

## **The Art and Application of Narrative Ethnography to Cultural and Ethnic Populations in Diaspora**

*Of key relevance among the Greek people / the Greek diaspora of Melbourne, Australia is the method of Ethnography. It's often described as both a process and method that can be considered both a methodology and a written account the consistent variable being a specific ethnic mission. It's important however when considering this methodology and being able to fully conceptualize it and to apply its benefits to understand its origins. The foundations of this type of work originate from social anthropology – specifically in history what is noted is this type of research is found when working with small communities that shares beliefs and practices that bind them culturally. However, moving forward to modern times ethnography is associated to social research undertaken in ordinary daily settings – with specific interests drawing on meaning and interpretation of those experiencing specific events rather than having a heavy focus empirical data. This paper aims to demonstrate and show through various qualitative undertaken in recent times how in fact Narrative ethnography can be applied, and the positivity of this method particularly to cultural and ethnic populations in diaspora. Both the lived experience of participants – through quotes and case studies will elucidate this in both the presentation and associate paper. This type of research and more generally qualitative methodologies may in fact be difficult to grasp and in turn challenge the explanation provided however its significant in magnitude one example being in healthcare and health issue. In fact, methods such as these do and can have ethical implications however with skilled supervision and a trained researcher in the area its benefits are and can be extensive. Applying theoretical concepts, continuously collect data analyse it and reflect are key and in addition having awareness of theoretical approaches associated to this type of methodology such as the 'etic' [outside – perspective of the observer] and 'emic' [insider – within the social group] are key and vital with using and applying this type of method. To show how narrative ethnography can be applied when working with ethnic or diaspora populations two case studies have been developed to elucidate this in this paper. A health issue will also be presented and discussed to further show the experience through the narration of the participants, the health issue being food and diet. It's vital however to view this as both a process and product; that includes factors such as the emic and etic (the position the researcher holds and/or their willingness to become part of the community they are researching, and if they already are to be able to also hold a twofold position of an outsider also, thus allowing the narratives to tell the story of the participants); trust and rapport building in the community and the social environment; and regarding the narrative environment its crucial to remember that this process is not linear, and one size does not fit all. However, before continuing its important to note the words of Hippocrates from his works "Let your food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food". The association of this powerful statement is of great importance and significance for this population particularly when noting the role and influence that the ancient Greek world has had. Directly relevant in this case study are themes such cultural fasting, home gardens, destiny and God's Will, and how cultural meaning is key for the Greek population. This is something that needs to be*

1 *consider when utilizing narrative ethnography as they are relevant and can*  
 2 *be determinate factors to health promoting activities particularly for ethnic*  
 3 *populations and those living in diaspora.*

## 6 **Introduction and Background**

8 Personal and group narratives have been an important component of the  
 9 study of historical trauma, which may refer to a transgenerational experience  
 10 involving transmission of attitudes and perceptions of past events. Historical  
 11 trauma has been shown to be related to resilience, and it is possible for narratives  
 12 of the past to support the formation of resilience. It has been suggested that the  
 13 nature of group experience and the group's response to this experience can serve  
 14 as a basis for positive or negative adaptation as individuals may base their  
 15 interpretation of their own experiences on the group's narrative and use it as a  
 16 means to understand their own lives. Health experience and health beliefs are  
 17 often based on patterns that have developed over long periods of time with a  
 18 given group and come to be viewed as trustworthy, without necessarily having  
 19 any medical or scientific basis

20 The maintenance and transmission of culture in the context of health and  
 21 wellbeing highlights how transmission occurs within a cultural community, the  
 22 role of individuals as well their generational roles in transmitting and  
 23 maintaining cultural ways and beliefs. Further, the potential for memories of the  
 24 past to shape and influence future health and wellbeing among specific  
 25 populations has also been documented in many contexts and for diverse groups.  
 26 This suggests that, in many cases, heritage culture may impact on the perceptions  
 27 of individuals and groups long after they have settled in and acculturated to  
 28 another culture and hence should not be overlooked in considering the factors  
 29 that may affect health, wellbeing, and a range of other socio-cultural interactions.  
 30 Religion and health highlight the crucial role that religion has in the experience  
 31 of illness and overall wellbeing. Religion can often provide a sense of comfort  
 32 and be a means of support as well as form of resilience and may also be a means  
 33 to conceptualize illness and general misfortunes in life. Religion can furthermore  
 34 offer meaning to an experience and suggest answers to questions that may  
 35 become barriers to overall wellbeing. For this reason, an understanding of an  
 36 individual's religious beliefs, as well as the outlook of faith that is dominant in  
 37 a given cultural group, can provide insight into the way in which issues of health  
 38 and illness may be approached and may also indicate the nature of resilience in  
 39 the face of adverse events that may be manifested by the people of interest  
 40 Avgoulas M-I 2025.

