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## LIFE EXPERIENCES AND TRANSITIONS OF ADULT MIGRANT LEARNERS THROUGH A BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

### PRZEMIANY I DOŚWIADCZENIA ŻYCIOWE UCZĄCYCH SIĘ DOROSŁYCH MIGRANTÓW Z PERSPEKTYWY UCZENIA SIĘ BIOGRAFICZNEGO

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to explore adult migrants' learning in light of their life experiences and transitions, drawing from the narratives of two migrant learners who attended 'Odysseus' solidarity school in Greece. The presented research harnesses the biographical learning theory and adopts a Bakhtinian, dialogical way of presenting the data under three themes: *wars and identity struggles, religious beliefs, migration and language learning in the host country*. The findings revealed that adult migrants' life experiences and transitions constitute a learning process, which enhances transformative learning of 'being', through a process of 'perspective and identity struggles'. It is also found that the accumulated experiences and transitions as well as adult migrant learners' previous educational capital are in constant relation to the way they experience language learning in the programme.

**KEYWORDS:** adult migrant learners, biographical learning theory, life experiences and transitions, 'perspective struggles', 'identity struggles', Bakhtinian dialogism.

**ABSTRAKT:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie procesu uczenia się dorosłych migrantów w świetle ich życiowych doświadczeń i tranzycji, opierając się na narracji dwóch uczących się osób, które uczęszczały do szkoły solidarnościowej „Odysseus” w Grecji. W przedstawionych badaniach wykorzystano teorię uczenia się biograficznego, a także przyjęto bachtinowski, dialogiczny sposób prezentowania danych, w ramach trzech wątków: *wojny i zmagania się z tożsamością, przekonania religijnych, migracji i nauki języka w kraju przyjmującym*. Na podstawie wyników ustalono, że życiowe doświadczenia i tranzycje dorosłych migrantów stanowią proces uczenia się, który wzmacnia transformatywne uczenie się „bycia” poprzez proces „zmagania z perspektywą i tożsamością”. Stwierdzono również, że zgromadzone doświadczenia oraz tranzycje, a także wcześniejszy kapitał edukacyjny uczących się dorosłych migrantów, pozostają w stałym związku ze sposobem, w jaki doświadczają oni nauki języków w ramach programu.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** uczący się dorośli migranci, teoria uczenia się biograficznego, życiowe doświadczenia i tranzycje, „zmagania z perspektywą”, „zmagania z tożsamością”, dialogiczność bachtinowska.

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## Introduction

The paper provides insights into adult migrants' learning in light of their life experiences and transitions, using the biographical learning perspective. Migration is regarded to be a learning process, which impacts an individual's sense of continuity (Mirza & Mamed 2019). Migrants, moving from one country to another have to make a clear shift not only geographically, but also culturally, socially, linguistically and practically. In other words, they must learn 'to be' in order to adapt to life in a new social space (Webb 2015). This kind of adaptation implies a deep transformation of identity aspects, which is in a constant and complex relation with new life experience and learning. Thus, when analysed from a biographical learning perspective, migrants' life stories unravel the learning outcomes of migration.

Most of the research focuses on migrants' formal learning (e.g. Guo 2010; Takouda 2016; Thunborg & Bron 2019) or explore migration learning through Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory (King 1999; Margaroni & Magos 2018; Morrice 2012; Vinciguerra 2017), although it is criticised for its lack of attention to sociocultural contexts (Taylor 2007). Therefore, this paper attempts to complement research on the field of migration learning, and in particular to provide deep insights in migrants' informal and non-formal learning, by exploring adult migrants' experiences and transitions through the biographical learning perspective (Alheit & Dausien 2000; Alheit 2018). According to Hallqvist (2014), biographical learning theory, departing from people's experiences and discontinuities, could address several new research areas on adult education, such as migration. Nonetheless, only Bron has embarked on this task (as cited in Hallqvist 2014), with few followers, like Thunborg and Bron (2019), who examined non-traditional graduates' life traditions and Malec-Rawiński (2017), who explored experiences of older Polish adults in Sweden, through the biographical learning perspective. In particular, no research of such type has been conducted in the Greek context.

