

THE PONTIAN FAMILY FROM THE FORMER USSR IN GREECE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract – *The aim of the present comparative study is to find out whether there are any differences in self-esteem between Pontian and Greek students at the 6th Grade level. Pontians are a particular type of immigrant in the sense that they are in fact 're-patriated': they are Greeks whose ancestors lived around Pontos in the Black Sea area during the seventh century before Christ. They moved to the interior of the ex-Soviet Union in 1916, and then returned to Greece in 1986. Although Pontians share a common history, religion, and several cultural elements with the Greeks, 'natives' regard them as 'foreigners' and as a result they are a marginalized population in Greece. This study set out to analyse the self-concept of a total sample of 1558 students attending 6th Grade. 552 of these students were Pontian immigrants, 864 were native Greeks while 172 were Pontian natives. The results of the present research lead us to conclude that there is a statistically significant difference in the self-concept between the Pontian and Greek population. It also seems that the marginalized immigrant family, whether belonging to the same ethnic group or not, comprises a population at risk as far as the self-concept of the children is concerned.*

Introduction: repatriation and self-esteem

According to research worldwide, immigration presents itself as a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon. The condition of immigration imposes primordial changes on an individual's and a family's life-cycle. The immigrant family has to mobilize numerous skills (language, ability to make decisions, to socialize, to cope with frustration and so on) as well as mechanisms of adaptation in order to survive and embed itself successfully in the new social environment of the host country.

According to comparative research findings the children of immigrant families, compared to native children, do not present more generalized or higher levels of emotional disturbances or difficulties in their social adaptation (Aronowitz, 1992; Touliatos & Lindholm, 1980). Nevertheless, it is generally

considered that the immigrant population represents a social group at risk as far as the psychological welfare of its members and particularly the formation of the self-concept of their children is concerned (Eyou *et al.*, 2000; Sam, 2000; Vered & Sheraga, 1997).

The main factors that contribute to the development of self-esteem as well as the development of the psychological welfare of immigrant children are on one hand the successful adaptation of their families to the new social environment (Sam, 2000) and on the other, the degree of 'social support' they receive. The term 'social support' refers to the chances offered to an individual by his/her network of interpersonal relationships, to develop further his personality and personal skills (McCombs, 1991). The main sources of social support during school age (which represents the age of the population of the focus of the present research) are parents, educators and their peers (Harter, 1986; Messer & Harter, 1986; Prinz *et al.*, 1999).

According to research findings (Rutter *et al.*, 1975), when immigrant children are successfully adapted to the social environment of the host country, then they do not present either a higher degree of pathology or other problems in any other dimension of their behaviour compared to the native population (Touliatos & Lindholm, 1980). According to other findings of research related to differences in relation to sex and school performance, immigrant children do not present differences compared to those of the native population (Osborne, 1971).

In the case of failure to adapt, immigrant children present dysfunctional patterns of behavior (Ashworth, 1975; Desbyshire, 1969; Gaetner-Harmach, 1981; Horowitz & Frenkel, 1976; Rodriguez, 1968; Taft, 1977; Vasquez, 1979). Such children experience loneliness, psychological problems, social exclusion, anxiety associated with their concerns about their future, and problems with their school performance as well as their overall adaptation to the school context (Vered & Sheraga, 1997; Bilanakis *et al.*, 1996; Hatzichristou, 2003).

According to other findings of comparative studies, the immigrant population seems to exhibit higher levels of impulsive behaviour, emotional vulnerability, lower self-esteem and higher levels of pathology than native children. On the other hand, they exhibit higher levels of motivation towards success and goals (Siefen *et al.*, 1996).

Research on immigrants and repatriates in Greece reveals that the majority of the immigrant population was found to experience higher levels of major depression and anxiety disorders compared to the native population (Georgas *et al.*, 1999). Research on self-esteem has shown that this is particularly low in the immigrant children and adolescents (Baral, 1977; Sam, 2000; Hatzichristou, 2003).

