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Recommended Citation

Anagiotos, Christos (2017). "Experiences influencing ethno-national identity learning: The case of young adults on the divided island of Cyprus," *Adult Education Research Conference*.

<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2017/papers/9>

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Experiences Influencing Ethno-National Identity Learning: The Case of Young Adults on the Divided Island of Cyprus.

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Abstract: Due to nationalist conflict Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots have lived apart from 1974 until 2003. This study investigates ethno-national identity learning as a lifelong learning process among young adults that were raised during the segregation period.

Keywords: Dewey, Cyprus, ethnic national identity, conflict, young adults

Introduction

This study aims at gaining in-depth understanding of how young adults from the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities that were born and raised during the segregation period (between 1975 and 1990) learn and understand their ethno-national identity and what experiences influence their ethno-national identity learning.

Cyprus is an island nation in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, founded in 1960 (after 82 years of British colonization) and member of the European Union since 2004. Difference in ethnic and national identity (ethno-national identity) between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots (the two major ethnic communities on the island) was the main reason that led to bi-communal violent conflict during the 1960s and 1970s, and resulted to the division of the island in 1974 when Turkey invaded Cyprus. Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots have lived apart and totally segregated from 1974 until 2003, with Greek-Cypriots living on the south part of the island governed by the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Cypriots on the north part in under 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). During that period people from the two communities did not have any interaction with people from the other community. Individuals rarely were allowed to cross the line that divided the island and kept the two communities apart. Known as the 'green line,' dead zone' or 'buffer zone,' and controlled by a United Nation's peace force, the line still divides the island, although since 2003 people from the two communities are allowed visit the other side resulting to some interaction with the other community for those who choose to do so.

Theoretical Framework

I built on the idea that learning is highly contextual and mostly informal, from the work of Hager and Halliday (2009) on lifelong and informal learning, to examine ethno-national identity as a learned identity throughout an individual's life. I argue that ethno-national identity learning in Cyprus occurs in the course of living, within communities, in interactions with other people and groups and can be intentional or unintentional and many times based on inquiry, reasoning and reflection. The study is grounded on Dewey's theory and particularly on his ontological and holistic notions of experience and learning (Dewey, 1925; 1934; 1938) and the contemporary interpretations of his work (i.e. Elkjaer, 2000; 2009; Hager & Halliday, 2009) that suggest that experience and learning are interconnected and highly contextual, and in constant interaction with the environment where individuals exist. Through this interconnection, individuals learn to be members of their communities and learn their identities.

My understanding of ethno-national identity is grounded on theories from the social constructionist approach and invented traditions which argue 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 Anderson, 1983; Hall, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1994).

Research Design

This multiple case study (Stake, 1995; 1998; 2005) employs narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008) to examine these young adults' experiences as expressed in their narratives and investigate how they understand and learn their ethno-national identity. Each young adult was treated as a specific, bounded, information-rich case (Stake, 1995; 1998; 2005; Patton, 2004; Yin, 2003) that provided insights and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of ethno-national identity learning. I adopted the dialogic/performance approach to narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) as my main interpretive and analytic strategy, an approach that combines elements from thematic and structural narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a subset of narrative inquiry that recognizes the subjective understanding of phenomena like identity learning and that for a given experience there can be multiple truths, since different individuals may construct different truths about the same phenomenon.

The participants for this study were 29 residents of Cyprus who were born between 1975 and 1990 and spent at least their first 17 years of life on the island. 17 of them were members of the Greek-Cypriot community (they speak Greek and are Christians) and the other 12 were members of the Turkish-Cypriot community (they speak Turkish and are Moslems). I deliberately chose this age group for two main reasons. First, because the two communities were almost totally segregated between 1974 and 2003, these young people were born and grew up in an all Greek-Cypriot environment (in the case of Greek-Cypriots) or in an all Turkish-Cypriot environment (in the case of Turkish-Cypriots) without direct contact with the other community growing-up. And second, because they were born after 1974, they did not experience the violence between the two communities that took place between 1963 and 1974. Living apart from the other community, their experience with the 'other' was limited to the stories told by their parents and grandparents (who experienced the violent events of the 1960s and 1970s), and the Greek-oriented or Turkish-oriented education (respectively) that they received during their K-12 education. For most of them, it was only after reaching adulthood that they got the chance to meet people from the other community.