## 42 **Literature, Methods, Results, Discussion and Case Studies**

44 What in fact is highlighted in the literature is that ethnography can be  
 45 described to a partnership or that of an active relationship between the researcher  
 46 and the population(s) that are being researched (Boyle 1994; Marcus and Fisher  
 47 1986). In addition, noted in the work of Moeran 2007 describes it as field and

being within the community that is being studied / researched. Or simply as put by Goodall 2004 who notes that it's a type of storytelling with a real nature. The magic of storytelling has been with us for as long as one can remember: oral histories from ancient time, to historical times and fairy tales too. They do in fact vary however share accounts that are both powerful and influential. Stories have so many underlying factors and often hold the variable of what keeps what is told to be kept in memory and a memory that is both shared with others and maintaining through the test of time. Thus, the power and influence of a Narrative Ethnography type of methodology is quite powerful and influential and worth exploring and understood.

Faith and Region has much being discussed in the literature – see Pargamont and Cumming 2010, Keoing 2007 for some examples but there are more these two are key thus are highlighted. Having a Greek Orthodox background these participants had a strong and powerful conceptualization that blanked their thinking and mindset; that they in fact had a pre-determined fate that was dependent on the Will of God. However, they had a two-fold explanation to this that was quite insightful, and can be the key to health intervention and/or health promoting activities through a cultural view the recognition that measures can be taken to improve their health and overall well-being *“we need to have a good balance as we are also responsible for our health and wellbeing”* – this quote being a direct reference to monitoring diet and keeping active. Keeping with this however this population/community group had a strong belief to the overall benefits of emotional health despite food preferences and that in fact emotional health held greater weight then diet alone - *“It's also stress. It's stress. It's not the food you eat”* and *“Stress is the worst, and that's what kills you. You see people who don't smoke, they don't drink, and they eat healthy, and they die from a heart attack or have cancer and those who smoke have nothing”*

Next the discussion turns to food and religion from a cultural lens a diagram will be shred on findings from the research that has been discussed here:

Food is connected to and can be described as a fundamental part of one's culture (both something that is one's background – but can be a means of connection too. An interesting point made was that food intake perceptions have withstood time as they have travelled from the times of ancient Greece to today the belief *‘παν μέτρον ἀριστον’* meaning *‘everything in moderation’*.

What the data has shown is that food and general eating habits are not the only things that are associated with life in Greece – home gardens in Melbourne, Australia are also associated and have a symbolic connection to life in Greece, particularly village life and agriculture.

Not only do home gardens have physiological benefits for example exercise, vitamin D and fresh produce what we see is that they also have an abundance of psychological benefits too - as water and soil from one's home land is often the key ingredients to overall health and well-being is something that is strongly believed by an echoed among Greek people regardless if age – I recall going to Greece with my mother<sup>1</sup> and she often say this to me she finds the water there

---

<sup>1</sup>Author, Avgoulas M-I

1 better for the skin and digestion and the food over lighter and not feeling bloated  
2 after a large and late meal.

3 Others from the studies said: *“I have a lovely garden with fresh vegetables,*  
4 *and I had a garden in Greece as well. Our garden is our connection to Greece”*  
5 *and “My grandfather’s garden is his life – he loves us but, his garden is his child.*  
6 *Every morning the first thing he will do is get his coffee, not Nescafé but the*  
7 *Greek coffee, and he’ll walk around his garden and sit there and take care of it.*  
8 *He is a lot happier when he is with his garden”*

9 Food is and its associated habits mean heritage and with thus comes  
10 responsibilities tied to family, identity and cultural practices that need to be  
11 shared and maintained – through the interviews some echoed *“as much as I can*  
12 *I cook what we used to cook in Greece”*. The determinate of reaching old age  
13 was also linked to food and diet choices *“We grew up with this type of food, and*  
14 *I believe the fact that we have reached this age, that is significant”* Some  
15 examples of foods that they still perceive to be healthier and better for their  
16 overall diet include white bean soup (cannellini beans), lentils, wild greens and  
17 fish, which they associate with experience in Greece. Older participants shared  
18 their disappointment and concern that their children and/or grandchildren do not  
19 like much and as a result don’t cook these kinds of food and their thoughts about  
20 this was that its generally not good for their health however this was not a view  
21 shared by their descendant particular their views that centered the Mediterranean  
22 diet *“I love the Greek diet and especially the olive oil. The Greek diet is very*  
23 *rich in nutrients and flavors and very tasty. Especially the grandmothers and*  
24 *mothers they want to provide and ensure the children are all set. I’m a very*  
25 *healthy eater and I do not diet or restrict myself; I just eat healthy. No processed*  
26 *foods – no sugars. I just eat food that mum cooks, no fast food. And for me the*  
27 *Greek diet is healthy”*.

