

Unpacking young migrants' collective identities: The case of ethnonational identifications and belonging

Abstract

Based on a qualitative study of youth identities in Greece, the paper unpacks the dynamic processes of ethnonational (dis)identification and belonging that Albanian young migrants are implicated in. Analysis of in-depth interviews illustrates how racism, coupled with their lack of citizenship, affect their (dis)identifications. Additionally, categorisation is reported to crucially mediate their belonging, giving rise to a double-edged sense of otherness and alienation. The paper concludes by putting forward a conceptualisation of young migrants' collective identities as involving the emotive dialectic of (dis)identification, categorisation and belonging, along with negotiation of boundaries and acceptance by 'others' in both home and settlement societies.

Key Words: young migrants, identifications, belonging, categorisation, Greece

Introduction

In the era of intensified migration waves, with an ever-increasing number of children and young people experiencing mobility and dislocation, new possibilities open up for thinking through and about the notions of culture and difference, of 'identity' and belonging. In undertaking the study upon which this paper is based I was particularly interested in qualitatively enquiring into the intricate ways through which young people weave their narratives of 'identity' in the rapidly changing and increasingly diverse context of Greek society. In the present article I seek to cast light on the collective identities of young Albanian migrants, an under-researched group in the Greek context (for exceptions see Vathi 2013, 2010).

Since the early 1990s, Greece has become one of the most popular migrant-receiving countries, with approximately 11% of the country's population being foreign-born (Triantafyllidou, 2014). Over the half of the migrant population (65%) originates from Albania, thus making up the largest migrant group. In the context of crisis and austerity that have been afflicting Greek society since 2009, the rising levels of unemployment and under-employment have engendered the de-regularisation and de-integration of parts of the migrant population (Gemi, 2014; Mavrommatis, 2016). This has resulted in a considerable number of Albanian migrants losing their employment and, being unable to renew their residence permits, in turn losing their legal stay status, while others return to Albania or migrate to other European countries (Gemi, 2014; Michail and Christou, 2016; Michail 2013).

It is against the wider migration and diversity-related challenges that this paper is framed, as it focuses on the collective identities of young Albanian migrants. Young migrants, like all children and young people, are seen as social actors (Corsaro, 2005; James and others, 1998) who make sense of their place in society and actively interpret the socio-cultural, material and emotional spaces they inhabit (Aitken, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). In line with this approach, the study upon which this paper is based sought to examine how young people with migrant and non-migrant background strategically negotiate 'identity' and power through their own voices (Devine 2013), and in the relational terrain of their lives, and more specifically in the familial and educational fields (see author, forthcoming). In drawing upon in-depth interviews with young Albanian migrants the present paper unpacks their collective

identifications and sense of belonging in relation to Greek society and their home country. In so doing, the paper contributes to a growing strand of literature on children's and young people's collective identities (Hengst, 2009), as these are mediated by migration, dislocation and transnational mobility (Anthias, 2002; Bailey, 2009; Colombo and others, 2009; Devine, 2013; Fangen 2007; Fassetta, 2015; Ni Laoire and others, 2011; Valentine and others, 2009).

In the following section the present work is located within theorisations of collective identities by which it is informed. Then the study's methodology is briefly presented, followed by the analysis of selected young Albanians' narratives. The paper concludes by putting forward a conceptualisation of collective identities as involving the deeply relational and emotive processes of (dis)identification, categorisation and belonging.

Collective identities and belonging

Theoretical accounts framed within variants of post-structuralism, feminism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis provided useful insights into the vexed question of 'identity'. A consensus can be noted among these variably focused perspectives in underlining the ambivalence, mutability and incoherence as key features of what can be seen as 'identity' (Rattansi and Westwood 1994). Against fixed, unitary and naturalised conceptions 'identity', other scholars pointed to the indispensable role of temporality, spatiality, and performativity in the stitching together of contradictory and often hybrid subject positions (Bhabba, 1994; Butler 1990; Massey and Jess 1995). Arguably, it is the interplay of discourses, practices and resource struggles in the field of multiple loci of power that frames the processes through which social actors locate themselves along intersectional axes of social divisions (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Brah 1996). Through this anti-essentialist lens, 'identity' emerges as multiple, fluid and fragmented, as being constantly under construction and 'subject to a radical historicisation' (Hall 1996, p.4).

