

# National identity and otherness in Greek speakers' talk about immigration: Methodological and transdisciplinary reflections

MARIA XENITIDOU\*

## Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present the potential contribution of using Critical Discursive Psychology to study national identity and immigration. It draws upon a study on Greek national identity negotiations in relation to immigration. The study was guided by the perspective of banal nationalism which treats national identity as a form of life in a world divided into nation-states (Billig, 1995). In terms of Greek national identity and immigration, the study drew similarities between the perspective of banal nationalism and the critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002).

**Keywords:** discursive psychology, banal nationalism, methodological nationalism, national identity, immigration.

## Introduction

Since the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Southern European countries have been regarded as experiencing a shift from migration senders to host societies. This shift, as a context of 'otherness' in Greece, has been theorised as contributing to re-opening the negotiation of Greek national identity, incurring a 'redefinition' to it. Inspired by this context, the aim of this study was to contribute to the exploration of the ways in which Greek identity discourse and discursive practices might have taken on board the presence of 'new' immigrant populations from the Balkans. This paper discusses two patterns identified in this study and considers the implications of the methodological choices and theoretical assumptions made.

Identity in the current study was treated as resource, discourse, topic and construct: all these manifestations were studied and analysed in the study from transcriptions using discourse analysis. Employing premises in Critical Discursive Psychology (Wetherell 1998), the study sought to explore the ways in which identity is both resourced in invoking constituted positions and practiced in participants' own orientations in talk, identifying both rhetorical (as ideological) and conversational (as situated) consequences.

Immigration in the current study was treated as a context for redefinition, amongst others - and redefinition itself was treated as a constant process - in the sense that it involves discourse on space - treated as national within nation-states (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002: 310-11). It is in this context that im-

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\* Dr Maria Xenitidou is Research Fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom. Email: M.Xenitidou@surrey.ac.uk.



migration - translocation in spaces which are treated as national - is seen as an issue of concern, provoking political and social negotiation.

Overall, the argument examined in this study was that Greek national identity is not a static phenomenon but a dynamic process, dependant on both context and on conversational pragmatics, rather than on axiomatic, resistant, solid and internally consistent definitions. When Greek national identity is constructed with reference to recent immigration from the Balkans, it is re-opened and re-defined in terms of the group of immigrants in question, constructing the national category and immigrant categories with reference to each other while attending to accountability and moral charges.

### Methodology

The target population for the current study was Greek citizens and ethnic Greeks (see Petronotti and Triandafyllidou, 2003) who were born and raised in Greece. The parameters considered relevant in the sampling process were locality and age<sup>1</sup>. The age groups selected were 18-21 (as having grown up alongside 'new' immigration) and 35-45 (as recipients of 'new' immigration in the sense of not coexisting in compulsory forms of socialisation such as primary education). A distinction was made between urban and rural areas as it was hypothesised that they would diverge in terms of the percentage concentration, the origin and type<sup>2</sup> of immigrants as well as their effect on everyday life. The research area was set in the Prefecture of Central Macedonia (Central Northern Greece) on the grounds that the percentage concentration of immigrants from Balkan states in the total population of the area is considered as significantly high. The municipalities selected were Thessaloniki (with 6.5% alien<sup>3</sup> concentrations), Halkidiki (8.5%) and Serres (2.4%) (see Potter, 1996 on the use of statistics).

Participants were selected using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling "is based on the assumption that a 'bond' or 'link' exists between the initial sample and others in the same target population, allowing a series of referrals to be made within a circle of acquaintance" (Atkinson and Flint, 2001: 1). This has been selected since focus groups work better with participants who know one another, as naturally emerging groups (Billig, 1992).

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, while different age groups were sampled, the particular research context did not reveal patterns in participants' lines of argument which were age specific. However, the urban/rural distinction followed in the sampling process was treated in participants' talk in terms of scale. When talking about urban areas immigration was treated as a phenomenon, whereas in the context of rural areas immigrants were treated as people and talked about in terms of (low) numbers (as too few) and in terms of integration (as quite assimilated).

