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Learning of National Identity in Areas of Conflict: The Case of Greek-Cypriot Young Adults in Cyprus

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Abstract: Cyprus is a divided country as a result of nationalist conflict. Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots have lived apart since 1974. This phenomenological study aims to describe how Greek-Cypriot young adults (born after 1974) make sense of their national identity and how their experiences have influenced the learning and construction of their national identity.

Introduction

Nationalist conflict “has caused enormous suffering both directly and indirectly” (p. 102) and is key in addressing the major security, legal and political issues in international relations (Gellner, 1997). In Cyprus, issues of national 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 200 000 population). Cyprus is an island nation in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, founded in 1960 and member of the European Union (EU) since 2004. The island is approximately the size of the state of Connecticut in the United States.

In this study we examined how young adults from the Greek-Cypriot community, who were born between 1978 and 1990, learn and make sense of their national identity. What are the lived experiences and events in their lives that lead them to form their national identity? Although two communities exist in Cyprus, the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot, in this study we examined the construction of national identity by young adults of only the Greek-Cypriot community.

Difference in national identity was one reason that led to bi-communal conflict during the 1960s (1963, 1964 and 1967) and indirectly resulted to the division of the island in 1974 when Turkey invaded Cyprus. It has since occupied 37.4% of the island. The occupied northern part of Cyprus is considered by the international community, the United Nations (UN) and the EU as occupied (by Turkey) territory of the Republic of Cyprus. In 1974, Turkish-Cypriots moved to the north part of the island occupied by Turkey and the Greek-Cypriots moved to the south part governed by the Republic of Cyprus. Before 2003 Greek-Cypriots were not allowed to visit the north part of the island and very few Turkish-Cypriots crossed the “green line” (the artificial border that divides the two areas) to visit the south. Consequently the two communities were isolated from 1974 until 2003. Representatives of the two communities have negotiated since 1974 to find a solution to the “Cypriot Problem” without success.

Previous studies looking at issues of national identity in the Greek-Cypriot community (Leonard, 2012; Papadakis, 2008; Perikleous, 2010; Philippou, 2003) talked about the formation of national identity mostly through education and examined student populations in elementary, middle and high school. They also found differences in the self-identification of the national identity inside these communities. Some people in the community identify as Greeks, others as Greek-Cypriots and others as Cypriots. These differences create confusion as well as disagreements and non-violent conflict within the community, making the search for a solution to the division of the island more

complicated. Even in the case of a future reunited island, these multiple identities may cause problems similar to those that led to the violent events of the 60s.

As Cyprus moves forward towards building a unified country, it is necessary to understand how a post-1974 generation of Greek-Cypriots – those who can now freely associate with Turkish-Cypriots and have no direct connections to the political turbulence of the 60s and 70s - have learned their identity. If we can understand the experiences, events and influences through which the identity construction occurred, we can begin to address the issues of national identity and conflict that held the island hostage for decades.

The Study

In this study we used phenomenology as a theoretical framework and as a method. Phenomenology focuses on examining the human consciousness and the human lived experiences “how [individuals] perceive it, describe it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104) and uses descriptive techniques to explain human experiences and the way individuals and groups make sense of such experiences (Collins, 1986). The lived experiences of the participants are the key elements of phenomenology that distinguish it from other theoretical frameworks (Van Manen, 1997).

Phenomenological design enabled us to draw a rich and detailed picture of the phenomenon of construction of national identity as described by the participants and explore details in the participants’ experiences to gain a deeper understanding. Specifically, we used the empirical phenomenological approach that examines participants’ “experiences in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

For this study we had three major research questions: 1) How do Greek-Cypriot young adults (born between 1978 and 1990) make sense of their national identity? 2) What are the experiences that influence the learning of the national identity of Greek-Cypriot young adults? 3) How do these experiences contribute to the construction/learning of their national identity?

The major sources of data were interviews conducted with each participant individually. The interviews were semi-structured; they were recorded and transcribed. We interviewed a total of 14 residents of Cyprus, born between 1978 and 1990, who spent the first 18 years of their life on the island, speak Greek and are Christians. For the purposes of this paper we will call them Greek-Cypriots to distinguish them from the minority group of Turkish-Cypriots (who speak Turkish and are Moslems). All participants were born and grew up in an all Greek-Cypriot environment without direct contact with the Turkish-Cypriot community at least until the age of 18 and they went to Greek-Cypriot public schools. They did not experience the violence between the two communities that took place between 1963 and 1974. Segregated from the Turkish-Cypriot community, their experience with Turkish-Cypriots was limited to the stories told by their parents and grandparents, and the Greek-oriented history education that they received during their elementary, middle school and high school years.

