

MISLEADING PERCEPTIONS WITH ETHNIC MINORITIES: THE CASE OF PONTIAC GREEKS IN CYPRUS

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Abstract

Immigration policy in Cyprus was largely formulated in the 1990s, with the intent to meet the labour shortages as a result of the growth in tourism. Consequently, a large number of Pontiacs (or Pontic-Greeks) of Greek origin from the Caucasus region migrated to the Republic of Cyprus. Today, the overall number of Pontiacs is estimated to be a total of about 20,000, out of which 10,000-12,000 are living in the Municipality of Paphos. This paper aims to highlight the importance of the use of social services by Pontic-Greeks as part of their integration into the local society. Ethnic Pontic-Greeks in Paphos were asked to describe their current living conditions and their relationships with the local society and the use of social services, such as community kindergartens, children after-school services, nursing homes, senior citizens centres, and social welfare agencies. The analysis articulated an underuse or no use at all of social services by Pontic-Greeks, mainly because they are not aware of these services or they hesitate to use them because they do not feel comfortable with the dominant population group; an issue that is an impediment to their social integration.

Keywords: Pontic-Greeks, minority, migration, Cyprus, use of social services

Introduction

Modern societies are characterized by complexity and cultural polymorphs. An important configuration factor for this new reality is the immigration, which constitutes a world phenomenon and has modified social institutions, perceptions and cultural models. Countries from all over the world host a considerable amount of individuals of different ethnicity, culture, language, and nationality.

For the present article, a particular interest is given to the migration that is observed during the last decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, which changed the demographic characteristics in a number of countries and/or social groups. This is especially true for the Republic of Cyprus, where labour migration is a relatively recent phenomenon which appeared in the early 90s. Pontiacs of Greek origin, who lived in the former Soviet Union until the early '90s, migrated massively first to Greece and later on to Cyprus, mainly because of ethnicity relation, as well as opportunities for a better life, as there was a need in the labour market in these countries.

This particular group selected the host country by assessing as additional criteria common language and religion, and where, quite often, accompanied by sentimental and cultural investment that separated them from other sub-groups in their place of stay, which also acted as a criterion to consider themselves as a minority (Vergeti, 2003). Those characteristics are unique, as they overcome the general causes of migration, as they are being understood in the EU.

In this paper, we are exploring the difficulties that the Pontic-Greeks (or Greek-Pontiacs) face in their integration process in relation to the use of social services in a time of economic recess in this country, where the vast majority of employees face salary reductions and job redundancies. The central question is to identify the ease and/or difficulty of change for a group that is exposed to a different environment, regarding political, social and economic conditions. Behaviors, attitudes and citizenship are interpreted as a process of self-making and being-made in relation to cultural norms, religious customs and social support systems, adjustment to a new culture, and changes in identity and concept of self. This paper will review these concepts and how they impinge upon social interventions. It is argued that a more embedded social intervention education model needs to be adopted, leading toward a better understanding of the dynamic mechanisms of migrants' integration to the local society of the host country.

Understanding the dimensions of Pontiac migration

Although migration can be observed in any time throughout the human history, the factors that lead people to migrate could be differentiated each time and are usually modified based on the attitudes of the people in the host countries (Kasimati, 2002). Many migrants leave their countries, mostly because of financial and/or political reasons, and choose to live in cultures that are close to their native culture or cultures in which the quality of life can be much higher than of their own.

Regarding the ethnic minority of Pontic-Greeks in Cyprus, the economic, political and social collapse of the Soviet Union, in addition to the

opening of the borders of the countries of the *East Bloc*, back in the early '90s, led hundreds of thousands of people to migrate to other countries in an effort to seek employment and better living conditions, than remain in the uncertainty that accompanied the collapse. Some estimates in the beginning of the 21st century, reported that there is a possibility that a 3-5% of the Eastern Europe population was expected to move in the next 15-20 years to Western Europe (Dietz, 2002). For example, the Munich Institute *Osteuropa* estimated that approximately 1.9–3.9 million individuals – many of them younger than 20 years old – would migrate to Germany (Dietz, 2002).

