

Article**Identity Reconstruction of Albanian Migrants in
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**Abstract**

Greece is rapidly facing challenges due to the increased culturally diverse people. As a result of the influx of legal and illegal immigrant flows from several countries, the issue of 'identity' became a public debate in Greece. Especially, in the border areas of Greece such as Konitsa, there are many first and second generation of Albanian migrants. Consequently, the rapid movement of migration challenged the adaptation of immigrants themselves in their host community due to social and cultural differences and as well as the host community members' adaptation to the migrants (Gidarakou et al., 2011). Therefore, this study analysed 'how does the migration influence the identity reconstruction of Albanians in Konitsa, Greece? by applying the 'interpretative theory'. This paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in the in Konitsa, Greece. The Albanian migrants were selected as informants through purposive and snowballing approach.

This study emphasised that the name, religion, language and public perception as the most influential actors in determining and maintaining the identity (crisis) of Albanian migrants in Konitsa. The Albanians reconstructed their identity by changing their name and religion or maintaining their religious identity while changing their names. Though some of them decided to maintain their names and religion, most of the times they mostly avoided the situations of sharing information about their original identity. Moreover, in terms of languages, the first generation learned and practised the Greek

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language whereas the second generation developed Greek as their first language and did not learn and/or speak Albanian in public spaces. However, some of the families communicate in Albanian inside their houses to maintain their original language. Furthermore, one of the key findings of this study is that the majority of the Albanians maintain a dual identity as a survival technique in Greece. This study also found that the process of identity crisis associated with the power of the immediate environment in shaping the identity. In particular, the power of the immediate environment contributes to unfavourable identity constructions, labelling, discrimination, intellectual disability and stigma. As a result, Albanian migrants in Konitsa are coping up with the identity crisis by reconstructing their identity to navigate through the immediate environment.

Introduction

Greece as a Christian Orthodox country, rapidly facing an identity crisis as a result of increased culturally diverse people. The ‘identity’ is concerned as an issue because of the variety of ethnic and culturally diverse migrants (Drydakis, 2012). The Greek national identity is justified in terms of ethno-cultural aspects (Triandafyllidou and Kouki, 2013). As a result of ethnicity and religion exclusively became dominant principles in the determination of identity. ‘Greeks are people of Greek descent – regardless of where they have been born – who are Christian Orthodox’ (Christopoulos, 2012 cited in Triandafyllidou and Kouki, 2013). In line with that ethnicity and religion influenced the views on the migrants in Greece. Rapid movement of migration towards Greece challenged the adaptation of immigrants themselves in their host community’s social and cultural differences as well as the host communities’ adaptation to the immigrants (Gidarakou et al., 2011).

The impact of ethno-cultural aspects in defining identity in Greek society has been discussed by several scholars. Firstly, identity is defined by factors such as religion, language and public views. It is difficult to differentiate the Greek identity from orthodox religiosity (Halikiopoulou, 2011). Religion is the core rigid of the identity construction in Greece. Hence, to be an active member of the Greek society, Greek ancestry or Christian Orthodox religious identity is necessary regardless of the Greek language proficiency. In other words, ‘Christian Orthodoxy is a necessary, but not

sufficient, condition while being of Greek descent is a necessary and sufficient condition' (Triandafyllidou and Kouki, 2013: 714). Secondly, although the language is not seen as a necessary condition for migrants to survive in Greek society, Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou (2010) argued that the knowledge of a language and culture is important in the circumstances where the natives play a major role in the community. Thirdly, the public criticism about the migrants in the host community significantly fuels the identity crisis. Greek society criticised Albanian migrants in negative ways; "they are arrogant and not straight-forward; we know from everyone that the Albanians are the worst race; Albanians are sly, not only sly but dangerous' (Fokas, 2013: 586).

Consequently, the adaptation of the Albanian migrants and host community in Konitsa was shaped by their identity. In Greece, Albanians holds more proportion (52.7%) on the numbers of immigrants in Greece (Papadopoulos et al., 2015). Though the migrants in Greek society were more embedded with the socio-economic and politico-institutional environment of the host communities, For more than two decades the Albanians in Greece were not allowed to actively participate in the public life or day to day encounters within the country due to their identity differences (Triandafyllidou and Kouki, 2013, Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou, 2010, Kloosterman and Ruth, 2001). As a result, identity became a crisis and a complex process. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how does the migration influence the identity of Albanians in Konitsa, Greece.