Given the above, the research reported, by adopting the biographical approach, on the experiences and transitions of two adult migrant learners, who attended a language learning programme in Greece, from a biographical learning perspective, and sought to explore the ways in which migrants' experiences and transitions inform their informal and non-formal learning in the host country.

In the following sections, life experiences are discussed through the biographical learning perspective. The research context and process are analysed, and participants' vignettes are critically presented. Then, a dialogical presentation of the two migrants' narratives, following the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism (Bakhtin 1981; 1984) and the *métissage* research (Chambers et al. 2008) takes place. Thus, a plasmatic dialogue

has been set up, based on common themes emerged from data analysis using excerpts of the most indicative autobiographical bits of data. The paper concludes with a final discussion around the questions posed and the emerging themes for further exploration.

### **Life experiences through the biographical learning perspective**

To address the research questions of the study, we have harnessed the biographical approach, which provides a powerful methodological tool to explore experiences. In the present paper, experiences are regarded to be always embodied in a specific person and interwoven in his/her life (Daher et al. 2017), so that any attempt to divide them in specific, closed units, would mean the loss of the phenomenon itself. Instead, when the analysis focuses on and captures the subjective perspective that the person uses to narrate his or her life, then it can reveal the depth and the meaning the person gives to important events. According to Alheit and Dausien (2000), every person conceives, interprets and works out social realities and experiences in a unique, subjective way, because individuals have an ‘inherent logic’ of the already formed biographical sense, called ‘biographicity’.

Acquisition of new learning and experience always includes a ‘communicative and reflective element, which responds to the biographicity’ and the already formed experiences (Christensen 2007, p. 20). ‘Biographicity’ then is described as a competence which allows the subjective interpretation and re-interpretation of life experiences in the social context and links new experiences to what individuals have already learnt, maintaining some sense of coherence of the Self, even in periods of radical change and disruptions (Tsiolis 2012), such as migration. In this context, the organising work of experiences is biographical learning, which presupposes self-reflective activities (Alheit 1994; 2018). Reflective activities are central to the notion of biographical learning of people, suggesting not only reflection about social events, but also about one-self. This is a non-linear time process, which generates personal coherence and identity (Alheit 2018) and enhances reconsidering one’s life and identity work (Hallqvist 2014).

According to Thunborg and Bron (2019) the process, which connects ‘biographicity’ to learning, is called biographical work. The latter refers to different aspects of learning, among them are how subjects construct and re-construct their biography and how they form and transform their identities throughout life. Thus, in this point an ongoing perspective transformation is palpable. Biographical work contains identity struggles, defined as: ‘struggles that people experience in different periods of life in relation to different social situations that are narrated retrospectively in their biographical story’ (Thunborg & Bron 2019, p. 40). Identity struggles may lead to a period of ‘anchoring’ (Fenwick 2006, as cited in Thunborg & Bron 2019, p. 40) or a ‘floating’

period (Bron 2000, as cited in Thunborg & Bron 2019, p. 40), both inevitable parts of the transformation of identities. The biographical work theory also draws from Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Thunborg & Bron 2019, p. 39) according to which, the identity transformation process includes battles between old and new meaning perspectives. Perspective transformation involves a structural change in the way people see themselves in the social context, which reformulates the criteria for valuing and acting (Mezirow 1978).

In the biographical learning process new knowledge and experiences are located within a changing framework "when people are situated within a changing environment, reflect on themselves and their biography" (Hallqvist 2014, p. 500). The above argument implies that transitions occur in connection to the biographical learning concept, and thus the biographical learning theory is regarded to be a useful tool when exploring migrants' experiences, since their life experiences include transitions, discontinuities or even disruptions. Then, storytelling is an important part of the biographical learning process, not only because it is the outcome of a learning process, but also because it is a learning process per se (Tedder & Biesta 2009, as cited in Hallqvist & Hyden 2013, p. 1).

