

Biographical constructions and transformations: using biographical methods for studying transcultural identities

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Abstract

In this paper, the fruitfulness of the biographical narrative approach in studying fluid, transient and transcultural identities will be discussed. In the first part, we will bring out the theoretical and methodological principles shared by the researchers working within the field of the biographical approach in relation to the notion of identity and to the modes for exploring it. In the second part we will attempt to use the biographical approach in order to explore the transformation of transcultural identity in the case of an Armenian-Greek/Pontic female immigrant coming to Greece from the ex-Soviet Republic of Armenia in 1991 after the collapse of the soviet regime.

Key words: biographical narrative approach; narrative identity; biographical work; biographical resources; positioning; ethnic identity; cosmopolitan self.

Resumen. *Construcciones y transformaciones biográficas: el uso del método biográfico para el estudio de las identidades transculturales*

En este artículo se discute el valor de la aproximación narrativo-biográfica en el estudio de las identidades líquidas, transitorias y transculturales. En la primera parte se presentan los principios teóricos y metodológicos compartidos por los investigadores en el campo de la aproximación biográfica relacionada con el concepto de identidad y la manera de explorarla. En la segunda parte, y con el fin de analizar la transformación de la identidad transcultural, se aplica el método biográfico en el caso de una inmigrante greco-armenia que llegó a Grecia en 1991, procedente de la ex república soviética de Armenia tras el colapso del régimen soviético.

Palabras clave: métodos biográficos; identidad narrativa; trabajo biográfico; medios biográficos; posicionamiento; identidad étnica; el «yo» cosmopolita.

Summary

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In this paper, the fruitfulness of the biographical narrative approach in studying fluid, transient and transcultural identities will be discussed. In the first part, we will bring out the theoretical and methodological principles shared by the researchers working within the field of the biographical approach in relation to the notion of identity and to the modes for exploring it. In the second part a relevant case of analysing transcultural identity through the biographical narrative approach will be demonstrated.

1. The biographical narrative approach of fluid, transient, transcultural identities

Researchers adopting the biographical approach start with an understanding of identity as a heterogeneous, transforming and polyphonic construct, which rejects any essentialist notion of identity as being something static, stable and rigid. Identity is not a person's given or permanent feature. It is rather a discursive construction that is produced by the efforts of a person to build and maintain a coherent self-definition in the form of a narrative¹. Forming identity is a lifelong procedure as well as a daily task, which consists of the endeavor to create coherence through the interconnection between both the changes experienced during a lifetime and the experiences gained by contradicting life-worlds and contexts.² That is to say that people can produce an interconnection of different and contradictory elements of their lives by constructing a coherent story of that life which can be narrated. That means, identity has a narrative character and it is constructed through narratives ("*narrative identity*")³.

According to the concept of narrative identity, individuals are able to secure a coherent understanding of themselves, despite the plurality and contradictory character of late modern societies. Thus, this coherent self-understanding is neither pre-given nor guaranteed merely by the fact that one belongs to a collectivity; it is much more an individual accomplishment insofar as it depends on individuals' ability to construct a coherent narration of themselves by combining and interconnecting different and contradictory elements and

1. Nassehi & Weber (1990), Fischer-Rosenthal (1999).
2. Alheit (2002), Hein (2006).
3. Alheit (2002), Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann (2000). See also Bruner (1990), McAdams (1993), Randall (1995).

experiences in the form of a life story⁴. The German sociologist Peter Alheit introduced the notion of “biographicity” or “biographical work” in order to describe this procedure. According to Alheit (2005), individuals in Modern Society will have to do “biographical work” in order to produce their biography (“doing biography”) and to sort out the events of their lives. In this way, they appropriate unanticipated events and subversive experiences while filtering them through the stock of their biographical experiences and knowledge. This appropriation process, however, is bilateral: the crystallized biographical knowledge “illuminates” the new experiences, but the latter can in turn bring about new retroactive interpretations of former experiences, the rearrangement of biographical knowledge and the revision of biography. Consequently, the configuration of biographical identity constitutes an open and fluid process of transformations.

