

Perceptions of Ethnic Albanians in New York City and the Role of Stereotypes in Fostering Social Exclusion and Criminality

Original article

Perceptions of Ethnic Albanians in New York City and the Role of Stereotypes in Fostering Social Exclusion and Criminality

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Abstract: In many European Union countries, law enforcement agencies and popular media have depicted ethnic Albanians as “brutal criminals” and a “dangerous breed”. Scholars have claimed that these labeling practices have hindered the social inclusion of Albanians in Western societies, and have fostered Albanian criminality. This research examines whether New York’s media also catalyzes processes of social isolation and deviancy amongst its Albanian migrant population by labeling them as criminals. The conclusions are based on newspaper analysis (1990-2014), focusing on depictions of Albanians in New York newspapers; interviews with non-Albanian population in New York City ($N=85$); and interviews with ethnic Albanian immigrants, including offenders, in New York City ($N=88$). Findings revealed that New York’s media is not necessarily influencing Albanian criminality.

Keywords: Albanian criminality – organized crime – labelling theory – media – New York – social exclusion – signal crimes

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Introduction

The role that ethnicity and culture play in shaping American organized crime has long been at the centre of a heated debate among criminologists, sociologists and political scientists. After the 1930s, with a frenzy of emotions, Americans reacted to crimes linked to Italian immigrants. Government reports, books, and newspaper articles criticized and decried Italian criminality. Some writers argued that Italians naturally possessed criminal inclinations, and that there is something unique about the cultural character of southern Italy that has predisposed immigrants from those regions to become involved in organized crime (Nelli, 1969; Cressey, 1969; Ubah, 2007). This led to the rise of the alien conspiracy model of organized crime that contends that the Italian Mafia is an outgrowth of Italian society and culture, and that its rise is a creation of southern Italians who brought along their secret criminal societies when they migrated to cities in the eastern US (Cressey, 1969; Albin, 1971; Bequai, 1979; Lombardo, 2002; Albanese, 2004; Smith, 1990).

The media and the public fascination with the “Mafia,” and the “Mob,” reinforced negative labels, which unsurprisingly led to Italian immigrants objecting to these mafia stereotypes (Puzo, 1969; Barkan, 2001, 2006; Albanese, 2004). Italian Americans have long complained about the suggestion that organized crime is largely the domain of those with Italian ancestry because such stereotypes affect the quality of their lives. Today other ethnic groups, such as Albanians, for example, have similarly been labeled as a “dangerous breed” coming from criminogenic societies (Raufer and Quere, 2006). More Albanians started arriving in the United States in the 1960s, trying to escape the harsh communist regime of Enver Hoxha. However, it was not until the early 1990s, after the fall of communism, and around the time of the Kosovo war (1998-1999) that they attracted international media and law enforcement attention for their increasing involvement in serious crimes around the world.

One of the questions this research tries to answer is whether the media portrayal and public images of Albanians as “ruthless mobsters” has led to social exclusion and criminalization of this ethnic group in the US. Many scholars have concluded that media shaming and the social labelling of immigrant populations triggers criminality, as minority groups struggle to gain equitable access to legitimate institutions within their host country (Chambliss, 1988; Antonopoulos et al., 2008; Schwanders-Sievers, 2008). In fact, some European criminologists studying trends of immigrant assimilation in Europe have affirmed that the media and government stereotyping of Albanian immigrants as delinquents has led to social marginalization by host country citizenry. These types of patterns heighten the sojourners likelihood to engage in criminality due to their exclusion from official community spaces (King and Mai, 2004). The situation in the US, despite the presence of articles and reports on Albanian organized crime, is less obvious.

The case study selected for this research involves ethnic Albanian immigrants living in the tri-state area in the US (New York, New Jersey and Connecticut) because the highest number of Albanians reside here. Demographic statistics show that over the years an estimated 170,000 to 250,000 Albanians have settled in the US; specifically within New York City (Samuels 2012; U.S. Census Bureau 2011)^[1]. At its core, this study intends to determine whether New York media in particular is responsible for creating xenophobia amongst its host country population by promoting a stigmatized image of Albanians^[2], and whether this negative image has served to marginalize the population from mainstream integration and to further their likelihood of engaging in illicit activities.

Methods

This research is based on the findings of a two-year study partially funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), which took place from November 2012 to November 2014. It utilized a multiple-triangulation methodology, and the conclusions are based on qualitative, quantitative, and document analysis. First, this research benefited from a more general analysis; it examined the scholarly literature on media, stigmatization, and crime, and looked at some existing studies on the portrayal of Albanian people in European countries such as Greece, Italy and the UK.

After this general literature review, we took a more systematic approach and collected and analysed English (US) language newspaper articles that contained positive (e.g., hardworking, loyal, hospitable, ambitious) and negative (e.g., mobsters, brutal, criminals, gangster) depictions of ethnic Albanians (including Kosovars) from major newspapers from New York City (U.S.). Our selection included major newspapers such as *New York Times*, *New York Post*, and *New York Daily News*. After preliminary analysis of the collected articles, we observed that media coverage of Albanian criminality has been fluctuating over time, possibly because of some changes that Albanian criminal groups have undertaken over time in terms of criminal activities, violence, and ethnic composition.

