

## Greek People, the Orthodox Religion and Resilience in the Time of Crisis

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*This paper examines the role of religion in supporting health and the significance this has on emotional wellbeing in time of crisis for individuals of Greek Australian background. Melbourne, Australia, has a large Greek community whose oldest members were born in Greece and emigrated to Australia 50-60 years ago. The children and grandchildren of these immigrants were born in Australia but often see themselves as members of a cultural community distinct from the English-speaking mainstream. In addition to language, one of the most significant cultural factors handed down by the immigrant generation is a belief in the importance of religion and religious rituals in maintaining health. These rituals and beliefs are also a powerful tool for coping in times of crisis, illness and other challenges. Its findings are based on several qualitative studies undertaken in Melbourne between 2011-2016. The individuals that participated in these studies relied on religious faith and traditional practices to support them in times of crisis. Their specific beliefs reflect orthodox theology but also folk practices specific to this community and can be applied to wellbeing and resilience shown by this population in times of crisis. They have a strong belief in destiny and generally accept that God provides the means for addressing negative conditions. This paper describes the nature of their beliefs and outlines the ways in which religion serves as the basis for their resilience and ability to cope with adversity.*

**Keywords:** Greek people, Orthodox religion, faith, resilience, crisis

### Introduction, Background and Methodology

The journey of Greek migration to Australia dates back to 1827, however the vast majority of Greek people arrived between 1945 and 1982, searching for a new beginning in the “lucky country,” – “the country of opportunity” as they referred to, and viewed Australia. This process was made possible by the Assisted Passage Agreement that was made by the Greek and Australian governments in 1952 that opened the way for the Greek people to first migrate to Australia and then for the City of Melbourne become home to the world’s largest population of Greek people outside of Greece, and this is still the fact now, in 2021.

In addition to integrating into Australian society, the migrants and their Australian born descendants have maintained a strong cultural identity that includes strong links to their ancestral country, to the Greek language and to their faith the Greek Orthodox religion (for further discussion on this, see Tamis 2005).

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Generally, faith and the Greek Orthodox religion has been significant as a means of support and an ingredient of resilience for both the Greek migrants and their descendants too (Avgoulas and Fanany 2015).

The majority of Greek migrants to Australia arrived with a firsthand experience of war. Greece had been occupied by the German-Italian forces during World War II and this was followed by the Greek civil war. Despite their aspiration for a new start life, many of these migrants saw the move to Australia as a temporary measure. Most intended to return to Greece at some time, having achieved a measure of success in Australia that would allow them to settle in their native land. For most, this did not become reality, and then ended up staying permanently in their new home. This has generated mixed emotions. On the one hand, older migrants often note wistfully that, “Unfortunately we could not go back.” Nonetheless, many of them are remarkably positive and consider that they may have been luckier than those who stayed behind in Greece, commenting, “Look at Greece now and those that live there. We are luckier here.” or “All they have is the sun, water and the Greek land. We have it all here just go to Oakleigh. It’s Greece in Melbourne.” Oakleigh is a Melbourne neighbourhood that offers a large number of Greek businesses and services. Others simply note that, “Australia was good to us.” This same view is sometimes echoed by Greeks who remained in their native land, especially in the today’s context of economic problems: “You’re a lucky one. You left and gave a future to your children – you made a life for yourself and for your children. Look at us here. We have nothing, and our children have no future.”

For the original migrant generation, as well as for their descendants, Australia became home, and they became acculturated to the English-speaking context. They came to refer to Australia as their second country or ‘*patrida*’ (“*Αυστραλία η δεύτερη πατρίδα*”). The vast majority of migrants had few possessions and were not well-educated. They came from largely rural backgrounds and were unskilled. They did bring a store of traditional knowledge, views, and behavior that they made great efforts to pass on to their descendants, as the essence of their ‘Greekness,’ and that were gradually adapted to the Australian context.