### **Research context and process**

The paper draws on the life stories of two migrant learners who attended Greek language courses at the solidarity school 'Odysseus' in Thessaloniki, Greece. The school has been established for migrants, refugees, repatriated and locals who want to learn new languages. It constitutes a constant reference point in the city, having, since its operation in 1997, over 8.000 adult learners from various ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In 'Odysseus' trainees, migrants, and locals, have the opportunity to attend in addition to the Greek language courses, other languages, such as: Albanian, German, English, French, Russian, Spanish. Moreover, during the year different events are organised for them, such as cultural visits to museums and neighbouring towns, parties, and film screenings. The school is completely supported and run by volunteers, mainly local teachers of all levels of education who embody the values of social solidarity and justice.

The participants presented in the paper are a man from Afghanistan and an Italian woman. In order to secure anonymity and confidentiality in the research, the pseudonyms Ahmed and Francesca are used respectively. The interviewees were selected on the basis of purposive sampling, so that researchers could communicate with the participants fluently: with Ahmed in Greek, and with Francesca in her native language, Italian. The first biographical interview with Ahmed was conducted in January 2019 at the school of 'Odysseus', a place familiar to both the participants and one of the

researchers. The latter was working as a Greek language teacher in its context. The interview lasted for about one and a half hours. The second interview with Francesca took place in May 2019 in a quiet café in the city centre of Thessaloniki, near her house, and the interview lasted about three hours. Both interviewees had been informed in advance that they would be asked to narrate their whole life as they remembered it up to the moment of the interview, without any specific questions, and they had been promised anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were tape recorded and then thoroughly transcribed.

The analysis, as in most qualitative studies, went through the three parallel flows of activity: data reduction – the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying and transforming data that appear in written-up field notes or transcription; data display – an organised, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action; and thematic interpretation (Miles & Huberman 1994). In particular, data from the interviews were placed in order, allowing the researchers to look at them thoroughly. This involved: first, creating a summary of the context of the biographical interviews – vignettes; second, an in-depth combing of the narratives, the purpose being to identify common themes, namely: *wars and struggles, religious beliefs, migration and language learning in the host country*. This was ‘The process of coding – sorting data, according to the commonalities that they share, into categories’ (Evans 2002, p. 157); and third, a dialogic – intertextual presentation of excerpts of the two life stories, inspired mostly by the Bakhtinian (1981; 1884) notion on dialogism and *métissage* research.

Bakhtin (1981) sees discourse as a dynamic, interactive process of communication in which the speakers – socially situated – respond to what was said and their reasoning contains in advance a part of the answer to come. For Bakhtin, therefore, the existence of an individual speaker does not exist. Speakers construct their speech, always interacting with the recipients of their speech, at a given time, at the level of real or imagined communities. Accordingly, he regards ‘ego’ ‘as an entity inextricably bound up with a specific space and time, formed through interactive relationships with others and with the world at large’ (Tsiovas 2000, p. 471). Bakhtinian influences can be found even in *métissage* research, which is an art-based research. In this, researchers interweave genres and narrations, to achieve deeper understanding of social life (Champers et al. 2008).