The focus of the analysis is the time-period between 1990 and 2014. Initially we wanted to include 1975-1989. However, not all newspapers in the current analysis had articles for that time-period available through the search engines we consulted: *LexisNexis*, *New York State Newspapers*, *The New York Times Archive*, and *Gale*. Also according to available media records, it appears that the extent of Albanian organized crime prior to the 1990 was far less significant.

The second phase was based on short survey interviews conducted on the streets of two New York City boroughs: The Belmont area of the Bronx and the Ridgewood area of Queens—zones known for the high volume of residents of ethnic Albanian descent. The areas were selected because the New York City Police Department (NYPD) described them as prominent hotspots of Albanian organized criminality (NYPD, 2006). An accidental sampling was used to recruit subjects of non-Albanian descent for this social perceptions study. A total of 85 participants were approached and surveyed at the research sites; a social perceptions model was used to study the public opinions and attitudes towards Albanians. The short-survey interviews took 10-15 minutes. The inclusion

criteria were that the subjects are more than 18 years old and are not of ethnic Albanian origin.

The final and most important phase of the study took place from October 2013 through November of 2014. This stage involved conducting in-depth, face-to-face interviews with members of the ethnic Albanian Diaspora, including documented and undocumented migrants as well as offenders ($N=88$). The sample was selected using snowball method and Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS) method. This has proven track records of enabling researchers to recruit and collect reliable information from hard-to-reach and stigmatized populations. This study used open-ended and closed questions and vignettes in order to better understand the perceptions of the Albanian Diaspora on various issues, including: media labelling, criminality, and social exclusion within New York area. The interviews lasted an average of 45 to 90 minutes. The self-reported criteria for recruitment were: (1) aged 18 or over; (2) of ethnic Albanian origin; and (3) living in NYC/NJ area for at least 1 year.

The sample is composed of 62.5% males and 37.5% females. Fifty eight percent of the subjects are between 18 and 35 years of age; 33% are between 35 and 55, and 9% are in the category of 55 and above. Moreover, 34.1% have university degree and 14.8% have post-university degree; 13.6% have elementary or no diploma, and 36.4% have high school diploma. Regarding religion, 31% identified themselves as Muslims, 22% as Catholics and 20% as Christians. Approximately 10% noted that they are atheists or agnostics. Approximately 89.8% were foreign born, mainly from Albania and Kosovo. Nine of these interviews were done with ethnic Albanian organized crime offenders, inside and outside of Federal Prisons in the U.S., and 21 interviews with done with Albanian offenders outside of prisons.

We used SPSS to analyse the results from the data collection, however because the research sample is relatively small, the statistical analysis remains descriptive in nature. While further research in this area is always necessary, these findings contribute to the scholarly debate on topics of migration, social exclusion and crime.

Media Stigmatization, Social Exclusion and Crime

The academic literature has demonstrated that negative depiction of immigrants can lead to stereotypical public opinion towards foreigners (Boomgaarden and Rens, 2009; Christoph, 2012; Schemer, 2012). News representations of ethnic minorities have usually been described as biased, favouring the dominant group over the communities of the “others” (Cottle 2000). Van Dijk (1991) argued that ethnic minorities were mainly represented in the print media in association with crime, terrorism, and problematic immigration, claiming that it is through newspapers that elites may affect the way “ordinary” people think and impose certain policies (Tsaliki, 2008; Chambliss and Williams, 2012). Longitudinal studies have attempted to quantify the impact of news coverage on attitudes toward immigration, for example. Walgrave and De Swert (2004) affirmed that Belgian

news coverage discussing how immigrant criminality was creating turmoil in society, nurtured increased levels of support for the state's anti-immigration political parties. Research shows that newspaper lectors consistently exposed to stories about ethnic criminality were more likely to perceive immigrants as a threat to national security than those reading less about ethnic crime cases (Schemer, 2012).

The influence of news media on stereotypes can also be explained by a pattern of "priming." This term refers to the cognitive process undergone by mass media observers in their formation of biases toward foreigners. Under these conditions, not only is it difficult for individuals to evade priming, as negative portrayals of minorities can be omnipresent within mass media channels, but it is also challenging for individuals to regress and reconstruct their attitudes to include favourable perceptions of ethnic groups after the priming process has already been mentally anchored (Schemer, 2012).

Bernburg (2009) and Hagan (1973) also argued that it is extremely challenging for persons who have been criminally labelled to distance themselves from this criminal image and become integrated into society. The decay of individual or group stigma is difficult because both formal and informal modes of labelling are consistently being reinforced by social sectors. Research into this phenomenon has shown that formal institutions, including criminal justice systems, and mass media, help to sustain the offender's criminal status within society (Chambliss, 1988).

Evidence gathered from prison studies in the US and the UK demonstrates that the high population of immigrant groups in prisons, for example, is often due to discriminatory arrests made by law enforcement agents. Ethnically targeted apprehensions lead to an over-representation of foreign nationals recorded in national crime statistics (Wortley, 2009; Giannangeli, 2013). Sociologists argue that prejudicial beliefs directed toward minority groups may lead cohorts to be unequally targeted, sanctioned, and stigmatized by state authorities.

Social labelling is especially corrosive when the stigmatized individual embodies the deviant self-concept and consciously allows him/herself to engage in criminal behaviour. This subconscious acceptance of the adverse social image impairs the individual's successful social inclusion (Chambliss, 1988; Bernburg, 2009).