The early years of settlement in Australia were difficult for the Greek people overall. Their positive outlook and resilience derived from their traditional culture and religious faith along with the view that maintaining their Greek ways would allow them to prosper. This knowledge, in particular, gave them strength and resilience in diaspora. As compared to other cultural groups in the multicultural Australian society, the Greek community has shown a unique level of attachment to their homeland which confers a sense of belonging (Kaloudis 2006). This has been supportive in the process of adaptation and acculturation and, for the original migrants, provided a refuge from the pressures of integration into the English-speaking mainstream.

Culture plays an important role in the life of individuals and populations and serves as a lens through which health, wellbeing and the experience of illness is perceived. The experiences of specific immigrant communities and the significance of cultural identity in overall wellbeing has been discussed extensively in the literature (see, for example, Lopez-Class et al. 2011, Unger and Schwartz 2012). The experience of migration is life changing, for the immigrants themselves and

also for their decedents. There is often little time for adjustment, and the attendant anxiety may also contribute to a number of health problems (Pumariega et al. 2005). However, migration and the nature of the associated experiences are difficult to predict and may be different for each individual (Berry and Kim 1988). It has also been noted that there are links between the journey of migration the experience of acculturation and the overall health of migrants (Miranda et al. 2011, Organista et al. 2003, Salant and Lauderdale 2003, among others).

This paper will explore the area of migration and health, in particular health and wellbeing will be discussed, and life in people of Greek origin before and after migration to Australia. Incorporating post migration participants that were in fact descendants of the original migrants, and how this can and has been a positive ingredient in time of crisis. Each participant was interviewed about their experiences, and the resulting texts were analyzed using the narrative approach to ethnographic study outlined by Savage (2006). One of the authors of this study, M-I Avgoulas, is a member of the Greek community in Melbourne and occupied a position as both an insider and outsider. For this reason, it was possible to carry out the interviews in Greek and for an emic and etic perspective to be identified (see Ong 1993, Savage 2006, among others). The discussion presented below consists of four sections: Health and Wellbeing in Greece before Migration; Greece after migration; Health and Wellbeing in Greece compared to Australia; and Life in Australia, migration and health. Quotations from the participants are presented to more fully present their perspective and views on their own experience.

Despite having lived in Australia for many years, the participants in this study were far more comfortable using Greek than English. This is a characteristic of the Greek community in Australia that has been widely observed; the migrant generation largely maintained a Greek-speaking identity. The first and second Australian generations are native speakers of English, however, and there is some evidence that facility in Greek is declining significantly among younger Australian-born individuals. Language is a significant factor in identity on multiple levels and is also significant in acculturation (see, for example Feuverveger 1989, Fishman 1977, Giles and Johnson 1981, Li 1995). In addition to its function in communication, language is an expression of ethnicity and cultural background (Authers 2006). For immigrants in particular, language may be a determinant in overall wellbeing, and the ability to communicate fully, including in the context of health care, may be crucial in the experience of health and illness (Unger and Schwartz 2012).

Despite the participants' preference for Greek, in fact, they were able to switch between Greek and English readily, and their normal use of Greek contained numerous English words which were specific to the Australian context. Some of these loan terms include: "homemade", "anyway", "alcohol", "jeans", "lungs", "hamburgers", "chips", "restaurant", "stress", "healthy", "computer", "children's hospital", "mobile", "bus stop", "drugs", "cheesecake", "ice-cream", "government", "happy", "yes", "cancer", "pollution", "inflection", "no hope", "soy milk", "very difficult", and "take it easy". When this language use was pointed out to them, a number of participants were quite surprised and also disappointed in themselves that they were using English words naturally and spontaneously and at times had

even forgotten the corresponding Greek words. This situation shows the importance of language maintenance to these members of the original migrant generation but also the inescapable presence of English in their environment as well as the existence of language shift (see Forrest and Dandy 2017). Overall, the English ability of these women was low, and they all relied on children and grandchildren for assistance communicating in the larger Australian environment. This was especially important in the context of health where their low level of formal education meant that they had little knowledge relevant to decision-making and tended to rely on traditional knowledge or on their English-speaking family members.