Moreover, other research carried out in Greece concerning the relationship between emigration and pathology show that those immigrants with a high level

of acculturation in the country where they emigrated from developed higher levels of pathology—when compared to those with lower level of acculturation during their stay in the host country—when they repatriated themselves in their homeland (Bilanakis *et al.*, 1995/ 1996).

According to other research findings (Leze, 2003; Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2001) immigrants as well as foreign students face difficulties in specific domains, including: difficulties in understanding and speaking the Greek language, learning difficulties and poor school performance. The above-mentioned characteristics constitute the main factors which hinder the process of social adaptation of immigrant students to their new social environment in the host country.

Further findings on repatriated as well as foreign students in Greece confirm that they have higher psychosocial needs compared to those of their native peers (Hatzichristou, 2003). Also, immigrant students seem to experience higher levels of anxiety (Georgas *et al.*, 1999).

The history of Pontians

Pontians are a particular type of immigrants. They can most certainly be regarded as repatriated because they are Greeks whose ancestors leaved in the Black Sea area during 700 B.C. After 1916 they immigrated to the interior of the ex-Soviet Union and returned to Greece in 1986. It should be mentioned that during the 90's Greece received a great number of Greek repatriates from many countries namely: Western Europe (mainly Germany), Albania and the ex-Soviet Union. The Pontians from the ex-Soviet Union have managed to keep their Greek identity regardless of being uprooted and the sufferings they endured. When they came back to what they considered their 'mother country' they were regarded by Greek society as 'immigrants', and therefore not Greeks. Natives refer to them as 'Russian-Pontians.' This name stigmatizes them and excludes them socially because they are not considered Greeks by the rest of the native population who seem to consider them as having the same status as any other immigrant population (Albans, Romans, and so on) (Anthogalidou *et al.*, 1998).

The Pontian population is faced with many difficulties in accomplishing their social and economic insertion in Greece. These difficulties are mainly due to the following:

- (a) Pontians cannot access a number of professions in the Greek labour market either because such jobs are prohibited to non-natives—as in the case of teachers and doctors, for instance—or because they do not have formal, certified training in vocations that Pontians learned informally, in

such trades and crafts as jewellery, car mechanics, electrical installation, and so on.

- (b) Pontians (mainly those belonging to the first generation) lack language skills.
- (c) They have a low financial status.
- (d) They have less chance than natives to climb up the social ladder.

Due to the above-mentioned difficulties, Pontian families face high levels of anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty due to their struggle to survive financially and also due to the effects of social exclusion (Kotsionis, 1993).

Research also indicates that their relationship with state authorities is often negative. They feel they have been 'deserted' by the state, that the policy of the Greek state is inadequate, and that the so-called 'good practices' are practically inexistent. Consequently, they feel very angry and suspicious towards any Greek authority and its representatives (Kotsionis, 1993).

During their stay in the Black Sea and the countries of the ex-Soviet Union the cultural characteristics of the Pontians have been altered as a result of the phenomenon of acculturation. At the same time, during this period the cultural givens of the native Greek population have also changed. Nevertheless, the expectations of Pontians were, on return to their homeland to find a culture identical to theirs. When they returned and came into contact with the native population they discovered a culture markedly different to theirs. They felt 'different', 'strangers' and gradually 'excluded' (Anthogalidou *et al.*, 1998).

The purpose of the present study is to find out whether there is a positive or a negative correlation between self-esteem and immigration. The specific research goal is on the one hand to evaluate the level of self-esteem of 6th Grade Pontian students of primary school and on the other to compare it to that of native students.

Social exclusion is a stressful condition by definition and it can be considered as one of the stressors the immigrant family is faced with. In the case of Pontians there seems to be a particular problem, i.e. they are faced with a specific identity problem which is due to (a) the fact they feel and have always felt Greeks, and (b) that they have always longed to return to what they considered their country, so that when they did return, they did so expecting to be welcomed as 'brothers' and 'equals', by the rest of the Greeks. However, what they faced upon their arrival in the 'mother country' was the same 'traumatic' experience of having to live with the identity of the 'immigrant 'the stranger' and the 'excluded' (Kotsionis, 1993; Anthogalidou *et al.*, 1998; Fotiadis, 2000). As the history of the Pontians shows, they can be regarded as immigrants and emigrants, refugees and repatriated at the same time (Kotsionis, 1993).

