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ARTICLE

Social identity, mental health and the experience of migration

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that social identities, which provide purpose and a sense of belonging, enhance resilience against psychological strain and safeguard well-being. This applies to first-generation migrant populations facing adverse experiences, including prejudice and disconnection from previous identities during host country integration, negatively impacting their well-being. The importance of social identity also extends to first-generation migrant descendants, confronting dual-identity challenges and experiencing exclusion and discrimination despite being native born. Building on the social identity approach to mental health, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate how migrants construct their social identities, their perspective on the challenges and changes they experience in relation to group memberships and ultimately, the influence this has on their psychological well-being. Findings emphasize the significance of social identity continuity and gain pathways in first-generation migrants' successful adjustment and psychological well-being. For second-generation migrants, dual-identity development is especially difficult during adolescence due to social exclusion and discrimination in schools. Even in early adulthood, pressure to maintain heritage identity can lead to negative mental health outcomes over time. The current study contributes to and strengthens the social identity approach to migrant mental health and has wider implications for psychological interventions and policy.

KEYWORDS

group belonging, mental health, migrants, migration, social identity

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INTRODUCTION

Migration is not a new phenomenon and has been present since the dawn of humankind. It is defined as the voluntary or involuntary movement of individuals or groups from one geographical location to another, either within the boundaries of a sovereign state or across international borders (IOM, 2019). Migration encompasses a wide spectrum of people who relocate, regardless of the drivers and means of migration or duration of residence at the destination. Given the various migration motives, hence the different challenges people may encounter, migration can be associated with both positive and negative experiences. Relocating for the purpose of enrolling in a university or commencing a new job can engender a positive experience as it is often linked with new opportunities, an increase in skills and knowledge and hope for a better future. Conversely, migration, especially when forced, can be distressing as it may be associated with family separation, financial worries or feelings of hopelessness. Regardless of positive or negative associations with life changes, significant life transitions are often associated with uncertainty, requiring people to adjust and reorient themselves in the new environment, which can negatively influence people's well-being (Carleton et al., 2012; Iyer et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2012). In the context of migration, leaving the usual place of residence to move abroad or within one's country of residence increases the likelihood of disrupting people's group life and the social identities that underpin it because of the inevitable social, environmental and often cultural changes. How migrants adapt to these changes depends on a variety of factors, including their access to pre-existing social connections from their former place of residence, the compatibility of these connections with those established in the relocated area and the extent to which both networks can provide support in the new social and environmental context.

Building on the social identity approach to mental health, researchers point to the important role group life plays in people's well-being (e.g. Jetten et al., 2022). Group memberships are powerful determinants of people's place in the world (and their sense of that place), and they have the capacity to provide people with access to key social and psychological resources, including trust and social support, self-esteem and the sense of meaning, purpose and control in life, in the face of difficulties (Cruwys et al., 2014; Greenaway et al., 2015; Jetten et al., 2013). An increasing number of studies demonstrate the importance of group life on mental health outcomes emphasizing that group memberships and the sense of belonging to groups are vital resources for positive psychological well-being (e.g. Haslam et al., 2008; Iyer et al., 2009; McIntyre et al., 2018; Smeekes et al., 2017). In regard to migrants, a recent meta-analysis demonstrates that increased social identification is linked with lower depressive and anxiety symptoms (Brance et al., 2023). As further demonstrated in the review, literature on migrant social identities predominantly focuses on ethnic identity and its impact on well-being. This is despite social identity theory suggesting that a person's social identity relates to any group that a person identifies as a psychologically meaningful description of the self, going beyond mere socio-demographic groups, such as race, gender, ethnicity or sexual identity. Nonetheless, studies indicate that maintaining identification with one's ethnicity post-migration is associated with reduced depressive and anxiety symptoms (Çelebi et al., 2017) and decreased psychological distress (Mossakowski et al., 2019). Additionally, increased ethnic identification has been shown to foster resilience against the negative effects of discrimination (e.g. Thibeault et al., 2018).

To further understand the interconnections among life changes, social sources and well-being, the social identity model of identity change (SIMIC) was developed. Because disruptions to social identity resulting from life changes can compromise individuals' mental health (Haslam et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2009), the model suggests that having multiple group memberships prior to significant life changes is essential for successful adaptation for two main reasons. First, belonging to multiple groups increases the likelihood of retaining some of these groups even after life changes, providing a sense of continuity and stability in the midst of significant life transitions. These established group memberships can serve as an anchor, helping individuals maintain a sense of identity and connection to their previous social context. Second, pre-existing group affiliations can act as a platform for expanding an individual's social network in the new environment. By leveraging these previously established

identities, people may find it easier to connect with new communities and integrate into their new social environment. SIMIC has been applied to various contexts of people undergoing life changes, including mothers (Seymour-Smith et al., 2017), stroke patients (Haslam et al., 2008) or people suffering from brain injuries (Jones et al., 2011; Muldoon et al., 2019). Fewer studies have focused on social identity changes in the context of migration, for example, refugees (Smeekes et al., 2017) or international students moving to study abroad (Cruwys et al., 2020). Nevertheless, Smeekes et al. (2017), for example, demonstrated that before migrating, having multiple group memberships was connected to decreased anxiety after migration but increased depression. They argued that this might reflect a stronger feeling of loss among refugees who had more group memberships before migrating. Yet they also demonstrated possessing multiple group memberships before migration positively affects well-being by increasing the likelihood of retaining some of these affiliations post-migration. Similarly, in line with social identity gain pathway in the SIMIC, studies have demonstrated that developing identification with mainstream culture is linked with lower levels of depression and anxiety, highlighting the importance of developing new group memberships in the host country to live a psychologically healthy life after migration (Meca et al., 2020; Tikhonov et al., 2019).

