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Christos Anagiotos

*Pennsylvania State University*

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# **The Role of Social Interactions in Learning Ethno-National Identity: The Case of the Divided Island of Cyprus**

Christos Anagiotos  
Pennsylvania State University, USA

Keywords: national ethnic identity, informal learning, social interactions, Cyprus

**Abstract:** Cyprus is a divided island as a result of nationalist conflict between the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot communities, which lived apart from 1974 until 2003. Using narrative analysis this paper examines how social interactions outside Cyprus influence ethno-national identity learning of young Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot adults.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how social interactions influence learning of ethno-national identity of young adults (born between 1975 and 1988) from the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot communities on the divided island of Cyprus. Specifically I look at how young adults from these communities describe and reflect on social interactions with non-Cypriots when visiting the respective motherlands, Turkey and Greece, as well as when meeting people from other countries who may be less familiar with the ethno-national identity issues in Cyprus. I examined participants' narratives and describe how each kind of social interaction influenced ethno-national identity learning. This paper is part of a larger study examining how young adults in Cyprus learn and make sense of their ethno-national identity. I use the term ethno-national identity, rather than ethnic or national identity, because in Cyprus some people self-identify using national identifications (i.e. Cypriot) or ethnic identifications (i.e., Greek) and most people use a combination of national and ethnic identities (i.e., Turkish-Cypriot, Greek-Cypriot).

This paper is grounded on theories from the social constructionist approach to identity that assume that ethnic and national identities are socially situated discursive constructs formed and influenced by the surrounding social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which learning of the identities takes place (see e.g., Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1997; Hall, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1994). The paper is also grounded on lifelong learning and informal learning approaches (Hager & Halliday, 2009) that helped me examine ethno-national identity as an identity learned throughout an individual's life. Ethno-national identity learning occurs in the course of living, within communities, in interactions with other people or groups, and can be intentional or unintentional and many times based on reason and reflection.

## **Background**

Cyprus, an island nation in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, was founded in 1960 after 82 years of British colonization and is a member of the European Union (EU) since 2004. It occupies an area of 9,250 square kilometers or 3,500 square miles and has a population of about one million. Issues of nationalist conflict resulted in the separation of the two major communities on the island, the Greek-Cypriot community (around 800,000 population) and the Turkish-Cypriot (around 180,000 population) (Ker-Lindsay, 2011). Differences in ethno-national identity were the reason of the bi-communal violent conflict during 1960s (1963, 1964 and 1967) and resulted to the division of the island in 1974 when Turkey invaded Cyprus. The north part of

Cyprus, making 37.4 percent of the island, is considered by the international community as occupied (by Turkey) territory of the Republic of Cyprus. As a result of the division Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots have lived apart from 1963 until 2003 and were totally segregated from 1974 until 2003 (Anastasiou, 2008). In 1974 Turkish-Cypriots were forced to move to the part of the island occupied by Turkey and, in 1983, formed the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC) which is politically recognized only by Turkey (the rest of the international community considers it an illegal state). In 1974 the Greek-Cypriots were forced to move to the south part of the island governed by the Republic of Cyprus. Until 2003 Greek-Cypriots were not allowed to visit the north part of the island and very few Turkish-Cypriots crossed the “dead zone,” “green line,” or “buffer zone” to visit the south (Papadakis, Peristianis, & Welz, 2006). Current negotiations for a just, democratic and viable solution remain at a standstill.

How new generations of Cypriots make sense of their ethnic and national identity is key to the future coexistence of the two communities. Previous studies found differences in the self-identification of the ethno-national identity inside these communities: some members of the Greek-Cypriot community self-identify as Greeks, others as Greek-Cypriots, and others as Cypriots (e.g. Bryant, 2004; Calotychos, 1998; Philippou & Klerides, 2010); and members of the Turkish-Cypriot community self-identify as Turkish-Cypriots or as Cypriots (e.g. Akcaki, 2011; Vural & Rustemli, 2006). As Cyprus moves towards building a unified country, and in order to avoid future conflict, it is necessary to understand how a post-1974 generation of Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots – who can now freely associate with the other community and have no direct connections to the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s – learn their ethno-national identity.

### **Research Design**

In this study I examine two populations: residents of Cyprus born between 1975 and 1988, who spent at least their first 17 years of life on the island, speak Greek and are Christians (for the purposes of the study I call them Greek-Cypriots); and residents of Cyprus born between 1975 and 1988, who spent the first 17 years of their life in Cyprus, speak Turkish and are Moslems (Turkish-Cypriots). There are at least two elements that make this age group unique. First, because the two communities were almost totally segregated between 1974 and 2003, these young people, now between the ages of 26 and 39, were born and grew up in an all Greek-Cypriot or all Turkish-Cypriot environment without direct contact with the other community at least until the age of 15 when the buffer zone opened in 2003. Second, because they were born after 1974, they did not experience the violence between the two communities that took place between 1963 and 1974. Their experience with the ‘other’ was limited to the stories told by their parents and grandparents and the Greek-oriented or Turkish-oriented education (respectively) that they received during their elementary, middle school and high school years.

