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## **Intercultural Communication in the Civil Services in Greece: The opinion of the civil servants.**

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### **Introduction**

As a result of the expansion of Europe and the constant and significant presence of ethnic minorities from the Third World, European cities are rapidly turning into cosmopolitan and multicultural centres. For this reason, the public service offices, that until now have not considered the cultural differences of their clientele, will have to re-examine their professional approach in dealing with these new populations. Civil service offices are the places where different cultures often meet. Therefore the professional personnel charged with serving the public have to be prepared to provide assistance to all clients, as they themselves become models of respect and consideration of cultural differences (Hains et al, 2000).

Unfortunately we seem to still be far from achieving this goal. Every day, either directly or indirectly, the conditions that maintain misconceptions and discrimination in the relationship between public institutions, public structures and users persist. Communication towards the client appears to not yet be concerned with intercultural diversity issues. The personnel of public offices are not yet trained to employ an intercultural communication approach.

### **Purpose of the study**

This paper presents the findings of a small scale study conducted in Ioannina, a city in north western Greece where there is a large concentration of migrant populations, especially from Albania. Prior to the presentation of our findings, we put forward a brief review of immigration to Greece and an analysis of its impact.

### **Background-Immigrations impact**

Immigration constitutes one of the more important challenges facing modern states. Generally, immigration as a phenomenon is seen as the rule and no longer the exception, given that important migratory cycles are observed throughout human history (Kassimati, 2003; Nikolaou, 2005).

Greece has a long history as a country exporting workforce. Despite the spectacular change in this status during the course of the last 20 years, it is estimated that even today when few Greek immigrate, more than 3.5 million Greeks live and work abroad. On the other hand, the current reality, which began to be shaped progressively from the middle of the 1980s, finds Greece among the foremost immigrant reception countries. Recent data reports, which are not always in agreement across sources, calculate the number of immigrants in Greece from 870,000 to around 1,000,000 individuals (Bagavos, 2003). Some estimate that there are up to 1.1 million immigrants out of a total of 11.04 million

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residents in Greece (Alpha Bank, 2005). According to other, informal and unconfirmed calculations, foreigners in Greece are closer to 1.5 million individuals. In the 2001 Greek Census (Greek National Statistical Organisation, 2002), 797,093 foreigners were recorded. However, it is estimated that the actual number is even higher, having contributed to the real increase in the country's population over the course of the last decade, given that the natural increase of the Greek population for the same period is negative, that is, more deaths than births (Ibid, 2002). Table 1 shows the increase of the total population of Greece and the influence of immigrant arrivals in these totals; noting that from 1996 to today, with the exception of 1997, that there has been a natural reduction in the Greek population (more deaths than births).

**Table 1 - Factors of Greek population change using various inventories**

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Births</i>	<i>Deaths</i>	<i>Natural increase</i>	<i>Net Immigration</i>			<i>Total increase</i>
				<i>Greek nationals</i>	<i>Foreigner nationals</i>	<i>Total increase</i>	
1951–60	1,533,249	577,212	956,037	-224,450	24,165	-200,285	755,752
1961–70	1,532,475	693,050	839,425	-497,169	37,832	-459,337	380,088
1971–80	1,438,877	801,509	637,368	255,552	78,856	334,408	971,776
1981–90	1,183,634	911,913	272,441	251,190	-4,148	247,042	519,483
1991–00	1,021,381	999,764	21,617	52,746	629,817	682,563	704,180

SOURCES: Greek National Statistical Organisation, Results of Inventories and Elements of Natural Population Movement; Drettakis, 2002; Bagavos, 2003.