The present research worked with the hypothesis that the primary school age Pontian students would present lower self-esteem than children from native Greek families would. This hypothesis is based on the following rationale: Pontians consist of a social group who suffer the effects of social exclusion in the Greek society. The condition of social exclusion has negative effects on the development of children's self-esteem because:

- The excluded family is faced with high levels of anxiety due to the condition of social exclusion and to their struggle for survival because of their low financial and social status. The family has more difficulties in maintaining a stable context of security for their children (Haritou-Fatourou, 1994).
- These families often react by overprotecting their children (Haritou-Fatourou, 1994) and therefore giving them less chance to develop autonomy and self-esteem.
- During their stay in the countries of the ex-Soviet Union as well as during their present stay in Greece, Pontian families are faced with a negative prototype of identification. The representation of the immigrant is, therefore, pejorative compared to that of the native Greek. The edification of the self-esteem of the Pontian students is hindered because they come up against a negative representation of themselves, as Pontians.

It should be noted that there is very little if any research concerning the self-esteem of the Pontian population. Most research in Greece and other countries is related to the economic and social effects of immigration. Also there is very little research on the psychological status of Greek immigrants or repatriated populations, and especially so of Pontians.

Method

Participants

One of the main concerns of the researchers of the present study was to define the 'Pontian student'. The necessity of such a distinction comes from the fact that Pontian students can be considered to fall in the following categories: (a) those students whose parents (and in many cases the children themselves) were born in the ex-Soviet Union. For the purpose of this study, such students are considered as 'Pontians'; (b) those students whose parents as well as themselves were

born in Greece and are considered as ‘native Pontians’: that is Greeks whose grandparents were Pontians. The focus of this research therefore includes both ‘Pontians’ and ‘native-Pontians’.

Research participants were students of the 6th Grade. This Grade was chosen because by then students have acquired sufficient language competence to answer the questions of the tests used in the research.

Selection of participants

According to the data of the General Secretariat of National Statistical Service of Greece and those of the Department of Primary education of the Ministry of education, 71% of Pontian students study in the schools of the educational regions of Athens (an urban area and the country’s capital), Thessalonica (also an urban area and the second biggest city in Greece), and Thrace (which is a semi-urban area in northern Greece). The present research took place in the above-mentioned regions. The method of random sampling was used. The number of participants in the research was 1,558. The average age of the students was twelve years. Out of the 1,558 students who answered the questionnaires, 522 were Pontians, 864 were natives and 172 were native-Pontians.

Instruments

The instruments used in the present study were the following:

1. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Scale, which is based on a mono-dimensional approach to self-esteem, i.e. it refers to one dimension of self-esteem, which is that of general self-esteem. The scale consists of 58 questions out of which 8 refer to the lying scale. If the subject answers positively in 5 of those questions then it can be regarded that he consciously tries to describe himself in an unjustifiably positive fashion. In that case the scale we did consider valid neither the Coopersmith scale, nor the correspondent Scale of Susan Harter that the participant has answered.

In the present research the validity of the Scale was checked and was found to have satisfactory stability in time and to be satisfactorily free of time sampling error. In a sample consisting of 177 students (Pontians, Natives and Native Pontians) and for a period of four weeks, the validity of the repetitive measurements was found to be equal to $r = 0,89$. The internal consistency of the questionnaire administered to a sample of 1478 students (Pontians, Natives and Native-Pontians) was equal to α Cronbach = 0,85.