The reasons that led to migration, as those were identified in that study, are mostly economic. However, concerning Greece and Cyprus, the consequences from the migration of the Pontic-Greeks occurred immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The major motive for a 42% of those migrants was the strong wish to return to the motherland, as that was reported by the General Secretariat of Pontiac Migrants (Katsikas, 1996). It is also important to note some general elements of the situation in the Soviet Union between the years 1985-1991, which could allow for a better understanding of the migration of the population under study.

Before 1985, only Pontic-Greeks from the central-Asian democracies of Uzbekistan, Kirgistan and Kazakstan, had a relatively easier access to travel outside the borders of Soviet Union because they had two passports, one from the Soviet Union and the other from Greece (Papastylianou, 2005). In addition, in 1985 an effort for an improvement in the social conditions of the Soviet Union was observed, and was characterized by the recognition of the independence of various nationalities, the opening of the borders and the free transportation of people to the West.

The above situation, in combination with the feelings of inferiority, the Greek roots and the insecurity because of the rising nationalistic conflicts in the Caucasus area against ethnic minorities, like the Pontic-Greeks, led to an increase of a migrant wave to Greece (Vergeti, 2003; Papastylianou, 2005). The migration of Pontic-Greeks to Cyprus began a few years later, at the beginning of 1991 (Trimikliotis, 2001). Arriving from Eastern Europe, Pontic-Greeks migrated to Cyprus, after an encouragement by the Greek government and after an improvement of the Cyprus economy and a need for more workers (Fileleftheros, 1996).

Before leaving their countries, Pontic-Greeks from the former Soviet Union, had aspirations for a better life with an abundance of consumer goods and the possibility of fun and relaxation, together with the desire to secure a job (Trimikliotis, 2001). However, the decision for a move to a new 'homeland' had various effects on them. One such effect is the extent of their social integration in their new 'homeland'. The following section refers to a

number of different effects, in an effort to reflect the changes made to the places where Pontic Greeks were settled, such as is the case of Cyprus.

Social Integration

The community of Pontic-Greeks has faced, and to some extent is still facing, serious problems of social integration in their host countries. This is primarily due to the lack of a national plan for retraining its members toward their absorption into the local labour market. Thus, unemployment rates, and underemployment among Pontic-Greeks, are still much higher than in the general population. Nevertheless, despite the fact that many Pontiacs have an adequate or high educational level because of the compulsory education in the Soviet Union, their community largely remains composed of a group of workers who work more complementary rather than competing with other workers, or face serious unemployment problems (Cassimati, 2002; Emke-Poulopoulou, 2005). At the same time, regardless of having a university degree that it is not taken into consideration for employment, there is an indication of the lack of a complete integration into the local society.

As the above discussion has indicated, there is a rather contradictory picture regarding the level of integration of Pontiacs into the local society. Although significant steps have been made toward their social integration, the level of their integration is still ambiguous, which is also shown by the level of service use from this particular ethnic group, as we shall see in the results section.

Furthermore, the use of social services from the Pontic-Greek community could allow for a more efficient integration into the local community, since they would have opportunities to participate in various activities. For instance, by participating in community after-school activities, a child, as well as his/her parents, could meet other people, children and their parents, and participate or even organize various events i.e. birthday parties, or celebrate children's day, mother's day, etc. In addition, instead of staying at home, elderly Pontic-Greeks could attend senior citizens' centers, where many activities take place on a daily basis. However, any activity and any age-group integration will not be an easy task to accomplish, if no efforts are made by professionals in such social services to promote respect and appreciation of cultural differences, and introduce programs that will bring together and celebrate different cultures.