At the same time, Greece, as with all developed countries, faces demographic ageing. This ageing is a result of increased life expectancy coming as a consequence of improved standards of living and scientific progress, and in combination with the reduction of birth rates and fertility. Thus Greece finds itself with an increasing portion of its population over the age of 60. According to the United Nations (2005) in developed countries, which includes Greece, there is marked and rapid increase in the number of elderly persons. The percentage of Greeks over the age of 60, from 23% where it is today, is expected to reach 36.8% by 2050. Indeed, individuals over 80 years of age which account for 3.6% today are expected to reach 9.5% of the total population in 2050 (UN, 2005). In the face of this rather disheartening landscape, as shaped by the demographic forecasts for Greece and Europe, many agree that this will have negative consequences for the economy and growth (Alpha Bank, 2005; Card et al., 2005) unless something does not change. The entry of immigrants appears to constitute an important factor in augmenting the otherwise dwindling active workforce of countries of reception. This is particularly true for immigrants aged between 24 and 59 years, the so called 'ages of positive saving' (UN, 2005). It is characteristic that in 1999, for every 100 foreigners, 9 were aged from 0-14 years, 86 between 15 and 64 and only the 5 were 65 years and more, while the corresponding sizes for the Greeks were 16, 67 and 17 (Bagavos, 2003; Tsimos, 2001 in Bagavos, 2003, p.75). 'Over the next 35 years, avoiding a future

reduction in the total workforce and a maintenance at the current levels requires an annual net immigration total, that will not simply be positive but must continue to increase' (Bavagos, 2003).

It has been argued that the positive economic revival of Greece during the 1990s is owed in part to the surge in the number of low cost economic immigrant workers, but also in the work of significant numbers of illegal immigrants (Alpha Bank, 2005; Nikolaou, 2005; Kasimati, 2003; Ioakeimoglou, 2001). The reception of cheap labour force through immigration is seen to function positively both in the short-term as well as in the medium-term for the economy of reception countries, in that legally employed immigrants will pay social security contributions and will commensurately make relatively small use of social services of state (Card et al., 2005). In either case, a review of the ideological and institutional frameworks regarding immigrants is required, given that in many instances both the state and the citizenry continue to consider immigrants as temporary sojourners in Greece; and as such need to be taken into consideration with respect to their access to civil services. The possible benefits that can accrue from realizing that immigrants will remain permanently are beneficial to both the immigrants (i.e., right to legal citizenship) and the nation (i.e., increase in younger workforce).

The supporters of liberal immigration policies in Europe note that immigrants, despite the high level of education or training that many bring with them, occupy employment sectors for which the native population labour force shows little interest. Immigrants not only do not take away jobs, but on the contrary their presence creates new positions through the increase of productivity and consumption (Ioakeimoglou, 2001). On the other hand, looking at the foreigner workforce employment sector we see that while the percentage registered as working and consequently paying contributions to the social security system is quite high (51,4%), the number of protected family members (students, housewives, children less than 10 years, etc.) is equally high (see Table 2). These individuals use the country's social services, without paying contributions themselves.

### **Immigration Policies – the immigrants as users of Social Services**

The recent history of immigration to Greece can be distinguished by two periods: the first concerns the first half the 1990s, which was marked by a total lack of organized immigration and an 'explosive influx' of immigrants, mainly from neighbouring Albania, but also from other countries. The second period, from 1997 to today is characterized by the legalisation and control of immigration efforts of the Greek state for those who reside and work in the country (Presidential Decree 358 and 359/1997, with the establishment of 'Green Card').

**Table 2 - Distribution of immigrants depending on the situation of employment in 2001**

Situation of Employment	Number of Immigrants	Percentage
Worker	391,674	51.4%
Seeking work	21,593	2.8%
Seeking work for first time	18,885	2.5%
Student	85,031	11.2%
Pensioner	30,148	4.0%
Rentier	1,476	0.2%
Domestic	108,236	14.2%
Other cases	23,900	3.1%
Individuals aged < 10 years	81,248	10.7%
Total	762,191	100.0%

SOURCE: Greek National Statistical Organisation, 2001 Census

Until 1991 there were no significant changes in the institutional framework in relation to immigrants as the legislation in effect dated from 1929. In 1991 a new law (Law 1975/91) was enacting replacing Law 4310/29, however, in many respects it was a copy of the old law and did little to enhance the plight of the immigrant as it was more concerned with issues such alien habitation and movement, police oversight of passports and deportation. Immigrants continued to face impermanence with respect to their status and situation, considered 'workers' and not 'citizens', and having to deal with both the indifference of the social services in terms of assistance and protection and the repressive policies of the police and generally speaking civil authorities. As Poulantzas (1974, p. 5) states, 'It is the policy of non assimilation, compatible with the modern imperialistic nature of capitalism and the repercussions that this involves in the interior of country of a capitalistic metropolis, as Greece has become. As such are referenced the sovereignty and the marginalisation of immigrants into strata' (Poulantzas as cited in Georgoulas, 2001, p. 207). This resembled the German policy of 'guest workers' (Gastarbeiter), and as such appears to have been either consciously or unconsciously based on the German perception for the immigration (Reich, 1995).