<sup>2</sup> This refers to categories constructed with reference to the purpose of mobility, such as economic/labour immigrants, ethnic Greek immigrants, refugees, and returnees as citizens of non-EU countries who are of Greek origin in that they derive from Greece or regions beyond the borders of the Greek state which were formerly influenced by Greek culture.

<sup>3</sup> Translation of term used by the National Statistics Service of Greece, 2001.

Overall, eight semi-structured focus group sessions were held with 39 participants. Focus groups were used in order to enable intersubjectivity (see Billig, 1989; Sacks, 1992; Tusting *et al.*, 2002), which personal interviews do not enable. Attention was paid to holding these group discussions in 'familiar' settings and to minimising the moderator's role in order for interaction to develop in a similar way as it does in everyday social encounters. Focus groups were typically held in what the researcher took to be 'neutral' places of socialisation, such as a coffee shop, a living room or a community hall.

### National disinterestedness and categorical accounting practices

Participants' talk in this study treated national identity as commonsensical to 'have'. The main lines of argument which treated national identity as natural appeared to be the rhetorical denouncing of uniqueness, exceptionality and superiority, in their essentialist form as automatic, biological characteristics of Greeks by nationality. This is instantiated in the extract below.

#### *Extract 1 - Focus Group 2 (Urban area, 35-45 years old)*

754 **Pavlos:** what does it mean to you that you are Greek? How do you see yourself in?

755 **Costas:** e:h I will answer this question generally

756 **Fotis:** =what do you feel?

757 **Costas:** eh?

758 **Fotis:** what do you feel? German?

759 **Costas:** no (.) I feel Greek, but I believe that this is a label, e:h and

760 **Fotis:** =you don't believe in the distinctiveness of the race?

761 **Costas:** exactly. yes >that is to say< e:h I don't believe that as a Greek I have

762 something more: than the others [...] that I am Greek is clearly a matter of a:

763 coincidence (.) I was born by specific parents [...] anyway I believe that

764 what makes me be Greek is that I had Greek education, right? Namely that I

765 grew up with the books e:h of the: Ministry of Education in Greece

766 **Vaggelis:** [maths ((inaudible)) remember?

767 **Costas:** [EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING. This makes me stand out say and

768 from then on the Greek language

769 **Fotis:** =the first

770 **Costas:** e:h (.) religion does not touch me much so I don't take this into

771 account but for many people it is quite important right as orthodoxy

772 **Fotis:** =religion for Hellenism is the burial of Hellenism

773 **Costas:** anyway e:h

774 **Fotis:** no I mean this

775 **Costas:** yes a:nd which means that even if I was born by Greek parents ok? And

776 was brought up for 5 years with them, if I then left and went to some other parents

777 and had Albanian education right? Albanian e:h an environment to influence me

778 right? A person constantly receives (.) then I would be completely different

779 to what I a:m now. Neither superior nor inferior but I would be: different

780 this is what I believe that makes me Greek in inverted commas right? Because I  
 781 believe that it is a label so to say it isn't (.) this is my opinion

The above extract evolves in response to the question on the meaning of being Greek. To this question, Costas' denial to respond specifically (line 755) seems interpreted by Fotis as a denial of 'feeling' Greek. This indicates that the speaker orients to the meaning of being Greek as automatically implying sentiment (line 758). In other words, national sentiment constitutes the definitional framework of Greek national identity in this context. Costas joins in the emotional discourse but his utterance is contrast-ridden as he then claims that feeling Greek is a 'label'. While this appears paradoxical at first glance, it is reflective of 'dilemmatic' argumentation indicated in a readiness to justify feeling Greek. Emotional discourse is tied into the discourse of nationalism, from which the speaker wishes to detach himself for the identity implications it may have in terms of rationality and objectivity (see Billig *et al.*, 1988).

Participants appear to acknowledge and disclaim for themselves distinctiveness, exceptionality and superiority. Thus, being Greek is a label, a formal category, in the sense that no exceptionality is or should be immediately attached to it. Participants' responses here, therefore, seem to indicate that attaching exceptionality and superiority to a national category commonly connotes a negative identity for the speaker, acknowledged as complying with nationalist discourse, which is commonly condemned (see Billig, 1995). This automatic association of national identity with making claims to superiority is explicitly then stated by Costas in lines 761-2. Costas reiterates that nationality is accidental and presents the criteria which compose Greek nationality, namely genealogical origin, education, language and religion – the latter seen as within the definitional discourse but resisted by participants (lines 762-774) (see Tsoucalas, 1983).