In engaging with these wider theoretical debates, the paper's framework shifts the attention away from the essentialism and fixity of 'identity' on the dynamic and relational *processes* of identification, dis-identification and belonging that young migrants are implicated in. These threefold conceptual foci are argued to better illuminate and capture the multifarious identity work (Hengst, 2009) performed by social actors, which in turn is key to understanding the nuances of migrant childhoods (Devine, 2013).

More specifically, the paper places analytical emphasis on how young Albanians form and narrate their *(dis)identifications* and *belonging* vis-à-vis their 'imagined' ethnic and national communities (Anderson 1991). With respect to the study of ethnic phenomena, Barth's (1969) work is seminal for foregrounding the situational and interactional dimensions of ethnic groups, as the latter come to be identified and confined through boundaries that are distinguished from and elevated over the mutable content of the 'cultural stuff' they enclose. It can be argued that is the drawing and re-instating of boundaries that play a key role in the formation of ethnic groups and national communities. Building upon Barth's work Jenkins (1994, p.198) argued that ethnicity is 'situationally defined, produced in the course of social interactions that occur at or across (and in the process help to constitute) the ethnic boundary in question'. From a perspective that places an analytical premium on materiality and relations of power, Anthias (2001, p.629) maintained that ethnicity involves the deployment of 'the boundary of the ethnic category, as a central arena for struggle vis-à-vis resources of different types'.

In a similar vein, ethnic and national identities, as forms of collective identities, can be conceptualised as a dynamic constellation of identifications and allegiances that social actors invest and de-invest vis-à-vis ethnic and national communities (Brubaker *et al.* 2004; Brubaker

and Cooper, 2000; Jenkins 1994; 2008). The present conceptual approach accords primacy to the situated and intersubjective dimensions of ethnic and national identities (Brah, 1996; Jenkins, 2008), taking into account the strategies and mechanisms that ethnic groups adopt in order to cope with and counteract racism (Modood and others, 1994; see also Modood and others, 2002).

Linked to the study of collective identities is social actors' sense of belonging, as the latter captures the sense of personal location and the 'complex involvement with others' (Weeks, 1990, p.88). Although belonging can be seen as closely interwoven with 'identity' (Weeks 1990), it is nevertheless fruitful not to reduce to it (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Notably, belonging has a relational and an 'affective dimension relating to important social bonds and ties' (Yuval-Davis and others, 2005, p.528). Further, it constitutes the *process* of yearning for emotional attachments and the feeling of being safe 'at home' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.197). Another distinction that can prove analytically useful for unpacking belonging involves its *formal* and the *informal* dimensions (Yuval-Davis and others, 2005), with the former encompassing citizenship, and the rights and duties that stem from it, or lack thereof, and the latter the lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion. From this perspective, we can approach belonging in terms of the wider social, institutional and administrative processes that social actors are implicated in, which involve 'the making and remaking of inequality and social exclusion' (Thomson, 2007, p.154).

After having reviewed the key approaches that have informed this paper's conceptual framework, the section that follows provides an overview of the study's methodology.