In an attempt to illuminate the current situation in Paphos area, the current study has focused on drawing out those elements that would allow making safe conclusions, in regards to the integration of this particular ethnic minority group. Therefore, the next section discusses the methodological

approach of the study in relation to whether Pontic-Greeks make use of social services and to what extent.

Methods

Participants

The sampling method used was proportional, stratified random sampling, in which we studied, with the use of questionnaires, the opinions and perceptions of 838 adults (367 men and 471 women) in total. In order to qualify for participation, an individual had to be Pontic-Greek and live in the city of Paphos. A social worker from the Paphos District Welfare Department guided the researchers to specific areas where large numbers of Pontic-Greeks live. Also, in order for someone to participate in the study had to be adult, meaning over eighteen years-old. Upon their agreement to participate in the study the participants were initially asked to sign a consent form, and then they were given the survey. Upon completion, they put the questionnaire in an unmarked enveloped and sealed it.

From the participants in the sample, 10.5% belonged to the 18-22 age group, 13.7% to the 23-27 group, 14.7% to the 28-32 group, 13.2% to the 33-37 group, 8.8% to the 38-42 group, 10.5% to the 43-47 group, 11.2% to the 48-52 group and 17.3% to the 53< group. Also, 64.7% of the participants were married, 19.4% were single, 9.3% were divorced, 3.8% were widowed, and 2.9% were living with a partner. Moreover, 18.1% of the participants had no children, 22.2% had one child, 42.7% had two children, 14.6% had three children, and 2.4% had four or more children. In addition, 2.7% of the participants had no formal education, 5.8% had completed primary school, 42.8% had completed high school, 12.3% had completed vocational school 35.9% had completed university and 0.6% hold a post-graduate degree. Finally, 0.2% of the participants lived in Cyprus 0-1 years, 1.9% 1-2 years, 1.8% 2-3 years, 3.7% 3-4 years, 10% 4-5 years, 36% 5-10 years, and 46.3% more than 10 years.

Materials

The survey was in Greek and consisted of two parts. In the first part, demographic information was collected (sex, age, marital status, number of daughters and sons, age of the oldest male child and age of the oldest female child). In the second part, participants were asked to answer a questionnaire consisted of sixty-two questions. The aim of the questionnaire was to examine the social needs of this community in the city of Paphos and the difficulties Pontic-Greeks are facing in all aspects of their everyday life (family relations, personal matters, financial condition, living conditions, professional status, social status and relations, leisure).

Results

Social Integration of the Pontic-Greeks

Table 1 *Deviant Behavior*

	Yes		No	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Have you ever been charged by the police with committing any offence?	157	19%	665	80.5%
Have you ever been convicted (fine, prison, imprisonment with suspension, community work)?	185	22.4%	635	76.9%
Have you ever used drugs?	56	6.8%	764	92.6%
Do you know any people in your area who use drugs?	350	42.4%	392	47.5%
Are there any individuals in your family who use drugs?	105	12.7%	665	80.4%

The analysis of the demographic data for the Pontic-Greeks indicates that they constitute a minority ethnic group which has not integrated well in the local society and faces several difficulties. To begin with, the Pontic-Greeks in our sample indicated an unemployment rate of 22.2% (27.8% for men and 17.9% for women) at the time (i.e., 2010) where the unemployment in Cyprus was around 6%. That is, the rate of unemployment in the Pontic-Greek community was more than four times the local average.

In addition, as it can be seen in Table 1, around one in five people in our sample has some trouble with the police and had been convicted at least once of an offense they have committed. Use of drugs also seems to be a severe problem. In particular, although approximately only 7% indicated that they use drugs, this is clearly an underreport as almost one in two indicated that they know people in their area who use drugs, and almost 13 percent indicated that there are individuals in their families who use drugs.

The above evidence points toward the direction that not only the Pontic-Greeks have not integrated well to the local society, but they are also in need of social services. However, these services are underused.

