

## **Greek in Diaspora**

*By Maria Irini Avgoulas\**

*This qualitative study examines the experiences of Greek diaspora communities in Melbourne, Australia, focusing on the intersection of religious identity, cultural maintenance, and health beliefs across three generations. Through in-depth interviews with immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation Greek Australians, this research explores how Greek Orthodox religion serves as a central pillar of identity and wellbeing, even as other cultural markers undergo transformation. The findings reveal that while participants experience conflicted identities regarding food practices, language use, and cultural belonging, religious belief remains a unanimous and unifying force. This study contributes to understanding how diaspora communities navigate cultural transmission, acculturation, and the maintenance of ethnic identity in multicultural contexts, with particular attention to the role of religion as a source of resilience and health promotion.*

**Keywords:** *Greek diaspora, Greek Orthodox religion, intergenerational transmission, cultural identity, health beliefs, Melbourne, acculturation*

### **Introduction**

The Greek diaspora represents one of the most significant migration communities in Australia, with Melbourne hosting one of the largest Greek populations outside of Greece. Understanding how diaspora communities maintain cultural identity while adapting to new environments remains a central concern in migration studies, anthropology, and public health. This paper examines three interconnected dimensions of the Greek diaspora experience in Melbourne: immigration and adaptation, identity formation and maintenance, and concepts of wellbeing and health.

Previous research has established that religion plays a crucial role in immigrant adaptation and mental health (Pargament and Cummings 2010, Koenig 2007). For Greek communities specifically, the Greek Orthodox Church has historically served not only as a religious institution but as a cultural anchor and social support network (Avgoulas and Fanany 2012a, 2013, Tamis 2005). However, questions remain about how the significance of religion and other cultural markers evolve across generations, and how these elements contribute to health and wellbeing in the diaspora context.

This study addresses these questions by examining the lived experiences of three generations of Greek Australians in Melbourne, with particular attention to how they conceptualize health, maintain cultural practices, and navigate their identity in the Australian multicultural landscape.

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## Literature Review

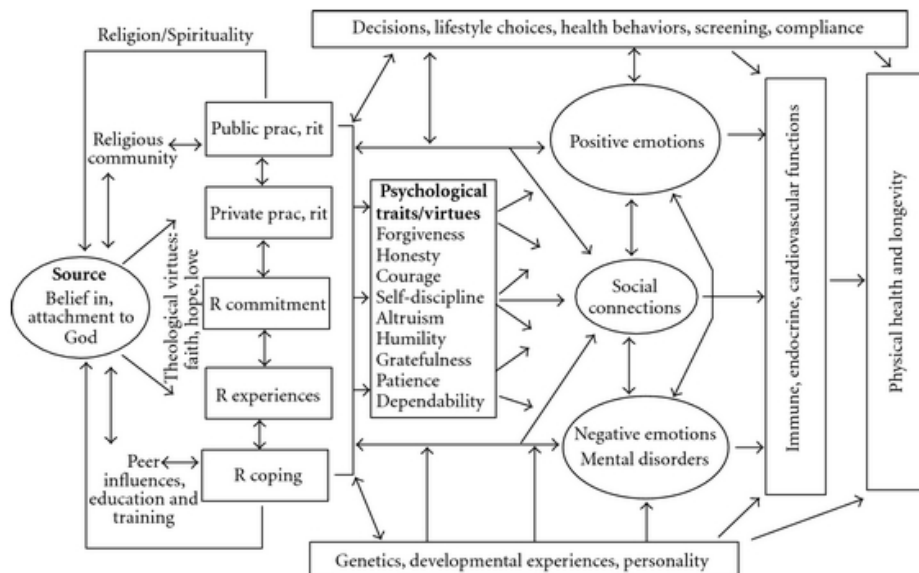
### *Religion, Health, and Wellbeing*

The Greek Orthodox religion is very important to Greeks. Much has been written about the topic of religion for health and wellbeing in general-examples can be found in the literature (Pargament and Cummings 2010, Koenig 2007, Pargament 1997, Avgoulas and Fanany 2015, and many others).