Findings

Theme One: Participants felt the need to clarify their national identity when they lived abroad

Tina, Demetres, Nicholas and Michalis completed master’s degrees either in the United Kingdom or United States. All four mentioned that around people of different nationalities they felt a stronger need to clarify their identity. Tina said that only when she moved to the U.S. did she feel compelled to articulate her identity,

[T]hat's what I figured out when I went outside Cyprus, that 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 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... I remember talking to a close friend that spend years in UK and asking him how he answered these kinds of questions. He said that he would say people he was Greek, although he is from Cyprus. He doesn't really care about this things and he said he wanted to avoid long unnecessary conversation...No, no! I didn't feel the same. For me national identity is very important...*

These statements agree with Charles Taylor's (1994) ideas about the "politics of recognition" (p. 2). Taylor stated that, "Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, and so a person or group of people can ... [feel strongly the need to clarify their identity] if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (p. 25). When among individuals similar to us we tend to overlook our culture. But among people of a different culture we strive for recognition; we want to separate ourselves from them. The paradox in our study is that even in the Greek-Cypriot community our participants were interacting with people that identified differently. The participants did not seem to consider the differences (between the Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot identities) strong enough to lead them to rethink their national identity, as they did when they interacted with foreigners abroad.

Living abroad made some participants feel protective of their identity. Tina said, *"These days we're just blending with the western culture and we are forgetting who we really are."* Keeping her national identity and passing it to her children is important to her, *"I would like them [my kids] to feel that they're Cypriots because these days we're losing all the identity part and values... It's important to keep all these values and traditions, because that's what defines us."*

This is an idea that Oakes (2004) talked about extensively, when he described the identity issues of the French Canadian population in Quebec (Canada). Quebecois feel the same danger of distinction of their language and culture as described by Tina. It is a phenomenon observed by other researchers also in other places of the world. Taylor (1994) described it as the obligation to keep the culture that was transmitted from a previous generation to the new generation; an obligation to the ancestors that kept the particular culture alive through the centuries.

Theme Two: Participants identified either as Greek-Cypriots or as Cypriots

In Cyprus, like in many other countries, "[e]ducation is generally a scarce and important public good ... [and it] is especially politicized in countries of pronounced ethnic inequality" (Pong, 1995, p. 239). Interestingly, none of the participants identified as Greek only, although they all agreed that in school there was great emphasis on their Greek identity. Tassos reflected,

[At school] they didn't push towards the purely Greek identity but there was an emphasis on it... The emphasis was always on the Greek, because that was the contrast between the other side [the Turkish-Cypriot side] on the North, on the occupied... They [people in school] didn't promote the differentiation between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots but between Greeks and Turks. The problem was the Turks not the Turkish-Cypriots... It's a fact that at school the history we were taught was mainly Greek history [long pause] and sometimes we would leave out things that had to be taught about Cyprus, history of Cyprus.

When it was noted with surprise that he identified as Greek-Cypriot despite his school and church (which he attributes as the major influences of his identity formation) promoting a Greek identity and not a Greek-Cypriot identity, he said,

It was like given! We were Cypriots and the school and the church had to strengthen something that was thought to be fought against or fading, that was the Greek identity... I don't think that the Greek identity was artificial, but the Cypriot identity was more real, we live with it every day. There was no need to be taught about it because it was in our everyday life; who you were; we are.

Christina had a different opinion. She thought that in school there should have been more emphasis on the Cypriot identity also. She felt school should not let students to figure out their Cypriot identity by themselves,

Even in school, we learn but we don't really...practice. We hear stuff from our teachers, but we don't really get into the process of doing stuff and thinking of stuff [that have to do with our Cypriot identity]... So, in order to get into that thinking process, you need to do or tell something about it, I think."

Theme Three: Meeting people from the Turkish-Cypriot community led some participants to identify as Cypriots

The participants that identified as Cypriots said that initially, usually while in school, they identified as Greek-Cypriots. Some agreed that one of the most influential experiences that made them rethink their national identity was meeting Turkish-Cypriots. Yiorgos met Turkish-Cypriots in a bi-communal event organized by a non-governmental organization when he was 18. He described the event,

When I talked to some Turkish-Cypriots for some time [they talked in English], I realized that we were very similar. Also the music that played at the event was Cypriot. Turkish-Cypriots had different lyrics from us [the Greek-Cypriots] but the music was the same... That was the time I begun feeling more Cypriot than Greek. After all, Turkish-Cypriots were not that evil as my parents described them. My parents are refugees so I can't blame them for feeling this way.