28 Cultural fasting has a crucial role to those particularly from this community  
29 who are of Greek Orthodox faith, not only does it serve as a religious act however  
30 also as significant for theses participants health, as a means of diet and food  
31 restriction and intake - *“fasting is very good, firstly for our health and let’s leave*  
32 *what they say about going to heaven”*. What has been documented are dilemmas  
33 and conflict when it comes to fasting at a both microenvironments and also to  
34 the macro social environment *“it’s good to fast when you don’t take medication.*  
35 *I cannot fast I have cholesterol and blood pressure and I need to be careful”* and  
36 *“It can be difficult at times to fast, particularly when we have gatherings.*  
37 *Sometimes during fasting periods, I cook meat or when I’m invited somewhere I*  
38 *have meat. This even happens in Greece that you eat meat during the fasting*  
39 *period. When you are with friends or at gatherings sometimes you cannot fast”*.  
40 The fact being that if it also happens in Greece and in a way parallel experiences  
41 are shared then it’s okay was an interesting phenomenon noted. Cultural  
42 membership is determined by shared practices and active participation and an  
43 example of this for this community is fasting *“I fast and so does my whole*  
44 *family, and of we want to take Holy Communion, we fast”*.

45 People of Greek background despite if they live in diaspora or in Greece  
46 tend to be very private, fixed in their ways and issues despite there magnitude

1 tend to remain behind closed doors, and tend to only be discussed with family.  
 2 However, what has been noted here is that by applying principles of narrative  
 3 ethnography an outsider to the nuclear family was allowed in, and issues of  
 4 health, illness and how to reach or maintain wellbeing were discussed and shared  
 5 in a trusted and safe environment.

6 Among the Greek elderly, health is closely linked to religion and God, as  
 7 they conceptualize their health as a manifestation of God's will. One participant  
 8 who for the purpose of this paper will be named Eleni shared the story of her  
 9 son's illness, "God protected my son, he had cancer, was very sick. The doctors  
 10 were giving me no hope. I prayed to the Virgin Mary and asked for God's help.  
 11 My son's health returned. It was his fate and God's will for him to be ok".

12 Petroula<sup>2</sup> recognized that, "It's important to look after our health, however  
 13 some things are unavoidable and if it's in our fate we will become unwell, it's  
 14 all dependent on God's will. If it's God's we will feel better". These participants  
 15 felt very strongly that health comes from God, and it might be possible for a  
 16 person to influence his or her own health through religious observances. In this  
 17 sense, they understood there to be a close connection between religious  
 18 expression and a manifestation of this expression in the form of health and well-  
 19 being. In times of illness, a return to health was similarly associated with  
 20 religious expression, and religion was uniformly seen as a source of important  
 21 emotional support. As Stathi said and was generally a unanimous view "If it's  
 22 God's will for us to be sick, we will be, and only His will can make us better."

23 A compilation of quotes (from all ages and a mix of genders) that echoed  
 24 this are below

25  
 26 "We need doctors, but religion gives us strength. Therefore, religion does good;  
 27 that's what I think. Our psychological wellbeing sometimes comes from church"

28 "If you've got your faith in God, that can help you deal with things, like depression.  
 29 I believe it's a very helpful way to manage things, to help you cope with what your  
 30 lot is, so overall it may improve your health, not just physical health, emotional  
 31 and also mental. Religion helps you adapt. You have people who pray with you.  
 32 There are a lot of services, blessings, holy water, that can help the person, not  
 33 necessarily heal them. It could give them spiritual strength."

34 "We have the service of the Holy Unction that is specific for health, for emotional  
 35 and physical health. Olive oil is used in that, and we know from ancient times until  
 36 today, olive oil has healing qualities so that is why it is used, and the flour used in  
 37 Holy Unction we can make into a πρόσφορο [offering bread that is taken to  
 38 church]."

39 "It's important for me, for my children, to receive Holy Communion regularly,  
 40 because we live in a society that puts a lot of pressure on us, and I believe, if you  
 41 have your roots in spirituality, which I believe orthodoxy really has, it grounds  
 42 them. It gives them something, a strength, a foundation."