Knowledge of Services

Table 2 *Knowledge of services offered by the local municipality*

	Yes		No	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Baby Care	385	45.9%	452	53.9%
Nurseries	501	59.8%	336	40.1%

All-Day School	420	50.1%	418	49.9%
Children Clubs	267	31.9%	571	68.1%
Elderly Day Center	248	29.6%	590	70,4%
Elderly Homes	319	38.1%	519	61,9%
Social Welfare Service	450	53.7%	388	46,3%
Home Care	97	11.6%	741	88,4%
Counseling/Mental Health Services	84	10.0%	754	90,0%
None	140	16.7%	698	83,3%

Although the Pontic-Greeks are in need of social services, they do not seem to be very well-informed for the services which are available by their local municipality. As it can be seen from Table 2, although the majority seems to be aware of at least one service, for individual services the knowledge is not that good. Similarly, although drug use seems to be a problem for this group (see Table 1), only 5.5% indicated that they are aware that there are services for drug prevention and detox offered by their local community.

We were interested in investigating whether certain demographic variables, such as sex and age, predict whether an individual is knowledgeable of the services available by the local municipality. Towards this end, binary logistic regression was applied with the dependent variable being the answer to the question of whether they were knowledgeable of any service offered by the municipality of Paphos (Yes/No), and the independent variables being participants' sex, age, number of children, marital status, and years living in Cyprus. No significant results were produced.

Use of Services

Table 3 *Use of services offered by the local municipality*

	Yes		No	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Baby Care	33	3,9%	805	96,1%
Nurseries	127	15,2%	711	84,8%
All-Day School	77	9,2%	761	90,8%
Children Clubs	43	5,1%	795	94,9%
Elderly Day Center	4	0,5%	834	99,5%
Elderly Homes	4	0,5%	834	99,5%
Social Welfare Service	78	9,3%	760	90,7%
Home Care	8	1,0%	830	99,0%
Counseling/Mental Health Services	17	2,0%	821	98,0%
None	530	63,2%	308	36,8%

The awareness of the existence of a wide range of services offered by the local community is limited, however, what is more worrisome is the even lower use of the services available. As we can see from Table 3, participants in our sample make very little use of the services available. In particular, more than 60 percent indicates that they have used no service at all, while for most services the use rate is less than 5%.

As before, we were interested in investigating whether certain demographic variables, such as sex and age, predict the use of services. Towards this end, binary logistic regression was applied with the dependent variable being the answer to the item “I have never used a service” (Yes/No) and with the independent variables being participants’ sex, age, number of children, marital status, and years living in Cyprus.

The results indicate an overall significant effect of age [$\chi^2(7, N=794) = 33.10, p < .001$]. In particular, in reference to those who were 53 years of age or more, those who were 18-22 were 2.2 times more likely to indicate that they have used a service, those who were 23-27 were 2.7, those who were 28-32 were 4.4, those who were 33-37 were 3.2, those who were 38-42 were 2.3, those who were 43-47 were 1.8 and those who were 48-52 were 1.7 times more likely. This indicates that the younger generation, particularly those between 28 to 37 years old, are more likely to use the services available, with the young and older groups to be less likely. The use of services by age-groups is depicted in Figure 1.

The number of children also had an overall significant effect [$\chi^2(4, N=794) = 32.09, p < .001$]. The difference seems, however, to be located between those who have no children and those who have four or more. In particular, those who have no children are 6.7 times more likely to indicate that they have not used any services, than those who have four children or more.

Finally, the sex of the participant, the marital status and the years living in Cyprus, do not seem to predict the use of services. One possible interpretation of the latter finding is that people do not actively seek help and are isolated, and that is why the duration of stay in Cyprus comes insignificant.

The participants’ low level of use of services is also apparent from their responses to the question “Have you ever asked the assistance of your local municipality in any personal or family issue?” The great majority of the participants answered ‘no’ (88.4%), while a small minority answered ‘yes’ (11.6%).