Finally, in lines 775-781, Costas formulates a personal hypothesis, as a common technique of fact construction, to argue that acquired criteria such as upbringing, education and social environment are determinants of national identification while genealogical origin and brief exposure to a culture are rendered insufficient to cultivate national identity. Prioritising acquired criteria of national identification functions to undermine origin for having negative connotations, while sustaining national identification as a formalised process. This enables Costas to argue that it is due to the accidental nature of nationality and its compromised role in national identity building that national hierarchies are irrelevant. In other words, he seems to subscribe to the view that talking about difference as an automatic understanding of national identities is relevant, while automatic positive or negative evaluations *per se* are not. The readiness to disavow claims to national superiority appears to have led Costas to an outward-looking account about the meaning of being Greek as a nationality rather than to an inward-looking account as an identity (see Billig, 1995). This may be indicative of a concern on the part of the speaker to 'present' a rational account of national categorisation, as internationally prescribed (see

Billig, 1995). The main critique of such discourse has been that it retains national categories and national divisions as normative (ibid).

In view of the social norm against biological categorisation and classification (see Billig *et al.*, 1988), this may be taken to constitute the discursive act of 'disclaiming superiority' as an integral part of definitional accounts of the meaning of being Greek. In other words, this study has suggested that in Greek identity talk arguing becomes infused in the argument (see Billig, 1987; 1989; 1991), as in the context of talking about Greek national identity with reference to immigration from the Balkans reflexivity appeared to constitute an integral part of definitional accounts.

It was in the afore-mentioned context that the negotiation of the boundaries of the Greek category with reference to immigrants in Greece became relevant. This negotiation emerged as a main pattern of discursive activity in talking about Greekness with reference to the presence of immigrants in Greece. This negotiation indicated a seeming readiness on the part of participants to categorise particulars along the national category (see Billig, 1987) by negotiating sets of criteria. The criteria of inclusion were presented as rational and inclusion was extended to various groups whose exclusion might have provoked the charge of prejudice. Nevertheless, central to this process was an implicit and explicit hierarchical arrangement of these categories. This is instantiated in the following extract.

*Extract 2 - Focus Group 6 (Rural area, 18-21 years old)*

- 359 **Alex:** what does it mean to you for someone to be Greek? [...]  
 360 **Costas:** they have to feel it  
 361 **Alex:** they have to feel it  
 362 **May:** that's what we concluded (.) that's right  
 363 **Alex:** regardless of whether he is an immigrant regardless if (.) he has to feel  
 364 Greek (.) to observe traditions  
 365 **May:** his parents may not be Greek they may live in Greece for years (.)  
 366 nevertheless he may feel Greek  
 367 **Dina:** a child who was born in Greece, who has never left for Albania or Bulgaria  
 368 or whatever his country is (.) and Greek is his first language  
 369 **May:** yes  
 370 **Dina:** who has learned to love Greece, who has learned to think in the Greek  
 371 mentality >if such a thing exists<  
 372 **Costas:** yes yes  
 373 **Dina:** how are you going to tell him that "you know you are not Greek" since he  
 374 doesn't have relations with his biological homeland (.) it's like  
 375 excommunicating him like telling him that "you have no homeland"  
 376 **Alex:** he is considered Greek Dina  
 377 **May:** yes  
 378 **Dina:** good (.) we agree

- 379 **Alex:** more or less all of whom you are talking about now are considered Greek  
 380 **May:** who? (...)  
 381 **Costas:** those who have been born here  
 382 **Dina:** yes  
 383 **May:** you may not have been born here (.) you may have come he may  
 384 have come when he was little he may live ((here)) many years (...)  
 385 **Dina:** it has do though with were you grew up  
 386 **Alex:** yes sure (.) it plays an important role (..) but also the one who didn't grow  
 387 up here and his father and his mother were here and left is considered Greek (.) he  
 388 will come he will do this that  
 389 **May:** with a different meaning  
 390 **Alex:** yes with a different meaning