Generally, what the literature suggests (Avgoulas and Fanany 2012a, Burch 2008, Cole et al. 2009, Geertz, 1973) is the positive nature of Greek culture, which has strong foundations in the Greek Orthodox religion. What we see is that religion provides an explanation for events that have occurred across different life experiences (Park and Folkman 1997 Murphy et al. 2003). One example in the Greek community is the church and the many miracles and the strength that prayer provides (Prado et al. 2004, Friedman et al. 2006, Pargament and Cummings 2010, Avgoulas and Fanany 2012a, 2012b, 2013).

The models of health that are most dominant and often discussed in the literature can be categorized as biopsychosocial, ecological, or social. However, many of these models do not account for the central importance of religion in individual health. An exception to this is a model (Figure 1) that was previously introduced by Koenig, King, and Carson (2012) and has direct relevance to the Greek community of Melbourne.

**Figure 1.** *Model of the Relationship between Religion and Health (Koenig, King and Carson, 2012)*



*Cultural Transmission and Identity in Diaspora*

Language plays a central role in the process of cultural maintenance and is also a marker of identity (Pauwels 2005, Borland 2006). For diaspora communities, the retention of heritage language represents both a practical means of communication and a symbolic connection to homeland and ancestry (Smolicz et al. 2001).

Cultural identity in diaspora contexts is often characterized by negotiation and hybridity, particularly across generations (Berry and Kim, 1988m Lopez-Class et al. 2011). Research on Greek Australian youth has documented the complexity of identity formation, with young people experiencing tensions between Greek and Australian identities (Tsolidis and Pollard 2009, 2010, Authers 2006).

*Food, Health Beliefs, and Traditional Practices*

Traditional Greek dietary patterns and health beliefs represent another domain of cultural maintenance. Previous research has documented the health meanings and practices among older Greek immigrants, noting the significance of traditional foods and preparation methods (Rosenbaum 1991, Mariño et al. 2002). These practices are often transmitted intergenerationally, though with varying degrees of adoption and adaptation (Avgoulas and Fanany 2012a).

**Methodology**

This qualitative study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the Greek community in Melbourne, Australia. Participants were recruited from three generational cohorts: immigrants (born in Greece), first generation (children of immigrants, born in Australia), and second generation (grandchildren of immigrants).

*Participants*

What was found in regard to formal education was that the immigrant generation had little or no formal education, whereas the Australian-born participants were all highly educated. A majority of the first generation (63%) had a university degree, while the second-generation participants were completing high school or had begun university study.

*Data Analysis*

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on emergent themes related to religious identity, cultural practices, health beliefs, and intergenerational transmission. Quotes presented in this paper have been selected to illustrate key themes across all three generations.

## Findings

### *The Centrality of Greek Orthodox Religion*

What it was found from the various research studies were four core elements that were transmitted between generations: culture, Orthodox religion, Greek food, and the Greek language. What I want to emphasize is that of all of them, the most important was the Orthodox religion.

### Religion as Strength and Community

Words from the immigrants that explain it better:

*"For me our Greek religion is a strength, a companion, a support. That's how my parents raised me and it's one of the many things I brought from Greece."*

*"When the Priest speaks on Sunday at Church-he guides us with his words and for me these words give me peace and joy."*

On this topic, a first-generation immigrant told me:

*"It is very important for me and my children to receive Holy Communion often."*

And on this topic, second generation immigrants told me:

*"Prayer gives me strength and having a saint to pray to gives you extra strength and support."*

*"We go to the doctor generally but prayer also helps-I prayed for my grandmother when she was sick."*

### Religious Practices and Health Integration

These narratives reveal how Greek Orthodox religious practices are understood not merely as spiritual obligations but as integral components of health and wellbeing. Prayer, church attendance, and sacraments like Holy Communion are described as sources of strength, peace, and healing that complement rather than replace biomedical healthcare.

### *Contested Identities: Food, Language, and Belonging*

While agreement on the significance of religious belief and its value to them in terms of personal resilience and membership in the Greek community was unanimous, the participants expressed a conflicted sense of identity in the other three domains. Below are some quotes from all generations that elucidate this.