Straiton et al. (2019) further highlighted the importance of developing an affiliation with the host country compared to exclusively preserving belonging to the country of origin. Their study demonstrated that immigrants who maintained affiliation to their country of origin and developed a sense of belonging to Norway reported better mental health outcomes in the face of discrimination. Overall, poorer mental health was found among those immigrants who developed an exclusive affiliation to Norway, followed by those who only maintained their sense of belonging to their country of origin.

These findings confirm the long line of literature linking biculturalism with positive mental health outcomes and better migrant adjustment in society, as synthesized by Nguyen and Benet-Martínez (2013). According to the bi-dimensional acculturation model (Berry, 1997, 2003), the interaction between mainstream and heritage cultural orientations results in four possible distinct acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. An integration strategy, also known as biculturalism, is evident when an individual identifies with both cultures and this is assumed to be the preferable strategy for minorities relative to other strategies (e.g. Straiton et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2013). Evidence suggests that bicultural people are likely to be the most well-adjusted individuals, receiving greater social support and having increased assets for coping mechanisms, hence reporting better psychological well-being (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Straiton et al., 2019).

Considering the range of different migrants, it is important to acknowledge that identity issues can extend beyond foreign-born migrants or first-generation migrants. Migrants who are native born or, in other words, second-generation migrants, in particular, encounter a unique set of challenges as they navigate the intricate interplay between their heritage and national identity, often referred to as dual identity. Thus, this is in addition to any other identity challenges a person may encounter at any given time. Literature indicates that dual identity is a complex concept. The term is not only used for different purposes but also operationalized in different ways in psychology, leaving no consensus on its definition. Nevertheless, the current study operationalizes it as the person's identification with ethnic and national groups, which appears to be the most commonly used approach in literature (Fleischmann & Verkuyten, 2016). The development of dual identity involves reconciling cultural heritage with prevailing host society values and norms, potentially leading to internal identity challenges and conflicts. The dual identity of second-generation migrants also exposes them to heightened scrutiny. The literature consistently points out that discriminatory experiences are a reality for many second-generation migrants, negatively impacting their self-esteem and overall psychosocial well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014). Similar to studies on first-generation migrants, the most commonly studied group identity for second-generation migrants is ethnic identity, with research demonstrating a positive association between increased ethnic identification and positive mental health outcomes. Yet research yields inconsistent findings on the protective role ethnic identity plays, debating whether ethnic identity plays a beneficial or harmful role in the relationship between discrimination and mental health. Several studies point to its protective role, demonstrating that

strong ethnic identity can protect against the development of depressive symptoms, buffering the negative effects of perceived discrimination among immigrant-status ethnic minorities (Brittian et al., 2015; Thibeault et al., 2018). Other studies demonstrate contradictory results suggesting that increased ethnic identity among ethnic minorities may intensify the distressing effects of discrimination (Mossakowski et al., 2019; Yip et al., 2008). They argue that discrimination may emphasize minority differences and ultimately disparage one's identity, thus harming mental health.

The current study

With the global increase in migrant populations and growing ethnic diversity (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021), understanding and supporting migrant social identities is crucial for enhancing psychological well-being. The existing empirical evidence on migrant social identities has primarily focused on ethnic identity and has mainly relied on quantitative methodologies, which struggle to reflect the multidimensionality of social identities and the wide range of groups that individuals may recognize as a psychologically meaningful and a core part of the self. Building on the social identity approach to mental health, this qualitative study explores how migration and migrant status shape social identities, their perspectives on group membership challenges and their impact on psychological well-being. Different social identity challenges exist between first- and second-generation migrants, and the study does not aim to compare them. Instead, it seeks to reflect on their life experiences, investigating how migration status affects their social identities and mental health. Consequently, the study investigates the influence of migration on the social identities and mental health of first-generation migrants. For native-born second-generation migrants, it delves into their dual identities, mental health implications and ties to their heritage identity.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Using a snowball technique, a total of 20 English- or Greek-speaking respondents who were 18 years of age or older were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The first-generation migrant sample consisted of two males and eight females from Georgia, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Latvia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, who, regardless of reasons for migration and length of stay in Greece, resided in Greece permanently at the time of the interview. Participants with a student status or those who resided in Greece for touristic purposes were excluded from the study. The second-generation migrant sample, who had at least one parent born in a country other than Greece, consisted of three males and seven females of Albanian, Czech, Georgian, Kazakh and Russian descent.

Procedure

After receiving ethics approval from the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee (026560), interviews were conducted from February 2021 to August 2021. Interviews were conducted on Zoom in English or Greek languages; those conducted in Greek were first transcribed into Greek and then translated into English.

The average length of the interviews was 36 min (range: 16–53), and 26 min (range: 13–41) for the first- and second-generation migrants respectively. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that participants were guided by, but not restricted to, the questions, allowing flexibility for participants to share their experiences. Interview topic guides were developed prior to interviews after a thorough review of existing literature and clearly defining the goals of the current study.

Analysis

The current study employed Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) data familiarization: audio recordings, transcripts and debriefing notes were thoroughly reviewed to understand migrant social identities and their impact on well-being, with initial ideas noted; (2) initial coding: systematic coding was applied across the dataset; (3) theme identification: initial codes were grouped into potential themes; (4) theme review: themes were refined through collaboration with a second researcher, resulting in a thematic map; (5) theme definition: ongoing refinement led to clear narratives for each theme (see Figures 1 and 2); and (6) report production: select extracts were used to highlight key arguments and themes.