An extensive negotiation of Greekness preceded this extract in which national feeling was constructed as the most important criterion of Greekness (lines 360-2). Extension to immigrants is "regardless" made by Alex (line 363) who also adds Greekness as a daily lived practice in the form of 'observing traditions' (line 364). Therefore, participants extend the construction of the category of Greeks, to include immigrants in general. May alludes to biological origin to compare it to long term residence, as 'nevertheless' potentially developing national feeling. Dina then lists three criteria (Jefferson, 1990) - place of birth, permanent residence and (first) language - followed by another two - love for Greece and Greek mentality - as factual reasoning for an extension of the boundaries. While these criteria are presented as normal and rational, their combination underlines the strictness with which this extension of Greekness is conducted, which also corresponds to Greek immigration policy directives. Speaking from a category of Greeks as entitled (see Edwards and Potter, 1992) to classify the Greekness of others (line 376 - "considered"), Dina adopts a distant footing (Potter, 1996) and uses active voicing (Wooffitt, 1992) to vividly construct this extension as an endowment as a matter of principle. At the same time full inclusion of these categories is mitigated by 'biological' origin, explicitly included in this line of argumentation (line 374). Thus, she seems to manage accountability both in terms of content and rhetoric (lines 367-375) (see Edwards and Potter, 1992, Potter, 1996, Billig, 1987).

It is, thus, revealed that an extension of Greekness is negotiated for moral reasons, which endows immigrants with formal Greekness. The formal, 'out-there' (see Potter, 1996) extension is co-constructed and extended to include first generation immigrants on the basis of this status (lines 383-385). In this negotiation of the inclusion of immigrants in the wider national group, constructing Greekness as prioritising the criteria of place of nurture and upbringing combined with the previous acquired criteria implicitly excludes Greek emigrants abroad from the national group. In the flow of argument though, and with the addition of origin and contact with Greece as criteria, the boundaries are extended - implicitly constructing a subcategory of Greeks

“with a different meaning” as formal status for Greek emigrants abroad (lines 386-390).

This negotiation indicates a readiness on the part of participants to extend the boundaries of Greekness and ‘nationalise’ ‘others’ on the basis of complying with particular sets of criteria. Nationalisation is negotiated in terms of a hierarchical arrangement in categories of Greeks, speaking from a category of Greeks, as complying with all of the central criteria of Greekness. This initially functions to reveal a ‘contract’ suggested for immigration in Greece as being in line with the thesis of integration through nationalising immigrants in relation to host norms and expectations. This corresponds to a strategy of assimilation. Nevertheless, this nationalisation is conditional (see White, 1999) and does not imply a super-ordinate category of Greeks but a split into different peripheral categories hierarchically arranged by extending the boundaries of Greekness, yet prioritising some values over others. These categories are included into the wider national group but are excluded from the central category of Greeks.

### **Evaluating transdisciplinarity, approach and method**

In terms of theoretical assumptions the current study was guided by the perspective of banal nationalism in its understanding of national identity as a form of life in a world divided into nation-states (Billig, 1995). This perspective has also been applied in the current study as an approach to understanding national otherness and as a theoretical context to studying national identity and immigration. In terms of Greekness (and immigration) as topic, the current study drew similarities between the perspective of banal nationalism articulated from a social psychological position and the critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002) articulated from an anthropological position on the basis that both forward critiques of the penetration of nationalism - the former with reference to everyday life and the latter with reference to the role of the social sciences - sociology in particular - in this penetration. The assumptions and conclusions of the current study supported the critique of methodological nationalism on traditional (sociological) migration research and aimed to contribute to a shift in perspective away from methodological nationalism.

This was done, firstly by exploring the complexity of Greek national identity in talk and challenging the fixity and homogeneity of Greek national culture with reference to immigrants (cf. Triandafyllidou, 2000; Triandafyllidou and Veikou, 2002). The findings that this approach enabled led to the argument that in talking about Greek national identity with reference to immigrants arguing becomes infused in the argument (Billig, 1987; 1989; and 1991): reflexivity and content appear as inseparable aspects of Greek national identification and immigrant otherness.