Narrating identities: The study

The study upon which this paper is based had placed epistemological emphasis on social actors' experiences, perceptions and interpretations (see author). A qualitative design was accordingly followed that included in-depth interviews, focus groups and observations carried out in two educational institutions located in Thessaloniki, the second biggest city of Greece. The institutions were selected on the basis of the ethnic diversity of the student population, after consultation with the local educational authority and the head-teachers. One hundred and three young people (54 males and 49 females) aged between 16-19 and attending the pre-final year of their post-secondary education participated in the study. Forty-six in-depth interviews were conducted with participants of self-identified Greek (N=22), Albanian (N=16), Georgian (N=5), Armenian (N=2) and Palestinian (N=1) ethnicities. The interviewees were selected on the basis of the biographical details they provided (e.g. ethnicity, parental occupations and educational qualifications) with the view to ensure a relatively balanced sample along the lines of gender, socio-economic and migration background. The migrant participants were all foreign-born and migrated with their parent(s) to Greece, residing continuously in the country for the minimum of six years and with their residence varying between six to fifteen years. The study followed the established ethical codes for working with children and young people (Heath *et al.* 2009). Informed, verbal consent by all participants was sought, while repeatedly assuring them that they can withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were given to all participants in order to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.

Given the article's focus, the following section reports on the interviews conducted with young migrants self-identified as Albanians. The interview guide was organised around five main topics; their migration journeys, their sense and narration of self, their experiences in the educational context, the role of family and parental involvement, and their aspirations and imagined futures, with the present paper focusing on their collective identifications. The

interviews lasted from one to two and a half hours; they were conducted in Greek by the author, as all participants were fluent in the Greek language, and then translated into English. The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed and analysed with the assistance of NVivo software.

The analysis followed a narrative-discursive approach (Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor, 2007; Taylor and Littleton, 2006) for it facilitates the exploration of the shared aspects in participants' accounts, along with the discursive resources mobilised in the identity work of individual social actors. The analytic method involved reading and analysing the interview transcripts as a corpus of data until key themes emerged. Notably, the analysis of key themes is one of the fundamental elements in narrative research (Phoenix, 2008). In the following section the key themes identified in this study's young Albanians' narratives are analysed, as these revolve around the interplay between identifications, racism and belonging, the role of categorisation and 'others', and the factors enabling and constraining the emergence of hybrid 'identities'.

Narrating (dis)identifications, racism and belonging

One of the key themes identified in young Albanians' narratives is the interweavement of evolving (dis)identifications with belonging, as it is further compounded by experiences of racism in the settlement country. This interplay is illustrated in the case of Pavlos, who migrated to Greece along with his parents at the age of five:

I am Albanian, I feel Albanian. Nothing has changed since I came to Greece. My friends are there, and here there are only racists. It was there in Albania that we used to play, it was there that I grew up; my childhood years; these things cannot be forgotten, they can never change; never. We must not forget our language and our motherland. All of us might change identity cards but nothing will ever change inside us. Whoever decides to be in Greece, should adopt Greece's culture, that is the way of life; you live according to the culture of Greece; you do not live according to the culture of Albania since you came here (Pavlos, 17)

What features centrally in this narrative is the salient dimension of ethnic identifications, linked to the place of early childhood years that seem to have etched indelible memories, thereby anchoring young Pavlos cognitively and emotionally to his homeland. Further, a claim to the stability of ethnicity is made, by arguing that it stays intact from the practicalities and ramifications of his everyday life in Greece. This can be seen as an attempt to dissociate ethnic identifications from the cultural practices enacted in the settlement society (see also Fangen 2007). In this context, the familiarisation with the Greek way of life and culture, along with the potential acquisition of Greek citizenship, are perceived as part and parcel of the process of adaptation in the settlement country. What is also worth underlining in this young participant's account is the divisive rhetorical schema discursively constructing his homeland as the *there-safe-place*, juxtaposed with Greece constructed as the *here-racist-place*. This resonates with King's argument (1995, p.2) about migrants' sense of 'identity' and place often involving 'a duality- "here" and "there", which is an important aspect of their lives'. Pivotal to this duality, as indicated in this narrative is the felt experience of racism and the profound impact it has on *informal belonging* (Yuval-Davis and others, 2005), in this case the sense of exclusion and marginality.