Finally, current research also indicates that labelled and underprivileged groups refrain from placing themselves in situations where they would directly have to interact with other ethnic groups. Labelled ethnic groups may evade out-group interaction with host country nationals; often out of fear that they will be rejected or stigmatized (King and Mai, 2004). The lack of "bridging social capital" as well as the high level of stigmatization could act as a powerful deterrent against an active involvement of immigrants in political and civil associations in the host country (Tsaliki, 2008). As a result, the immigrants' interests may not be properly represented at the political level. This may lead to further marginalization of ethnic groups and to migrants' propensity to engage in crime.

Albanian Migrants in Europe

The transition from a centrally planned to market economy has been difficult on the Albanian people. After 1990, hundreds of thousands of Albanians were left unemployed as 90 percent of the factories were closed. The legacy of the economic crisis of the 1980s, the breakdown of the economic structures and the revolts of 1991 and 1997 were just a few of the many factors responsible for creating the economic plight during of the transition period (Vidali, 1999; Arsovska, 2015). The first great exodus of Albanian refugees crossed the borders with Greece and the sea to Italy during the crisis of 1991-1992.

King and Mai (2004) state that ethnic Albanians soon became known to be some of the most rejected and stigmatized people within the European Union (EU). Research indicates that countries of the western world neighbouring Albania, such as Greece and Italy, as well as more distant countries, including the UK and Germany, have all participated in the popular press's polluted portrayal of the Albanian Diaspora (King and Mai 2004; Antonopoulous et al., 2008). The media in particular, both in Greece and Italy, have played a significant role in the stigmatization of Albanians by regularly associating them with crimes of ferocious or morally reprehensible nature (Tsaliki, 2008). The Albanian migrants in Greece and Italy in particular have become the "constitutive other" (Hall, 1996: 4).

For example, in Italy, domestic media has often been accused by the human rights agency, Freedom House (2012), as furnishing a forum for immigrant shaming. Initially, the Italian paper *La Repubblica* released a slew of news articles depicting the ethnic cohort as a group of deserving political refugees. However, in the mid-1990s, headlines illustrating Albanian sojourners as illegal immigrants and greedy economic migrants involved in grave transnational crimes gained popularity (Kosic and Phalet, 2006).

The situation in Greece also deserves a particular attention because of the large ethnic Albanian diaspora. In the early 1990s, and following a massive influx of Albanian immigrants, leading Greek newspapers such as *Ethnos and Kathimerini* casted Albanian refugees as released political prisoners who would commit violent crimes upon entering Greece (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004; Tsaliki, 2008). The subsequent repercussion of media stereotyping toward the Albanians created the emergence of moral panic. BaldwinEdwards (2004: 59), for example, stated: "There were repeated claims, such as that reported in a leading newspaper, *Kathimerini* in January 1996, that 60% of all recorded crimes were committed by, mostly Albanians".

Moreover, research indicates that the weak and distrustful social relations between Albanians and Greeks problematize the very notion of a smooth social integration of Albanians into the Greek society. According to the 2003 European Social Survey, young people in Greece demonstrate a xenophobic attitude towards immigrants. Within the negative impact of the presence of immigrants

in Greece is “an increase in deviance”; the fact that “they take away jobs from Greeks;” “they make Greece a worse place to live” (Dragona, 2007).

Also, in Greece, data collected from interviews with law enforcement officials described Albanians as being a “dangerousness reference point,” serving as a pillar of comparison to measure criminality amongst other foreign organized crime groups (Antonopoulous et al., 2008). As of 2008, examples of discriminatory police practices have shown that Albanians accounted for an inflated 42.3% of all inmates serving sentences in Greek penitentiaries (Antonopoulous et al., 2008).

Moreover, in the UK, dailies such as the *London Times* and the *Guardian* often featured news articles about Albanian offenders’ involvement in human trafficking, drug smuggling, and prostitution. In 2001 and 2002, *The Times* and *The Independent*, referring to statements given by the UK Home Affairs Correspondent, wrote that the “tightening grip” of Albanian gangs on the vice trade was “changing the landscape” of Britain's sex industry (Burrell, 2001). In 2011, *The Times* also reported: “[t]he court documents describe an organization of [Albanian] immigrant families with a code of honor, strong ties to the homeland, record of ruthless violence” (Pavia, 2011: 1). In existing studies, Albanian Diaspora members living within Western Europe often describe that they have being occluded entrance to access key social sectors such as housing and labour markets because of negative perceptions often originating from media messages (King and Mai, 2004; Schwanders-Sievers, 2008; Tsalki, 2008). This form of segregation often leads to repeated encounters of goal blockage, a process known to trigger social deviancy (Paoli and Reuters, 2008).

In summary, the limited literature suggests that because a majority of Albanian immigrants in Europe continue to occupy the lowest tiers of the social echelon system, they often gravitate toward pursuing the goals of materialistic success by illicit means, with the legal conduits being sealed off to most of them (Paoli and Reuters, 2008; Schwanders-Sievers, 2008). In some situations, however, stereotypical identifications with violence and crime have led some Albanian immigrants to resort to coping strategies, such as adult baptism and name changing, in order to avoid individual exclusion (Tsalki, 2008). The question this paper addresses is whether media stereotypes and social exclusion of Albanian immigrants is also common in the US. More specifically, do media stereotypes and alienation lead to increase in criminality among ethnic Albanian immigrants in New York City?