As before, in order to investigate whether certain demographic variables predict the use of services, we applied binary logistic regression with the dependent variable being the answer to the item “I have never used a service” (Yes/No) and the independent variables being the participants’

sex, age, number of children, marital status, and years living in Cyprus. The results indicate an overall significant effect of the number of children [$\chi^2(4, N=786) = 13.17, p = .010$]. In particular, those who have no children are 4 times more likely to indicate that they have not asked for the contribution of local authorities than those who have four children or more.

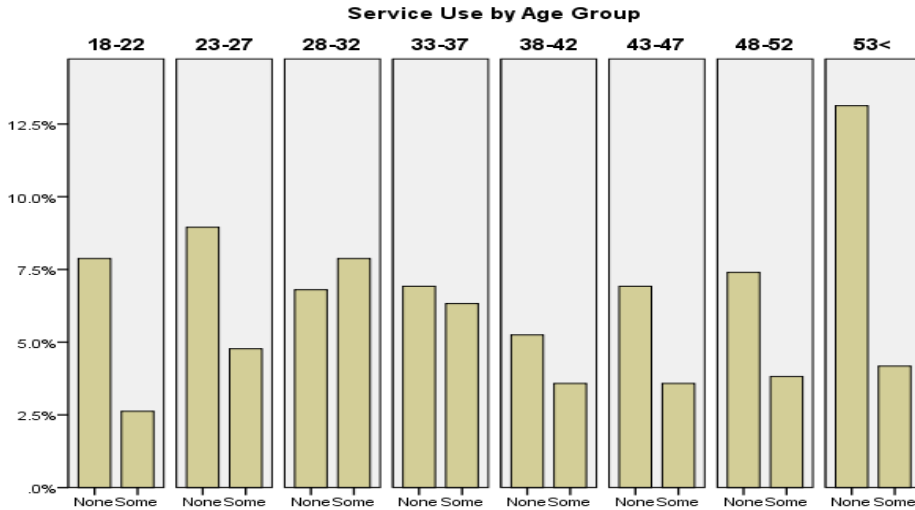


Figure 1. The group of age 18-22, 23-27 and 53< are the least likely age groups to use some welfare service.

Conclusion

Following the above analysis of the study, this section aims to provide the major findings that came out of this research. As the analysis indicates, the Pontic-Greeks make little, or no use at all, of the social services available at the municipality of Paphos. It seems that there is no difference between men and women in the use of services, with both sexes indicating a similar low usage. In addition, this population group, although is residing in the specific area for about 20 years, has not yet been fully integrated with the local society. They are skeptical to a number of activities and resources that focus on their community, as they are not asked to participate in the design and the implementation phase.

However, there is variability between age groups, with the lowest use to be found among the younger and the older groups. It also seems that the number of children has an effect, mainly with those having four or more children making more frequent use of the services. Interestingly, the number of years spent in Cyprus does not seem to predict neither knowledge nor the use of services. One possible interpretation of this finding is that the specific minority group has not integrated to the local society and does not actively try to do so. Thus, it remains isolated without time period having a positive effect on its integration.

These findings have important implications for policy making. Being at the frontier of Europe and, until recently, enjoying a high degree of prosperity, Cyprus has attracted many immigrants. Thus, the focus of future policy should not be focused on the establishment of more social services but on the adjustment of existing ones, in terms of becoming more accessible to minority groups. This is an important insight especially in the light of the financial crisis which has affected Cyprus since 2010. The consequences from this financial crisis can be counterbalanced by appropriate interventions that will enable minorities to make better use of the available social services. In addition, it is important for future studies to investigate the social consequences on Pontic-Greeks in Cyprus as a result of their lack of integration into the local society. Issues like family relations, substance abuse, unemployment, school dropout, juvenile delinquency, and other criminal activities should be studied in relation to the extent of this population group's social integration and participation in social activities.

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