## **The participants’ vignettes**

### ***Ahmed***

Ahmed is a 40-year-old Muslim Afghan migrant. He first joined “Odysseus” school in 2015 to learn Greek, and he returned back to it in 2018 to attend an advanced Greek course and an English language course for beginners. He willingly participated in the

research. He was born in Kabul, where there was always war and where he had to work, since his childhood. Even though he aspired to become a doctor, he left his homeland in the age of 14 to avoid participating in the war against the Taliban. After a wandering period, he came to Greece through Turkey. The first few years in Greece though were not easy. He was moved from one place to the other, and after having an accident, he was transferred by an NGO to a refugee camp in Thessaloniki for medical care. This is where he took his first Greek lessons and managed to get his first stable job in the textile industry. While in Thessaloniki, he had attempted to migrate to Brussels, where he had the chance to find a better job. However, he came back to Thessaloniki, after staying there for three months, because of the Greek warm weather and hospitality that made him feel accepted. Now, Ahmed, who had always wanted to become a doctor, is volunteering at the Doctors without Borders, as a translator and hopes to become an official translator. However, his only educational experience, after finishing primary school, are the language lessons in the refugee camp and 'Odysseus' school and a Latin dance course he attended some years ago. In this context he made friendships with native people with whom he still meets in different places for dancing.

### **Francesca**

Francesca is an Italian woman around 50, who attended the A1 Level Greek language course in 2018-2019, she was still unable to speak Greek, hence the interview took place in Italian. According to her narrative, she had an easy childhood, being protected by her family. She was born in Sicily, but when she was 9 her family moved to Rome. Her father, who was a dentist, due to professional commitments, was absent for long periods, therefore she grew up with her mother. The latter had a powerful presence in her life. Their relationship was so strong that Francesca did not feel the need to seek her independence. Francesca studied foreign languages, literature, culture, and also took a Russian language course. She occasionally worked in the tourism industry and never had to worry about making ends meet. However, when, at the age of 41, Francesca lost her mother, her life changed dramatically. She experienced the decline of her socio-economic status and had to train and work as an assistant to blind children and helper of older adults. People around her, though, viewed her as being a 'badante', which means a caregiver of elderly people with negative connotations. A crucial element in her life, as emerged from her narrative, is religion and her faith and devotion to God. However, Rome, according to her, has been transformed to "the capital of Muslim migrants". This, along with the underestimation she was feeling in her community and a traumatic attack she suffered personally from Muslims, prompted her migration to Greece, due to the good weather and low cost of living. She did not have any job in Thessaloniki but managed to live well with the income from renting her apartment in

Rome. Nonetheless, at the time of the interview she was planning to move to Athens hoping to find a job. Her trajectory in Greece seemed to still be in progress.

### **A dialogic presentation of the analysis of the narratives**

This section tackles creating the space for a plasmatic dialogue and interchange between Ahmed's and Francesca's narrative constructions, through the eyes of the researchers. The dialogical analysis of narratives targets a deeper understanding of significant experiences, life transitions and identity transformations. The excerpts are presented under the common themes that emerged from the analysis in the narratives, namely: *wars and struggles, religious beliefs, migration and language learning in the host country*. It is worth mentioning that the coded themes are critically discussed in light of the participants' overall life experiences. Thus, fragmentation into closed units is avoided and themes are seen as manifestations of autobiographers' narratives, in interaction with their identities.

#### ***Wars and identity struggles***

This was a common theme raised in the two narratives, seen from a different perspective in each case.

**Ahmed:** "I was 3-4 years old; We had war. We have up to this moment – troubles. And I don't like it at all. And that's why I left my family and everything, my homeland [...] I had to leave Afghanistan because the Taliban came. I was imposed to go to war, and I didn't like to go and kill a human being [...]. To make you understand, imagine that in Thessaloniki they come and invade your house. The army wanted us to go to war, so as not to allow Taliban to come to our homes. We were afraid that they would come and kill us."

**Francesca:** "Odysseus' seems to gather people who have experienced war somehow [she laughs] ... whether they lived war in Iraq; whether they lived war in a more imaginary way; whether it has to do with wars that no one understands, it doesn't matter. Thus, people wonder: Why did she come here?"