Albanians in New York City: Media, Perceptions and Experiences

Media

In New York City, news articles about Albanian criminality, and more specifically Albanian

organized crime, go back to the early 1980s. In 1985 the Wall Street Journal wrote about one of the first Albanian criminal groups involved in drug trafficking. The so-called leader was an Albanian man by the name of Xhevedet Lika. Lika worked with Skender Fici, an Albanian who operated a Staten Island-based travel agency. Using this company as a front, Lika booked trips to Yugoslavia, where many Albanians lived, and became a specialist in handling immigration paperwork. It also appears that Lika used Fici's travel agency to arrange short trips to Yugoslavia and Turkey, where the heroin was bought and then smuggled to the U.S. (DeStefano, 1985). Journalist Anthony M. DeStefano notes that even in the 1980s Albanian-American offenders were involved in everything from drugs and gun-running to counterfeiting, however, their activities attracted little publicity. This could be due to the fact that Albanian offenders in the early years worked in isolation, and their criminal activities did not have high social impact.

Martin Innes (2004) refers to high social impact crimes as “signal crimes” because they have the capacity to cause so-called “moral panic” by changing the public's behaviour and belief about their security. Innes argues, for instance, that organized theft is very different from street robbery, child and woman trafficking, or rape. In earlier years, Albanians in New York were predominantly involved in trafficking of smaller quantities of heroin, illegal immigration and counterfeiting, which are not necessarily considered “signal crimes” because the public may not perceive them as a direct and immediate threat.

By the mid-1990s, however, the Albanian Bad Boys, or Albanian Boys Inc. became known as one of the first gangs of ethnic Albanians who operated in areas of the Bronx and Bensonhurst in New York and attracted significant media attention. The gang was created by a group of young Albanian immigrants who arrived in the Bronx, New York as political refugees seeking asylum after the fall of communism in Albania (1991) and prior to the Kosovo conflict (1998-1999). Members of this gang were known for engaging in violent fights with other gangs (Gonzalez, 1999). The fact that the crimes were violent and involved high school students was probably one of the reasons why the media started focusing its attention on Albanian immigrants and crime. Many Albanian immigrants expressed resentment regarding the image that their ethnic group gained at that time within the local community. “The politicians and the media made us look very bad after those incidents [...] everyone was blaming us even though they never found the culprits” (Goodnough, 1994: 1).

In the years following these incidents, particularly after 1999, New York newspapers released more articles reporting on the criminality of ethnic Albanians. This is also due to the fact that the volume and variety of Albanian organized crime grew rapidly after 1996. Groups composed of younger ethnic Albanians emerged on the organized crime scene in New York City and by the late 1990s they concentrated on fraud, extortion, robbery, and in particular, burglaries of convenience stores and commercial premises. During the late 1990s, stronger associations as well as rivalries between Albanian and Italian-American crime groups began to emerge, which was another reason why Albanian crime became somewhat more visible (Arsovska, 2015).

Stories about the rise of sophisticated criminal organizations emerging in New York, such as “The

Corporation”^[1], “The Krasniqi Crew”^[2], the “Wolfpack” group^[3], and the “Thaqi syndicate”^[4], continued to surface into the 2000s. Regionally based periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *The Post*, *Capital New York*, and *The Daily News* have all referenced Albanian mobsters as a threat to society due to their propensity for brutality (Goodnough, 1994; Hartocollis, 2005; Fahim, 2006; Preston, 2006; Heldman, 2011). These news stories concentrated on the Albanians’ determination to control New York City’s organized crime scene that was once controlled by the Italian mafia (Purdy 1994; Preston, 2006). Albanian offenders were portrayed as an untouchable breed of exotic criminals that have demonstrated unparalleled acceleration in their takeover as well as domination of black markets such as gambling and drugs (Hartocollis, 2005; Fahim, 2006; Heldman 2011).

By the early 2000s, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and U.S. Department of Homeland Security also began to take notice of Albanian organized criminal groups. Referring to the Albanian criminal organization “The Corporation”, the FBI reported: “[...] many of its leaders had worked with established crime families in New York muscling aside competition through violence and intimidation; they started taking up territory and beating up made men [...] Their names sounded like they were lifted straight from a TV crime drama: ‘Big Frank’, ‘Nicky Nails’, ‘Louie’, ‘Fat Angelo’” (FBI, 2006: 1).

So in an effort to answer the question of whether New York periodicals are culpable of diffusing stereotypic portrayals of ethnic Albanian immigrants as criminals, an extensive newspaper analysis was conducted. The articles were collected mainly from New York’s major newspapers, such as *New York Times*, *New York Post*, and *New York Daily News*. To avoid counting same articles multiple times, we did not account for duplicates of the same articles, nor did we account for when multiple keywords appear in the same article (such as “crime”, “criminal”, and “victims”). LexisNexis provides the information regarding how many articles contain such words, not how often the words occur. Some negative keywords we used during our search were Albanian mob/mobster/criminal/gangster, violent/brutal Albanian, Albanian mafia/organized crime, and so on. Examples of positive keywords included hardworking/honest/ambitious/kind Albanian, Albanian victim, Albanian hospitality, Kosovo war victim, and so on. We also physically looked at the articles to ensure quality.