Understanding identity within the framework of biographical research as a heterogeneous, transforming and polyphonic construct does not imply the adoption of the post-modern scepticism of a fragmented and split self; which celebrates the narrative text as a momentary expression of transient and precarious pseudo-coherence (Chamberlayne et. al, 2000: 6). The biographical approach stems from the understanding of biographies as “radical documents of the sociality of the individual” (Apitzsch, 1990). This means that biographies are always viewed as socially and historically formed. The transformations of the biographical identity – the ways in which individuals change their self-definition by transforming their basic biographical narration in order to incorporate new unsought experiences-, depends on their biographical resources. By biographical resources we mean the biographical experiences and knowledge gained by individuals during the course of their life. We are only able to understand the identity work of individuals in question by exploring their life-history, and the social and historical contexts in which they gained their relevant life experiences, as well as the way in which the interplay between biographical opportunities and structural constraints took place.

But this process of identity transformation, i.e. identity (or biographical) work, should not be considered only as a process of adaptation to changing social conditions. It is also an active means of social positioning⁵. Every biographical self-presentation contains ways of negotiating a position within a system of power relations and represents claims of belonging to a system of differences.

According to the aforementioned approach, one can conclude that biographical research can contribute to the study of fluid, heterogeneous and changing identities in Late Modernity⁶. The biographical narrative approach

4. See, among others, Bukow & Spindler (2006).

5. See, among others Harré & Van Langenhove (1999), Davies & Harré (1990), Schäfer & Völter (2005), Tuijer (2007).

6. For the use of the biographical research in the field of transnational migration studies, see, among others, Apitzsch (2003), Lutz & Schwalgin (2006), Apitzsch & Siouti (2007), Lutz (2009), Spies (2010).

also provides an interesting methodological tool to explore transcultural identities, for the following reasons:

- a) Through the systematic and methodical elaboration and interpretation of biographical narrations (life stories), generated in the situation of narrative interview⁷, social researchers can reconstruct the ways in which individuals incorporate new unsought life experiences into their biography, as well as the ways in which these individuals establish symbolic bridges in order to incorporate the new elements into a coherent self-definition. The biographical research can reveal the procedures and patterns that are used by individuals in order to produce a coherent biographical identity under conditions of change and movement between different cultural contexts.
- b) Through the biographical analysis it is possible to explore the different discourses, as well as the culturally established meaning structures and belief patterns from which individuals draw in order to construct their narrative identity⁸. In addition, the way in which a person defines themselves and is defined by others can be revealed together with the way in which the person wants to be recognized in the social space.
- c) Because of the temporal complexity of the biographical narratives as well as the performative character⁹ of the narrative interview the narrator re-enacts in their story his former selves; they evaluate them and point out the transformations of self-identity through time. The transformation of self-identity can also be studied as a shifting of the significance from some parts of the identity to others during movement through different contexts¹⁰.

In the second part we will attempt to use the biographical approach in order to explore the transformation of transcultural identity in the case of an Armenian-Greek/Pontic female immigrant (Tonia) coming to Greece from the ex-Soviet Republic of Armenia in 1991, after the collapse of the soviet regime¹¹. Before the presentation of Tonia's case, a short description of the Pontic-Greeks "repatriated" to Greece from the ex-Soviet Republics is required.

7. Schütze (1983), Rosenthal (2004).

8. Spies (2010).

9. Riessman (2003), (2008).

10. Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann (2000)

11. This case is taken from a sample of Greek-origin immigrants' biographies coming from the ex Soviet Union, which has been collected by a research group from the University of Crete. G. Tsiolis was a member of this research group along with Prof. S. Papaioannou and M. Tzanakis. The research was carried out from 1997 to 2000, in the frame of a European project (TSER) on "Self-Employment activities concerning women and minorities". The coordinator of the project was Prof. Ursula Apitzsch (University of Frankfurt). For an overview, see Apitzsch & Kontos (2008).

