around situational salience, as well as Bucholtz and Hall's principles of emergence and relationality in their definition of identity as 'the social positioning of self and other' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:586), suggest a dynamic similar to structural coupling, as described by Luhmann, in that social, situational, contextual and temporal factors influence what possible identification actualises within an individual, while not necessarily causing them. However, the non-linear relationality and lack of cause-and-effect relations between social environment and identity suggest that while identity and inter-subjective social contexts are linked, they are still independent of one another. While two people in interaction may share a culturally available set of narratives that provide indexicality and a set of ideologies to construct such narratives that can allow for certain identities or identifications to emerge, it is highly unlikely that both individuals will have the same self-narratives that actualise the same possibilities of self-positioning in relation to the other.

Since an identity receives input from several other structurally coupled social and psychological systems to provide sense for the individual, those environmental factors neither create nor directly interface with it. They are merely structurally coupled.

As a person moves through life they experience a diverse range of situations, relations, and circumstances. For any of those to become a potential source of identity, they first need to become a narrative that relates to other narratives about the self that already exists. A person, for example, may be born with a certain physiology, and they likely come to identify themselves through the narratives around that physiology. Yet plenty of examples disprove that link to be inevitable. A person might be socialised in a certain group-based ideology, yet not find sense, or possibilities for actualisation in the narratives it provides, and seek them elsewhere. A person engages with different potentials generated externally or internally and might consciously or subconsciously adopt one of such identity potentials as an identity anchor that remains a stable and salient source of self-knowledge, positionality, and meaning. Identity potentials, thus, are the foundation and the source of what is available to describe, position, and experience oneself.

Identity theorised this way is highly relational, dynamic, and thus a living system. It is a socially enacted, situated, contextually dynamic, and temporally malleable phenomenon that includes diverse knots and anchor points as both targets and sources of identity potential.

In the context of this study then, identity is defined as the situationally, contextually, and temporally variable usage of a wide range of identity potentials within an individual; accessed through an engagement with cultural scripts, manifested in social practice, and leading to a coherent and senseful actualisation of a meaningful self-iteration.

Methodology

The research conducted for this project was concerned with the identity of people who live transnationally in the borderscape between Poland and Germany. In an attempt to achieve 'epistemological integrity' (Marshall and Rossman 2014), the research questions, overall design, and methods followed a person-centric, inter-subjective, and ontologically relative approach. This philosophical position of 'Contextualism' (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2019), meaning an ontology that multiple, potentially competing versions of reality may exist, was the starting point, maintaining the empirical focus toward rich accounts of subjective experiences and situated social phenomena in specific contexts.

The Research Sample

The people interviewed were working-age adults whose daily lives are lived transnationally across the Polish-German border. This means, concretely, that the participants in the study all actively engage, either professionally or personally, with people or institutions on both sides of the border. This can mean living on one side and working on another. It can also mean being socialised on one side of the border and living on the other, while still having many friends and family members in the place of origin.

Of the 32 interviewees, 21 were Polish citizens, eight were German citizens, and three were socialised in both countries, holding double citizenship; 14 interviewees lived in Poland and 18 in Germany; and nine interviewees worked in Poland, 23 in Germany. A total of 15 women and 17 men participated as subjects. Among the women, 12 were Poles socialised in Poland and two were Polish but socialised in both Poland and Germany as children of a German father and a Polish mother. There was no female participant who was born and raised in Germany. Among the men, eight were Poles socialised in Poland and seven were Germans who were socialised in Germany.

Living a transborder life, in the context of this study, means having daily or very frequent experiences of crossing language, administrative, institutional, personal, social, or national boundaries. To determine eligibility to participate in the study, the following rule was applied: across the three dimensions of citizenship/socialisation, place of residence, and place of work, there should be at least one transnational shift (see graph below).

Table 1: Interviewee Selection Matrix

Citizen of / Socialised in…	Living in…	Working in…
GER	GER	POL
GER	POL	POL
GER	POL	GER
POL	POL	GER
POL	GER	GER
POL	GER	POL

Source: own elaboration

Methodological Approach

In order to elicit rich accounts about the networked lives of transnational borderscape inhabitants, a qualitative data generation format aimed at a visual elicitation of narrative accounts was used.