### Immigrant Generation: Nostalgia and Loss

Immigrant generation:

*"In Greece where I grew up I had my own garden-yard."*

*"We didn't have much growing up in Greece-we ate lots of legumes and rarely meat. But we were happier and healthier-than now when we have everything, we eat meat almost every day and we're not well."*

*"In Greece I had a very large garden with lots of fresh vegetables-I have a garden here too, you see, the garden reminds me of Greece and Greek soil."*

*"As much as I can, I cook Greek food."*

*"At this age what is good and I prefer are legumes-and especially lentils but the children don't like them."*

These narratives from immigrant participants reveal a nostalgic longing for the simplicity and perceived health benefits of their traditional Greek lifestyle. Gardens emerge as particularly powerful symbols-physical spaces that connect them to homeland, traditional foodways, and memories of a healthier past.

### First Generation: Inherited Wisdom and Observed Change

First generation:

*"My mother always told me to eat well-the best foods she told me are greens and legumes and to eat very little meat she told me. That's what I grew up with she told me."*

*"In the old days there weren't so many illnesses-and especially childhood ones, there weren't as many as now. It was the food, in the old days we ate better. More from home and very rarely from outside."*

*"I remember when I was growing up my parents always had a garden-I especially remember my father was always there. My parents told me it reminded them of the village and Greece when they were growing up."*

First-generation participants demonstrate an awareness of their parents' traditional knowledge while simultaneously observing differences between past and present health patterns. They serve as a bridge generation, having received direct transmission of traditional practices while living fully in the Australian context.

### Second Generation: Critical Consciousness and Selective Tradition

Second generation:

*"Processed food is bad for our health, all the chemicals, why are apples so big now? Apples from the tree are smaller compared to the ones from the supermarket. The growth hormones they did not have them then and that's the reason we have more illness today that we didn't have then in my grandmother's time. Best example my grandmother grew up in a tobacco farm, their tobacco was all natural, it wasn't addictive; it was still bad for your lungs, but not that bad, and there weren't all those chemicals. It was not addictive; you only smoked it because it was a pastime thing, a social thing. Now cigarettes are one of the worst things you can put in your body."*

*"My grandparents always had a garden, lemon tree and lots of flowers. Like Greece they told me-it's tradition and our culture they told me."*

Second-generation participants articulate a sophisticated critique of modern food systems while valorizing traditional practices. Notably, they frame this not primarily in ethnic terms but in broader health and environmental discourse, suggesting a universalization of what they learned as Greek cultural practices.

*Acculturation and the "Greek Way" vs. "Australian Way"*

What we can see from the data is that the Greek way was a strong perception particularly for the elders; however, despite their strong reluctance, they were influenced by the Australian way—that being via family, friends, and doctors, generally those born in Australia-diaspora.

This finding highlights the complex negotiation between maintenance of traditional practices and adaptation to Australian norms. Even when immigrants express strong commitment to "the Greek way," they are inevitably influenced by the Australian context through their children, social networks, and healthcare providers.

*Religious Fasting: Continuity and Adaptation*

Fasting (abstinence from certain foods) was something all generations spoke of. However, the meaning and practice of fasting showed both continuity and transformation across generations.

One explained:

*"Fasting is what we do in our religion. We have religion inside us, and we are born with one homeland and one religion."*

An immigrant participant said:

*"If you don't fast, you cannot understand religious events."*

Another expressed:

*"Living in Australia, we only fast the week leading up to Easter. The people in Greece work shorter days, have days off, and can celebrate things better."*

This participant felt that if she was in Greece, she would fast more:

*"There you would feel it more as a festive religious event because, at religious times, they change their working times based around the celebration and attending church services."*

What was interesting and important to note was the observation of a shift in the symbolic meaning of fasting in the Australian context:

*"Obviously it's difficult to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays but I would at least try to have vegetarian food."*

Another elucidated:

*"Fasting is religious mainly. It prepares you mentally, it cleans you before you go into the happy days, but it's also really healthy. I generally fast, unless there is a special occasion, and I may have dairy. And it's a chance to be really healthy as well. I like to fast and it's not bad."*

These accounts demonstrate how fasting practices adapt to the Australian context while maintaining religious significance. Notably, younger generations increasingly frame fasting in dual terms-both as religious obligation and as healthy lifestyle choice-suggesting a hybridization of traditional religious practice and contemporary wellness discourse.