Repatriated Pontic-Greeks from the ex Soviet Union

Pontians are people of Greek origin, initially inhabiting a broad area along the coast of the Black Sea. The name “Pontian” is derived from the Greek word “Pontos”, which means “sea”. In different historical periods they emigrated to the Caucasus and along the North Black Sea coast. In 1914 there were about 650.000 to 700.000 Greeks residing in Russia. From 1937 onwards, during the Period of Stalin’s expulsion, large numbers of Pontian Greeks living in the Caucasus and the North Black Sea were expelled to Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghisia)¹². Subsequent generations of Pontians residing in Soviet Republics achieved a high degree of social and economic integration. After the collapse of the Soviet regime, Pontians migrated en masse to Greece. Since 1989, an estimated 155,000 Pontians from the former Soviet Union have taken up permanent residence in Greece (Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace 2000: 26 and 40-41).

Pontian newcomers were defined as “repatriated” by the Greek State, although neither they nor their parents have ever lived in Greece and emigrated from the country. Repatriation in this case has an imaginary character and refers to the return to their ancestral “homeland”¹³. Due to their ethnic origin, the newcomers were granted Greek nationality through relatively simple procedures. In comparison to immigrants and asylum seeking persons, “repatriated” Pontians have been seen in an administrative as well as ideological sense as “our own foreigners”; as part of the widespread Greek Diaspora. On the basis of all this, a framework of social policies and support programs for “repatriated” Pontians has been organized by the Greek state¹⁴.

The definition of Pontian newcomers as “repatriated” and its ideological connotations provoked high expectations both on the part of the newcomers and that of Greek society. However these expectations have remained unfulfilled.

Being used to the Soviet Regime, in which state interventionism played the central role, Pontian newcomers overestimated the capabilities of the Greek state to provide housing and career prospects. Despite all the support policies and programs, for the majority of the newcomers, the arrival in Greece meant being confronted with great material difficulties. Arrival in Greece also entailed being faced with a different system, that is, a social formation which functions differently from that of the previous country on economic, administrative, legal and cultural levels¹⁵.

At the same time, the natives had noted very quickly that “our own foreigners”, although of common ethnic roots, were culturally very different. Most of them couldn’t speak Greek and their customs, behavior and life-style were

12. See also Nekrich (1978).

13. See also Voutira (1991).

14. The “Reception and Rehabilitation Program” has been carried out by the National Institution for the Reception and Rehabilitation of Repatriated Greeks.

15. See also Papaioannou, Tsiolis and Serdedakis (2008).

distant. For these reasons, in the everyday speech the official term “repatriated Pontians” hasn’t been adopted, but rather the composite term “Russian-Pontian” which sounds very denigrating to the newcomers.

2. The case of Tonia: the biographical construction of a cosmopolitan self

2.1. Biographical portrait

Tonia (45) was born in the Soviet Republic of Armenia to an Armenian father and a Greek-Pontian mother. Her father worked as a veterinarian in a small village and her mother was a housewife. As the youngest child of a large family she went to live with her childless uncle and aunt in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Since her uncle was a Professor of Medicine and the director of a hospital and her aunt was a philologist, Tonia grew up as an only child in a bourgeois and highly-educated family. Despite her family’s expectations for her to study medicine, Tonia opted for Armenian philology. After finishing her studies she worked for five years in a folklore museum and for the next nine years as a teacher in a school.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, she immigrated to Greece because of the difficult situation occurring in Armenia due to the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as the heavy earthquake in 1991. In her decision to immigrate to Greece a crucial role was played by the official invitation from the Greek State to all inhabitants of the ex-soviet republics who had Greek origins, as well as the existence of a support program organized by the Greek state for rehabilitation. Because of her Greek origin on her mother’s side, Tonia utilized the opportunities offered by the Greek state; she came to Greece and was included in the Rehabilitation Program. For the first eight months she stayed for free in a hotel in the countryside of Thrace (the north-east part of Greece). The Rehabilitation Program covered all the costs of her accommodation and expenses. After this initial period, she moved to Alexandroupoli, a town of approximately 40,000 inhabitants. She continued to be given support by the Program for her needs, such as receiving a subsidy to rent an apartment. During this period she worked as an unskilled worker in various temporary and seasonal jobs, such as a dishwasher in a pizza restaurant, a cleaning lady, a farm worker during the cotton harvest, and an industrial worker. She also moved out of Alexandroupoli for short periods in order to find seasonal work. Parallel to this she had lessons in the Greek language. Meanwhile, in a factory in which she worked for a short time, she got to know a native Greek man and got married to him. After a series of unsuccessful efforts to find a job as a teacher of Armenian literature, she was restricted to part-time baby-sitting.