For the period 1990 to 2013, in New York, *The Daily News* had 787 total articles of which 71% were negative, and 20% positive. The *New York Times* had 3,466 articles of which 63% were negative, and 47% positive. The *New York Post* had 769 articles (68% negative, and 25% positive). Further, the total number of articles (that contained the word Albanian) for all three New York newspapers was 7,055 (4,554 of which focused on negative descriptions). What was obvious from our analysis is that particularly after 2001, New York media tended to write significantly more about Albanian criminality, specifically Albanian organized crime (an increase of approximately 30%).

However, during the same time-period, New York media also published many positive articles on Albanian immigrants, particularly articles related to the war in Kosovo. Also compared to other

emerging criminal groups in the country (e.g., Italian, Russian, Mexican, Colombian), Albanian offenders were not necessarily the centre of the media attention, and articles on Albanian criminality appeared periodically in newspapers (e.g., after big arrests, for example). So although this descriptive analysis shows us that New York media took a notice of Albanian criminality, it does not necessarily show us if and how this media portrayal affected the quality of life of Albanian immigrants in New York.

Perceptions

In the survey interviews (accidental sampling), 85 non-Albanian respondents were asked to state three qualities that immediately came to mind when the word “Albanian” was mentioned. When respondents were asked about the first quality that came to mind when they thought of Albanians, 30% named a quality that was positive, 34% named a quality that was negative, and 37% named a quality that was neutral. When asked to say the next quality that came to mind, 30% named a quality that was positive, 43% named a quality that was negative, and 27% named a quality that was neutral. Finally, when asked to think of a third quality, 29% named a quality that was positive, 40% named a quality that was negative, and 32% named a quality that was neutral. Therefore, results for primary perceptions of Albanians demonstrated that 67% of the respondents were likely to describe Albanians positively or neutrally, while the remaining 34% associated Albanians with negative attributes.

The most frequently cited positive characteristics of Albanians were “hardworking” and “ambitious.” Other common perceptions noted were that Albanians were “good people,” “calm,” and “nice.” Neutral descriptors focused on the perceived diversity of this ethnic group, and descriptions listed included words such as “close knit (ethnic community),” “pride,” “different language,” and “different culture.” Negative perceptions of Albanians included descriptors such as “aggressive,” “selfish,” and “crazy.” Some participants stated that Albanians were “not sociable” or that they belonged to the “Kosovo-mob.”

Then list of opposite adjectives were also introduced in the survey questionnaire, which included a series of word pairs, wherein respondents were given two opposite personality traits (i.e., nice – mean) and were asked to choose the word in the pair that they felt best described the ethnic Albanian population. The results indicated that when given a choice between two contradictory adjectives, over half of the participants were likely to ascribe the positive personality traits to Albanians, such as nice (78%), friendly (69%), kind (53%), cultured (52%), level-headed (64%), gentle (53%) as opposed to the following negative counterparts: mean (39%), hostile (32%), rough (47%), uneducated (47%), illogical (36%), extremist (72%), untrustworthy (25%), irrational (54%) and dirty (12%).

Figure 1. Perception of Albanian people in New York City (Bronx and Queens)

When the social integration of ethnic Albanians was questioned, 64% of respondents mentioned that Albanians belong to a “close knit community,” while 36% of participants described Albanians as “well-integrated into American society.” Most notably, when asked about perceived ambition, 90% of the respondents found ethnic Albanians to be very ambitious, often times indicating that they were “one of the most hardworking groups of people.” Regarding ethnic Albanian culture in general, 46% of respondents said they thought Albanians were “civilized, refined, liberal”, while 54% said Albanians were “barbaric, traditional, revengeful”. This is the first of the four questions where the majority of the responses favoured the negative portrayal. Regarding ethnic Albanians’ ability for conflict resolution, 55% of respondents said they thought Albanians were able to “develop a logical and peaceful solution to the problem”, while 45% said Albanians were more likely to “resort to violence as a means of settling the conflict”. Regarding ethnic Albanians’ materialism, 43% of respondents said they thought Albanians were “modest people who do not flaunt their assets,” while 57% said Albanians were “very materialistic people who value luxury goods”. Regarding ethnic Albanians’ forgiveness, 43% of respondents said they thought Albanians were “forgiving”, while 57% said Albanians were more likely to “hold grudges”.

The questions on the survey instrument also collected data on the integration of ethnic Albanians within the host country’s society. Key variables included housing and employment, which sociologists consider being important indicators in the structural assimilation of migrant communities within their host country. First when asked, “Do you find Albanians to be different from other immigrant groups?” 31% of respondents said “yes”, while 69% said “no”. When respondents were asked about their level of agreement with the statement, “I would live in a neighbourhood with other ethnic Albanians”, 52% agreed, 27% remained “neutral”, and 20% disagreed. The results also revealed that 69% of respondents indicated their willingness to work alongside ethnic Albanians while 16% remained “neutral” (indifferent).

Media influence vs. interaction

Data was collected to test whether the level of contact with ethnic Albanians influenced people’s perceptions of this ethnic group. Respondents were asked to identify whether they: have experienced *direct and frequent contact* with members of the ethnic Albanian community (for example, at work or at school); know Albanians through *observation* (for example, frequent exposure to the Albanian community mainly because they live in the same neighbourhood while sharing no direct contact); or, know about Albanians through *media* (respondents formed

perceptions about Albanians due to routine media exposure and did not experience any levels of heightened contact).