Arguably, the racist and scornful treatment that young migrants tend to experience in settlement societies crucially cross-cut with the processes of ethnonational identification and dis-identification, as these are played out in certain contexts (Valentine and Sporton 2009). This

constitutes a key theme recurring in this study's young migrants' narratives, with dis-identification being characteristically prevalent among young Albanians. Phillipos, who migrated to Greece from Albania along with his family at the age of six, sheds more light on this process:

I have been raised here in Greece and I have adapted well. I have gone to school here and I got used to it. I came here at a young age and I don't know Albania. Here we have lived more years and it has been better for us. In Albania things were worse; it is not like here; we could not find jobs and they did not pay us well so we could not live like that. Because I am here since I was very young, I have adapted so well that I do not want to go back. When they call me Albanian I get so much angry. I am Albanian but I feel more like a Greek. Yet it upsets me when they mockingly call me 'hey you Albanian'; I do not know why, but it upsets me. All of my friends are Greek and it is only me who is Albanian and that disturbs me. I feel differently [pause] I do not know [pause] I feel inferior. For these reasons it is important for me to take the Greek citizenship, because they will not scorn me and because we will avoid the trouble of renewing our permit cards every second year and paying thousands of Euros. (Phillipos, 17)

The impact of early socialisation in the settlement society is evident, with Greece constituting the place that young Phillipos has been brought up and educated, juxtaposed with his lack of knowledge of his homeland Albania and his unwillingness to return there. It is in this context that his evolving identification as a Greek and his belonging to Greek society is narrated alongside his dis-identification as an Albanian. Dis-identification, namely the negative emotional investment and distancing from their ethnicity, appears to be one of the main identification patterns observed among young Albanians in Greece (Vathi, 2010). The cases of dis-identification evidenced in this study can be associated with experiences of racism and name-calling, coupled with a sense of inferiority that young Albanians, like Phillipos, seem to have internalised. In these cases, the acquisition of citizenship, what has been termed as *formal belonging* (Yuval-Davis et al. 2005), is perceived by as a mechanism protecting against emotionally disturbing racism. From a more instrumental perspective, naturalisation can terminate the resource-consuming process of stay permit renewal, thus bringing an end to uncertainty for his family and himself. As Wimmer (2014,p. 840; 2013) maintained, it is theoretically fruitful to see members of stigmatised ethnic groups 'as strategically competent actors who aim to enhance their own moral recognition, prestige, power and command over resources'. Nevertheless, these strategies involve boundary-crossing that takes place against the dominant's group counter-efforts to 'seal' their boundary (Wimmer 2008). The following section further illuminates these strategic struggles experienced and negotiated by young Albanian migrants.

'I am in the middle, I am in nowhere': Others, categorisation and belonging

This section reports on young Albanians' narratives that shed more light into the lack of belonging experienced in both societies of origin and settlement. Characteristic is the case of Eleonora who migrated with her parents to Greece when she was five-years-old and offers a reflective account of her felt lack of belongingness:

I feel as a foreigner in both countries. When I go to Albania, I feel as a foreigner in the sense that I do not know the mores, the customs; it is exactly the opposite when I come to Greece. During the few years I lived in Albania things have imprinted on me. Because I lived for very few years there I have the nostalgia to go back, not to feel like

a stranger in my own motherland. On the other hand though it is also the stance that Greeks had towards me, that is, when I came here, if they had been different, friendlier, then one in a million I would have likely felt Greek, but I don't think so. Here I feel foreigner because of Greeks' attitudes and because it does not come out the feeling that I am Greek. This is the issue, that my opinion is influenced by the behavior of others in both countries. This is complex in the sense that I go to Albania and I want to stay but I also want to leave at the same time. I wonder when we will go back to our home and then I realise that by 'home' I mean Greece. When I say that I will go to Albania on one hand I mean I will go to my motherland and on the other hand I mean that I will go to another country. Greece is my home not my motherland. Albania is my motherland, that's a given, and I want to be Albanian and I love Albania despite all the things they say against it. (Eleanora, 17)