2. The Susan Harter (Self-Perception Profile for Children, 1985) Scale. The theoretical approach to self-esteem in this scale is more holistic compared to Coopersmith's Scale. Susan's Harter Scale refers to many dimensions of the self-esteem and emphasizes the multidimensional nature of the term as well as the feeling the person has about his overall self-worth. The scale consists of thirty-six questions and is divided in six sub-scales (Global Self-Worth, Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, Physical Appearance and Behavioural Conduct). Each sub-scale consists of six questions. The reliability analysis of repetitive measurements, considering that each sub-scale consists of only six questions, showed that the sub-scales had satisfactory stability in time ($r =$ from 0,65 to 0,77) as well as satisfactory internal consistency (alpha Cronbach = from 0,65 to 0,76).

The criteria that led us to choose Susan Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children scale were the following: It presents high validity, it is easy to use and it emphasizes the multidimensional nature of the meaning of the term of self-worth. The Coopersmith questionnaire was also administered for the following reasons: (a) in order to have a better assessment of the overall self esteem of the students; (b) it gave us the possibility to identify the false answers; (c) finally both scales have been used by a great number of researches in Greece and elsewhere.

Procedure

The data of the present study were collected from October to May 2002. A total of seventy schools were contacted for the purposes of the study. Out of these, 40 were located in Athens, 25 in Thessalonica, and 15 in the area of Thrace.

The questionnaires were not administered during periods of national or religious celebrations. The rationale that informed that decision was that during festivities children are usually in a very positive and celebratory mood, which could affect their answers to the questionnaires.

The questionnaires were administered in the classroom, during the first two didactic hours. The time required for the completion of each questionnaire was approximately 40 to 45 minutes. It was explained to the students that they were participating in a project. They reacted very positively and often showed excitement at being involved.

Results

A major finding was that while students of the 6th Grade were naturally expected to have been born in 1990, a large number of Pontians (145) was in fact born before that date and were consequently older than their native peers. This

difference is due to the fact that upon their arrival in Greece, they were placed in lower grades than those corresponding to their age, on account of the fact that they did not speak the Greek language. We therefore set as a primary task the finding out of the correlation between self-esteem and the age of the students.

Correlations between self-esteem and age

By placing individuals randomly in each group we constructed the following three equal groups: Pontians, Natives and Native-Pontians ($n=145$). One-way ANOVA analysis showed that statistically significant differences between means existed in the following scales-subscales:

- Self-Esteem (Coopersmith): [F (2,432) = 5,7, $p<0,05$]
- Scholastic Competence (Harter): [F (2,432) = 6,87 $p<0,001$]
- Social Acceptance (Harter): [F (2,432) = 3,89 $p<0,05$]
- Behavioural Conduct (Harter): [F (2,432) = 4,76 $p<0,05$]

Students born before 1990 present lower self-esteem compared to those born in 1990. Therefore, since age is an important factor affecting self-esteem, we focused the rest of the analysis only on students who were born in 1990.

Correlations between self-esteem and origin: Pontians, Natives, Native-Pontians

We continued our analysis by examining the correlation between self-esteem/self-perception and each group according to the place of birth of the students (Pontians, Native, and Native-Pontians). The analysis of the One-way ANOVA analysis showed the existence of statistically significant differences between means in the following scales-subscales:

- Self-Esteem (Coopersmith): [F (2,1408) = 39,85 $p<0,001$]
- Global Self-Worth (Harter): [F (2,1408) = 15,14 $p<0,001$]
- Scholastic Competence (Harter): [F (2,1408) = 45,1 $p<0,001$]
- Social Acceptance (Harter): [F (2,1408) = 14,43 $p<0,05$]
- Athletic Competence (Harter): [F (2,1408) = 12,38 $p<0,001$]
- Physical Appearance (Harter): [F (2,1408) = 4,45 $p<0,05$]
- Behavioural Conduct (Harter): [F (2,1408) = 19,49 $p<0,001$]

We applied the Post Hoc Tests (Student-Newman-Keuls) in order to locate differences among the groups. The analysis showed that the general self-esteem

and self-perception scores on all sub-scales were lower in the Pontian students in comparison to the other two groups. On the contrary, there was no difference between Native Pontians and Greeks.