In 2001 and in 2005, as a result of a changing demographic and social reality, the Greek state enacted a new institutional immigration policy framework that sought to clarify the following:

- a. The establishment of the immigrant legalization process for those that live and work in Greece, with simultaneous stricter control of immigrant entry. This effort cannot be considered as being effective as more than 500,000 foreigners continue to live in Greece illegally. Moreover, the processes continue to be complex and time-consuming, maintaining bureaucracy at the local authority (municipality and prefecture) as well as at the central authority level (Ministry).
- b. The orientation to a process of 'integration' and 'inclusion of' immigrants into Greek society. This is attempted by focusing on the following three axes dealing with: employment and social security, equal access to education, and promotion of immigrant family reunification processes. However, despite these

measures, it appears that serious difficulties still exist with regard to the more permanent stay of immigrants and their families in Greece. This is due in large part to both the resiliency to change that characterizes Greek bureaucracy but also to long standing attitudes that make registration and the acquisition of Greek citizenship traditionally strict for 'those not of Greek origin/heritage'.

- c. The establishment of a rational and coherent immigration process for those who wish to legally enter Greece, with the collaboration of local (prefecture, region) and the Consular authorities, to determine workforce needs and the submission of applications from the foreigners interested in covering these needs.

All of the aforementioned with respect to Greece's immigration policy, but also in line with the country's real needs based on demographic and economic data, leads us to the conclusion that the immigrants are for all intents and purposes already users of administrative and social services and are likely to increase their use of these services. This is a reality that we encounter in many increasingly multicultural cities of the developed world. In this context, the services, public and private, have become the meeting places for both native and the immigrant populations. Specifically what the social services have as their basic mission, guaranteeing equality for all, requires that they constitute an example with regard to the acceptance and the respect of cultural variation. However, what we have witnessed is an ineffective and nonproductive form of communication between natives and immigrants, as well as the appearance of discrimination at the expense of the immigrant groups. We argue that a cross-cultural communication deficit in terms of knowledge and expertise exists in the public sector. Thus, the professional personnel untrained and ill informed to effectively deal with the changing social milieu, tend to react subjectively towards immigrants' 'different ness', using their expectations, objectives and personnel value system as their reference criteria (Psimmenos, 2003).

Most times, even in their contact with the social services, immigrants fall victims to the negative stereotypical perceptions that accompany them and create feelings of fear, reserve and avoidance in natives. Research studies have shown that, often with the help of mass media (Galanis, 2003, 1991, 1989), the image of immigrants is considerably downgraded in the reception societies. Immigrants are often considered responsible for unemployment, devaluation of living standards and increased criminality (Kasimati, 2001; Kourtovic, 2001; Nikolaou, 2005; Petrakou, 2001; Galanis, 2003). Moreover, immigrants, despite the significant ethno cultural diversity between themselves, are usually treated as if they were a single homogeneous group, in the dipole 'we' – 'them' (Petrakou, 2001). This however, is worrying when it is also observed in the scope and substance of public service employee communication with immigrants. This we hypothesize is owed to the subjectivity with which each employee conceives and executes his/her work in tandem with the lack of explicit directives and directions. On the other hand, it is also due to the complete absence of relevant training on work related issues under multicultural conditions and intercultural communication. Finally, we consider that these employees, to a very large degree, identify the rightful beneficiary of social services as being a Greek national, who exclusively has the prerogative of enjoying the civil and social rights guaranteed by the state, while immigrants are seen in many instances as having fewer rights than natives. Research in the area of social services has shown that these services are intensely prone to seeing immigrants through

a prism of subjectivity. That is, in the way they are seen by employers and society, how labour ethics are understood and applied, the role of professional and national values of employees, the immigrants role in the job market, their efficiency and the role that they in play in the society (Psimmenos, 2003).