### **Health and Wellbeing in Greece before Migration**

The participants in this study all seemed to feel that Greece before migration was a healthier place than Australia (generally the belief remains the same today particularly by the younger ones that the health benefits of life in Greece are endless “where to start – everything is just better in Greece, the food is yummy and good for you. People there (in Greece) are happier not just those at beach bars – but even at church”), and that being in their homeland was an aspect of wellbeing. Having migrated at a young age, however, it was notable that these perceptions did not reflect the adult perspective the women had gained over time or the experience of raising children. One commented on the fact that her memories of Greece were those of a child, saying, “We were strong kids then; the lifestyle was different then.”

Medicine has a long tradition in Greece dating back to Hippocrates and has remained a highly respected profession. Nonetheless, some participants recalled doctors in Greece being not very knowledgeable. One noted, “There were doctors, but they did not know the medication.” Others remembered only seeing a doctor for something serious, and others had never been to a doctor in Greece. One participant recalled, “In Greece in those years, I remember there was only one doctor for many villages and someone had to go personally to call the doctor, as there were no phones to contact the doctor to come and then the doctor would come on the donkey, it was very difficult.”

The participants were aware that illness was treated differently in the Greece of their youth than in Australia. A more traditional and informal approach was the norm as was the use of home remedies and treatments derived from plants. Several of them recalled specific treatments they had experienced or instances of being sick. The participants’ comments included: “My mother would rub me with petrol, she would give me warm drinks;” “I had whooping cough and I was taken to the seaside. The doctor had said ‘take her for some fresh air.’” One participant, who had had tonsillitis, said, “They put something like hay on a towel, they would heat it and it would take away the infection, as they couldn’t go to doctors.” Another participant reported being made to stay in bed when she was sick and that rubs and cupping were also used at the time.

Overall, the participants felt they had been healthier in Greece, and their explanation for this was that they ate healthier food and looked after themselves better. One participant said, “When I was a child in Greece, I would eat meat only once a week, and it was fresh. We didn’t have refrigerators. That’s why there weren’t so many illnesses.” Another commented that, “We were lucky that there were no infections then as the atmosphere was clean.”

The contrast between Greece and Australia was notable in the participants’ perceptions of health. One factor in this may have been the difference in age. Speaking from a position of older age, the participants had greater awareness of illness that they had not yet experienced at the time they were still living in Greece. Since most of their experience of dealing with health problems of their own as well as those of family members had occurred in Australia, it is possible they viewed Australia as less healthy simply because it was the location of the majority of the illness they had personally experienced. It is also the case that these participants were aware of concerns about health and the environment that are periodically discussed in the media, including the Greek language media in Australia, and that this also influenced their perceptions as did their views of their children and grandchildren that reflect the wider Australian context.

### **Greece after Migration**

Asked to think about the current situation in Greece, the participants felt that Greece itself as well as the people there had changed since they left. They had all had the opportunity to visit at various times and observe their original homeland firsthand. One participant explained her perceptions, saying: “Greece has changed. When I was there, I would close my eyes and remember the past, the Greece I remembered. Everything has changed, and this saddens me. The people who live there are now different, I did not find my friends, everything has changed.” Another noted that: “Greece has changed, the way of life is very different, young people have no respect.” One commented on the difference between Greece and Australia, saying, “Here we work, and I have taught my children this as well. There, the young people just want to have a good time. Here we have a better life.” They all noted a significant difference between the Greek and Australian lifestyle and the fact that they had come to be seen as ‘Australian’ by people in Greece. Having left at an early age, these women had not experienced firsthand the changes in Europe in the final decades of the twentieth century which included major cultural and political change associated with European Union. At the same time, the participants were not conscious of the ways in which they had changed as a result of their experiences in Australia and, while they felt themselves to be the same as they had been when they left Greece, were unaware that their culture and that of people in Greece had diverged. Generally, they realized that they no longer belonged in Greece, and some of them were surprised to note that they, in fact, were disliked and feared as outsiders or interlopers. One participant explained: “[It was] terrible, my own father and brother did not speak to me. The people there changed. They would say ‘the Australians have come to take our farmland’.”

Another commented, “They disliked us and we them.” One participant expressed a comparable concern showing her Australian association, saying, “They don’t have money there. A lot of them are coming here for work, and this may result in our children here not having work.”