A questionnaire was administered in order to find out the structure of the Pontian family (we administered the same questionnaire to the native students of sample). By the term structure we refer to whether the families under study were nuclear or extended. We added extra questions in the section referring to the demographic data. The kind of questions we asked were the following:

- How many persons live in your home?
- How often do you communicate or meet with your relatives?
- Where do your grandparents and uncles/antes live?

What we found out was that a significant percentage (52%) of Pontian families lives with their grandparents or other members of the extended family. In other words, they either live within walking distance of each other or share the same house or apartment. An equally significant percentage (35%) of Pontian families live away from their relatives who are left behind in Russia. They can therefore be regarded as nuclear families. The target of the following analysis is to depict any differences in the self-esteem / self-perception between the students whose families are in close contact with their relatives (and therefore their functioning can be regarded as that of the extended family) and those whose families are in no contact with the extended family (and their functioning is closer to that of the nuclear family). We have proceeded to separate analysis concerning contact of the students of the sample with grandparents and other relatives.

Correlations between self-esteem / self-perception and bi-generational structure of the Pontian family (grandparents)

One-way ANOVA showed statistically significant differences between means of the following scales and subscales:

- Scholastic Competence (Harter) [F (2,381) = 6,60, p<0,05]
- Social Acceptance (Harter) [F (2,381) = 3,35, p<0,05]
- Behavioural Conduct (Harter) [F (2,381) = 3,40, p<0,05]

H Post Hoc Tests (Student-Newman-Keuls), p=0,05 showed:

Scholastic Competence (Harter): the students who are scarcely (once every two months) or never in personal contact with their grandfathers and

grandmothers present lower (scores) of scholastic self-perception compared to the students who are in a daily, personal contract. Furthermore the scholastic self-esteem of the students who have daily contact with grandparents presents the same scores with those who contact their grandparents twice or three times a month.

Social Acceptance (Harter): The students who have very scarce personal contact (a period of more than two to three months elapses between meetings) with their grandparents or other close relatives present lower Social Acceptance from students who are in daily personal contact.

Behavioural Conduct (Harter): The students who have very scarce personal contact (a period of more than two to three months elapses between meetings) with their grandparents or other close relatives present lower Behavioural Conduct from students who are in daily personal contact.

Correlations between self-esteem / self-perception and structure of the Pontian family (cousins, uncles and aunts)

One-way ANOVA showed the existence of statistically significant differences between means in the following scales- subscales:

- Self-Esteem (Coopersmith) [F (2,387) = 7,59, p<0,001]
- Global Self-Worth (Harter) [F (2,387) = 7,95, p<0,001]
- Scholastic Competence (Harter) [F (2,387) = 6,66, p<0,05]
- Behavioral Conduct (Harter) [F (2,387) = 3,402, p<0,05]
- Physical Appearance (Harter) [F (2,387) = 3,66, p<0,05]

The Post Hoc Tests (Student-Newman-Keuls), p=0,05 analysis showed the following in the domains of self esteem (Coopersmith) / Global self-worth (Harter), Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Physical Appearance.

Students who are in daily contact with grandparents, uncles and aunts present higher general self-esteem and self perception compared to the other two groups. On the other hand those students who contact their relatives once or twice a month do not present any difference in their self-esteem compared to those who very seldom or ever contact them.

Discussion

According to the findings of the present research, the self-esteem of the sixth Grade Pontian students from the ex-Soviet Union is lower than that of the native students. This difference in the self-esteem is present in all subscales of the Harter

test. These findings are consistent with those of other research findings (Siefen *et al.*, 1996; Bilanakis *et al.*, 1995; Sam, 2000).

Given the above results we may come to the conclusion that Pontian students of the sixth Grade are a social group whose insertion in the host country is not satisfactory. The fact that the families of those students are not sufficiently embedded in Greek society affects negatively the development of the self-esteem of its young members. We may also assume that the low self-esteem of the young Pontian students may, in its turn, be at the origin of anxiety, marginalization from the group of peers, difficulties in the psychosocial development of the students and low school performance (Botsari, 2001; Eyouat *et al.*, 2000; Hatzichristou, 2003; Siefen & Kirkcaldy, 1998; Madianos, 2000; Sam, 2000).