Secondly, the shift in perspective was attempted by focusing on the interconnectedness between traditions of argumentation of Greek nation-building

and discourse on immigrant integration, which has been identified as a major shortcoming of migration research (see critiques by Brubaker, 1992; Castles, 1995; Favell, 2001a; 2001b; 2005). By challenging the assumption of homogeneity in Greek national identity, relational definitions of national identity were enabled, which seemed to contradict taken-for-granted assumptions that immigrants *de facto* reduce cultural homogeneity. In the context of people positioned and addressed as Greek, born, raised and living in Northern Greece talking about immigrants from the Balkans in focus group sessions, Greek national identity was constructed as assimilatory. Taking the interconnectedness argument on board, this could be explained in terms of the prominence of aspects of ethnic nationalism in Greek nation-building, reflected in Greek lay actors' talk. However, whereas previous research claimed that on this basis Greek national identity is constructed as exclusionary (see Triandafyllidou, 2000; Ventura, 2001), in the context of the current study findings supported a more complex argument. In particular, the argument put forward is that in talking about Greek national identity with reference to immigrants, participants in the current research orient to an ethno-genealogical sense-making of the nation and organise immigrants hierarchically around this construction (see Triandafyllidou and Veikou, 2002; Pavlou, 2004).

These findings both indicated and responded to the need to trace shifts in context and argument as regards Greek national identity with reference to immigrants (Figgou, 2002). For example, Figgou's research on Greek people talking about refugees from Albania and the former Soviet Union, and the Muslim minority in Thrace indicated that for her participants "assimilation of groups from distinct cultural backgrounds into a common super-ordinate category is undesirable, illegitimate and even racist" (Figgou, 2002: 349). However, the current study identified and explored a relative 'openness' in the negotiation of Greek national identity - to the extent that assimilationist lines enable such an openness.

This could be explained in two ways: firstly, in terms of moving beyond the process of identity construction as undertaken by immigrants and locals as two distinct categories (see Favell, 2001a and 2001b) constructing two distinct identity narratives and towards arguing for the co-construction of identity in everyday social encounters; secondly, in terms of supporting the argument that context matters (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) in conditioning understandings of national identity and otherness. The first explanation necessitates a periodic exploration of social actors' understandings of national identity and otherness, in this case Greek national identity and immigration in local contexts. The second explanation necessitates local and modest in-depth research (see Figgou, 2002) and indicates that further research should focus on the interaction of social and policy discourse in their understandings of integration and their construction of categories of hosts and others (see White, 1999). As such, it cautions against attitudinal, survey-type research which makes claims to generalisability and universal application of its findings without taking into



account the macro-social and local-interactional contexts in which these findings are produced.

Overall, therefore, the theoretical assumptions and conclusions of the current study indicated that the combination of banal and methodological nationalism, which has not been addressed by researchers or by a dialogue between social psychology and sociology, appears useful in providing alternative understandings of identity and immigration to the ones provided by attitudinal, anthropological or ethnographic type of research.

In terms of methodological implications in particular, while employing a reflexive approach in the sense of transcending the nation-state/immigrant nexus and treating national identity and otherness as topics, the current study focused, nevertheless, on 'national' identity, rather than on identities and immigration 'in general'. The focus group schedule in particular 'positioned' participants in national terms and conditioned the ways in which national identification and immigration were talked about. This might have interfered with both the conclusions of this study and their generalisability beyond the particular focus group contexts. In particular, considering the conclusions of the current study beyond the focus group schedule and outside the emergent conversational activities that intra focus group dynamics conditioned, would be countering the argument on which the research was based and sought to examine: namely, that Greek national identity is not a static, unidimensional phenomenon but a dynamic and complex process, dependant on context and conversational pragmatics rather than on axiomatic, resistant, solid and internally consistent definitions.

The significance of the findings presented in the current study - as revealed during the analytic process - is found at identifying the potentials of opting for a relational approach to identification as well as at foregrounding the complexities of identification. In many respects participants transcended the 'conditions' of the focus group schedule by formulating reflexive accounts of national identification and by negotiating the boundaries of Greekness with reference to immigrants, which may have been overshadowed by a methodological emphasis on matching content to categories and making evaluations on it.

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