### *Language and the Politics of Identity*

Language plays a central role in the process of cultural maintenance and is also a marker of identity. For the participants of this study, the Greek language was a way they could retain a cultural identity, even when the language was not a primary means of communication.

Something that was said by a second-generation participant echoes this well:

*"I don't want to lose any part of my Greek identity, like I said, I don't see myself as Australian, I don't have Australian blood, like an African elephant if it's born in Australia, we still consider it African, so we're just [Greeks] born somewhere else."*

This powerful statement reveals the essentialist nature of ethnic identity for some diaspora youth. The metaphor of the African elephant illustrates a belief in immutable ethnic belonging that transcends birthplace-a conception of identity rooted in ancestry and heritage rather than civic nationality. This perspective stands in tension with multicultural ideologies that emphasize hybrid identities and suggests the persistence of strong ethnic identification even among Australian-born generations.

## **Discussion**

### *Religion as the Unchanging Core*

The most significant finding of this research is the unanimous agreement across all three generations regarding the central importance of Greek Orthodox religion. While other markers of Greek identity-language proficiency, dietary practices, connection to homeland-showed variation and conflict across generations, religious belief and practice remained constant and uncontested. This suggests that religion functions as what Smolicz et al. (2001) term a "core value"-an element so fundamental to group identity that its loss would result in the dissolution of the ethnic community itself.

The integration of religious practice with health and wellbeing, as evidenced in participants' narratives about prayer, church attendance, and sacraments, aligns with Koenig, King, and Carson's (2012) model of religion-health relationships. For Greek diaspora communities, religion provides not only spiritual sustenance but also social support, meaning-making frameworks for dealing with illness and adversity, and specific health-promoting practices like fasting.

*Nostalgia, Gardens, and the Somatic Memory of Place*

The recurring motif of gardens in immigrant narratives warrants particular attention. Gardens function as what might be termed "transnational spaces"-physical locations in Australia that are semiotically linked to Greece through cultivation of Mediterranean plants, use of Greek agricultural techniques, and association with childhood memories. The garden becomes a site where immigrants can literally touch Greek soil (even if transported or symbolically present), cultivate Greek foods, and perform Greek labor practices. This embodied connection to place suggests that diaspora identity is maintained not only through abstract cultural symbols but through sensory and physical engagement with materially reconstructed homelands.

The nostalgia expressed by immigrants for simpler, healthier lives in Greece reflects what Boym (2001) terms "restorative nostalgia"-a longing not merely for the past but for a past imagined as more authentic, pure, and wholesome than the present. This nostalgia serves psychological functions, providing comfort and continuity, but may also create intergenerational tensions when transmitted to Australian-born generations who lack direct experience of the idealized homeland.

*Generational Shifts and the Universalization of Traditional Practice*

The data reveals a fascinating pattern whereby Greek cultural practices are progressively reframed in more universal terms across generations. While immigrant participants describe traditional foods, fasting, and gardens primarily in ethnic terms ("the Greek way," "what we brought from Greece"), second-generation participants increasingly articulate these same practices through universalized health and environmental discourses.

For example, traditional dietary patterns are praised not because they are Greek but because they avoid processed foods and chemicals. Fasting is valued not only as religious obligation but as a healthy lifestyle practice. Gardens are important not only as connections to Greek heritage but as sources of natural, uncontaminated food.

This universalization may represent a strategic response to Australian multicultural context, wherein ethnic particularity must be justified through appeals to shared values (health, sustainability, natural living) to gain broader legitimacy. Alternatively, it may reflect genuine hybridization of Greek and Australian frameworks, producing new forms of ethnic identity that incorporate both heritage and contemporary concerns.

*The Paradox of Language*

The second-generation participant's statement about Greek identity presents a paradox: asserting strong Greek identification while presumably having limited Greek language proficiency (given demographic patterns in second-generation communities). This suggests that language, while acknowledged as important, may be more significant as a symbol of identity than as a practical communicative tool. The very assertion "I don't want to lose any part of my Greek identity" in

English, using an Anglo-Australian metaphor (the African elephant), exemplifies this paradox.