The major sources of data were semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant individually. Secondary data sources included informal interviews, observations and document analysis.

Major Research findings

Two different self-identifications within each community were found. Greek-Cypriot and Cypriot in the Greek-Cypriot community, and Turkish-Cypriot and Cypriot in the Turkish-Cypriot community. Previous studies looking at issues of ethno-national identity in the two communities talked about the construction of national identity mostly through education and examined mostly student populations in K-12 education (i.e. Akcaki, 2011; Calotychos, 1998; Philippou & Klerides, 2010; Vural & Rustemli, 2006). They did not look at what happens after students graduate from school and whether school learned ethno-national identities remain unchanged. The findings from this study suggest that ethno-national self-identifications among

young adults in Cyprus are not fixed, rather they can be dynamic and they often change in early adulthood, influenced by a number of interconnected experiences and through reflection, reasoning, and inquiry. Fifteen out of 29 participants reported changes in their ethno-national self-identification or their understanding of their ethno-national identity during their late teenage years and early adulthood and attributed these changes to certain experiences. Such influential experiences that in many cases led to changes in ethno-national self-identifications were: a) the experience of meeting people from the other community (something that none of the participants was able to do before 2003) and realizing that they were not “monsters” as they were described in school history books, b) meeting people from other countries abroad, which forced participants to re-examine and in many cases question their self-identification, c) crossing to the other side of the ‘green line’ and getting to know the rest of the island that they did not get to see growing up, d) learning about the history as presented by the other community, and learning about the suffering of the other, something that participants were unaware during their K-12 years since their history education mentioned only the suffering of their own community.

The participants in the study have been learning their ethno-national identity throughout their lives. Since all participants grew up on the island, certain shared events, experiences, and elements of the environment were similar or the same for all or some of them, although they may have not influenced participants the same way. Many other elements were different for each community or each participant. Even though certain experiences were similar for some of the participants, learning to be Cypriot, Greek-Cypriot, or Turkish-Cypriot was a unique process for each one of them. It was the process of interaction (or transaction in Dewey’s terms) between people, experiences, knowledge, and the surrounding social, political and historical environment in each case. Interactions did change the participants and at the same time changed their environment. For example, Maria’s self-identification change from Greek-Cypriot to Cypriot and her friendship with Turkish-Cypriots, influenced her parents’ views about Turkish-Cypriots and led them to begin having contact and relationships with Turkish-Cypriots.

What it meant to be member of their ethnic community (Greek-Cypriot or Turkish-Cypriot) was different for each participant and for some it changed throughout their lifespan because of contradictions between the narratives that led them to their original self-identification (heavily influenced by their parents and narratives in their education promoted by the leadership in the two communities) and their personal experiences. For the participants’ generation, the post-1974 generation whom were born after the bi-communal conflict and did not experience active violence on the island during their life, what it meant to be member of their community was different than what it meant to their parents’ generation, who experienced the violent conflict of the 1960s and 1970s. The parents’ self-identifications were heavily influenced by the “us” versus “them” narrative of the conflict. It was only reasonable that the national narrative that their parents’ generation formed, and the ethno-national identity connected to that narrative, would not resonate with some of the participants and many of the people in the participants’ generation, who had substantially different, less violent experiences than their parents.

Participants from both communities did not hesitate to question the ethno-national identity that was “inherited” and promoted to them by their family, their K-12 education, and the historical, social, and political environment in their community earlier in their life. When they questioned their ethno-national self-identification it was because of experiences contradictory to the national narrative or changes in their environment. Changes in their self-identification occurred after reflection on those experiences and reasoning. The exception to that was their original self-identification, learned mostly while they were in elementary and middle school,

which they all reported seemed very normal at the time. Reflecting on those years, all of the participants reported that they were not cognitively able to understand what it meant to be Greek-Cypriot or Turkish-Cypriot, their reported self-identifications at the time. The experiences that, in most cases silently, influenced ethno-national identity learning in the earlier years of their lives (up to middle school) were interactions with their parents; experiences at school, like history education, national celebrations and commemorations, teachers' views on ethno-national identity; and the Cyprus conflict and participation in protests against the enemy.

