

WHAT CHILDREN THINK ABOUT FOREIGNERS: A RESEARCH STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

BY DR. SPYROS SPYROU*

The Center for the Study of Childhood and Adolescence, a non-governmental, non-profit organization which focuses its activities on childhood research, has recently completed a quantitative study on Greek Cypriot elementary school children's familiarity with, knowledge about, perceptions of, and attitudes towards a variety of foreigners who live in Cyprus. The research consisted of self-administered questionnaires aimed at 5th and 6th grade children and was carried out in May and June 2004 in 10 different public schools in Nicosia with a total sample of 288 children. The study was supported by the Bi-communal Development Programme, which is funded by USAID and UNDP and is executed by UNOPS. In this article, we present a few of the key findings of the study in an effort to highlight children's thoughts on these issues and to pinpoint the larger social implications of the study.

The majority of children (69%) stated that they personally know foreigners who live in Cyprus. Most of these foreigners that the children know come from Russia (30%), Greece (26%), the UK (21%), Georgia (18%), Sri Lanka (14%), and the Philippines (14%). A smaller but still very significant number of children (56%) have non-Cypriot relatives.

What do the children think about the number of foreigners in Cyprus? Seventy-seven percent (77%) of children stated that they think there are too many foreigners who live in Cyprus today. Only 2% thought there are too few and only 6% thought that the number of foreigners who live in Cyprus is about right. These figures suggest that in children's minds Cyprus is flooded with foreigners.

Similarly, the overwhelming majority of children stated that either "some" (46%) or "all" (39%) foreigners should go back to their countries. Only 10% of the children stated that no foreigners should return home. The high percentage of children who think that some or all foreigners should go back suggests a clear sense of intolerance towards foreigners or at least to a large number of them. Those who state that all foreigners should go back to their countries are at the same time although indirectly, expressing a strong preference for ethnic homogeneity.

When presented with different statements about foreigners and asked whether they "agree," "disagree" or "have no opinion", the children revealed some of their beliefs, fears, and anxieties about foreigners. What emerges from the children's responses when they did state an opinion is a negative stance towards foreigners. More specifically, a large majority of children disagreed with the statement "foreigners make our country better" while a considerably smaller number agreed with it (64% versus 10%). A similar pattern emerged with the opposite statement, "*foreigners make our country worse*",

where 47% of the children expressed agreement and 30% expressed disagreement. This finding suggests that close to half of the children see foreigners in Cyprus as a problem. However, the fact that one in three children disagree also suggests that there is a sizable group of children who do not view foreigners negatively.

The patterns that emerge with many of the other statements which present foreigners in a bad light are very similar. Thus, only 23% of the children think that “foreigners help our economy” while almost half of them (49%) disagree with the statement. Similarly, 42% agree that “foreigners make our economy worse” and only 26% disagree with it.

With regard to the employment of foreigners in Cyprus, it seems that a very significant number of children see foreigners as a threat (45% state that “foreigners take jobs away from us” while only one in three disagree with the statement). However, at the same time, 56% of the children agree that “foreigners do jobs that we do not want to do” and only 18% disagree with the statement which suggests that more than half of the children do not see foreign workers as competing with local workers.

Another interesting finding of the study is that most children (59%) see foreigners as being responsible for the increasing crime in Cyprus (only 16% disagree) and fewer but still a very significant percentage of children (43%) agree that “foreigners make our neighbourhoods worse off” (30% disagree with the statement).

With regard to the issue of foreigners’ rights, a large number of children (42%) state that “foreigners should have the same rights as Cypriots” but an almost equally high number (37%) disagree.

A very small percentage of children (15%) feel that “it is good that foreigners live in Cyprus” while almost half of them (47%) state that they disagree with the statement. This negative reaction towards the presence of foreigners in Cyprus parallels our finding that 42% of the children do not think that “foreigners can offer us new ways of seeing things” (only 29% see that possibility).

Yet, despite their overall negative view of foreigners, it is worth noting that many children (46%) believe that “Cypriots discriminate against foreigners” whereas only a small percentage (16%) disagree.

When children were asked to what extent they like or dislike various groups of foreigners, they were much more likely to express their liking for a Western group rather than an Eastern group. A very similar pattern emerged when children were asked to state whether various groups are “civilized” or “uncivilized”, “clean” or “dirty”, “hardworking” or “lazy”, and “good” or “bad”. Eighty four percent (84%) of the children think that Greeks are “civilized”, 74% think Greek Cypriots are, and 69% think the British are. At the bottom of the list were Turks and Pakistanis with 8% and Sri Lankans with 14%.

In an effort to understand what children think of “others” we asked them to what extent they find it easy to like someone as an individual irrespective of where he/she comes from. Fifty-five percent (55%) stated that they “do not find it easy” to like them while 35% stated that they “find it easy” to like them and only 8% of children stated that they find it “very easy” to like them. The very high percentage of children who do not find it easy to like someone as an individual irrespective of where he/she comes from implies that ethnicity and culture play significant roles in how children evaluate “others”. A member of an ethnic or cultural group which in the children’s imaginations is negative will automatically be evaluated negatively. At the same time, the 35% of children who find it easy to like them pinpoints the diversity which exists among children when it comes to seeing and evaluating “others” and focuses on a more critical evaluation of individuals irrespective of their ethnic or cultural background.