In this narrative we can see the discursive constructs of 'home' and 'motherland' being utilised to capture the nuances of belonging in the course of migration, namely the crucial questions of where one feels at "home" and "safe" (Yuval-Davis 2006). This has been similarly identified by Michail and Chistou (2016, p.963) in their study of young Albanian migrants in Greece as an 'ongoing emotional struggle in terms of belonging and where "home" is'. Further, strongly evident in Eleonora's account is the profound role that 'others' play in shaping the contours of belonging, or lack thereof. As Jenkins has argued (2000, p.22), 'the recognition and validation by Others are, if not determinate, certainly crucial in setting limits to possibility', and by logical extension to the malleability and flux of belonging. The dynamic interaction with Greeks' and Albanians' attitudes, and the ways these are experienced, interpreted and internalised, feed into the young woman's lack of belongingness and ambivalence towards both settlement society and Albania. This is similarly echoed in studies exploring young migrants' sense of belonging in other European contexts (Ni Laoire and others, 2011; Valentine and others, 2009) that reported the experience of return visits as resulting in some cases in the dislocating sense of not being accepted and not fitting in their homelands.

Closely linked to the struggles of belonging is the process of *double categorisation* taking place in both settlement and home countries. This is also powerfully narrated by Nikos, who migrated to Greece with his parents when he was six-years-old:

I am Albanian; this is important to who I am. I want to be Albanian, I want to feel Albanian. I do not like hiding the fact that I am Albanian; I like saying it. Others do not say it and that hurts me. I take it as if they are ashamed and that hurts me. Motherland for me means many things [pause] the place I started [pause] I cannot express it. It means simply many emotions. I do not want to forget my motherland nor my mother tongue [pause] Here I am in the middle, I am here and I feel a stranger, I then go to my country and I feel a stranger too, for it has been so many years since we left; and I am in the middle, I am in nowhere. No matter how many years you are here you always will differ from the Greeks. You need something more. No matter what you say, you will always need to be someone else in order to stay here, because you will always differ. (Nikos, 17, Albanian)

Motherland features saliently in this narrative, signifying not merely a physical place nor a geographical entity, but the land of his roots, a fountain of emotions and allegiances surpassing expressive capabilities and calling forth a strong commitment to language and collective memory. This account seems to resonate with Connor's argument (1993) about the emotional depth of ethnonational bonds, partly explaining the potency with which young Albanians, like Nikos, identify with their homeland. Despite his strong ethnic and emotional identification as

an Albanian, the pride and commitment to his motherland, the young participant articulates a double-edged categorisation as ‘other’ experienced as much in relation to Greek and Albanian societies. His sense of being ‘*in the middle of nowhere*’, as Nikos puts it, is associated with the alleged differences distancing him both from the Greeks and his co-ethnics in Albania. His narrative captures a theme also reported in another study with young Albanian migrants in Italy, Greece and England that identified ‘the alienation in the attitude of the locals who consider them different and contest their belongingness to Albania by seeing them as more Greek, Italian or English’ (Vathi and King 2011, p.510). Arguably, the narratives of this study’s participants strongly echo the pattern identified among young Albanians in other contexts, as they strive to cross the ethnic boundary but face ‘insurmountable difficulties, living thus at the edge of the boundary’ (Vathi, 2010, p.20). Further, the cases reported here are useful for disrupting the notion of belonging as a linear outcome of identifications. Notwithstanding these young Albanians’ positively claimed ethnic identifications, their dislocating experiences as ‘others’ in both Greek and Albanian societies seemed to have contributed to the intensely felt sense of alienation and lack of belonging. Notably, their narratives illustrate the constitutive role that *categorisation*, involving the dynamic process of other-definition and ascription of difference (Jenkins, 2000), plays in locating and crystallising a sense of belonging. These young migrants’ positioning as ‘others’ in both the settlement and home countries, is a manifestation of how dislocating and turbulent belonging can be in the course of migration, accompanied by a sense of in-between-ness and liminality (see also Colombo and others, 2009; Vathi, 2010).