However, the question remains, are Greek civil and social services effectively and cogently prepared to assist immigrants to access those services to which they are entitled?

### **Study Parameters**

Our study in this phase should be considered a preliminary foray into the subject. It had as its underlying purpose an effort to begin to identify the awareness, comprehension and knowledge of Greek civil servants in terms of their intercultural communication skills. The randomly selected group sampled consisted of 60 of the 200 civil servants (social workers, teachers, local government and judicial system employees) attending an international seminar on social representations and intercultural communication in Ioannina (Eperos, Greece). The international seminar they attended was entitled 'Immigrant Reception by Civil Services and Cross-cultural Communication' and was organized by the Laboratory of Studies on Emigrant Hellenism and Cross-cultural Education (EMAEΔE), of the University of Ioannina's Department of Primary Education. The period during which the study was actualized was the fall of 2004. The data was collected using a close-ended questionnaire and structured interviews constructed along the same lines as the questionnaire but also to draw out possible qualitative data.

To identify the participant's position in relation to these three factors (awareness, comprehension and knowledge) we gave the questionnaire and conducted the structured interviews to solicit their responses to the following general research questions:

- Do civil servants believe that they are doing a good job with respect to their engagement with immigrants?
- Are problems in their agencies related to working with immigrants?
- Do civil servants believe that immigrants have fewer rights than do native Greeks?
- Have civil servants received intercultural communication training?
- Do they believe that they will be better prepared to do their work if they receive training?
- Are they working with 'diversity' in their work environment?

### **Findings**

Our sample consisted of 60 randomly selected civil servants attending an international seminar. Fifty completed the close-ended questionnaire and 10 took part in the structured interview. In Table 3 we note that the majority of the respondents' educational level is beyond the secondary school level. While in Table 4 we can see the distribution of the participants based on their level of education in terms of whether or not they have received previous training on issues related to diversity. We observe that the number of the respondents who have not received previous training on issues related to diversity is

substantially higher than those who have and that level of education does not appear to play a decisive role in this.

**Table 3 - Distribution of the participants according to their level of education**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Secondary Education</i>	<i>Technical Vocational Education</i>	<i>Higher Education</i>	<i>SUM (N)</i>
Questionnaire	16	23	11	50
Interview	1	5	4	10
Total	17	28	15	60

**Table 4 - Distribution of the participants according to their previous training on diversity**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Yes</i>			<i>No</i>		
	<i>Level of Secondary Education</i>	<i>Technical</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Technical</i>	<i>University</i>
Questionnaire	1	3	3	15	20	8
Interviews	-	1	1	1	4	3
Total	1	4	4	16	24	11

With respect to the degree to which the respondents come into contact with immigrants in their work context (see Table 5), we see that over two-thirds responded that their contact with immigrants is either 'often' or 'very often'. Over half responded that their dealings with immigrants take place 'very often'. All of the study participants had some contact with immigrants, even if it were 'rarely'. Following this, the next issue examined dealt with satisfaction with services provided; the respondents indicated how satisfied they were with the services they provided and in another question how satisfied they believed immigrants were with services provided (see Tables 6 and 7 respectively). In regard to how satisfied the respondents were, here too, slightly more than half responds to that they are satisfied to varying degrees with the level of services they provide; although there are 14 of the total who appear to not feel satisfied. However, when asked to assess the level of satisfaction the immigrant clients had in terms of services provided (Table 7), we see that even though their perception was that the clients were satisfied, over a third felt that it was to a moderate degree. There were, though, an equal number of respondents who felt that immigrants are either, 'much' or 'very much' satisfied with the services they receive.