Inspired by different fields in the social sciences, the approach uses narrative, as well as episodic interviewing, including social work (Ecomaps (Hartman 1995)), biography studies (the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (Rosenthal 1993; Schütze 1983; Wengraf 2001)), social psychology (the Twenty Statement Test (Kuhn and McPartland 1954)), and applied social network science (advice and support networks (Maya-Jariego, Letina, and González Tinoco 2020).

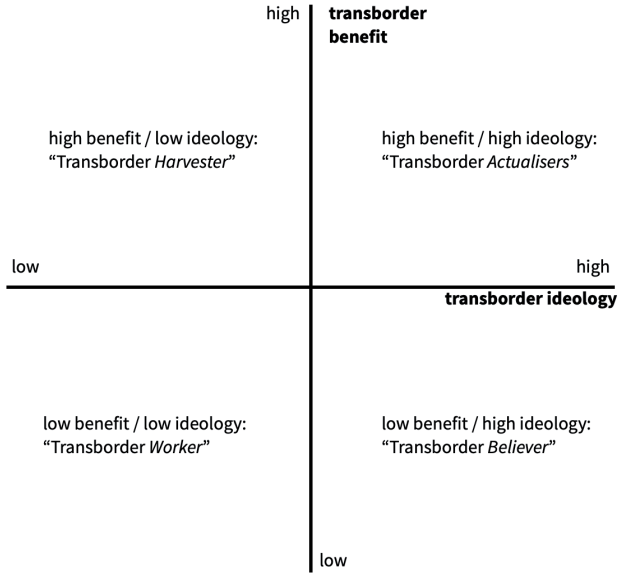
Results

After the initial reading of the interview data, an unanticipated differentiation in the responses and the descriptions of experiences and outlooks appeared. How interviewees experienced the time of the border closures during the pandemic seemed to have been significantly influenced by their ideological involvement with life at and in the borderscape. While some interviewees seemed to live at the border because of happenstance, for others, the fact that they live and work in and across a border had a political, philosophical, and emotional meaning.

The degree to which participants benefit from the transnational living context (increased income, reduced costs, language learning possibilities, etc.) or not (discrimination, decreased living standards, etc.) significantly influences how they engage with the border and its influence on their lives.

These two dimensions, when put into a matrix categorisation of borderscape inhabitants, provide an interesting avenue to understanding who actually benefits from the availability of the borderscape as an identity potential.

It became evident that to some interviewees, the choice to live and work across the border was pragmatic, utilising the asymmetries of the borderscape to increase the quality of life for themselves and their families. Other interviewees spoke about the discrimination they experience, being labeled a migrant and treated as inferior or being judged based on their accent while speaking the neighbouring language. Ideologically, on the other hand, for several participants, living and working across the border was also an actualisation of a political or values-based ambition: the implementation of a European promise.



Graph 1: Transborder Inhabitant Phenotypes

Source: own elaboration

To determine which subjects fall into which category, all interviews were coded to reveal indications of ideological involvement, and the benefits and disadvantages of transborder life. The coding made it possible to map the research participants into these four phenotypes: Transborder Actualisers, Transborder Believers, Transborder Workers, and Transborder Harvesters. Let's examine each phenotype to understand how the border is being used, perceived, and lived in.

Transborder Actualiser

Transborder Actualisers are people making full use of the cultural, social, and economic benefits, and living a vision of transborder cooperation that aligns with their ideas and values around a borderless region, transnational, and intercultural connection, and, in many cases, an idea of Europe that is equal, mobile, social, and diverse.

Eight research participants fit this scheme. Everyone in this phenotype had an ideological connection to their life across the border. They consider it an important component that makes them who they are. Also, European themes and wishes to decrease the significance of the border are important here. They

report primarily social and cultural benefits from their life across the border, with economic benefits playing a comparably smaller role. This doesn't mean that they don't mention any disadvantages, both in the de-root category and with experiences of being migrantised. However, these are outweighed significantly by the positive experiences.

Transborder-Believer

Transborder Believers are people connected emotionally, philosophically, and politically to the ideas of a borderless region, transnational, and intercultural relations and connections, and the 'promise of Europe'. However, their lived reality doesn't always mirror those values and they experience more disadvantages and fewer benefits of transborder life than the Actualisers.