Respondents who stated they had “direct contact” with Albanians constituted 53.3% of the sample; 25.3% said their contact was limited to “observations”, and 21.3% said they had no interaction, only media influence. A total of 78.6% of respondents stated that they had either shared direct interaction or observed the group’s behaviours around the neighbourhood. A necessary point of interest is that only 17 of the 85 respondents had no direct contact and only media influence. This does not violate the assumptions required for our hypothesis tests, but it something the reader should bear in mind.

Having this in mind, we found that there is a moderate, statistically significant relationship between “level of contact” and “the first quality that comes to mind when thinking of Albanians”, $\chi^2 (1) = 4.86$, $p = 0.028$, $p < 0.05$.

Figure 2. Level of contact and perceptions of Albanians (media interaction vs direct contact (minus observations))

Similarly, at the beginning of the survey when non-Albanian respondents were asked to decide whether they would describe Albanians as friendly or hostile, those with media influence tended to support more the “friendly” position. About 75% with media influence selected the “friendly” option versus 62% who had some contact with Albanians.

Figure 3. Level of contact and perceptions of Albanians (Are Albanians friendly or hostile?)

However, towards the end of the questionnaire some of the respondents with media influence changed their position, mainly from neutral to negative. We found moderate, statistically significant relationship between “level of contact” and “perception of ethnic Albanians’ ability for conflict resolution”, $\chi^2(1) = 7.40$, $p = 0.00698$, $p < 0.05$

So there was some contradiction among our findings. Overall, those who had only media influence were more likely to have the first thing that came to their mind about Albanians be positive or neutral (87%) however, they were also more likely to say that Albanians would resort to violence as a means of settling the conflict (80%), (as opposed to develop a logical and peaceful solution to the problem, which was 20%) towards the end of the interview. One explanation for this is that the respondents may have started out trying to give Albanians the benefit of the doubt (since the respondents admitted they had neither observed or had direct contact with Albanians), but as they got more comfortable with the interviewer (and more convinced that there would be no negative consequences for admitting their opinions), they started to say more negative things.

In research, there is something known as “social desirability bias.” This refers to the human desire for others to think well of them, so when being interviewed about their opinions, respondents may be unwilling to share their true feelings, as it may risk the interviewer's good opinion of them. However, the contradiction in our findings may also be an indicator that the non-Albanian

respondents with media influence did not have any strong or well-formed opinions about Albanians and could easily sway in any direction.

Experiences

Eighty-eight members of the ethnic Albanian Diaspora were recruited to participate in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews on issues of social assimilation, migration, organized crime, and integration into US society. The data from these interviews was used to gain knowledge on whether members of the Albanian Diaspora felt that their quality of life in the US is being affected by negative media images.

Respondents' ability to access social sectors was one of the most important topics surveyed throughout the interviews. Some Albanian immigrants discussed the challenge of securing employment following their arrival to the US however, the majority of respondents did not feel excluded from the American society. In fact, only 12.5 percent of the respondents felt that Albanians are not treated equally when compared to non-Albanians/"Americans" in New York City. About 87.5% said that they are equally treated. Also 40.3 percent noted that it was not easy to find employment after they moved to the U.S. while 59.7 percent noted that it was relatively easy.

Figure 4. Albanian migrants views on social exclusion, stereotypes and media labels^[1].

To be more specific, one female respondent from Albania (age 35) stated that her family encountered difficulties while attempting to find employment in the US “Finding a job was difficult because we didn’t have any support from relatives, from Albanian people or friends. After my arrival I wanted a job but I had to wait some time and that was difficult on all of us” (Interview #1, 2013). However, the difficulty of finding a job in this case was not necessarily linked to social exclusion of Albanian people.

Another respondent, in his late forties, mentioned that sometimes Albanian diplomas (foreign education) is not recognized in the US which makes it difficult for Albanians to get good quality jobs and for this reason they end up working as construction workers, bus and truck drivers, and domestic servants. When asked about their ability to access labour markets within the US, many respondents also stated that the reason why they sometimes had trouble finding employment was not because of discrimination, but simply because of the presence of cultural and linguistic barriers within the host country.

Moreover, one female respondent (in her late fifties), who is now a naturalized American citizen, mentioned that her experiences in the US have been very positive, and her response resembled that of many of other participants in this study. “As Albanians, I believe that we are treated exactly the same way; we are seen as equals in this country. That’s the good thing about the US [...] I used to live in Europe where discrimination is more prevalent, but that’s not the case here, this country is built from immigrants. So if it is tough to make it then it is tough on all of us, not only on Albanians” (Interview #4, 2013).

An interview with an ethnic Albanian male from Kosovo, in his mid-fifties, who came to New York as an asylum seeker, also suggests that members of the Diaspora are given equal opportunities for success. “When Albanians are here in the United States, they tend to work hard. Take my children for example; they are very successful after graduating from University; one is now an architect and the other is a lawyer and yes, they have had all the opportunities that they could ever ask for here in New York” (Interview #18, 2013).

As far as the media influence is concerned the respondents’ opinions were divided. Some did argue that the Western media tends to “talk about Albanian crime,” however, many emphasized that in it is often the European (western) media that focuses on these issues to a greater extent. Approximately 63.6% of the respondents agreed that Americans tend to associate their culture with crime (while 36.4% disagreed), and 56.7% agreed that the Western media associates their culture with crime (while 43.3% disagreed). A foreign-born Albanian female in her mid-forties, for example, stated that media in American society, although not extremely influential in casting anti-Albanian sentiment, does play a role in the portrayal of her ethnic in-group.