The participants also commented on a number of lifestyle changes that they observed in Greece. These included statements such as, “They don’t cook, they go out” and “They don’t even go to church. The grandmothers don’t even go. I go to church every Sunday.” Changes in language use also stood out to the participants, particularly the use of the English language in Greece. One noted, “I hear on television shows from Greece that some Greek words are used wrong,” adding that use of the English word “okay” is widespread. At the same time, the participants felt a strong sense of nostalgia and longing for the Greece they remembered. One said, “I do feel a pull to go back. I was born there, my village, but when I went everything was different, nothing was the same as the way I left it.” One participant recalled that, on one of her first return trips to Greece, she wanted to bring some Greek soil to Australia but decided not to as the soil belonged to Greece. The pain and difficulty associated with what the participants referred to as having “two homelands” was illustrated by one woman who said that, when she went to Greece for a holiday she missed her family in Australia by the second week, but, when she leaves, she misses Greece. She commented, “That’s what it’s like to have two homelands.” Another said, “It’s our *πατρίδα* (homeland), my family is there. Here I feel and have always felt like someone who is free but a prisoner.”

These participants expressed sentiments that show a significant aspect of the experience of migration, the difficulty in reconciling the effects of long term residence in a foreign location with the memories of their culture of origin. For many of them, the awareness that life in Greece had changed significantly from the form they remembered was an unexpected and often unwelcome realization, as was the fact that they, themselves, had gradually come to think differently from friends and family who had remained behind. This was evident in more easily observable aspects of their Greekness, such as the use of English loan words in speaking, as well as in more intangible ways, like attitudes about work, religious observance, and way of life.

Greek culture in Australia, which developed over the years through the efforts of the migrant generation as well as their descendants, reflects the memories of the original Greek settlers and has been adapted to the Australian context. This has created a situation where people of Greek background in Australia feel themselves to be Greek, and this cultural identity is defined by the standards of the migrant generation whose views and experiences reflect the Greece of their youth as well as their social and cultural background. By contrast, Greek people in Greece have developed a very different modern identity characterized by continuous progress from the difficult war years up to the present time, which is structured by membership in the EU and participation in the affairs of the European region. In this sense, the Australian Greek community has maintained a comparatively static conceptualization of what their cultural identity entails but has moved significantly into the English-speaking mainstream. This is, of course, an aspect of adaptation to

the Australian context and has occurred largely unconsciously among members of the Greek community.

### **Health and Wellbeing in Greece Compared to Australia**

The participants in the study viewed health care as superior in Australia, but emotional health and wellbeing were seen as better in Greece. One participant noted, “The comfort that as difficult things maybe you can overcome them financially here [in Australia]. When my children were ill, I would take them to the doctor, buy the medication. There [in Greece] no. Our parents found it very difficult. There my siblings were ill, and they died, why they died? There wasn’t medication, the doctors were not careful? The years were difficult.” Another commented, “It’s better here, the healthcare.” Reflecting on the difference, a participant concluded, “Here people mainly go to doctors.”

One participant, however, added that, while formal health care was better and health knowledge more widespread in Australia, people were healthier in Greece. Other participants agreed that the lifestyle in Greece was better, at least as they recalled it. One commented, “The way of life is very different in Australia compared to Greece. It’s beautiful in Greece. You feel wonderful in Greece. Our life changed in Australia. You go to work, you come home and then you go to work again.” Another expressed this same view: “Here we work very hard. I don’t understand how over there they don’t have the anxiety we do. Things are harder now, as they don’t have work, but you go there and the shops and cafes are full.”

The participants felt that, in Greece, people experience less stress than in Australia. One said, “They don’t have money, but they have a good time.” This participant then mentioned a childhood memory of Greece: “I remember, as a child, I would go to the garden. I would take an onion with some bread and I would eat. But I would not stress. I would go to the fields for work and I would come home singing in the evening.” Another commented on the current economic crisis in Greece saying, “Things were better before the crisis. It was better, the way of life is better.” Nonetheless, the participants had many favorable views about life in Australia that related to their health and wellbeing. One noted that, even when she is in Greece, she tries to maintain the lifestyle she has adopted in Australia, saying, “I try to keep my rules. I have breakfast, a sandwich for lunch or tuna with salad. We have learnt a different way here.” Another participant commented that, “They live better in Greece, but the families are not close. We are more connected to our families here.” Another recognized that she had adapted to the Australian context and that this had been beneficial. She said, “We have adopted an Australian lifestyle that I think works well.”