Methodology

This paper is based on a small scale qualitative study conducted in Konitsa, a border village of Greece. Ten Albanian migrants who were residing in Konitsa were identified as the informants of this research. The selection of informants for this study was carried through a purposive and snowballing approach which allowed the researcher to specifically select the study population. Semi-structured interviews, field notes and observations were used as data collection tools. The main question of this paper is 'how does the migration influence the identity of Albanians in Konitsa, Greece'. Furthermore, this paper attempted to answer, How do Albanians perceive the identity crisis in Konitsa? What are the major factors influencing the identity crisis? How do these factors characterise the experience of Albanians in Konitsa?

An interpretive approach was used for the data collection and analysis of narratives from the informants. The interpretation is about thinking, reflecting and the thinking of the thoughts' (Geertz, 1973). Considering the link between the identity crisis and ethnic-culture, an interpretation of migrant's identity reconstruction could be seen as interpretations of their ways of life such as, the way of thinking, feeling and believing, an abstraction of behaviour etc. For instance, in terms of culture, what people do or what people join or what people answer are the meanings of socially established structures of culture. As this study was based on the ethnography of the Albanian migrants in Konitsa, Greece; the paper considered the personal experiences of Albanian migrants. As it was claimed that these interpretations must be 'cast in terms of the interpretations to which persons of a particular denomination subject their experiences' (Geertz, 1973:15). Hence, this paper is based on the researcher's interpretations of what the informants are up to and the systematic analysis of those interpretations through the theoretical approach. The application of interpretive theory guided to distinguish the actions from their past and present actions based time, place, specific people, etc. Following the Interpretive approach, this paper is written based on the part of the informants' narratives.

Findings and Discussion

The interviews with the Albanian migrants in Konitsa acknowledged religion, name, language and public perception as the key factors which influenced their identity reconstruction in Konitsa, Greece. As the study was preoccupied with these concepts, the findings are presented based on these identified factors.

Religion and name

As emphasised by scholars in this field of study, religion and name played a crucial role in determining the identity and status of a migrant in the host society. From the Albanian migrants' perspective, in an orthodox Christian society, they have been forced or indirectly motivated to be an orthodox Christian with a typical Christian greek name. According to these migrants, they had to change their names and switch religion in order to survive in terms of employment, integration and day to day life in the host community. Yet, these Albanian migrants negotiated this name and religious challenge in three ways.

Firstly, some of the Albanian migrants completely changed their name and religion into orthodox Christianity.

'I changed my name to Greek version and I was a Muslim but now I am a Christian' - Migrant No 2

Secondly, some of the others maintained their original religion as it was at the pre-migration but changed their names in order to cope up with the demands of their host community. According to these respondents, maintenance of their religion meant to be more secretive and tried to avoid the circumstances of sharing any information about their religion. In this way, they maintained their religious beliefs and practised religious rituals and customs inside their houses.

'I am a Muslim and didn't tell anyone about my religion in Greece' - Migrant No 1

Thirdly, even though there were significant challenges imposed by the host community's religious beliefs and cultural identity, some of the Albanian migrants maintained their religion and names. However, to avoid the problems and challenges in the host community, they pronounced their names based on Greek pronunciation and never discussed their religion with others.

'While I am living in Greece I share my name as Niko and didn't use my original name. This name is more similar to my Albanian name but I never pronounce in that way. If I had told my original name to others, I have to go back to Albania' - Migrant No 2

Language

Along with the influence of name and religion, based on the narratives from the migrants, it was obvious that Language (Greek) played another influencing role in their identity crisis. Consequently, the Albanian language was suppressed in public places as a result of the identity crisis created in their post-migration process in Konitsa. As per the migrants, suppressed or narrowed chances to speak Albanian in public spaces created the feeling of suppression of their identity as Albanians.

Language as a socio-cultural determinant, it influenced the identity of Albanian migrants in two ways. One hand, it required and imposed the migrants to learn the Greek language; as a result, it became a necessary option for survival. It was a hard choice for the first generational migrants.

'If you don't speak Greek how can you get a job' - Migrant No 1

According to their experience, it was very important to learn Greek to survive in Konitsa. One of the respondents stated that without learning or knowing Greek it was very hard for him to survive in Konitsa and he faced lots of challenges in searching and obtaining an employment.