2.2. Biographical case reconstruction

After the interviewer’s initial request to Tonia to narrate her life story, she built up a long narration which included episodes from her childhood in Yerevan;

her life in Armenia; her decision to emigrate to Greece and the trip to Greece; the difficulties with which she was confronted on her arrival in Greece; the support that she obtained through the Rehabilitation Program as well as the restrictions that were involved in joining the Program; the different jobs she did; her unfulfilled expectation to work as a teacher of Armenian literature; and finally her acquaintance with and marriage to a native Greek man.

Her narration was linear, following the chronological order of the facts and the periods of her life. It was enriched by descriptions and argumentations, corresponding to the different periods, thus, providing context information and evaluations of the periods in question.

A detailed text analysis reveals that Tonia's narration is driven by a latent mechanism of contrasting "then" with "now", and "there" with "here", based on the turning point in her life that she experienced on migration to Greece.

We will try to point out which images of the self (I-positions) emerged in the narration and how they are transformed according to the transition from one national-cultural context to the other.

Before starting her narration Tonia gave a preamble: "*For a person like me it is very difficult to pinpoint where it all began*". It is a concluding assessment made in advance which implies that her life history was a journey full of drifts and changes. She decided to start her life story by mentioning her place of birth, the occupation of her parents and her upbringing in her uncle's family.

I was born in a village. My father was a vet; my mother was never employed, but...

My uncle was a doctor – a professor of medicine – he lived in the capital city. He was also a director of a big hospital. He was childless and I was given to them. I grew up in the capital city. I studied – I was like an only child – everything was rosy for me and ...mm... in the capital city-

And I have to say this. The standards of education in the Soviet Union were much higher than in Greece- to tell the truth. And there everybody tried to graduate from university because they knew that they would find a good job. There were factories; there were small industries [...] many schools, hospitals, theatres and culture in general.

They took great care of this [meaning culture].

In this opening passage Tonia provides a short self-description emphasising her upbringing in an educated, cultivated family of high status in an urban area, the capital city of Armenia. She notes that she was brought up in the best conditions (as *an only child*) and she studied at university. High education and culture was, according to Tonia, not only a feature of her family, but also one of the priorities of the Soviet System.

It is notable that when she speaks about the situation in the Soviet Union Tonia adopts an impersonal and distanced speech, using the third person plural form ("*They took great care of this*"). She doesn't identify herself with the Soviet Union. Although she recognizes herself as a soviet citizen who was affected by all the positive and negative regulations of the soviet socio-econom-

ic system, she did not consider Soviet Union to be her “homeland”, because of its character as an international State formation. Tonia names as her “homeland” Armenia (*I always say – here in Greece as well, that I’m an Armenian- my father is Armenian- I am an Armenian*).

In parallel with her manifest self-definition as an Armenian, a secondary ethnic definition arises from her narrative, the Greek one, because of her mother’s origin. Tonia said:

At university I was called “Greek”. They called me Greek because of my mother’s origin and they always said that I should be proud- that she was, let’s say, Greek. Whenever a professor talked about Greece, he looked me in the eyes- and I was so proud that I felt my feet leave the ground-

During her life in Armenia (in the period of “then” and “there”) she was proud of this second part of her ethnic identity because of an imaginary schema that equates Greece with ancient Greece as *the cradle of civilisation*. Tonia based her understanding of Greece on an imaginary and idealistic picture of the “historical homeland” that was constructed by the diasporic discourse. This picture, though, doesn’t correspond with the daily life in contemporary Greece. The following extract is characteristic:

I was shocked when I saw what Greece was like-because I knew from books-from history – like every child who goes to school, that history starts from Greece. Greece was- the cradle of civilisation – in the 5th century before Christ.