War has been a strong experience in Ahmed's narration. War brought troubles, fear, insecurity, killing. War was the driving force that violently provoked the transition to a new life trajectory; he had to migrate at the age of 14 in order to survive, which signifies a geographical transition (Thunborg & Bron 2019). Reflecting on his childhood, Ahmed constructs his anti-war attitude, revealing his peaceful, anti-hero identity. Francesca, on the contrary, speaking in her native language, uses the word "war" auto sarcastically and metaphorically, as the reason of her own migration. "Wars and fights" are meant to become the reason of her geographical transition as a migrant

after her mother's death. The latter led her to transition to a new phase of her life cycle (Thunborg & Bron 2019), which transferred her from the role of "the daughter" to the role of an adult of forty years old.

**Francesca:** "My mother's death devastated me since I had never cut the umbilical code. God cut it. At a certain point he got angry and cut it. I was forty years old when my mother entered the hospital and after a year died, just before celebrating my birthday. When she got ill, I remained alone, and I became a 'mother' to her...It took me 10 years to become independent. There has been a struggle all these years..."

**Ahmed:** "My father was very old, he couldn't work, and I had siblings; we were all seven children, for which I had to work. And I was too young...too young. I think that from the age of 6-7 years old, when I started school, up to 14 years old, I was always working ...I was working".

Francesca being totally unprepared became the 'mother of her mother', taking on new responsibilities; Ahmed had to work since he was a child, taking on the role of his father. The repetitions "And I was too young, too young" and "I was always working, I was working", as well as the intonation of his voice are indicative of the lived difficulties in his childhood. Nonetheless, when he was asked about the conditions under which he was working, as a child, he answered:

**Ahmed:** "Everything was very good. All children were working together. That's how I could buy my school bag, my notebooks, a pair of shoes. Yes, it was good".

At this point, Ahmed's words illuminated contradictions; he seemed to struggle between two value-sets: the one of the Afghan child, who has in mind that child labour is a common practice in his country and naturalises the phenomenon, and the other of the adult migrant, who has gained new experience in a European context, and has second thoughts on whether working as a child is acceptable or not. This contradictory perspective could be described as a 'perspective struggle', in correspondence to the 'identity struggle', proposed by Thunborg and Bron (2019). Thus, an ongoing perspective transformation (Mezirow 1978; 2000) was palpable, possibly signifying an overall change in the way Ahmed related to the world and sensed his Self (Hoggan 2016).

At the age of fourteen, Ahmed was forced to migrate to Iran, and then to Pakistan and Turkey, from where he passed to Greece. Ahmed's narrative seemed to be grounded in a latent mechanism separating his lifetime in the period "before" and "after" migration. This was the case for Francesca as well; the period "before" and "after" the loss of her mother. In both cases, moving away from their families stigmatised their lives and brought them to a transitional life stage. Ahmet was forced into a pre-mature independence and survival learning path. He avoided saying much about it and he described his passing from Iran, Pakistan and Turkey as being an extremely difficult period, which hardened him. Francesca was forced to a late independence and maturity learning path.



This process made her redefine who she was, after passing through a ‘floating’ period (Bron 2000, as cited in Thunborg & Bron 2019, p. 40).

This is indicative in the following example by Francesca’s narrative that made her realise that she was no longer the doctor’s daughter. Once she was accused of stealing from an old woman, whom she was taking care of. When she asked for legal assistance from an old lawyer friend, she was told that she could not prove her innocence since she was just a caregiver.

**Francesca:** “After my mom’s death, I realised that people ‘frame’ you. They ‘frame’ you with rationales that don’t represent you [...]. I remember this incident was a shock for me. [...] I was still identifying myself as the doctor’s daughter; do you understand? After all these years, I thought I had a personality defined by various things. It’s not only what you think of yourself since your childhood, but also all the experiences you have lived [...]”.