The primary sources of data were interviews that were conducted with each participant individually. I interviewed a total of 29 people, 17 Greek-Cypriot and 12 Turkish-Cypriot. The interviews, which lasted between one to two hours, were semi-structured; they were recorded and transcribed. Secondary data sources included observations and document analysis. Across the whole process, I employed triangulation strategies and peer review by three educational scholars (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). I adopted the dialogic/performance approach to narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) as my interpretive and analytic strategy, an approach that combines elements from thematic and structural narrative analysis. Key in this approach as

described by Riessman (2008) is the influence of cultural, historical, interactional and institutional contexts in the formation of the participants' narratives.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Due to the complex political background and the history of ethnic/national conflict in Cyprus it is common for people on the island to change their ethno-national self-identification. A number of possible influences to these changes in ethno-national identities have been identified including education, political affiliations, parents' self-identification and interaction with the other community (Akçaki, 2011; Bryant, 2004; Calotychos, 1998; Papadakis et al, 2006; Philippou & Klerides, 2010; Vural & Rustemli, 2006). My findings indicate that there are two more influences that were overlooked before: interactions with people from the respective motherlands (Turkey for the Turkish-Cypriots and Greece for the Greek-Cypriots) and interactions with foreigners outside Cyprus. Below I present how these two influences play a role in participants' self-identifications, using five participant cases (out of 29) as illustrations.

#### **Turkish-Cypriot Participants**

The notion of the Turkish-Cypriot community is not a uniform collective identity anymore (Akçalı, 2011; Vural & Rustemli, 2006). Some members of this community identify as Turkish-Cypriots and others as Cypriots. No participants self-identified as Turkish and, in fact, rejected any suggestion of Turkish-Cypriot as being Turkish, a perception all twelve Turkish-Cypriot participants faced in their interactions with people from mainland Turkey. Mustafa, who self-identified as Turkish-Cypriot, mentioned that he felt more connections to mainland Turks than to Greek-Cypriots, yet he believes that Turkish-Cypriots are different than Turkish from Turkey. He said, *"We have many many common things [with the Turkish from Turkey] but there is this part which makes me Cypriot."* When asked how he felt visiting Turkey, he said, *"I feel home but in a way I always feel responsible for explaining them [people in Turkey] because they don't get the idea of being a Turkish-Cypriot. Here [in Cyprus] we say I'm a Turkish-Cypriot. Over there[in Turkey] they try to define you as Turkish... they think of north Cyprus and Turkish-Cypriots, as part of Turkey, like Adana, Angara [cities in Turkey] and I tell them, just because we speak the same language doesn't mean we have the same exact cultures... I believe one of my obligations is to explain them. I always, when I meet a Turkish person, I explain them, 'OK, we have a common ground but I'm a Turkish-Cypriot' [he put emphasis on the word 'Cypriot']."*

Fatma, who self-identified as Cypriot, reasoned that if all people in Cyprus identified as Cypriot rather than Greek-Cypriot or Turkish-Cypriot it could prevent future conflict between the two communities. But the ideas of mainland Turkish she met contradicted her argument. She recalled how frustrated she felt defending her identity during her studies in Istanbul, Turkey, *"...People had it wrong! ...Turkish people prefer to use the motherland [Turkey] and baby-land [Cyprus] thing. They think, 'You are the baby-land of the Turkey and we came here [to Cyprus], and saved you [in 1974]. ' Maybe but I'm not Turkish! ... It's frustrating when they don't know about us."*

Mustafa and Fatma had different views about their identities that led them to different self-identifications. But both Mustafa and Fatma – and, indeed, all 12 participants from the Turkish-Cypriot community -- expressed frustration when people from Turkey *"are trying to define [them] Turkish"* (as Mustafa put it) because they want their unique identity as Turkish-Cypriot to be maintained. Mustafa felt *"obligated to explain them I'm a Turkish-Cypriot [emphasis on the*

*word Cypriot].*” Fatma and eight other participants mentioned that when Turkish people did not know about their distinct culture it reinforced the Cypriot part of their identity.

Turkish-Cypriots also reported that the distinct identity of their community was reinforced when they realized that many people outside Cyprus and Turkey did not know about their community and assumed that they were Greek-Cypriots. Mustafa, who studied in the United States, explained how living abroad strengthened his Turkish-Cypriot identity, “[*Living in the U.S.A. for four years*] helped me out to realize that I had to keep my identity even stronger. Because any fluctuation that you made gave this other person, let’s say American, Chinese, anyone outside of Cyprus, they were calling me Greek. They say, ‘From Cyprus? Oh you are Greek’. I didn’t like it, because for them my community didn’t exist... .. You have to work harder for people to know who you are.” He explained that, even when he self-identified as Turkish-Cypriot, some people abroad thought he was Turkish, which was also unacceptable to him. He said “*Or you say Turkish-Cypriot and they say, ‘Isn’t that Turkey?’ That actually pushed me further. If I didn’t go to the United States I wouldn’t [have] noticed these details. You exist in your own community so you don’t know what the rest of the world thinks about you. You go there [abroad] and you see that they have no idea about you. It’s very upsetting!*”