The findings of the research validate further the hypothesis according to which the healthy development of self-esteem presupposes a social context, which provides emotional security and social acceptance (Botsari, 2001; Burns, 1986; Hatzichristou & Hopf, 1992; Hatzichristou, 2003; Matsagouras, 1999; Mason *et al.*, 1996).

Pontian students who are placed in classes which do not correspond (are lower) to their age (e.g. a twelve year-old student is placed in a third Grade class) present lower self-esteem / self-perception than their native peers. This difference is found to be statistically significant in the domains of: Self-Esteem Coopersmith, Scholastic Competence Harter, Social Acceptance Harter and Behavioural Conduct Harter. The students were placed in lower classes on the assumption that they would have fewer difficulties in learning the Greek language and that by learning faster and in an easier way the Greek language they would have more possibilities to insert themselves successfully in the Greek educational system. However the fact that these students study in lower grades than those who correspond to their age and therefore their classmates are younger than themselves seems to have a negative affect on their self-esteem.

Another major finding is that students of the sixth Grade who are in close personal contact with the extended family (grandparents, cousins, uncles) present higher self-esteem than those who are in very scarce or no contact at all in the domains of Global Self-Worth, Scholastic, Social and Behavioural self-perception.

These findings may lead us to the conclusion that the contact of the students with the extended family and especially with their family peers affects positively the development of the self-esteem. We may conclude that the peers of the family as well as the adults function as a network of support. Further research could reveal the mechanism behind this finding with peers. One could put forward the hypothesis that there is a mechanism of identification taking place apart from the hypothesis that the extended family functions as a network of emotional security and support.

Applications

The findings of the present research show us that the Pontian students from the ex-Soviet is a group at risk as far as the development of their self-esteem is concerned. We therefore propose a number of measures that could be taken in order to face and also this prevent the effects of their exclusion.

- a. *The establishment of a positive context (emotional climate) in the classroom:* Pontian students should be encouraged to participate actively and equally to the other students and experience a climate of acceptance and equality with their peer natives. All students (native or not) should be introduced to the principles of equality and the respect of human rights. Students should also be sensitized to accept differences and multiculturalism.
- b. *Activities organized by the school:* The school should organize lectures and other activities common to students of all origins (festivities, expositions) inside and outside the school premises. The purpose of these activities would be to sensitize the students, the parents of all nationalities (whether Pontian or natives) and the community on issues of equality, and difference of every kind (sexes, nationality, social status, and so on).
- c. *The existence of a transitional period before class placement:* Repatriated students should be given the possibility to go through a transitional stage before they are taught the whole syllabus in the native language (Greek). This can be achieved by the creation of remedial language and enculturation classes in schools and with Pontians teachers, from USSR, who will teach their native language in a few lessons at the first year of school.
- d. *Placement of the repatriated students to the class that corresponds to their age:* Repatriated students should follow classes that correspond to their age and they should be able to follow at the same time the secondary lessons in their mother language.
- e. *Teaching of the Russian language:* Russian should be taught as a second language in schools where there is a great number of Pontian students.
- f. *Seminars addressed to teachers:* Seminars should be offered to teachers in order to disseminate information on subjects concerning the teaching of foreign and repatriated students. Emphasis should be given on the recent developments of the methods of teaching a language to foreign students.

- g. *Activities that contribute to empowerment*: The establishment of activities the target of which will be to reinforce the acceptance of repatriated students by their native peers. In the case of Pontians who speak the same language with natives, museum-based instruction in shared cultural heritage can be used as a tool that will contribute to mark out common cultural features and will lead to the further strengthening of their relationship and the acceptance of their differences. Teacher training programmes should include sessions on the psychology of repatriated students and their families. Universities should also encourage and support research on issues related to repatriation and on transcultural education, so that teachers become more sensitised to the problems and particularities of repatriated students.
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