This finding aligns with research showing that heritage language proficiency often declines across generations even as ethnic identity remains strong (Portes 1994, Pauwels 2005). Identity markers may persist symbolically even when their practical manifestation diminishes.

### *Limitations*

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size and recruitment methods are not fully specified, limiting assessment of representativeness. The mixing of generational categories (immigrant, first, second) requires clarification, as terminology varies across migration literature. Additionally, the researcher's own positionality within the Greek Australian community is not explicitly discussed, though insider-outsider dynamics significantly shape qualitative research (Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

### **Conclusions**

This study demonstrates that Greek Orthodox religion serves as the central, unifying element of Greek diaspora identity in Melbourne, remaining constant across three generations even as other cultural markers undergo transformation and contestation. While food practices, language use, and sense of national belonging show generational variation and conflict, religious belief and practice maintain unanimous importance and consistent meaning.

The findings suggest several important conclusions for understanding diaspora communities:

**First**, cultural transmission is selective and hierarchical. Not all cultural elements are transmitted equally; some (like religion) maintain primacy while others (like language, dietary practices) are more negotiable and adaptable.

**Second**, diaspora identity involves continuous negotiation between maintenance and adaptation. Even immigrants who express strong commitment to "the Greek way" are influenced by Australian contexts through their families, social networks, and institutions. This negotiation intensifies across generations, with Australian-born generations developing hybrid frameworks that combine Greek heritage with Australian and global discourses.

**Third**, the relationship between religion and health in diaspora contexts deserves greater attention in public health research and practice. For Greek communities, religious practices are inseparable from health beliefs and behaviors. Healthcare providers working with diaspora populations should recognize the integration of religious and health domains and consider how religious institutions and practices might be leveraged for health promotion.

**Fourth**, material and embodied practices (gardening, cooking, fasting) are crucial sites of cultural maintenance and transmission. Diaspora identity is not

only abstract or symbolic but is literally cultivated, prepared, consumed, and incorporated into bodies across generations.

**Finally**, this research highlights the importance of longitudinal, intergenerational approaches to understanding diaspora communities. Single-generation studies miss the dynamic processes of cultural transmission, transformation, and innovation that characterize immigrant communities over time.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Future research should explore several questions raised by this study:

- How do Greek Orthodox religious institutions in Melbourne explicitly or implicitly support health and wellbeing?
- What gender differences exist in religious practice, cultural transmission, and health beliefs across generations?
- How do mixed-heritage families (Greek-Australian intermarriages) navigate cultural and religious transmission?
- What role does return migration or regular visits to Greece play in maintaining cultural identity and practices?
- How might the findings for Greek communities compare with other Orthodox Christian diaspora groups (e.g., Serbian, Russian, Coptic)?

### *Practical Applications*

For healthcare providers, community organizations, and policymakers working with Greek diaspora communities:

- Recognize the central importance of Greek Orthodox religion and consider partnering with churches for health promotion initiatives
- Understand that health beliefs integrate religious, cultural, and biomedical frameworks; avoid assuming secular Western health models
- Appreciate the significance of traditional practices (fasting, dietary patterns, prayer) and work with rather than against these practices
- Acknowledge intergenerational differences in education, language proficiency, and acculturation while recognizing shared core values
- Support cultural maintenance activities (language classes, cultural festivals, traditional cooking) as contributing to community health and resilience

### *Final Thoughts*

The Greek diaspora of Melbourne represents a vibrant, dynamic community maintaining strong ethnic identity while adapting to Australian multiculturalism. At the heart of this identity lies Greek Orthodox religion—a source of meaning, community, resilience, and health that transcends generational change. Understanding how diaspora communities like the Greeks navigate identity, belonging, and wellbeing provides

insights not only for scholarship but for building more inclusive, healthy, and culturally responsive societies.

As one immigrant participant beautifully expressed: "*For me our Greek religion is a strength, a companion, a support.*" This simple statement encapsulates the profound role of religion in diaspora life—not merely as doctrine or ritual, but as lived experience that provides strength for daily challenges, companionship within community, and support through life's inevitable difficulties. In the Greek diaspora of Melbourne, religion remains the enduring thread that connects generations, bridges homelands, and sustains wellbeing across time and space.

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