Referring to her ethnic definition of Pontic-Greek Tonia mentions an interesting differentiation: In Armenia the group of Pontic Greeks define themselves in their ethnic language and with the endonym “Romios”. This definition goes back to the period of the Ottoman Empire describing the Christ orthodox inhabitants of “rum millet”. A crucial factor for belonging to this ethnic group was the knowledge of the ethnic language (“Romeika”), which was a form of the Greek language spoken by the Pontic Greeks. For all the other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union as well as the state itself, Pontic Greeks were defined with the term (exonym) “Grek”, “Grecki”.

Let me tell you something- there (in Armenia) we don’t know the word Pontios-we speak of Romios-and we referred to ourselves as... “can you speak Romeika?” – And if you know Romeika, you are Romios- this is what we were saying-But the others- Armenians for example – or Russians called us Greek-Greek, Greek

That’s what’s written in my mother’s passport- Gavrilidou Harikli: Greek-We came here- we were told: “you are Pontians”.

According to Tonia, ethnic identity in the Soviet Union was not a factor of negative discrimination or exclusion from aspects of social life. It didn’t

limit access to social goods and services (education, health services, the labour market, culture, and participation in administrative or government posts). Even the dictate for endogamy, which was upheld by the older generations of Pontians as a regulator of matrimonial exchanges, was extenuated as cases of mixed marriages in her kinsfolk demonstrate. Tonia seems to adopt as a cognitive pattern, in order to organize her experiences in Armenia, the notion of “Internationalism”; a constitutive element of the official soviet rhetoric.

Pontians didn't use to marry people from different ethnic backgrounds. Even my mother couldn't get married until my grandmother's death – otherwise she wouldn't have been allowed to marry an Armenian. The Pontians took good care of that.

Not in recent years though. Half of my cousins are married to Armenians –
But in the old days...

Internationalism-this was our word – friendship – we were all brothers and for that reason we progressed.

In conclusion we can recapitulate the system of Tonia's self-definitions that emerges from the narration of her life in Armenia as follows: Invoking the soviet official ideology of Internationalism, Tonia reduces the relevance of ethnic belonging to her personal identity. She emphasises elements such as her high education and her profession as a teacher of Armenian literature, as well as her participation in the cultural life in an interesting town, like the capital city of Armenia. Referring to her ethnic identity she identifies herself primarily as Armenian and she defines her Greek background as a secondary element, an alternative to that of the dominant ethnic identity in Armenia. She refers to her Greek background as a means by which she distinguished and differentiated herself from other Armenians in a positive way, because of the glorious history of ancient Greece.

It is also important to notice that Tonia evaluates Internationalism – that means the demotion of national characteristics as elements of social differentiation – in a very positive way by defining it as a crucial factor in the progress of the Soviet Union (“*Internationalism-this was our word – friendship – we were all brothers and for that reason we progressed*”).

Before I examine how her self-definitions have changed when she refers to “here” and “now” (after her immigration to Greece), it should be interesting to follow the way she describes the experience of moving to Greece.

When I came here- I was split- I didn't know a single Greek word, I couldn't understand either the newspapers or the TV-programs; I couldn't understand what was said, I suffered a shock- from which I couldn't recover for two months-and if things hadn't been so bad (in Armenia), I would have returned. Because I had there a three-room apartment – I had a good job that I liked – and- I worked- I had my circle of friends- I knew the language- I was like a fish in water- that's how I felt there-It's bad to lie – Your homeland is the place where a child first walks – it doesn't matter what his nationality is.

It is obvious that the move to Greece has been experienced by Tonia as a biographical break; in particular it signals the dramatic degradation of her living standards, a rupture in her professional career, the loss of her social networks and relationships, a total change in her daily life's routines and practices. In this new framework Tonia felt like a stranger ("*I was split*", "*I suffered a shock*").