The comments of the participants reflect the contrast they perceive between Greece and Australia but also demonstrate the degree to which they have become integrated into the Australian context. This fact was not apparent to many of them until they were asked to reflect on their experiences and talk about how they saw them. Overall, the participants recognized that they had done well in Australia and had achieved a lifestyle that surpassed what would likely have been available to

them if they stayed in Greece. Nonetheless, the perception of loss remains a significant aspect of their experience, and they are aware that there were tradeoffs in coming to Australia despite their own success and that of their children and grandchildren. This highlights the dilemma of migration that has been experienced by many groups, including the Greek community, namely that the gains they have achieved are necessarily balanced by losses, and it is not always possible to reconcile the two.

### **Life in Australia, Migration and Health**

This section of the paper will begin with two quotes to set the scene for what will be discussed and can also serve as a reflection to what has been discussed – one quote is from an elder (who was born in Greece), and the second from a young person (a descendant born in diaspora).

“Religious rituals are good, especially during illness as they help us emotionally. They do not take away illness. They give us courage and strength.” – Elderly Greek participant

“I believe it [magic] because it happened to me in my old house. One night, and after it happened I went straight to church. One night, we went to see a play in the city with cousins, a normal night, nothing weird. I went to bed hearing dogs barking and, as a teenager, you hear all the stories that if there is a dog barking, there is an evil spirit. I found this out from school and friends, not my grandmother, and also the internet. Because when you start reading things on the internet, forget it, you can't stop. I woke up and I used to have a clock next to my bed. It was digital, had a light and I could always see the time and I had a look and it was around 3 in the morning. You know how they say at 3 o'clock, all the spirits come out. I went to move and get back to bed. I could not do it. I could not do it. I could not move and then I looked in my doorway, and there was a massive black figure in my doorway. I went to go and scream. I couldn't scream. I couldn't move. I felt like something was sitting on top of me. I couldn't breathe and I remember I started crying. I freaked out. I didn't know what was going on. The first thing I did, because it's the only one I know off my heart, was to recite the Lord's prayer, because through Greek school, we always said it, and then I managed to fall asleep, and two hours later, it happened again, and it had moved from my door to have moved on top of me. I freaked out and I couldn't scream. I just wanted to scream and call for help. I couldn't move. I could not breathe and I was in panic mode. The next morning, I didn't know how to explain what happened. One of our family friends is a priest, and I went to my mum, 'You have to call him. I need to see him.' I went and spoke to the priest, and he said that we have to do something about this. When we spoke, he gave me a little prayer to read every night and he said that, if anything else continues, to come back. Two weeks passed, and then one night, out of nowhere, I woke up and I stood up in my bed, and all that I can remember is hearing all these voices and I can't even explain it. All these voices around my head, and I was, 'No, this is not okay, and this time, I could move, so I got up and I ran. I ran to my mum and I told her we have to go back [to see the priest]. The next day, we went back, and the priest took me to the front of the church and he did this massive prayer and he put me under, not a cloak (the gown the priest wears),

and ever since then, it has not happened again. He said to me that it could have been either, not someone who was trying to hurt me, but something that was either wrong inside of me or something that wanted to get in my head and wanted to do me harm. I asked to see a priest because this is something a doctor could not understand, a possession from an evil spirit. They would think I'm losing it, but if you go to a church and say that, they would understand. I chose church because I always knew it can help because a lot of things had happened. My mum lost her sister to cancer when I was really little, and she would always tell me that she would go to church or get a priest for support and to help her prepare, and that's how I knew straight away that I have to." Greek – Australian young participant.