Hybrid ‘identities’: Enabling and constraining factors

What became evident through the narratives of young Albanians analysed so far is how belonging is formed and negotiated in interaction with ‘others’ and through the interplay of categorisation. However, in other young Albanians’ accounts the role of categorisation and racism tends to be underplayed, while affinities and attachments both to their homeland and to Greek society are powerfully narrated, as these are enabled by positive identifications and inclusionary experiences in both contexts. This is strongly evident in Elisa’s case who migrated to Greece along with her mother and older sister when she was seven-years-old:

I came to Greece when I was seven-years-old. I do not know but since I was born in Albania and I lived the first years of my life there, so I come from there and I am not ashamed of course of that- although there are others who are ashamed to say that they are from Albania- I am from there and I do not have any problem with that. My mother, my father, my grandparents, my roots are there. I do not know how others would hear that, but I live here and I feel Greece as my country too. I care though for my motherland Albania as well, so I could not betray any of these countries. I care for both countries and I will feel disturbed if I hear anything bad for Albania or Greece. I do not like this ‘half-half’ term, I think it is a bit stupid. You come from a certain country and you love yet another one because you lived so many things here, you found friends here. I come from Albania but I love Greece too. (Elisa, 17)

In this account is salient the mobilisation of emotionally-charged discursive constructs, such as *love*, *care*, *betrayal*, *shame*, as they all come into play to articulate the intensely emotive dimensions of identifications and attachments (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Yuval-Davis 2006). Elisa narrates her allegiance to her country of birth and early childhood, land of her family and roots, distancing herself at the same time from her co-ethnics, who are purportedly ashamed of their origin, whilst articulating her evolving affinities and feelings of care to Greek society. This resonates with the case of young Albanians in Italy (see also Vathi, 2013) who

narrated their sense of multiple belonging, vocalizing a prideful attachment to their homeland alongside their identifications with the settlement society. Arguably, this multiple sense of *belonging* is not divisive or subtractive, as the ‘*half-half*’ identification in Elisa’s view implies, but hybrid and strongly emotive. As Hall has argued (1990, p.235) ‘identity’ in the diaspora and migration context can be conceived as living ‘with and through difference, not despite; by hybridity’. Notably, hybridity comes to signify the celebration of diversity and change as enriching (Woodward, 1997). In Elisa’s case, the sense of informal belonging (Yuval-Davis and others, 2005), the lived experiences of inclusion, indicated by the forging of social bonds in the settlement society, seem to enable her *hybrid* attachments and affinities to be formed. Yet, the latter are not expressed without heightened awareness and scepticism as to the possible objections to her claim of belonging on the part of Greeks, as her caveat ‘*I do not know how others would hear this*’ indicates. Overall, this narrative can be argued to lend credence to the understanding of belonging as a process of negotiating recognition and acceptance.

In other participants’ narratives can be traced an emergent sense of belonging to Greek society that seems, nevertheless, to be undercut by the structural, political and legal parameters of their residence, namely by the fetters of state policies and the ways young migrants tend to be treated by Greek authorities. This is evident in Alexandros’s case whose family migrated to Greece when he was five-years-old:

I have been living for so many years here; I would say that I somehow belong to Greece too. It is though that I am a foreigner in Greece, with respect to my ethnicity. I would like to get the Greek citizenship; it will help me to stay more comfortably here and not to have to renew every two years the papers, like my parents do; in having the capacity to live freely, because the Police can stop you in front of everyone – it has never happened to me but I have seen it happening to others. You feel shame, to be stopped by the Police as if you were a criminal, whereas you have been living in this country for so many years. This is the reason I would like to get the Greek citizenship, in order not to have the anxiety that Police will catch me, in order to be free. (Alexandros, 17)