From her present point of view she interprets her decision to leave Armenia as being related to push factors rather than pull factors; that is to say she migrated more in order to escape difficult situations at home rather than because of what she expected to find in the country of destination. In her interview she avoids reproducing the common rhetoric of the return to the "historical and ancestral homeland" that is mentioned very often by newcomers from the ex-soviet republics. She interprets her emigration as being forced and irreversible, to the extent that there is no way of going back.

The feeling of being a stranger got stronger due to the negative and stereotypical way in which the natives treat the newcomers, defining them as Russian-Pontian. The term Russian-Pontian disputes indirectly the "Greekness" of the newcomers and functions as a symbolic border between "us" and "them". Very soon it took on a negative moral connotation by denoting delinquent behaviour and connection with the mafia. The following extract is characteristic:

Racism exists. This is what disturbs me. In Greece two things disturb me very much, unemployment and racism. When they call me Russian-Pontian, I get upset. I have explained a thousand times to people, Russia was another republic, Armenia another, Georgia another. The distance from Athens to Yerevan is almost the same as the distance from Yerevan to Moscow. How did I become a Russian-Pontian? My father was Armenian and my mother Greek, who is the Russian?

Her immigration and her experiences of living in Greece modify the way she defines herself and where she feels she belongs. After her arrival in Greece she had to confront a social world, which was new for her. In this new social world, she feels that she doesn't belong. Despite her Greek origin she feels like a stranger. In this new situation Tonia cannot identify herself with an imaginary notion of "Greekness" based on information coming "*from books, from history*", or from the idealized diasporic collective memory. We can detect this shift in her self-definition. In her accounts related to the period of "here" and "now" she diminished her Greek background as an element of her ethnic identity as follows:

Firstly, she stated clearly that she is an Armenian because of her father's ethnic background and her being born and brought up in Armenia. She reinforces this statement by theorizing it: "*It's bad to lie – Your homeland is the place where a child first walks – it doesn't matter what his nationality is.*"

Secondly, she evaluates the Greek conditions of living by contrasting it with the situation in the Soviet Union. In this comparison the situation in the Soviet Union seems to be superior due to its higher cultural and educational

level, as well as the security, which the soviet system provided in fields such as employment, health and social services. For this reason, Tonia's pride in being Greek when living in Armenia, has been replaced by shock and disappointment on coming into contact with the reality of living in Greece.

Tonia came from a society in which her ethnic hybrid Armenian-Greek identity functioned in a positive way without being the most important element of her positioning in the social space. Now she lives in a new framework in which the immigrants of Greek origin from the ex-Soviet Union have been treated in a discriminating way because of their ethnic-cultural differences. Within this framework, she chooses to identify herself neither with native Greeks as one of them, based on their common ethnic background, nor with the group of newcomers as repatriated members of the wide-spread Greek Diaspora. Instead, she displays a more *cosmopolitan* self, characterized by an open attitude that enables her to make her way into another culture¹⁶. In her narration, Tonia emphasizes her ability to learn different languages and cultural customs like folkdances.

The cosmopolitan self that is revealed by Tonia includes further inherent elements such as being educated and familiar with worldwide forms of art (classical music, famous ballet troupes, painting, and literature). These elements have the character of personal qualifications and achievements that were acquired during her life in Armenia.

Her cosmopolitan self as well as her superior symbolic capital (high education and culture) is pointed out in following extract in which Tonia refers to an episode of transcultural exchange with her native Greek husband. It has to do with the mutual effort of both of them to learn the language of the other.

Q: Does your husband try to learn some words in Russian?

T: Yes, yes, sometimes yes. He learnt "paka" which means "Goodbye" when I hang up the telephone. He learnt "zaranda". "Zaranda" means "microbe" and you say this when somebody makes you sick: "go away zaranda". He learnt also two or three Armenian words like "plik", which means "greedy". I often used to say "plik, you ate everything, leave something for a visitor". He learnt also "dempo". Dempo means in Armenian "blockhead"; one who does not grasp things quickly. Because from the beginning of our relationship I had this problem; when I heard a new word and I asked Giannis "what does it mean?", he started to explain and I found very fast a synonym in Greek. But of the other hand, whenever I asked him for a new word in Greek by describing what I meant in a roundabout way, he couldn't understand what I was talking about. And I said to him "You are a dempo. A ten-year-old child