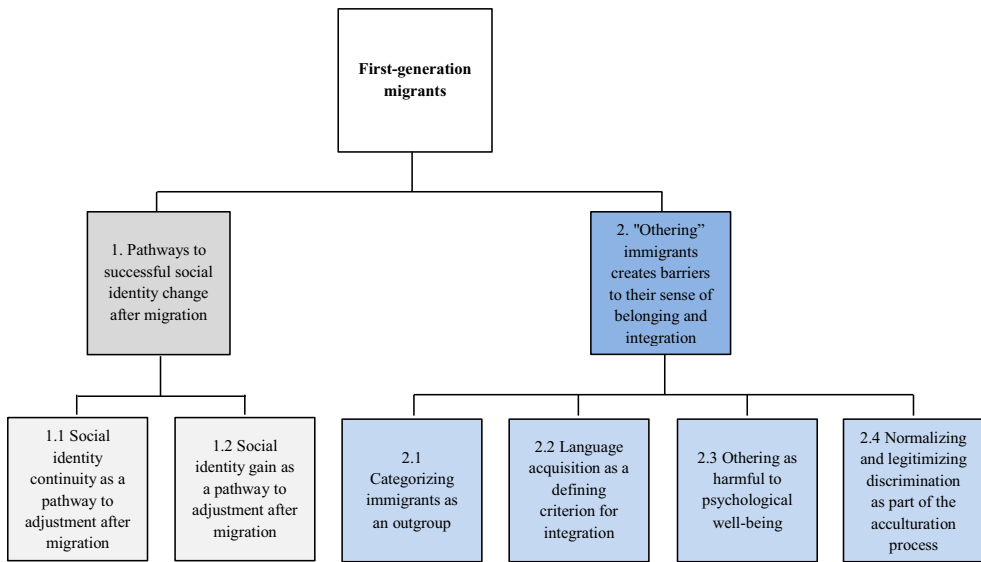


FIGURE 1 Themes and subthemes from interviews with first-generation migrants.

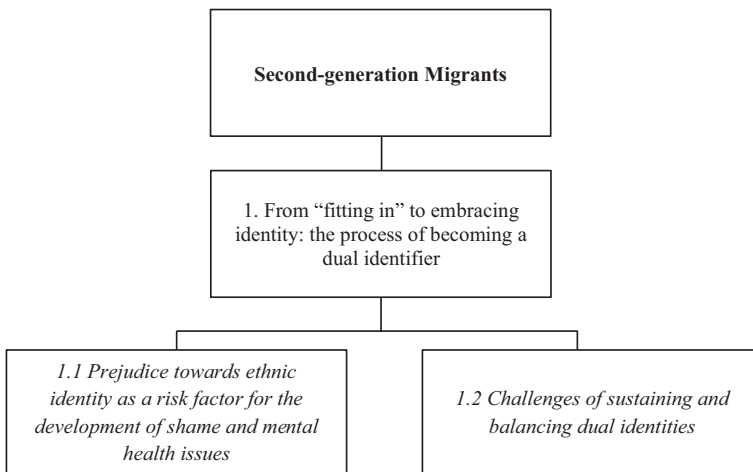


FIGURE 2 Themes and subthemes from interviews with second-generation migrants.

To minimize bias and ensure validity in the coding process, investigator triangulation was used: independent coding of the first three interviews was undertaken by the first and second authors to develop a codebook. The researcher's agreement was high. Any differences and codes that unambiguously did not fall into the coding criteria were resolved by discussion between the authors.

RESULTS

Results from interviews with first-generation migrants

Pathways to successful social identity change after migration

Social identity continuity as a pathway to adjustment after migration

In line with SIMIC, findings from the current study suggest that a way to minimize migration challenges and strive towards an adjustment in the host country is to retain already established group identities. It can be observed that first-generation migrants tend to maintain a strong identification with their place of birth, also referred to as national identity. National identity often reflects a person's background, including where they come from and the environment they grew up in, but it may also reflect traditions, beliefs and values. As some participants mentioned, their place of birth defines who they are. While it appears that, for some people, migration can weaken identification with an individual's nation, some people develop an even stronger sense of connection and pride.

I've definitely adapted here even though until my last breath, I'll be Georgian because I grew up there. I feel more Georgian than Georgians themselves because I'm far from my homeland and it hurts.

(P4)

Maintaining national identity and the connection with its group members may alleviate resettlement stress and challenges and be a great help in making steps towards successful adaptation in the host society.

It's very important to be in an environment with compatriots in the first years. Especially those who came before you because they have more experience and can help you. It's very important. I had a friend from Gaza, who came before me and set up a network at the university with many people. Whatever I needed, he always helped me.

(P8)

As a study by Abdulahad et al. (2014) demonstrated, loss of identification with a familiar country is associated with the development of stress. Consequently, we argue that sustaining social ties with one's nationality and its members may give a sense of familiarity and safety, which can be particularly crucial during adjustment to a new environment.

Migration and the changes it causes to previously established friendship groups proved to be a particularly sensitive topic. Participants described that the most important and meaningful social identity is the one derived from these groups; hence, the distance from friends is strongly felt.

Friendships are the most sensitive part for me because I miss my friends in Latvia even though I have friends here (...). It was a big loss for me, more than the fact that I left and my mom was left alone in Riga.

(P5)

This may be because migration required adjustments in the means of communication and social support participants received from these groups. Nonetheless, participants maintain their connection with friendship groups even years after migration and recognize these groups as an important part of who they are. It also appears that social identity derived from friendships is a bridge to their connection with their cultural identity, keeping the connection between the past and present.

My connection with friends definitely got stronger. I believe it's all about our childhood, traditions, and even language. It's not like I am hunting this feeling of my country. It's inside of my blood. We have the same background, same taste in music, and history. It's very important to keep this connection for me.