Although Alexander articulates, albeit hesitantly, his claim of belonging to Greek society, this seems to be undermined by the lack of ‘formal’ belonging and what this entails in terms of the lingering fear of police ‘stop and search’ controls and the bureaucratic renewal of stay permits. Living under the state of semi-legality, fear and precariousness has been reported by earlier studies on Albanian migrants’ incorporation in Thessaloniki (see Hatziprokopiou 2003). In the context of crisis-stricken Greece, Albanian migrants have been experiencing renewed de-regularisation, political exclusion and economic marginalisation (Gemi, 2014). The negative impact of economic crisis on the integration of migrants can also be related to the ‘explosive socio-political environment, which directly or indirectly has threatened migrants’ well-being’ (Mavrommatis, 2016, p.4). This is evident in Alexandros’s narrative in which we can see the omnipotent categorising power of the state to name and impose the category of foreignness via its monopolisation of physical and symbolic violence (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In this context, the sense of belonging to Greek society is undermined by state-induced categorisation and the pervading sense of bounded agency and constrained freedom that seem to afflict the lives of young migrants like Alexandros.

Concluding remarks

The paper illustrated how young Albanian migrants narrate their identifications, emotional attachments, and affinities to their country of birth and early childhood and the Greek society.

With reference to the latter, most of this study's participants spoke emphatically of their struggles to adapt to the 'Greek way of life', while few of them referred to their evolving identifications and their emerging allegiances to Greece. Further, a sense of alienation and marginality is powerfully enunciated by young Albanians who made reference to a host of hindrances that are perceived to rebuff their claims of belonging to Greek society, among the most fundamental of which are the racist attitudes of their Greek peers and their semi-legal, semi-permanent status of residence. Being in a state of precariousness and of the constant fear of being arrested seem to exacerbate their sense of foreignness and exclusion.

Further, it has been argued that children's and young people's identities are constructed in and through specific places and spaces, and invested with emotional affinities and attachments. Linked to that, a key theme running through young Albanians' accounts was the narration of their ethnic identifications with their country of birth, as reinforced by their childhood memories, linguistic ties and 'roots', and accompanied by emotions of pride and commitment, love and care. Despite their emotionally-invested ethnic identifications, a double-edged sense of 'othering' was also voiced by some participants, as they saw their claims of belonging to their home country to be rebuffed by their co-ethnics, perceived to define them as 'others' on the basis of their migrant status, while their claims of belonging to the Greek society were rebuffed by the majority group, perceived to define them as 'others' on the basis of their ethnicity and the purported differences emanating from that membership. It can be argued that the sharp tensions between emotionally-invested identifications and a sense of 'otherness' experienced in both countries of settlement and origin, point to an understanding of belonging that is distinct from identifications, however powerfully the latter may be felt and uttered. Notably, belonging does not seem to emerge as the linear outcome of the process of ethnonational identifications. Rather, categorisation, with the ascription of 'otherness' and the internalisation of difference, seems to mediate more crucially young Albanians' sense of belonging and their liminal positioning in Albanian and Greek societies.

On a concluding note, this paper detailed nuanced aspects of collective identities as performed and narrated by social actors in the course of migration. The participants' accounts illustrated the power of ethnonational identifications but also the dialectical play of difference and its deep implication in the processes of dis-identification and the shaping of belonging. Arguably, in the frame of dynamic, inter-subjective and strongly emotive processes through which identifications, categorisation and belonging come to be experienced, boundaries are being drawn on the basis of alleged similarities and differences between the 'self' and 'others'. The collective identity of young migrants is rooted in these historically, materially and politically bounded processes that involve strategic struggles over boundaries and resources, the yearning for recognition and acceptance by 'others', along with the forging of social bonds and attachments in both countries of origin and settlement.

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