I think the media leads people to form this negative idea when they see or read something in the newspaper and they say ‘Oh where are you from’ and then when I tell them that I am Albanian

they usually say ‘Oh, you Albanians...did you read about what happened to that Albanian criminal in the paper?’ (Interview #4, 2013).

Younger respondents (ages 18 to 35) were also aware of the power of media in promoting a negative image of their ethnic group. An Albanian male in his midtwenties noted: “There was this guy; he was ethnic Albanian. He came into the media when he was trying to pose a bomb threat at Times Square [...] and since then, people are like, all Albanians are crazy. High-profile cases can change a lot for Albanians” (Interview #6, 2013). However, the argument that several respondents made is that although such isolated negative cases can be powerful in shaping public perception, they personally do not think that there is overwhelming negative representation of Albanian people in New York media.

More than half of the respondents however referenced the 2009 movie *Taken*¹¹ (54 out of 88 respondents) as an example of where they felt that Albanian culture was depicted as ultra violent and revengeful. One male Albanian offender, in his late forties, currently serving a prison sentence for extortion, illegal gambling and organized crime, explained:

US is a country of opportunity but they can be tough on immigrants. It’s nothing in particular against Albanians, just any kind of immigrant. The government is a little racist. During my trial *Taken* hurt me a lot. The movie came out around the time of my trial. So the jury put me in the same basket with human traffickers and abusers of kids. People who do the prostitution thing must not have kids. I have daughters. To think of someone doing that to them makes me sick. So in general immigrants, but not necessarily Albanians, are the focus of media and governments because the perspective is that when immigrants come, they bring the worst of the country (interview #1a, 2014).

Many of the respondents however also clarified that if the US media focuses on Albanian criminality that was due to the fact that some Albanians indeed committed serious crimes. An Albanian male, in his late fifties, born and raised in New York noted:

If Hollywood recognizes you then you’ve made it. Yes, the media does focus occasionally on aspects of Albanian criminality but rightfully so. I don’t think the descriptions are sensationalized. Even *Taken* seems relatively accurate to me (Interview#60, 2014).

With some exceptions, most participants in our sample stated that New York-based media was fairly portraying their ethnic culture and, as far as movies are concerned, no one takes them seriously nowadays.

One female immigrant from Albania, who is in her early thirties and residing in the U.S. for over 15 years, stated that her culture was unexposed in contrast to other ethnicities within New York, such as the Hispanics or Italians. She mentioned that a majority of Americans still lack proper knowledge of Albanian culture because the community composes only a small segment of the entire

population, remaining invisible in the media. “I don’t think that the press here in the US stereotypes Albanians. Maybe in a country like Italy they do, but you have to recognize that in Europe, those citizens have a much greater knowledge of Albanians.” (Interview #7, 2013). Likewise, another male Albanian respondent clarified: “*Taken* was a terrible movie. But although America often portrays foreigners as the villains I don’t feel that particular emphasis is placed on the Albanian people” (Interview #28, 2013).

Also some respondents acknowledged that there are also a lot of positive stories about Albanian immigrants. An American-Albanian female respondent (in her early thirties) reported:

During the Kosovo war we were not portrayed negatively at all. I feel that we were seen as victims [...] later, there were cases in the media about Albanian mob activity in Staten Island; however I don’t feel that Albanians are mentioned a lot in the press and if they are engaging in crime then this doesn’t constitute ethnic profiling. The public has the right to be informed (Interview #9, 2013).

Interestingly, a majority of respondents (89.7%) mentioned that the American society is positively stereotyping Albanians, and that these stereotypes are free from media influence but rooted in formal interactions with individuals from this ethnic group. In fact, several respondents mentioned that American society either lacked proper knowledge about their ethnic group or attributed the Albanian population to favourable qualities, perceiving them to belong to a cultural group with a strong work ethics.

One migrant, a female respondent from Albania, stated that the host country typically perceives the ethnic Albanian community as diligent, ambitious, and hardworking: “In general, Albanians are known as hard working people in Europe and in the United States, and especially the American government has been very supportive of Albanians in Kosovo and Albania” (Interview #9, 2013). Another male, in his forties, also added: “Some of the stereotypes are that we work as hard as Mexicans. We are known in New York as doormen, and building supervisors. I like to think people like us” (Interview #28, 2013). Likewise, an ethnic Albanian male, in his late thirties, further explained:

It’s a shame that there are bad characters in our culture, but you find this with Greeks, Italians too. I think Americans largely associate Albanians with hard work, honesty, ambition and patriotism. Americans are also a very nationalistic people and this country has done great things for us (Interview #19, 2013).

Thus many Albanian respondents did not encounter negative out-group prejudices from non-Albanians as a result of Albanian criminality.

From our research, it does not appear that the media labelling of Albanians as criminals is affecting the quality of life of Albanian migrants in New York to a great degree. Albanian participants alluded to a variety of factors as to why immigrants and first generation Albanian-Americans become

involved in organized crime. A prominent consensus was that in New York, recent immigrants were driven by poverty and the western world's materialistic society, and turned to a life of crime because they were too impatient, too ambitious, and too proud. An organized crime offender noted: "I wanted to give my kids what my father could never give me. I live and breathe for my kids, and want to protect them" (Interview, 1a, 2014). Some elaborated on a personal inability to delay the gratification produced by "hard and honest work." One offender explained: "I hardly spoke any English when I got here, and I knew I would never make it like this. I was a waiter, a busboy, a handyman [...] I worked very hard but I never saw any rewards" (Interview, 2a, 2014). This study, however, is beyond the scope of this paper and will require further analysis.