The participants in this study experienced a range of emotion associated with their experience of migration and settlement in Australia. While they had experienced happy times in Australia, memories of sadness, longing for family left behind, stress and anxiety related to the work context, the difficulty of not speaking English, and having to learn a new way of life are very clear to them. One participant spoke poignantly of the day they left Greece. Saying, "They took me to Athens, Piraeus, and, when the time came to leave. . . Oh God, if I knew how to swim and I was not afraid of death, I would have jumped. That's how much leaving impacted me, even though I was coming to my sister who adored me." Another explained, "We came here without knowing the language, without knowing anyone. It was challenging for us. The first year's there was a lot of sadness. We were afraid, and we would hide. I was afraid if someone knocked on the door, what would I say to them as I did not know the language. I was afraid if someone would come to my house and take my children. All this caused us stress." This participant concluded, however, that, "Australia made us people." This statement epitomizes an idea expressed by all the participants that the challenges they faced in Australia forced them to become self-reliant and resilient in the face of a strange society and culture. The participants were also aware of the connection between their experience of migration and their health, both mental and physical. One participant said, "The health of all immigrants has been impacted by migration." Another explained, "Migration impacted my health. I had a nervous breakdown. That's what the psychiatrist told me." Thinking about her experiences, other participants concluded that, "[Migration is] why I have health problems now." This same woman reflected on the importance of her faith in coping with the problems she experienced, saying, "Everything was very difficult. I was alone. It was very difficult and dangerous. I didn't know anyone, and I would pray, and I would ask for the Virgin Mary's help."

All of the participants in this study hoped and expected to return to Greece one day. This idea was an assumption that underlay their activities in Australia from their first arrival. In particular, it motivated their very strong desire to maintain their Greekness and, more importantly, to convey this identity to their children and grandchildren, even as they tried to adapt to the Australian context. One participant said definitively, "We all had the dream of staying in Australia for a few years only and to return to Greece." Another explained the dilemma of living between two cultures with the hope of returning to Greece as follows: "Everything changed from the minute we got here. Life changed. We did what the

Australians do. We kept the Greek language, [but] our manners changed. We have order here.” Another participant described the hope of migrants like herself but noted the well-known difficulty of return migration, saying, “We all came here with the same dream, to make money and go back. This didn’t happen, and the ones that did go back, returned to Australia.” The problems faced by people of Greek origin who decide to return to Greece has been well-documented in the literature (see, for example, Christou 2002, 2006, King and Christou 2010) and serve to show the real impacts of the psychological and emotional changes caused by acculturation.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the difficulties the [participants in this study, and other members of the original migrant generation of people of Greek origin to Australia, experienced, they have, as a group, shown remarkable resilience that is characterized by the integration of the first and second Australian generations into all levels of society. Nonetheless, the experience of migration affected the perceptions and attitudes of the migrants and changed them, relative to family and friends left behind in Greece. One domain of experience that has been significantly altered by their experience in Australia relates to health and wellbeing, where the contrast between the situation in the Greece of their childhood contrast sharply with the Australian context. While in certain ways, they tend to view their health and that of their family, as well as their access to healthcare services, as having benefited in Australia, they still have mixed feelings about the healthiness of the environment, especially the psychological dimension represented by life stress. This underscores the division between physical and mental health in the experience of migrants and suggests a need to better understand the psychological impacts of the experience of migration, especially as these individuals age and face additional physical challenges associated with chronic illness and the period of older adulthood. The perception of the Greece of their childhood that has been passed down to the next generations and that suggests a healthier, happier place presents a serious contrast with the Greece they have experienced as visitors later in life and serves, for many older migrants, as a source of concern and confusion that is difficult to reconcile with the advantages of their life in Australia. Overall, Greek migrants have achieved success in Australia, particularly as measured by economic status. This has contributed to physical health and vastly improved opportunities for children and grandchildren. It does not, in many cases, have the ability to soften the conflicting perceptions migrants often feel about their wellbeing that center on how Greece “should be” and confusion as to why it has, in their view, changed in ways they find concerning. This suggests a need to better understand the expectations of older migrants, the social factors that have motivated their actions over the life course, and the specific issues that exist within various of the cultural communities that make up Australia’s multicultural society. Further research on these topics would greatly enhance our understanding of the experience of migration and also

suggest ways to more effectively address the needs of older Australians who were born in other countries and who are effectively caught between cultures.

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