16. According to Hannerz (1992: 252-253), "a more genuine cosmopolitanism entails a certain metacultural position. There is first of all, a willingness to engage with the Other, an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences. ... There is the aspect of a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting, and reflecting, and there is cultural competence in the stricter sense of the term, a built-up skill in maneuvering more or less expertly with a particular system of meanings".

would have understood but not you”. (Giannis:) “How can I understand, if you don’t explain it correctly”. (Tonia:) “in the same way in which I can understand you”. (Giannis:) “You are sharp-witted, sharp-witted”. Ok, Giannis only finished primary school, but he is clever at mathematics”.

The extract reveals different types of asymmetries. There is an asymmetry of interest in learning the language of the other that corresponds to the asymmetry of power: while the husband doesn’t really attempt to learn Russian and Armenian – the learning of some funny words has more the character of a game – Tonia has to learn Greek as a presupposition for her integration into the social life of the native community. However in her narration Tonia undermines the power character of the above mentioned asymmetry in a discursive way: she ascribes the asymmetry of interest in learning each other’s language as her superior capacity to learn a foreign language in comparison to that of her husband’s. Instead of focusing on the “structural” side of the power asymmetry between a “native” man and a “foreigner” woman, she emphasizes the personal skills related to educational ability. At the same time, through this narration Tonia confirms the construction of a *cosmopolitan* self, that she adopts, by presenting herself as a person who is open and able to appropriate the codes of other cultures. Through the satirical characterization of the “blockhead” and the “sharp-witted” she inverts the power relation on her behalf by setting as a standard for evaluation the agility of wit and the ability to learn.

By presenting a cosmopolitan self and emphasizing her symbolic capital as the main element of her self-definition, Tonia tries to overcome the degradation of her position in the social hierarchy in her country of destination. By constructing a cosmopolitan self she negotiates a position in a system of power relations, offering different criteria of recognition than that of the provincialism of the local community.

3. Concluding remarks

In this concluding part we will emphasize on the potential of the biographical approach in studying cases of movement between different ethnic and cultural contexts, as has been shown in the analysis of Tonia’s case.

Through the biographical approach the movement of an individual between different ethnic and cultural contexts can be studied as a re-forming of individuals’ self-conception. This re-forming occurs by the re-interpreting of elements from the biographical resources. We show that in Tonia’s case that her education and cultivation cannot function in her new situation as qualifications in order to find a proper job (as teacher of Armenian literature). However it is these education and cultivation, which provides the “material” for constructing a new self-identity (a cosmopolitan self), through which she is able to claim a better positioning in the social space of her place of destination.

Through the biographical approach the transformation of self-identity can be studied as a shifting of the significance from some parts of the identity to

others during the movement through different contexts. In the case of Tonia her immigration brought a change in the balance between the two parts of her hybrid ethnic identity (Armenian-Greek). While in Armenia her Greek background provided her with a positive discrimination, in Greece it functions as an identification factor with the group of “Greek repatriates from the ex-Soviet Union”; a group which is negatively marked by the locals and has stereotypical connotations. Therefore, Tonia opted to diminish her Greek background as an element of her ethnic identity in Greece.

Through the biographical analysis we are able to explore individuals’ strategies of actively coping with cultural differences. Upholding her Armenian background, Tonia opted to take up the position of a “foreigner”, which offers her an interesting synthesis of remoteness and nearness by allowing her to be involved and detached at the same time¹⁷. Instead of adopting the “nationalistic” rhetoric regarding her “Greek origin”, which dominates among the “repatriates” from the Soviet Republics, she provides rather a “cosmopolitan view”, which is characterized by an open attitude to achieving cultural competence in an alien structure of meaning and practices.

Last but not least, biographical narrative analysis reveals the discursive strategies of individuals for positioning themselves in a system of power relations and social hierarchy. Tonia’s case shows an individualised strategy of positioning by focusing on her personal skills and achievements rather than connecting herself to a wider collective narrative.

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17. See also Bagnoli (2007:33).

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