(P2)

Friendships are an important part of people's daily lives and, as previous literature has demonstrated, have a range of implications for both physical (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010) and psychological (Holt-Lunstad, 2017) well-being. This is because healthy friendships are a frequent source of key social resources, including social support; they provide a sense of belonging and purpose in the world, as well as boost self-confidence and self-worth. Friendships may be vulnerable to deterioration and termination due to migration, which is why it is particularly important to encourage maintaining identification with friendship groups to increase the likelihood of successfully navigating through the major life transition of migration.

Social identity gain as a pathway to adjustment after migration

Adjustment to the new environment also depends on the extent people are able and willing to gain new group memberships after life transitions. However, participants shared that, despite striving to develop new group memberships, it is not an easy process and that the failure to acquire new identities made some feel alienated in the host country. Despite quite often meeting new acquaintances, participants explained that they often do not replace the previously established group memberships. Participants tend to long for close, meaningful relationships, which newly met acquaintances often cannot provide.

I don't have close friends like I had in Russia (...) It's really hard to find this person when everything is new to you. I have a lot of people to talk to, but it's not the same thing.

(P3)

Despite these challenges, first-generation migrants who gained new social group memberships were more satisfied with their lives in the host country.

Female participants often shared that having a family affects their day-to-day interactions, expanding their social network and increasing their sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Participants discussed Greek values towards families and children in comparison to their country of origin and described the positive changes in Greek attitudes towards them since they had children.

This is where everything started to get better (...) Now I have some new friends. I know some children, and grandmothers who live here. I really feel the difference now (...) Everyone suddenly got acquainted with me.

(P3)

Similarly, people who attended university in Greece described its community as a valuable source for developing new acquaintances and facilitating the acquisition of group memberships, easing participants' way into the community. Participants talked about the university as a means of widening their social network and as a bridge for a quicker adaptation to the host society.

Another new social identity aspect among everyone who migrated is the extent to which they find a sense of belonging to the host country. As mentioned previously, participants recognize the importance

of adapting to the host country and letting changes occur to their identity by integrating features of the new culture. Participants shared that, to some extent, they have adapted some characteristics from Greek culture, which eased the integration process and created a sense of belonging and feelings at home in Greece. This is in line with literature on biculturalism linking identification with the host country and maintaining a sense of belonging to their country of origin with positive mental health outcomes and better adjustment to the host society (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013).

My grandmother used to say that wherever you go you should wear such a hat, so I've adapted here and I have some common habits and opinions with the Greeks (...) even though until my last breath, I'll be Georgian because I grew up there.

(P4)

Overall, we argue that the identity gain pathway is important for migrants because developing new identities increases the likelihood of finding a sense of belonging and grounding in the new society, thereby providing resources for social support in the face of resettlement challenges. Therefore, building on previous findings, taking on new identities may increase the likelihood that migrants view the major life transition in a positive light (Haslam et al., 2008).

'Othering' immigrants creates barriers to their sense of belonging and integration

Categorizing immigrants as an outgroup

Considering the socio-historical context of Greece, known for maintaining its strong national identity throughout history, it has been argued that immigrant populations and the diversity they bring may pose challenges to Greek national identity (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Within this context, a qualitative study by Sapountzis et al. (2006) explored Greek attitudes towards immigrants. They demonstrated that participants tend to draw a line between themselves and immigrants in order to protect and maintain their identity, often referring to them as *others* in the discourse of Greek society. Othering also created a platform for generating various cultural stereotypes of immigrants in Greece, characterizing immigrant populations by hostility and aggressiveness. This is despite the consistent increase in immigrants and diversity in Greece, where today, 13% of the total population is foreign born (UN DESA, 2020).

The othering was also experienced by the participants in the current study as they described that often Greeks tend to separate 'themselves' and 'foreigners'.

I consider that I live in a country that does not evolve, so the mindset of people dates 100 years back. I personally do not face any problems compared to my childhood, but from what I see in my environment, there is still a separation: I am Greek and you are the foreigner.

(P7)

Participants elaborated that there is a further separation between the 'good' and the 'bad' migrant, which determines Greek behaviour and attitudes so that migrants from all backgrounds are not treated in the same way.

When I say that I am from Russia, they tell me that I am lucky and that they love Russia and things like that. I think if I said that I am from Georgia, I would not have the same treatment though.

(P6)

In fact, this is not a new phenomenon. In line with previous qualitative literature on Greek attitudes towards immigrants, we found that this may happen for two reasons. First, it may be that some people

tend to be more in favour of those immigrants who are perceived as 'similar' to them, as was demonstrated in a study by Sapountzis (2013). These are immigrants who share common habits and qualities and are of similar ethnic descent. In regard to this, a participant from Georgia reported the ignorance she perceived in her colleagues regarding her ethnic background. Distancing herself from group members has helped as she does not believe that communication would be effective in resolving this issue.

I'm definitely anxious with people I work with. I have met many people who are ignorant and don't understand history, and who try to categorize you. I don't feel particularly anxious, I just try to avoid such people. They will put labels on you that you don't like, but there is no way to explain it to them. It's pointless.

(P7)

Second, Sapountzis (2013) demonstrated that some people might be hesitant towards those migrants who receive benefits, believing that giving benefits to these people produces inequality. As explained further, this may stem from stereotypes and prejudice in the discourse about immigrants, criticizing them for claiming benefits and not contributing to the country's development. Such cultural stereotypes were confirmed in the current study by a participant from Ukraine, who faced bureaucratic problems in regard to her staying in Greece despite being fluent in Greek and finishing a degree at a Greek university. An acquaintance of hers seemed to be surprised about the documentation issues she faces as she compared her situation to those immigrants who have received some benefits from the Greek government.