According to Cooley’s (as cited in Dunn 2010) looking-glass theory, people shape themselves based on others’ perceptions. Thus, contradictions between the way she viewed herself and the way others did, drove her to a crisis within herself. Until this event, she had not realised that people did not face her anymore as a reputable person, from a respected family. She could not accept her social decline. Francesca was feeling disconnected from her biography. Being in a ‘floating’ period (Bron 2000, as cited in Thunborg & Bron 2019, p. 40), she was not able to define her own self and understand her position in the social context.

### ***Religious beliefs***

Religious beliefs emerged as a common nodal point impacting their life perspectives and their positioning in the social context.

**Francesca:** “[...] For many years I was thinking of leaving because I couldn’t afford living in Rome. However, I couldn’t break the bond with the church because Rome, for me, was the capital of the world, because of the Pope...oh, I was hearing his voice and I was hearing Christ”.

This, of course, changed after an attack she suffered, which she described as follows: She was walking on the street, when two men hit her and took from her the symbols of her faith: a ring with Christ and two pendants with Catholic Saints:

**Francesca:** “They didn’t touch anything else. [...] I’m convinced that this wasn’t accidental. It wasn’t accidental. Well, they were two Muslims that I knew [...]. And I was sure they knew me as well. I was already bothering them, because they got the ring, a kind of demonstration for them. I was wearing this ring since 2005, since Santo Giovanni Paolo the second died. I was stuck with this ring because I had seen it on priests and monks. I was bothering them. Besides, for Muslims it is annoying when

a woman goes out alone. And I was always moving around alone. For them, this was a demonstration. [...] A Woman alone with things that exposed her beliefs. I was bothering them. Well, they thought, 'We'll give her a lesson'".

**Ahmed:** "To make it clear for you...where there is no Taliban, women may get dressed as they like. They aren't obliged to wear burka. But where the Taliban is, women have difficulties".

**Francesca:** "[...]With Muslims we should always be somehow careful [...]. This is the time for jihad, the holy war, that derives from the Koran. For Muslims, we are all enemies, all unbelievers, and they try to make us believe in their God; if we don't, they kill us, for being infidels".

**Ahmed:** "According to our Holy Books, you don't have the right to kill not even an ant! Not even an ant! Where did they [Taliban] see that they can kill a human being?"

Ahmed demonstrates himself as being religiously moderate, clearly separating his position from whoever represents fundamentalist Islam:

**Ahmed:** "...When I was in Afghanistan, I used to go to the Mosque and pray. Here [in Greece], I might go to the Mosque, only if I go to Komotini [a Greek city with Muslim minority]. And I don't like some Muslim migrants saying that we must have our Mosque in Thessaloniki. For me not."

The migration experience in Greece has informed Ahmed's religious beliefs who declares to be a Muslim, but far from the fundamentalist vision embodied by the Taliban. However, subsequently he adds:

**Ahmed:** "...I wouldn't like to see a church in Afghanistan. This isn't right. At least, that's what I think".

This statement undermines the initial impression that his religious identity was in an 'anchoring' period (Thunborg & Bron 2019, p. 40), having integrated religious tolerance. Ahmed seems to negotiate the boundaries of his religious tolerance, which is indicative of his religious identity struggles. Nonetheless, in his entire narrative, Ahmed differentiates himself from the Taliban in an attempt to overturn the hegemonic discourse in Greece that sees all Muslims as being extremists and violent defenders of their religion. This resonates the Bakhtinian concept of 'polyphony', according to which every discourse integrates elements from the social discourses and responds to these implicitly (Baktin 1981). Francesca, on the contrary, views all Muslims as being similarly dangerous and develops a hostile rhetoric against them.

Throughout their narratives concerning religious beliefs, women's position in Islamic society emerges as a common theme. They both disagreed with the disadvantaged position of women in Islam, with Ahmed stressing the difference between the Taliban and the rest of Muslims, and Francesca seeing all Muslims as a whole, echoing the Western dominant discourse (Baktin 1981).