**Table 5 - Distribution of the responses to the question: 'How often do you come into contact with immigrants?'**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Very Often</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Not at all</i>
Questionnaire	24	13	11	2	-
Interview	7	2	1	-	-
Total	31	15	12	2	-

**Table 6 - Distribution of the responses to the question:  
'How satisfied do you feel with the level of services you provide to immigrants?'**

Category	Very Much	Much	Enough	A little	Not at all
Questionnaire	11	14	14	8	3
Interview	1	3	3	2	1
Total	12	17	17	10	4

**Table 7 - Distribution of the responses to the question:  
'How satisfied do you think the immigrants are with the social services you provide?'**

Category	Very Much	Much	Enough	A little	Not at all
Questionnaire	8	12	20	9	1
Interview	1	3	4	1	1
Total	9	17	24	10	2

As a follow-up question to their assessment of their client's satisfaction, we asked them to check the reasons they thought accounted for the difficulties that occur when working with immigrants (see Table 8). It is worth noting that more than half indicate it is due to a lack of training but that they attribute the difficulties to immigrants themselves. It's not surprising that over two-thirds are not satisfied with the lack of training on managing diversity issues and thus supports our earlier statements (see Table 9). This is also in line with a review of teacher attitudes on their training needs in relation to intercultural education (Mattheou et al, 2001; Spinthourakis & Katsillis, 2003).

**Table 8 – Distribution of the responses to the question:  
'What are the reasons you believe that account for the difficulties that arise when working with immigrants?'**

Reasons	Questionnaire	Interview	Total
They don't speak Greek	20	8	28
They have a different way of thinking	15	1	16
They don't know how the system works	10	1	11
A lack of training in dealing with immigrants	29	9	38
Reservations on my part	8	-	8
Reservations on the part of the immigrants	15	1	16
Other (illiteracy and apathy)	3	-	3

**Table 9 – Distribution of responses to the question:  
'Are you satisfied with your training on managing diversity issues through intercultural communication?'**

Category	Very Much	Much	Enough	A little	Not at all
Questionnaire	2	4	5	26	13
Interview	-	1	2	4	3
Total	2	5	7	30	16

The last responses as presented in Table 10 deal with the type of social service access rights immigrants should have in relation to their immigration status (legal/illegal). It was surprising that less than a third felt that legal immigrants should have the right to access the same services as a citizen. Whereas it was expected that very few would agree with illegal immigrants having this right. Given these first responses, it was not too surprising that about a third would note that illegal immigrants should only have access

to health and education services nor that legal immigrants should have almost the same access rights as citizens.

**Table 10 – Distribution of responses to the closed question:  
'Should immigrants (by immigration status) have rights to social services access?'**

<i>Category/Legal Status</i>	<i>Exactly same</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>Almost same</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>Only to health and education</i>	<i>No right to any services</i>
Questionnaire	8		25		14	3
Interview	5		3		2	-
Total	13		28		16	3
<i>Category/Illegal Status</i>	<i>Exactly same</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>Almost same</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>Only to health and education</i>	<i>No right to any services</i>
Questionnaire	2		15		20	13
Interview	1		2		6	1
Total	3		17		26	14

## Conclusion

The awareness, comprehension and knowledge of Greek civil servants in terms of their intercultural communication skills and understanding of the right to access immigrants have, are important parameters in all efforts aiming to improve the quality of services provided for immigrants and citizens alike in an increasingly multicultural society. These factors may very well be significant inputs towards planning and providing effective training of civil servant professionals. Our preliminary foray into this area was to see what in fact the current understanding of a small sample of such professionals was in relation to their work with immigrants. Our research confirms some of our hypotheses while surprising us on others. It also motivates us to consider undertaking a more detailed investigation of this issue in the future on a broader scale.

As far as the main results are concerned, it seems that Greek civil servants aren't necessarily satisfied with how well they are doing their job, with the mixed results leaning somewhat towards the negative when we try to interpret the 'enough' responses. They believe that the problems at work related to working with immigrants are due to their lack of training but also are to do with the immigrants themselves. Few have had diversity training even though the majority work with diversity in their work environment. They overwhelmingly believe that they would be better prepared to do their work if they had intercultural communication training. However, further investigation is needed with a more detailed research design in order to include additional information as well as other factors.

The findings could be of interest to various immigration policy and service provision stakeholders such as social service providers, trainers as well as to civil servants themselves. We believe that it would be of interest to continue and extend this research on a regional and national basis both generically across professions as well as profession specific in Greece or abroad in order to form a basis for a large comparative study on the issues that refer to the intercultural communication skills and professional development.

Civil servants need to understand the role culture plays directly and indirectly in their dealings with others and to develop good intercultural communication skills and

multicultural competence so that they can be more effective in delivering their services to the changing populations within society.

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