Do children consider it acceptable to judge all the people in a group the same way? Twenty-one percent (21%) stated “very acceptable” and 41% stated “acceptable” while only 28% stated that they consider it as “not acceptable.” This finding suggests that for the majority of children (62%) the group identity of an individual is more important than the individual’s own characteristics. Indirectly, this explains why stereotypes are commonly and conveniently used rather than considered a problem when evaluating “others.”

When we asked the children to state the first three words that come to mind when they hear ethnic labels, the associations that children made are particularly revealing of their perceptions and attitudes towards various groups. Here, the focus is on four groups that are of particular interest to our understanding of relations between Greek Cypriots and foreigners, namely, Sri Lankan, Filipino, Russian, and Romanian women. For Sri Lankan women, children mentioned words that primarily focused on their colour. The word “black” was at the top of the list mentioned by 46% of the children, although a number of children mentioned “dark skin” (5%) and negro (3%). Words associated with the work status of Sri Lankan women in Cyprus were also mentioned by many children: domestic worker (37%), cleaner (18%), maid (8%), slave (5%), and assistant (2%). What is interesting is that the pattern which emerged for Filipino women resembles very much the one for Sri Lankan women. At the top of the list were words and phrases which focused on the work status of Filipino women such as “domestic worker” (36%), “cleaner” (20%), “maid” (8%), “assistant” (3%), “slave” (2%), and “worker” (2%), and words that focused on colour such as “black” (29%) and “dark skin” (6%) were also mentioned.

A very different pattern emerged for Russian and Romanian women. The words used by the children to describe Russian women had to do with their perceived physical characteristics and appearance such as “tall” (38%), “beautiful” (29%), “blonde” (28%), and “white” (14%). A second set of words used by several children focused on the perceived kind of employment of Russian women, such as “cabaret” (10%), “prostitute” (4%), “domestic worker” (6%), and “cleaner” (6%). Interestingly enough, for Romanian women children again used words that focused on appearance and physical attributes, such as “tall” (26%), “beautiful” (24%), “blonde” (17%), and “white” (9%). Other

commonly cited words included ones which focused on their work-related status, such as “domestic worker” (9%), “cleaner” (6%), and “worker” (3%), or had more negative associations such as “cabaret” (7%), and “prostitute” (5%).

Our research also investigated the thoughts and understandings of children in the sample whose families employ domestic workers. In the sample, 29% of the children had domestic workers in their homes. Most of these domestic workers come from the Philippines (33%) and Sri Lanka (31%). Of particular interest was the relationship between the children and their domestic worker. The overwhelming majority of children described their relationship with their domestic worker as either “very good” (51%) or “good” (24%) suggesting that overall the relationships that children have with their domestic workers are positive. A small number of children described their relationships as either “bad” (1%) or “very bad” (10%) while 14% evaluated their relationships as “neither good, nor bad.”

What do the children like about their domestic workers? The most frequently cited things had to do with the domestic worker’s behavioural characteristics and qualities such as, she is “clean” (29%), “good” (18%), and “gentle/polite” (15%) as well as with her work performance such as she is a “hard worker” (24%) and she “cleans well” (19%). When asked to state what they dislike about their domestic worker the children mentioned a variety of things which can be grouped in different categories as follows: personality characteristics such as “pig-headed” (15%) and “arrogant” (8%); general behavioural characteristics such as “untidy” (12%) and “takes her shoes off” (8%); specific behavioural characteristics which influence the relationship between the child and the domestic worker such as “she doesn’t let me do anything” (4%) and “she sometimes ignores me”; and, reasons that focus on the domestic worker’s appearance such as “she is black” (4%) and “she is ugly” (4%).

And finally, *how would the children feel if their domestic worker decided to leave or had to leave Cyprus?* A significant number of children stated that they would feel “sad” (21%) or “very sad” (14%) if their domestic worker decided to leave or had to leave Cyprus, which once again reinforces their evaluation of their relationships with their domestic workers as “good” or “very good.” An even higher percentage of children (48%) were more indifferent towards such an event while only a small percentage of children stated that they would feel “happy” (4%) or “very happy” (7%).

The overall negative picture of foreigners which emerges from the study suggests the need for serious work to create a more tolerant and accepting society where difference is appreciated and respected rather than stereotyped and stigmatized. That fact that not all children express these negative feelings towards foreigners is, of course, encouraging. Nevertheless, the challenge remains to educate the young ones in ways that allow them to live and coexist with others, whoever they may be. Multiculturalism is here to stay and Cypriot society needs to address the presence of “others” in inclusive ways which are based on understanding and productive relations. Needless to say, all social institutions including schools and the family need to take responsibility and contribute to this direction.

* Dr. Spyros Spyrou is an assistant professor of social anthropology at Cyprus College and the director of the Center for the Study of Childhood and Adolescence.