Those participants who questioned their self-identification at one or more times during their lives did so later during their high school years or adulthood. Interconnected experiences and the way these experiences influenced ethno-national identity learning varied in each case and was also related to their previous experiences.

The comparative method (Raivola, 1985) was employed to compare participants from the two communities on the island. The comparison between participants from the two communities revealed similarities and differences allowed a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of ethno-national identity learning. In fact, the comparison revealed that participants from the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot community who self-identified as Cypriot exhibit more similarities in their ethno-national identity learning process and the relevant experiences than with the participants from their community. For example, they defined their identity in civic-territorial terms and both connected it with their future aspirations for a unified country. Also they mentioned that experiences in the respective mainlands Greece and Turkey, where they studied, were overwhelming for them and made them realize that, for them, there were important differences between their culture and the culture of the people in the mainlands. Further, how they were perceived by the people in the mainlands also influenced their self-identification. For them these experiences came to contradict their understanding of their ethno-national identity during elementary and middle school, when they believed that they were more or less the same with the people from the mainlands. This contradiction for participants from both communities reinforced their Cypriot identity.

Similarly, Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots who self-identified as Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot respectively reported similarities in their ethno-national identity learning process. They claimed Greek and Turkish heritage and history (respectively) as important elements of their ethno-national identity. Distrust for the other community was a key theme in these participants' narratives; participants described personal experiences or the experiences shared with them by their parents and grandparents, and the knowledge about historical events from their K-12 education that reinforced the distrust towards the other community.

Contact with the other community and its connection to trust was also another theme similar in the narratives of participants from both communities. The participants that had regular contact with members of the other community indicated that they would support a solution for a unified country rather than two separate governments. On the other hand, participants that had very limited contact with the other community supported a two state solution to the Cyprus issue, claiming that the two communities are not ready to live in a unified country yet.

One key difference between the participants from the two communities that influenced their ethno-national identity learning process was the experience of misrecognition when meeting people abroad. Turkish-Cypriot participants reported that they got upset when people abroad wrongly assumed that they were Greek-Cypriots or Turks and were often frustrated by the non-recognition of their self-proclaimed state, TRNC (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), in the north part of the island. Greek-Cypriot participants faced less incidents of

misrecognition (probably because the Greek-Cypriot community population is bigger and the Republic of Cyprus is recognized as a member of the European Union) and were more flexible when facing incidents of misrecognition, when people mistook them as Greek.

Conclusion

The differences in ethno-national identities in the two communities create confusion as well as disagreements and non-violent conflict within the two communities, 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 1960s. As Cyprus moves towards building a unified country, it is necessary to understand how a post-1974 generation of Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots — those who can now freely associate with people from the other community and have no direct connections to the political turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s — learn their national identity.

The study shows that ethno-national identity learning is a lifelong learning process influenced and interconnected with the physical, political, social and cultural environment, individuals, groups and narratives in the environment; and that ethno-national self-identifications among young adults in Cyprus are not always fixed, rather they can be dynamic and they often change, influenced by interconnected experiences and through reflection on those experiences.

Through the examination of 29 cases the study introduced and employed the concept “identity learning” as a new learning-oriented perspective on looking at ethno-national identity in Cyprus. This new perspective combines the concepts of identity from the social constructionist approaches (see Anderson, 1983; Hall, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1994), the concept of experience from Dewey’s theory (1925; 1934; 1938) and the concept of learning from the informal and lifelong learning theory (Hager & Halliday, 2009). The “identity learning” concept introduced in this study expands lifelong learning theory to the sphere of learned identities — an area that lifelong learning literature did not explore yet — by specifically looking at participants’ ethno-national identity as a lifelong learning process of becoming. I suggest that the “identity learning” concept, introduced in this study can be used to examine ethnic and national identity in other places around the world, particularly in areas of conflict, to help us understand what are the lifelong learning processes that head to individual and group self-identifications.

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