'At the beginning, I didn't know Greek and it was very hard for me to survive without knowing greek' - Migrant No 3

On the other hand, the second generation of the migrants developed Greek as their first language and did not want to practice or speak Albanian in public spaces. According to their experience, avoiding Albanian as their language will bring positive perceptions from the Greek people. Subsequently, the second or younger generation of Albanian migrants did not want to share their identity as an Albanian by practising the Albanian language. In addition, some of the respondents maintained their sense of Albanian identity by practising/speaking Albanian at their houses and teach the Albanian language to their children.

'I don't have any Albanian friends here in Konitsa and I don't speak Albanian to find out' - Migrant No 4

Public perception

Though the research identified religion, name and language as the first and foremost influential factors; public perception of the Albanian migrants also became a crucial determinant on identity reconstruction. Public perception of Albanian migrants was perceived in the ways of dual identity and collective social consciousness. According to the observation, some of the migrants felt that it is very important to maintain their identity as an Albanian even though they are in Greece. However, they maintained their Albanian identity and while adapting to an identity as a Greek person. Hence, they used the dual identity to maintain their network with other Albanians in their community and to be an active member of Konitsa.

'I am Greek but my blood is from Albania' - Migrant No 4

Furthermore, they also criticised about the collective social consciousness such as allegations of racism and the mentality of the majority of Greek citizens. During the interviews, respondents said that the mentality of the Greek citizens was that Albanians were mostly perceived as being the wrong side of the law. An Albanian migrant

expressed that even the children in Greece developed racial attacks on Albanian migrants' children.

'My daughter, when she was first in class, the Greek kids racially attacked her. The Greeks, they are racist because Albanian child is first and my child cried after school' - Migrant No 1

Moreover, during an informal discussion with some of the Greek citizens from Knoitsa, the researcher observed that the Albanian migrants were perceived as persons who committed/will commit crimes and persons with deviant behaviours. One of the Albanian migrants claimed that racial attacks and negative perception on them influenced the practice of the Police in Konitsa. He further said that he recounted that the Greek police tortured his brother to death on the border when they were trying to enter Konitsa. He felt that it happened not because the Police tried to ensure the border control but because of the racial and negative perceptions against Albanians.

'I hate the Greece police. They are racist. He recounts that the Greek police tortured his brother to death on the border when they were coming. He has since developed a deep hatred for the Greek security forces'. - Migrant No 5

The narratives from the participants suggested that the identity reconstruction was dominated by the religion, name language and public perception as well the host community's practice on these factors. Even though migrants expressed that the religion, name, language and public perception in their host community influenced on their identity crisis, according to the researcher's interpretations the identity crisis is associated with other several actions in the host community. By analysing the association of these factors and the identity crisis, the researcher was able to explore the hidden process of this struggle. It became clear that the process of identity reconstruction was associated with the power of the immediate environment in shaping their identity, labelling and discrimination, intellectual disability and stigma, and negotiation of unfavourable identity constructions.

Considering the power of the immediate environment in shaping the identity of Albanians in Konitsa it is evidently clear that, while some remain in their identity most of them changed their name and religion, changed only their name, pronounce their name in a Greek way without changing it and did not share their real identity. These actions significantly show the power of immediate environment and the migrants tent

to accept this power as a survival technique in order to cross the border and obtain a visa, find an employment, seek shelter and integrate into the society. The experience of the Albanian migrants in Konitsa, explains that they have been seen as ‘stranger’ or ‘nobody’ by their hosts. Mayday and Wilson (2009) also identified that the migrants from a different country, religion and language will be seen as strangers and aliens by the host community. By analysing the narratives of the respondents, their identity is becoming lost as a result of their failure in reconfirming their aspects of identity in the new socio-cultural environment. Further, they had to remove or move out of their social identity and reduce themselves to their physical selves in their immediate environment in Konitsa, Greece. For example,

‘I don’t want to have anything with Albania. Especially because of the kids; I speak only Greek to the children. When I talk with my elder boy (son), who is now in the Greek military, he says I don’t care about my Albanian origin. All I know is I am Greek’ - Migrant No 6

The power of the immediate environment in shaping the identity of Albanians in Konitsa led to labelling and discrimination, the perception of the local host community regarding the Albanian migrants illustrates how labelling leads to discrimination. It was obvious that during the discussions and observation, most of the Greek people, as well as the interviewed people, stated the labels such as ‘Albanians, Albanian immigrants, Albanian refugees etc’. These wordings clearly explained that the migrants are perceived as ‘others’ in the majority Greek society in Konitsa, Greece. As a result, they faced marginalisation and discrimination in their day to day life encounters. For example, they had to work on underpaid jobs, unskilled labour and over workload at the workplace. Especially it was very hard for them to find even an underpaid job as an Albanian migrant.