### ***Migration to Greece and language learning in the host country***

Migration to Greece was a significant geographical transition for both Ahmed and Francesca. Francesca decided to migrate, having been unable to handle the insecurity she felt in Rome. Ahmed arrived in Greece having in mind to further move to North Europe, but eventually stayed there. This was due to the lack of the necessary economic resources and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) to vindicate his life upon arrival:

**Ahmed:** “I neither knew nor understood where to go, because first of all I didn’t know a language [Greek or English] so, I couldn’t even take a decision”.

Only after learning some Greek in the refugee camp in Thessaloniki, Ahmed managed to find a more stable job, tapping into improvement prospects conducive to enhanced self-sufficiency and autonomy:

**Ahmed:** “[the refugee camp] we had some Greek lessons, but it wasn’t much. It lasted four months, overall 80 hours; something like that. It was much better than nothing. And that’s how I found a job in a factory in Panorama [a suburb in Thessaloniki]. [...] After that I found another job for the next 13 years in the textile industry.”

The migration transition made him realise the importance of language learning. Hence, he decided to continue Greek lessons. Despite broadly differing biographical experiences and educational capitals, ‘Odysseus’ hosted pivotal points in the two migrants’ biographies. The migrant identity was intertwined with language learning and the social interactions that developed within ‘Odysseus’. The following dialogic parts are indicative of the above:

**Ahmed:** “Three years ago [i.e. before attending ‘Odysseus’], I couldn’t speak clearly and make connections. Learning the language at work or through communicating with people is another thing; it’s different at school. That’s why everyone wants to go to school, to learn how to speak and behave”.

**Francesca:** “At ‘Odysseus’ school you meet people from all over the world [...]. Here, at ‘Odysseus’, I’ve changed...uh not changed, but I’ve been able to reflect and see more things. [...] In fact, in Rome, I used to be more racist. On a personal and interpersonal level, there are so many new things to achieve; you can develop yourself and move beyond rationales in which you were imprisoned [...]. With all these people at ‘Odysseus’ who experienced war, I became curious, and yearned for dialogue [...]”.

**Ahmed:** “I want to become a translator. I need to learn to write. Even if there is a good job for me, how am I supposed to know it, since I cannot read and write?”

**Francesca:** “My friends in Italy argue that I’m not doing anything special here and I need to go back. But I don’t feel this way. [...] Because, first on an interpersonal level, here, I’ve met so many people who have offered me a lot that makes me feel I’m ‘saved’. Besides, all these months I’ve been learning a new language and I’m telling you, honestly, that I may not speak Greek, but I understand so many things [...]”.

In the context of ‘Odysseus’ Ahmed became an adult learner, after being far from any educational activity. Thus, for Ahmed, ‘Odysseus’ became the space that enabled him to address practical issues faced in the host country and a space where he could negotiate his identity as a learner. After almost twenty years of living in Greece, at the time of the study, he was aspiring to become a translator and was investing in language learning to build up his educational capital (Norton 2001; 2010). Besides, he had realised that language is connected to ‘behaviour’ (“...That’s why everyone wants to go to school, to learn how to speak and behave”). Learning the established customs and social behaviour in the host country emerged as an important means of integration in Greece.

This was not the case for Francesca. To learn one more language was interesting to her, but not vital. As Norton and De Costa claim (2018), she might have been motivated in language learning, but she did not invest in it. She was managing to live well in Greece without having to work, and, as she said in her narrative, she felt recognised and accepted by native people (“...here, I’ve met so many people who have offered me a lot that makes me feel I’m ‘saved’”). Meeting migrants from different nationalities in the classroom was more important to her than learning the language per se, since the former made her reflect on her old meaning perspectives (Mezirow 1978; 2000) on migration, and broadened her mentality on Muslim migration in Europe, which made her ‘less racist’.

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

The aim of the paper was to explore adult migrants’ experiences and transitions, through biographical learning perspective, with the ultimate goal to provide deep insights in migrants’ informal and non-formal learning.