Maria had a similar experience,

I was lucky enough to participate in a program where I had the opportunity to meet Turkey Cypriots at a point in time when we couldn't pass[cross] the borders[before 2003]... It was a Fulbright program that took Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots in a university in the USA to study together for a month or so, so I am one of those people that was put in touch with Turkey Cypriots, I even have friends from the other side of the island now. So I discovered that apart from differences, we also have similarities. Since we're born on the same island, that before the war of 1974, the two communities used to live together, so they have some traditions in common. Even

though the language and the religion are different, they have many similarities. So while I was in school, what I thought of Turkish-Cypriots was totally different than what I think right now, because I didn't have the opportunity to interact with them and see their perspective, I thought that whoever is of the north side of the island is the enemy.

For some of our participants meeting people from the other community for the first time was a positive surprise. Turkish-Cypriot young adults were not that different from them. After all, they did not know much about ordinary Turkish-Cypriots of their own age. The history books taught them about the soldiers and the wars between Greeks and Turks and their parents despaired about the invasion of 1974. Change of national identity influenced by the environment (cultural, political and economic environment around the individual or group of individuals) is an idea expressed in the instrumentalist's tradition (one of the dominant traditions in ethnic and national identity in political sciences). Instrumentalists argue that in a given context there can be more than one national identity available for the individuals to choose from (Varsney, 2007). Instrumentalist tradition also talks about the possibility that an individual may change his/her national identity if the influences in his/her environment change (Chandra, 2004), which seems to have happened to Yiorgos and Maria.

Theme Four: The Cypriot Church influences the national identity of Tassos but did not influence the national identity of Christina

Two participants, Tassos and Christina, who both identify as Greek-Cypriots, consider themselves religious and active in their church. They agreed that the church promoted the Greek identity along with the Christian-Orthodox identity. There was a contradiction, however, in the way they viewed the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in the formation of their own national identity. Tassos said, “[T]he Church was always pro-Greek, and always emphasized on being Greek... Yes, the Church influence my identity, it reinforced the Greek part of my identity a lot. He then added, “Everything in the Cypriot Church is connected with Greek. In Church we don't separate the Greeks from Greece with the Greeks from Cyprus, we are all Greek-Orthodox.”

Christina disagreed with this connection, “It is wrong to connect them [Greek and Christian identities] because Christianity is much bigger. We cannot restrict Christianity in the narrow view of a nation...”. And then he added quite frustrated “I'm Greek- Cypriot and Orthodox –Christian but these are two different identities. I don't confuse them. If I had to choose one I would choose Orthodox- Christian.”

The impact of religion has always been very strong in constructing identity and in building Greek nationalism in Cyprus. Elements of Christianity were introduced to the island during the Roman period (58BC-395AD). By the 7th Century, the Greek Orthodox religion had obtained the “de facto leadership among the Christian population” (Yiangou, 2002, p. 267). The Greek Orthodox Church remained powerful throughout all conquests, influencing the society's elites and exerting political influence. With the arrival of the Ottoman Turks in 1571, the role of religion was strengthened further, as “a person's political affiliation was defined first by one's millet, or religious community, and only afterwards by a complex of birthplace, profession and family” (Bryant, 2004, p. 16).

Conclusions

Learning of national identity is a complicated phenomenon. In areas of conflict, like Cyprus, it is important to understand how newer generations construct their national identity. We examined the construction of national

identity as a learning process. Our analysis shows that learning of national identity is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon and we need to examine it as such if we are to understand it. From our analysis it is evident that the participants (Greek-Cypriot young adults, born after 1974 and uninvolved in the violent conflict between the two communities) negotiate, rethink and sometimes refine the national identity that was promoted to them by the school, the church and their parents. A number of experiences played important role in their learning and making sense of their national identity. Our argument is that since our participants and their generation did not experience the conflict they are more likely to find similarities with the Turkish-Cypriots and live peacefully on the island. In general, and always in reference to the participants of this study, we saw a movement towards Cypriotism as an attempt of this generation to live in harmony on the island with the other community.

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