Discussion

Available studies indicated that, in recent years, the rising wave of crime in European countries such as Greece, Italy and even Germany, has been often attributed to ethnic Albanian immigrants and has been used as a pretext for retaliatory policies towards them. Negative stereotypes often appear to be constructed and revived in the media. The consequent xenophobic feelings fermented amongst, for example, the Greek or the Italian population has then been used to justify government actions. This in turn seems to have had some criminalizing effect on the excluded Albanian population in a number of European countries.

However, the results from this study indicated that New York-based media does not necessarily cultivate negative perceptions of ethnic Albanians. It was theorized that media stigmatization would lead non-Albanian US citizens to harbour attitudes of xenophobia toward the Albanian out-group, forcing the migrant group to face discrimination, inequitable entrance into social spheres, and in turn gravitate toward a life of crime. However, the New York-based news media analysis illustrated that the percentage of stories regarding Albanian profit-oriented and violent crime was significant yet not as prominent as in EU media sources. In addition, the most common crimes linked to Albanian immigrants that are frequently mentioned in New York media are organized theft, burglaries, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration. There is very little information, if any, on trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation, prostitution, rape, senseless murder of ordinary people, violent robberies, and so on. These are what Martin Innes (2004) labels as "signal crimes," and such crimes that lead to "moral panic" seem to be more prominent in the European context (Arsovska, 2015). This finding shows that the media effect on cultivating attitudes of criminal labelling of ethnic Albanians is overall weaker in the U.S., particularly when compared to countries such as UK, Greece and Italy, where Albanians are routinely linked to episodes of organized crime, particularly brutal human trafficking for sexual exploitation, by press agencies.

Interviews with non-Albanian respondents indicated that in areas such as Belmont (The Bronx, New York) and Ridgewood (Queens, New York), people, overall, hold slightly more positive than negative out-group perceptions. The results also showed that in some cases, the in-group did not

share any direct contact with Albanians and still held favourable perceptions of this out-group. In other cases, there were respondents who engaged in daily contact either at the workplace or at school, but did not exhibit positive perceptions toward this ethnic community due to negative experiences. When respondents indicated that their perceptions of Albanians were derived from media influence, they still expressed positive or neutral perceptions over 50 percent of the time, except in a few situations. The fact that non-Albanian respondents who only knew Albanians through the media changed their viewpoint of Albanians a couple of times (from positive/neutral to negative) is also an indicator that the media-influenced opinions are not very strong.

The commonly cited personality attributes, such as “ambitious” and “hardworking,” demonstrate that overall the Albanian community is respected by many American and non-Albanian social counterparts. The notion of Albanians being perceived as ambitious is corroborated by evidence yielded from a World Value Survey^[1], which mentioned that in 1998 and 2002, 88% of Albanian respondents reported that “less emphasis on work would be a bad thing”. Thus, many Albanian respondents said they had to “live up to” the positive stereotypes of the ethnic Albanian community.

It is interesting to note that despite the majority of positive opinions, many nonAlbanians still perceived this population to be especially cloistered in comparison to other more assimilated cultural groups in New York City. As illustrated by the results, majority of respondents noted that the Albanian community remains an extremely celled ethnicity and complete acculturation as well as assimilation into the host country society has not yet been achieved.

The findings from the media analysis and the survey were relatively consistent with those of the Diaspora interviews. While some ethnic Albanian participants expressed that they had faced inequalities within the structures of the host country society, it appears that this was not due to media influence. They had access to key social sectors, such as housing and labour markets. Although a majority of Diaspora members did refer to stories of Albanian criminality in the news media, they did not believe that this tainted their image within society. Qualitative interviews suggested that respondents were cognizant of the fact that their criminal image is much more prevalent in the EU, where higher levels of organized crime are performed by Albanian gangs. In the US, even if some members feel that they are stereotyped or that their conationals are shown in print and TV media outlets as criminals, this does not seem to bear any effect on their ability to access social spheres. Thus, the results from the Diaspora interviews pointed to a lack of evidence for the assumption that media clout leads to an increase in criminality among ethnic Albanians in New York City.

Conclusion

Results from this study have demonstrated that New York media does not place a salient emphasis

on Albanian criminality; host country nationals do not necessarily adopt xenophobia toward Albanians because of media influences; nor do members of the Albanian Diaspora feel that a criminal label occludes them from accessing key integration opportunities with their host country. Although the initial hypothesis maintained that media influence, social labelling, and marginalization are conducive forces that led to the rise of US-based ethnic Albanian organized crime, the data collected was not supportive of this hypothesis. Many respondents noted that American society either lacked proper knowledge about their ethnic group or attributed the Albanian population to favourable qualities. One reason might be that the crimes committed by ethnic Albanians in New York City do not have high social impact and are not necessarily considered “signal crimes” that lead to moral panic (Innes, 2004).

Given the sample size, this study remains largely descriptive and theoretical, and the findings should not be generalized to entire populations. Although the results did not demonstrate a strong linkage between media and crime, it should be restated that further research into the criminalizing effects of media stigmatization and the social labelling of immigrant populations is necessary.

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