The research data confirm Thuborg and Bron’s research findings that life experiences and transitions, both “geographical and life cycle” (Thuborg & Bron 2019), constitute a learning process, which informs participants’ “biographicity” (Alheit 2018; Alheit & Daussien 2000), and enhances interpretation and re-interpretation of the accumulated experiences. Participation in the language programme provided opportunities that “drew on and challenged participants’ life course-acquired socio-economic and cultural experiences” (Brown 2020, p. 26). In particular, Ahmed’s and Francesca’s experiences and transitions have made them learn ‘to be’ in repeatedly changing life and social contexts as learning experiences interrupted pre-existing categories of perception (Brown 2020, p. 26). In this way, they have learned to form and transform aspects of themselves. However, transformation is not a linear process. Both participants, in an attempt to maintain their internal sense of coherence (Alheit 2018; Alheit & Daussien

2000), tried to balance their old and new perspectives, and subsequently, their old and new sense of self-identity.

This 'identity struggle' process is part of the 'biographical work', described by Thunborg & Bron (2019). 'Biographical work', then, is a useful concept, when exploring identity transformations as a consequence of learning. Both participants went through identity struggles, as they retrospectively narrated their experiences. Within this process, they went beyond reflecting and reconsidering their past frames of reference (Mezirow 1978; 2000). They went through a contradictory and struggling perspective process, which could be called 'perspective struggle'. For example, when referring to child labour, Ahmed seems to 'float' (Bron, as cited in Thunborg & Bron 2019) between the perspective of the Afghan child before migration, which approves of child labour, and the perspective of the Afghan migrant in a European country, which rejects it. Ahmed experience an internal struggle between two antagonistic perspectives for the same social phenomenon.

Moreover, the research findings indicate that the accumulated experiences and transitions, as well as adult migrant learners' previous educational capital inform the way they perceive the input of 'Odysseus' educational programme in their lives. Ahmed, during the wandering period in Greece, realised that he had to go back to school, after a long period of educational discontinuity, to improve his living conditions. In the context of 'Odysseus', Ahmed formed his learning identity. He invested in language learning (Norton 2001; 2010) aiming for social mobility. Francesca, though, who carries a rich educational capital, did not invest in language learning at 'Odysseus'. However, within the multicultural environment of this school, she identified the chance to reflect and "go beyond rationales in which (I) had been imprisoned". Thus, language learning in a non-formal educational programme and like 'Odysseus', may foster changes in the way adult migrant learners view their identities, depending on their 'biographicity'.

Additionally, the dialogical presentation of the participants' biographical experiences, raises another important point: the intrusion of the prevailing social voices into their own subjective discourse, making it 'polyphonic' (Bakhtin 1981; 1984). As migration and refugee flows from Muslim countries increase rapidly, especially in Mediterranean countries, such as Greece and Italy, the prevailing voices are these who see Islam as a threat. Ahmed, being aware of that, tried to separate himself from the fundamentalist Muslims, whereas Francesca reproduced the hegemonic voices. Thus, both biographies, by being presented dialogically, mirror the prevailing social 'logos and antilogous' and the migration nexus formed in the host country. This may have promising methodological implications in other educational and social science research. Therefore, the Bakhtinian presentation of analyses needs to be further investigated in terms of its applicability and transferability in other educational contexts.

The findings of this study may be further investigated regarding their applicability in other migratory contexts, given that it is a small-scale research. Nevertheless, the two life narratives analysed and critically presented in the paper manifested the wide heterogeneity of the migrants' group in terms of skills, competences and socio-cultural capital; thus, contributing to further implications for lifelong learning. This study suggests that there is still a lot of research to be conducted in exploring the pedagogical implications and challenges that migrants' heterogeneity brings, when organising and facilitating programmes for them.

**Acknowledgement:** The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers as well as Dr. Maria Brown and Dr. Pavlos Hatzopoulos for their invaluable comments on the paper.

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