I've heard from a lot of Greek people who are saying like 'Come on, so many immigrants come here, take documents, and money from government. How come you cannot stay here after so many years?'

(P2)

Interestingly, since the 2015 refugee crisis, participants have noticed that negative attitudes towards refugees and other culturally diverse migrants have increased.

Othring as harmful to psychological well-being

Literature on migrant othering has mostly focused on barriers it creates to migrant integration in the host society. Nonetheless, we would also like to point out the harm othering may have on migrant psychological well-being even when the desired level of integration has been achieved. One participant believed that, regardless of the achieved level of integration into the host society, there are always things that remind them that migrants are different.

I lived here for so many years. I did so many things. I learned the language. I finished university. I'm almost a local, but I cannot stay here. It's like they want to remind you that you are different. That's very stressful and I think it's unfair. The system is disgusting (...) I remember when I found out that I cannot stay I was crying. I went to a psychologist because I was so stressed.

(P2)

Cultural stereotypes that construct immigrants as aggressive can be hurtful and have damaging effects on immigrant mental health, especially when fellow colleagues use them as a reason for withholding trust.

I went to girls and said in a friendly way: "these two interpreters are calling you in bad words in front of the beneficiary, that's why other people are laughing at you." They didn't believe me, they reported me to the office for accusing colleagues. (...) How can I trust

now? I went to a psychologist for 6 months because I couldn't stop crying (...) I didn't want to communicate with people. When I came back home, I couldn't sleep, I was crying until 5 or 6 in the morning and had 2–3 h of sleep.

(P10)

It is evident that such othering has made participants lose their sense of psychological security, leading to the development of depressive and anxiety symptoms.

It is important to note here that the level of migrant integration does not solely depend on their willingness and ability to do so but it also depends on the extent the host society is willing to accept and include them as valuable members of society. The persistence of negative social interactions between immigrants and the majority may create a barrier to migrant integration into the host society, preventing migrants from achieving positive psychological well-being.

Language acquisition as a defining criterion for integration

One of the main signals of foreignness, and cause of othering, is a lack of knowledge of the host country's language, which has been shown to be one of the main barriers to developing a sense of belonging to the host country and integrating into the host society (Esser, 2006). Hence, a long line of literature points to the central role that second-language acquisition plays in the integration processes (e.g. Berry, 1997; Hawkins et al., 2022; Phillimore et al., 2018). Participants in our study discussed language as a means of integration. Not being able to speak the host country's language was a key barrier to interactions with native speakers and the participants' ability to express themselves, which created feelings of not belonging.

Before I started learning Greek and when I couldn't communicate, there were times when I felt like I didn't belong there. It was a bit challenging. Not everyone speaks English in Greece, so when you are trying but can't express yourself, it's a challenge. So at times I kind of felt that I don't belong here, but then you go through it by learning the language and the culture.

(P1)

Limited social interactions with the majority due to low language proficiency also limit opportunities for receiving social support. For example, a participant, who experienced major resettlement challenges in the first year, described the barrier she faced in communicating with her fellow classmates and letting them know about the issues she faced.

It was very stressful, very stressful because a lot of things that I know in Ukrainian or in Russian, I simply couldn't explain. I couldn't write a project in the university, so it was very difficult. It was even difficult with the people I studied with. They were asking 'Hi, how are you', and I'm just like 'ola kalo, esi [Greek to English translation: everything is good, how are you]?' (...), but I couldn't explain how I actually felt and what I was going through.

(P2)

Participants, who eventually learned Greek, saw the benefits of it, describing the positive changes in terms of communication with Greeks and seeing life and Greek culture from a local perspective. One participant explicitly stated why she believes that the acquisition of the host country's language is vital:

Language plays a really big role. The better you speak, the better you integrate in society. I really believe that.

(P3)

Language serves to facilitate migrant integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), and thus lack of language proficiency creates barriers to positive social interactions between the minority and majority (Konya, 2007; Phillimore, 2011). As a result, due to the limited community engagement language incompetence creates, it is also, arguably, a barrier to developing new group memberships in the host country, which is one of the key pathways discussed previously to achieving positive social identity and as a result psychological well-being after life transitions.

Normalizing and legitimizing discrimination as part of the acculturation process

Despite long efforts to address and reduce discrimination towards minorities, it appears that immigrants have and continue to accept such discrimination, which they regard as part of the acculturation process. Participants in our study evidenced the tendency to normalize discrimination. Whether a participant has or has not experienced maltreatment, including discrimination, social exclusion or sexual harassment, participants constructed such attitudes and behaviour as a social norm and part of the integration process. Some participants mentioned that it is not specific to Greece or Greek people but happens everywhere.

Every Greek, every Georgian or every Russian in their country wants to be dominant, it's a fact. It's not exactly racism; we all have it a little inside us too. We all pretty much have it, just like when I was little, I did not want to see Tatars and Muslims in my country, so clearly people look at me strangely. Even now that I'm successful in my life, I still receive jealousy and racism. I cannot say that Greeks are racists because racism exists in every nationality.

(P4)

Another participant described an instance when she was directly discriminated against because of being a refugee, from which she learned to avoid social situations that might reveal her migration status. When it is not possible, she tends to accept the way people treat her.

We rented a house, a very expensive one because no one trusted us. We were refugees. I don't judge them, the way that I'm thinking – I can understand them. They were afraid to rent a house to someone who had this card because they would probably face some problems because of that.