15 of the research participants were categorised as this phenotype. In contrast to Actualisers, Believers report significantly fewer benefits of living and working across the border between Poland and Germany. While their ideological involvement is strongly distributed across transnational life, the European component of that life, and their wishes for a reduction of the bordering process across all areas of transnational life, we can see no codes of primary concern with their immediate reality. The reported disadvantages around de-rooting, social degradation, and experiences of being migrantised are then in stark contrast to this, while also being heavily outnumbered by the strong ideological benefits reported. For Believers, it is specifically this belief in the promise of a borderless Europe that allows them to live with the disadvantages even though they do not derive a lot of tangible benefits from their cross-border reality.

Transborder Worker

Transborder Workers are people living and working across the border mainly for the economic benefit it brings them. Their emotional attachment is predominantly connected to their immediate social and physical environment, home, and family, and their ideas of transborder interculturalism and attachments to the identity potential of Europe are relatively low. They may experience several of the same disadvantages that Believers do, such as migrantisation and un-rooting.

Seven participants in the study were mapped to this phenotype. The Workers phenotype primarily described an economic benefit from working in the Polish-German borderscape and being more concerned with their primary and immediate lived reality, such as their home, family, and neighborhood. They also experience significant disadvantages from their cross-border life. The highest

number of experiences of being migrantised (stereotyped, disadvantaged, discriminated against based on language skills or accents, considered to be less educated or less competent, etc.) were reported by members of this group.

Transborder Harvester

Transborder Harvesters are people who experience similarly high social, cultural, and economic benefits as Actualisers do, but don't report the same political, social, and emotional attachment to living and working in, around, and across the border. They focus mostly on their family and immediate surroundings and do not experience the same hardships as Workers.

Only two of the research subjects mapped onto this phenotype. This category is for individuals who primarily describe the benefits of working and living in the Polish-German borderscape without detailing many disadvantages, but also without a significant ideological attachment to that border-crossing space beyond their immediate reality.

The main difference between Harvesters and Actualisers is in the higher degree of mentions of the economic benefits of living and working across the border and a stronger ideological attachment to the immediate life, rather than the more lofty, ideological identification potentials of a debordered Europe. The main difference between Workers and Harvesters is the experiences of being migrantised, which Harvesters do not mention at all, and the significantly larger amount of mentions of the cultural benefits of living and working in this transnational setting.

Conclusion

The categorisation into Transborder Actualiser, Believer, Worker, and Harvester can help describe with more accuracy who benefits in the most holistic ways from the potentials that a life across a border has to offer and to whom those benefits are elusive. Just because a person lives and works in a borderland, commutes across a border to work, or becomes a short-distance migrant does not mean that they will automatically consider themselves more European, or transnational, or indeed a 'bordersurfer' (Terlouw 2012), 'regionaut' (Löfgren 2008), or 'subbordian' (Barthel and Barthel 2018).

This isn't, by any means, a clear-cut picture but one that includes nuance. While the ideological involvement with Europe is almost exclusive to Believers and Actualisers, with the primary concern of one's immediate life almost entirely with Workers and Harvesters, this doesn't mean that Actualisers don't experience any

disadvantages nor that Workers have no connection to the ideas and aspirations of Europe and the transnational in general. The differentiations are made according to trends, tendencies, and patterns, not based on binary either-or decisions.

Class and privilege, including gender-based privilege, appear to be the most powerful predictors as to whether a person can fully tap into the identity potential that a life lived in the borderscape has. For a person of privilege, liminality becomes opportunity and potential philosophical and material wealth. Whereas for a person who lacks that privilege, liminality can become disorienting and marginality amplified, resulting in an orientation to the hyper-local, and suffering through the discriminations that everyday life entails.

Incredible advances have been made towards a shared sense of belonging and community across this political, geographical, and historical phenomenon that is the Polish-German border. It is very likely that 10, 20, or 30 years ago, we would have a very different distribution of transnational phenotypes at the Polish-German border than we find now. The speed at which the Polish-German border-region has integrated, from impermeable to permeable, particularly behind the historic backdrop of centuries of animosity, violence, and subjugation, is simply astonishing.

Border-regions permeable to the degree of invisibility are amplifiers and accelerators of integration. Their permeability needs to be safeguarded so that access to a transnational, trans-transborder identity potential remains open. Only identity potentials that are, in fact, available can turn into identity anchors and lived and conscious experiences. Thriving border regions in Europe (and anywhere else), need people who are emotionally invested in and identify with them. Understanding what facilitates access to the identity potentials a border region exclusively provides can help reduce barriers to accessing those potentials and create vibrant opportunities to live them.

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