‘Since I am an Albanian, nobody wants to offer me a job at the beginning but after a lot of struggle, I was able to find a job with low wages. I had to accept that job because I didn’t have any other choices’ - Migrant No 7

As Maydell and Wilson (2009) emphasised, a ‘handicap’ identity was constructed as a result of migrants’ lack of knowledge about their host society and which in turn became as a stigmatised labelling of ‘intellectual disability’. Despite being new to the society, Albanians were seen as lacking in profound knowledge of local customs and traditions. This stigmatised perception of intellectual disability by the host community created a stigma symbol again the Albanian migrants. For example, the improper accent of Greek

became a stigma symbol by identifying them as outsiders. Although the migrants face labelling, discrimination and stigma, they tried to negotiate with these issues by constructing unfavourable identities. The interviewed migrants constructed their identities in their host community by blaming themselves and reframing of negative labels.

In addition, blaming themselves for their identity reconstruction became common practice to confirm their participation and active involvement in the host community. For example, I don't like Albania, I don't want to go back Albania, I am a Greek, etc.

'I don't want to have anything with Albania. ... I don't care about my Albanian origin' - Migrant No 8

On the other hand, though they blame themselves for their identity as an Albanian, they happened to reclaim and maintain their Albanian identity.

'I am Greek but my blood is from Albania. I have been there 4 years ago and I don't like that place. I don't have friends. My relatives call me only for money so I don't like them' - Migrant No 9

Interestingly they also reframed the 'negative labels' from society as 'normal' in order to fight against the powerless position within the host environment (Maydell and Wilson, 2009). A piece of narrative from one of the respondents clearly explained this approach;

'I don't like anyone from Albania because their mentality is very bad. It is because I experienced it with my dad and mom. He is irresponsible with improper behaviour. He also tried to control my life' - Migrant No 10

The negotiation of unfavourable identity constructions led to the implications of power imposed by the immediate environment which shaped their identity.

Conclusion

The findings of this study explored how does the migration influence the identity of Albanians in Konitsa, Greece. The following factors were identified as the most influential actors in determining and maintaining the identity crisis of Albanian migrants in Konitsa; religion, name, language and public perception. The first level of identity reconstruction occurred due to the challenges imposed by the religious views and ethnical name. The Albanian migrants negotiated this particular crisis in three

ways; firstly, by changing their name and religion; secondly, by maintaining their religious originality but change the names and finally by maintaining their original religion and names. However, in the latter ways, they mostly avoided the situations of sharing information about their original religion and Albanian name. Furthermore, language became a compulsory requirement for survival. Most of the first generational migrants had to learn Greek for their survival. Later in the second generation, most of them developed Greek as their first language and did not learn or practice or speak Albanian in public spaces. However, some of the migrants speak Albanian only inside their houses to maintain their language identity. Considering the above challenges, the dual identity as Albanians and Greek used as the key survival technique by the migrants in Konitsa. The mentality of the many Greek people was always negative about Albanians and that caused discrimination and racial attacks against Albanians (For example - seen as criminals).

Finally, by analysing these aspects of the Albanians migration and identity experience in Konitsa, realised that Albanians reconstructed their identity within the Greek community in Konitsa, Greece by placing their identity within the community of other migrants, normalize them as part of this community and rounding it locally and claiming their agency and membership among the local people as Albanians (Maydell and Wilson, 2009). In line with the identified factors and identity crisis, it could be argued that the process of identity reconstruction was associated with the power of the immediate environment in shaping their identity, labelling and discrimination, intellectual disability and stigma and negotiation of unfavourable identity constructions. The influence of the immediate environment led the Albanians to blame themselves for being Albanians. However, Albanian migrants reframed their negative labels as a normal aspect in their day to day encounters. Furthermore, Lack of language proficiency created an 'intellectual disability' stigma on these migrants and the wordings such as 'Albanians, refugees' migrants and criminals showed the struggles of labelling, stigma and discrimination.

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