(P10)

With an aim to understand the reasons behind the legitimacy of group-based discrimination in our interviews, we draw upon the model of responses to exclusion as proposed by Jetten et al. (2013). The model conceptualizes the processes behind appraisal forming to understand when group-based rejection is perceived as legitimate or illegitimate and the consequences it may have on people's well-being. It has been argued that group-based rejection will be perceived as illegitimate when (1) people realize that rejection is targeted towards individuals as group members and (2) people realize that there are no valid reasons behind this. It is in these circumstances that people engage in a collective response, challenging rejections and drawing from the resources of group memberships to cope and protect their well-being. What we see from our interviews is that, despite perceiving rejection as group-based, people tend to believe that there are valid reasons for this. The literature points to the range of adverse consequences this can have on people's well-being, suggesting that perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination negatively impacts mental health (e.g. Chen et al., 2017; Tinghög et al., 2017). However, what we see in our study is that participants tend to deny any emotional effects that discrimination has had on them, often mentioning that such adverse social situations do not trouble them anymore. For example,

I generally don't care what people think of me. When I start talking they look at me strangely but it doesn't always happen. At first, I didn't like it at all and, obviously, I don't like it now, but I don't care anymore.

(P5)

Discrimination and its effects on well-being was a topic of discussion in all interviews and, as presented above, often talked about in an ambiguous way. This may be that constructing a stance of indifference towards discrimination is used as a form of defence mechanism to avoid the more distressing feelings that these socially adverse situations would otherwise have caused.

Results from interviews with second-generation migrants

From 'fitting in' to embracing identity: The process of becoming a dual identifier

Prejudice towards ethnic identity as a risk factor for the development of shame and mental health issues

The question 'Who am I?' is a primary question during adolescence, which psychologists have regarded as a critical period for personal and social identity formation. The main objective of youth is fitting in or, in other words, to be accepted by peers, which is why friendship groups during this period of life become increasingly important (e.g. Hogg et al., 2011). Worries about fitting in and consciousness of differing identities compared to peers were consistently observed across all interviews, contributing to the development of participants' shame about their identity.

When I was little, my grandmother used to take me to school and talk to me in Pontian,¹ I was ashamed. I don't know why. Or when my mom, grandmother and I were going out and they were speaking in Russian, I was also ashamed. As a child, I had this in me – shame. I don't know why, I wanted to say that I am Greek.

(P15)

Validation from peers is critical during early adolescence and may determine the extent to which second-generation migrant children will develop the identity of their parents (Gharaei et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2017). Encounters with peer discrimination because of one's identity often inhibit adolescents from developing and embracing a strong ethnic identity, encouraging youth to engage in further identity exploration (del Toro et al., 2021).

There were times when I was little that I said I didn't like being from another country. There was also prejudice against us then. I was already ashamed to say that I am Pontian. Inside the house, however, it didn't harm us (...) it was when I was in primary school.

(P16)

Adverse social experiences also shaped the way migrants build their social networks. That is, participants belonging to prejudiced ethnic/national groups in Greece, particularly Albanians (Iosifides & Kizos, 2007), often try to avoid developing friendship groups of people from the same background. Some participants explicitly said that this was a strategy for escaping adverse social situations, which they often experienced while growing up.

Most of my friends are Greek or from other countries, but not many are from Albania. Maybe because of my harsh childhood and racism. A child who was playing with an Albanian child was rejected somehow from other social groups, so I was feeling ashamed with other Albanians. I guess, I tried to hide myself. Maybe as years went by, I

¹Pontian Greeks are ethnically Greek group, who traditionally lived in Greece in certain regions. Due to historical events, many of the Pontians lived in the Soviet Union and after its collapse repatriated to Greece (see Kokkinos, 1991).

subconsciously developed a thought that I cannot have Albanian friends. I told myself that I don't want to have a wall in front of me.

(P11)

It was observed that prejudice and the associated trauma also contributed to the development of psychological symptoms. This is in line with research demonstrating that perceiving the self as a target of discrimination is detrimental to mental health in adult (Schmitt et al., 2014) and adolescent populations (Benner & Wang, 2018), but it may be particularly detrimental when discriminated against by people of the same identity group (Giuliani et al., 2018). This is because, as Haslam et al. (2018) note, 'A person will generally experience the health-related benefits or costs of a given group membership only to the extent that they identify with that group' (p. 17). Hence, for second-generation migrants, born and raised in Greece, strong identification with Greek identity seems natural and being rejected by Greeks, therefore, particularly impacts their mental health.

Crying a lot of times. It was really hard because I was trying to adapt to society. The adaptation came easily, but came easily because I was telling myself that this is your life now. Your parents are from Albania. It's not something bad, cultural differences are around us, so stick with this and live a life, knowing that there are a lot of types of people around us. You aren't the only one that faces racism. So, a lot of crying, a lot of thinking, thinking again. why, why, why? I always had this in my head – why? Why are my parents Albanians? Why are we poor? Why do they have to live in exile and come here? Why do people have this perception about us? (...) It was like a dark, grey cloud over me, and drops of rain were the thoughts that I had all the time. They were falling on my shoulders, and I was feeling really stressed, really depressed for many years.

(P11)

Challenges of sustaining and balancing dual identities

Early adulthood is a vital period in migrant lives as they transition from hiding to embracing their identity. Significant changes in identity occur for reasons such as leaving the school's environment, widening the individual's social network and gaining knowledge of ethnic and cultural diversity. As presented below, the participant's self-perception of being an alien in Greek society changed into becoming a person with an embraced dual identity.

I don't have to hide my identity and that my parents are Albanians anymore. I am trying to find a safe place and time to let people know that I am Albanian (...) The first time when I came across people and had this interaction with people from a lot of cities around Attica was in the university. People from different cultural, social and financial backgrounds. So I was finally receiving this safety that there are other people around who are different as well (...) It was like a big hug from people without them knowing.