Fatma had similar experiences “... *when I went abroad for my university education especially when I went to Netherlands, everybody asked me where I’m from, because when you meet someone everybody asks this. I said Cyprus. [They answered] ‘Oh OK! Greek side or Turkish side?’ That’s the second question always. And I started to, OK what should I say? So during that time I started to think a lot, ‘Am I a Cypriot or a Turkish-Cypriot? Who am I? Because really, I don’t want to say I am a Turkish or I am Greek... but I’m from Cyprus, and I started to say, OK I am Cypriot and I come from the northern part of Cyprus.*” Her self-identification as Cypriot came partly as a result of the reactions she got while abroad when she identified as Turkish-Cypriot, “*I say Cypriot probably because of the reaction I get when I say Turkish-Cypriot. People say, ‘so you are Turkish’ and I say ‘no I’m Cypriot’... everybody thinks that if you are Cypriot and you live in the north you are Turkish, which is not right. We are not Turkish and we are not Greek! We are Cypriot that speak Turkish... That’s why I started to identify as Cypriot. For them [foreigners] to understand who really I am.*”

### **Greek-Cypriot Participants**

Among Greek-Cypriot participants three national identities exist: Cypriot, Greek-Cypriot and Greek (Bryant, 2004; Papadakis et al, 2006; Philippou & Klerides, 2010). Below I illustrate how three participants (out of 17) from this community talk about their social interactions outside Cyprus and how these interactions influence their ethno-national identity. Tina said that while she was in Cyprus, where she associated only with other Greek-Cypriots, she was not compelled to clarify her national identity. But when she moved to the U.S., “[*T*]hat’s [*when*] I had to share with other people what’s my ethnicity, what are the characteristics of my culture. I lived in the U.S. and I felt a minority ... while in Cyprus you don’t really get into the process of thinking that stuff [*identity issues*].

Michalis, who self-identified as Greek-Cypriot, recalled the moment that he first felt the need to think about his identity: “*It’s not that I didn’t think about my identity before, but when I went abroad for my masters and people were asking me where I come from and what language I*

*... speak, I realized that I needed to think about my identity again... It's like I didn't want people to get the wrong picture of my identity. And you know with all this confusion of identities in Cyprus it's easy for an outsider to come to the wrong conclusions... For me national identity is very important, maybe because of my studies [education] and so I had to figure it out, what I am."*

Yiannis self-identified as Greek-Cypriot until he realized that the Greeks from the mainland that he met did not really like Cypriots. That led to a conscious decision to downplay the Greek part of his identity. At the time of the interview he self-identified as Cypriot and described the experiences that led him to this transition, *"When I was twenty I went to Khalkidhiki [an area in Greece] for vacation... [and] I overheard some Greeks saying 'Oh those Cypriots they are everywhere! When will they leave?' I can tell you it didn't feel good at all. Until that point I thought of Greeks as our brothers but after that.... And you feel that way when you talk to the average, everyday people in Greece. All this prejudice against Cypriots makes me angry... And when I realized how disparagingly they saw me, I felt even more Cypriot...I don't want to have identity connections with Greeks if they don't like us. I can be Cypriot and it works just fine. We are independent after all."*

Although participants self-identified in different ways and gave a variety of explanations to support their ethno-national self-identifications, all of them from both communities wanted their respective community identity to be seen as unique and different from those of the mainlands (Greece and Turkey). Interactions with outsiders that did not recognize the participants' identities frustrated and upset them. When participants were among people of a different culture they strived for recognition; they wanted to separate themselves from the people from mainland Greece and Turkey and they wanted the rest of the people they interacted with to recognize the existence of their community and their unique identity and culture. Participants described how these experiences made them to rethink, re-learn and adjust their identity and the ways they chose to introduce themselves when meeting people outside Cyprus, in order to avoid misrecognition or non-recognition. These were issues that participants did not face before they traveled abroad since in the homogeneity of their communities their ethno-national identity was not questioned. Even though in the two communities there are different ethno-national self-identifications, the common understanding between community members is that they belong to the same community but they happen to have different political views that lead to different ethno-national self-identifications. Participants' experiences and views outside Cyprus support Charles Taylor's (1994) ideas about the "politics of recognition" (p. 2). Charles Taylor stated that, "Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves... Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, [and] can be a form of oppression..." (p. 25)

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I illustrated that ethno-national identities in Cyprus are not static and that many times people make choices, change and re-learn their ethno-national self-identifications, based on reasoning and reflection. Hence we need to be examining ethno-national identities in Cyprus not as fixed identities learned in childhood and adolescence, but as malleable identities, informed by experiences and formed by choices, made throughout an individual's life and influenced by political and social surroundings, including social interactions. The use of lifelong learning and

informal learning approaches to understand identity should be of particular interest for researchers, since these approaches provide the tools for such understanding. Further research needs to be done to examine whether what individuals in Cyprus revealed about the influence of social interaction in ethno-national identity learning also applies to individuals elsewhere (particularly in post-conflict societies) and whether something similar applies to identities other than ethno-national identity.

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