(P11)

Scholars often argue that, in order to be dual identifiers, people have to identify with both ethnic and national groups highly. Nonetheless, the current study takes a different approach, in line with Simon and Ruhs (2008), arguing that a person does not have to identify equally highly with both groups to be considered a dual identifier. What we see in our interviews is that second-generation migrants have strongly developed identification with their birth country and, without a doubt, call themselves Greeks. Participants described their strong sense of belonging to the Greek mentality and Greek way of life.

I don't feel very close to Russians. I feel closer to Greek culture, it's like I'm of Greek descent.

(P13)

Similarly, another participant shared:

I would say that I don't feel connected enough with my Russian identity, I belong here.
(P18)

Conversely, ethnic identification or, in other words, identification with the identity of their parents appears to be much more complex. Despite growing up in a family with a mixture of traditions and often having the culture of origin as the main one in large family gatherings, participants believe that a strong sense of identity is not a given. Participants clarified that eating family's traditional food, listening to music and following other family traditions do not mean highly identifying as Albanian, Russian or Armenian, for example.

I am not much influenced because I no longer go to Albania and because I have grown with the local mentality. But when relatives come and play Albanian music, or speak in the dialect they speak there, I enjoy it. It sparks joy from your homeland (...) I have certainly adopted many pieces from them, but the Greek culture, of course, gives me a different energy.
(P12)

Across interviews, the lack of ethnic identification can be attributed to two primary reasons. First, there is the issue of incompatible identities. Many participants from Albania and the former Soviet Union face challenges in reconciling their upbringing in traditional families with the modern Greek environment. They highlight differences in mentality and behaviour between Greek culture and their own, making it challenging to embrace both identities equally, often leading to conflicts. Cultural differences can be particularly noticed when interacting with family members, as participants describe instances of feeling misunderstood by their family.

Sometimes it's frustrating because Albanians are more traditional, Greeks are also traditional, but they are trying to adapt to modern times. So I am trying a little bit to balance this. Traditionalism and modernist, so yea it's kind of frustrating, but I can describe myself as a modern-traditionalist.
(P11)

The importance of identity compatibility has been demonstrated in previous research (Iyer et al., 2009). Particularly, it was found that the more incompatible an identity is perceived compared to already established identities, the more people tend to reject it.

Second, it seems that family plays a vital role in second-generation migrant ethnic identities, with participants often 'blaming' parents for their lack of identification with their ethnic group. Considering the length of a family's time in Greece, it may also be that the more families integrate into Greek society, the more the family's culture becomes mixed with Greek, leading to a lack of ethnic identification among immigrant descendants.

Now, as the generations go by, the manners and customs will probably be forgotten, or at least they will not be the same. Our parents have not passed it on to us 100%, so that we can continue the traditions.
(P14)

The balance between the two identities becomes particularly challenging in large family gatherings, such as weddings. Participants avoid being perceived as 'too Greek', which often creates conflict between the family members. Particularly, they might be perceived as outsiders who reject their ethnic identity.

If you don't switch between identities, there will be a problem. Family looks at you strangely because you are essentially rejecting or you are ashamed of your origin, when this is not the case. So just change your character and behaviour depending on the occasion. (...) I went to a Greek school. At home, I spoke Greek and not Russian. I didn't speak Pontic, while the rest of the family spoke. I was clearly the 'Greek' of the family. Although I participated in all the Pontian events, I was always different from the rest.

(P17)

There is a lack of evidence to speculate about the effects external pressure on ethnic identity has on mental health. However, data from our interviews show that such pressure comes at a cost to participants' psychological well-being, making participants feel uncomfortable, frustrated and judged about who they are. While most participants seem to cope with the family's pressure so far, forced identity switching may not be a long-term solution as it may reduce the sense of belonging to family members.

I believe that a person has limits. You cannot always wear a mask and feel comfortable everywhere. I believe that if the older generation cannot understand that the younger generation is different and we cannot have the same habits as them, at some point, the younger generation will 'explode' and 'revolt'. At the moment, I feel fine, but I'm not comfortable.

(P17)

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to expand knowledge on migrant social identities, their ties to significant social groups and their impact on psychological well-being. The study's focus was not to compare first- and second-generation migrant identities in Greece or their associated challenges, but rather to explore the distinct life experiences of these two seemingly similar yet different migrant groups. This exploration demonstrated that migration status plays a role in both social identity and mental health outcomes.

Regarding first-generation migrants, the study examined how migration affects their social identities and, subsequently, their mental health outcomes. Migration results in various shifts in first-generation migrant social identities. For those people who belonged to meaningful groups at their previous place of residence, migration means losing the sense of bond with group members. Nonetheless, people strive to maintain their identification with these pre-migration groups, such as family and friends, while also strengthening their identification with their culture of origin. Despite preserving connections to previous group memberships, leaving meaningful groups behind has consequences for migrant well-being, leading to feelings of loss and emptiness. Moving to a new place of residence involves meeting new people and developing new identities, which can be more challenging than maintaining previous group memberships. Although people tend to develop a sense of belonging to new groups, including student communities or neighbourhoods, these groups often do not become an internalized part of the self. Instead, they serve as a bridge to integration into the host society. The integration process itself presents complexities and barriers rooted in the host country's tendency to perceive migrants as outsiders rather than members of its society. In Greek society, immigrants are often perceived as outsiders unless fully integrated (Sapountzis et al., 2006). A significant barrier to integration, identified by both the majority and minority groups, is language. Low language proficiency reinforces the majority's perception of immigrants as outsiders, limits interactions, creates misunderstandings and reduces a sense of belonging to the host society. Discrimination is another major barrier, diminishing migrants' willingness to engage and communicate with the majority.

Regarding second-generation migrants, the study aimed to explore the impact of growing up with a dual identity on their mental health and their connection to their ethnic group. Findings indicate that despite exposure to ethnic identity through family traditions (e.g. music and food), second-generation

migrants often distance themselves from this identity during childhood and adolescence due to social challenges such as prejudice, discrimination and exclusion in schools. Young adulthood becomes a crucial phase as they navigate the complexities of embracing both identities. Balancing these identities proves challenging, and pressure to pretend to identify with their ethnic group causes discomfort and frustration, potentially detrimentally affecting their psychological well-being in the long term.

In line with the main objective to examine the impact of social identity on migrant mental health, this study enhanced understanding of how migration and migration status affect social identity and mental well-being. Findings identified factors that either facilitated (e.g. university community) or hindered (e.g. discrimination) changes in first-generation migrant social identity. However, notable mental health challenges were associated with the difficulty of forming new group affiliations in the host society. Those unable to establish meaningful connections post-migration often experienced symptoms of depression, including sadness. As a result, pre-migration group memberships set high expectations for connection within new social groups, leading to frustration, loneliness and despair when such bonds could not be developed. For second-generation migrants, childhood and adolescence years were detrimental to their mental health. Specifically, those who encountered discrimination and social exclusion in schools reported experiencing depressive symptoms, including crying and sadness, along with shame over their differing identities. Even in adulthood, embracing their identities brings challenges and mental health burdens, such as anxiety and frustration, often due to family pressure to uphold their heritage identity.

While the two migrant groups were analysed independently, our analysis sheds light on the common challenges and resilience patterns shared across generations and underscores the generation-specific challenges that shape their integration and psychological well-being. It is important to highlight that the concept of 'othering' is a shared experience across both generations and underscores a common challenge faced by migrants in developing a sense of belonging and acceptance in societies, adversely affecting their mental health. On the other hand, analysis demonstrates some notable differences between the two generations in relation to social identity formation. For first-generation migrants, the challenge often lies in balancing the retention of the previously established group identities with the acquisition of new group memberships in the host country in line with the SIMIC. Their experiences are characterized by the difficulty in finding meaningful connections in the new environment, and sometimes longing for the deep relationships they left behind. In contrast, second-generation migrants face the unique challenge of navigating dual identities from an early age. Their identity crisis is not about maintaining a previously established identity versus acquiring a new one but rather about balancing and integrating two co-existing identities. They often confront issues related to fitting in and face internal conflicts regarding their ethnic identity, influenced by the societal attitudes and prejudices they encounter. Recognizing these parallel yet distinct pathways is vital for developing effective support systems and policies that are responsive to the diverse needs of migrant communities.

The study is not without limitations. Interviews were only conducted in Greek and English, which limited participation to those proficient in either language. This may have affected first-generation migrant findings, excluding those potentially facing more significant language barriers and greater difficulties in developing new group memberships and a sense of belonging to the host country. Future research should consider multiple languages and focus on one cultural background to explore social identity change across generations. Furthermore, despite qualitative research being known for its quality and depth of interviews, another potential limitation of the current study is the small number of participants in each migrant group.

Given that interviews were conducted with migrants in Greece, it is important to consider the socio-cultural context of Greece and the discourse on immigration attitudes. Culturally constructed stereotypes of immigrants may not be generalized to other cultures. Similarly, it is also important to consider the socio-cultural context of Greece, when considering the culture and ethnicity of the participants included in the study. The first-generation sample may have adjusted well or shared similar values, potentially making integration and social connections easier than for those from more distant cultures. Conversely, the second-generation sample included individuals of Albanian background, which should

acknowledge the history of Albanian migrants in Greece and the associated stereotypes and prejudice (e.g. Iosifides & Kizos, 2007). Thus, experiences may vary among ethnic and cultural groups. Lastly, the shorter length of the interviews is likely due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, the online interview format and the overarching context of the COVID-19 pandemic when interviews were conducted, which itself presented additional psychological and social challenges.

Overall, findings from the current study contribute to and strengthen the social identity approach to migrant mental health by demonstrating that group life is an important determinant of psychological well-being and has wider implications for psychological interventions and policy. Irrespective of migration reasons, changes to social identities and the social environment, in general, are common denominators for all people who undergo migration. The study is novel in its application of the SIMIC, which helped us to understand migrants' experience of resettlement and adjustment in a new country. Building on data from our interviews and contributing to the social identity approach, we highlight the importance of understanding how social identities change in response to migration in order to develop policies that promote migrant adjustment. Considering the pressure migration may take on people's well-being, we believe that sustaining social connections after migration should be a primary focus when addressing migrant mental health. In addition, we emphasize the importance for migrants of receiving community and social support since one of the main hurdles identified in the current study is taking on new social identities after relocation. Overall, immigrants with wider social networks and meaningful group memberships will be better able to draw on the resources that groups provide to cope with resettlement challenges.

With regards to second-generation migrants, struggles with ethnic identity, identity questioning and a will to hide their family roots were common. School years, in particular, have been characterized as the most emotionally challenging period in their lives. Therefore, interventions aimed to encourage adolescents to embrace their identities early on are vital for their psychological well-being, helping them untangle identity confusion, which often develops due to their social environment. Changes in social policy to address bullying and social exclusion in Greek schools are vital to protect the mental health of children and adolescents with migrant status, in addition to institutional changes in curriculum, aimed to educate students about ethnic and cultural diversity promoting diversity and social inclusion in schools. Generally, practical initiatives promoting positive social interactions between migrant and majority groups should be encouraged.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kristine Brance: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; data curation; validation; visualization. **Vasileios Chatzimpyros:** Conceptualization; methodology; writing – review and editing; supervision; investigation; validation; formal analysis. **Richard P. Bentall:** Writing – review and editing; supervision; conceptualization; validation; investigation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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