43  
 44 Tasia said that she tells her children that Jesus Christ is always with them  
 45 and that they always have extra support. [*Ο Χριστούλης είναι πάντα μαζί σου*].  
 46

---

<sup>2</sup> All names are in this paper are fake as to keep the participants privacy

“Prayer is something that can help you when you feel helpless and that no one else can help you apart from God. By praying it ignites hope in your heart.”

“Prayer offers support and having something, a prayer or a saint that you pray to, is very supportive.”

“We generally go to the doctor, but I also pray for my grandmother who is unwell. I pray because I am religious, and I try to connect to God. Prayer gives you comfort, and I always do my cross before I go to bed. My parents taught me this, and my grandmother and grandfather, because I come from a religious background”.

“I always carry an icon with me when I travel for protection and my book of prayers with me.” This participant then explained, “I went through a stage a couple of years back and I would always pray every night. I would go to church every so often. I would sit down and let everything out. Church has definitely made me stronger.”

To show how narrative ethnography can be applied when working with ethnic or diaspora populations two case studies has been developed to elucidate this and in addition two health issue will also be accompanied to further show the experience and its as association to health, illness and overall wellbeing - the health issues being *‘food and diet’* and *‘religion and positive wellbeing’*.

The findings discussed in these case studies are from collected works in Melbourne, Australia of three qualitative studies where narrative ethnography was used and applied. Ethical guidelines and principles were applied and upheld at all times for all studies individually; with no ethical issues arising at any time for any of the three studies. An emic and etic perspective also allowed for narrative ethnography was used. The unique position of the researcher and one of authors of this paper, Avgoulas, being Greek Australian, herself was able to easily emerge in the Greek culture and be accepted by this community, and in turn as she is a very experienced qualitative researcher with a very strong interests in socio-cultural issues health and well-being allowed for rich data to develop. In 2011, qualitative research was undertaken that investigated *‘Cultural Understanding of Health and Adjustment to Cardiovascular Disease among the Greek elderly’*. 13 participants, 60+ years of age, took part in this research over a period of a month. The participants were recruited from Frondita Care activity group. This study examined the health beliefs of elderly Greek Australian and the way they understand health and disease. In addition, what was elucidated here was how elderly Greek Australians understand cardiovascular disease and in turn their health seeking behaviours and attitudes. In 2012, part of a PhD research that Avgoulas undertook at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia study two commenced – investigating *‘Health Beliefs and Practices in Three Generations of Greek Australian Women in Melbourne’*. 48 participants took part in this research one generation from each family that represented individual generations [Immigrant, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>]. Each speaking about the meaning of various life experiences and how they associated this to health and wellbeing from a cultural lens. In 2016, the third and final qualitative study was undertaken that investigated *‘Greek dancing as an aspect of cultural identity and wellbeing’* – examining specifically participation in Greek dancing while living in Diaspora.

19 students from Manasis School of Greek Dance and Culture in Melbourne, Australia participated.

It's vital however to view this as both a process and product; that includes factors such as the emic and etic (the position the researcher holds and/or their willingness to become part of the community they are researching, and if they already are to be able to also hold a twofold position of an outsider also, thus allowing the narratives to tell the story of the participants); trust and rapport building in the community and the social environment; and regarding the narrative environment its crucial to remember that this process is not linear, and one size does not fit all. The findings of the research that came about semi-structured in-depth interviews that were analysed using concepts of thematic analysis. In addition, as Avgoulas is fluent in Greek (speaking and writing) this allowed for interviews to be conducted, analysed and transcribed in Greek or even for code switching to occur, allowing for a more natural and inviting environment. This showing how narrative ethnography was used and can be applied to address health issue of ethic and diaspora populations. However, before continuing its important to note the words of Hippocrates from his works "Let your food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food". The association of this powerful statement is of great importance and significance for this population particularly when noting the role and influence that the ancient Greek world has had in time and to the modern world. What however needs to be noted are that themes such cultural fasting, religion, home gardens, destiny and God's Will, and how cultural meaning is key for the Greek population. This is something that needs to be consider when utilizing narrative ethnography, as they are relevant and can be determinate factors to health promoting activities particularly for ethnic populations and those living in diaspora.

Having a Greek Orthodox background these participants had a strong and powerful conceptualization that blanked their thinking and mindset; that they in fact had a pre-determined fate that was dependent on the Will of God. However, they had a two-fold explanation to this that was quite insightful and may be the key to health intervention and/or health promoting activities. Through a cultural view the recognition that measures can be taken to improve their health and overall well-being. Keeping with this however this population/community group had a strong belief to the overall benefits of emotional health despite food preferences and that in fact emotional health held greater weight then diet alone as stress was a contributing factor and, in many ways, this impacted health and well-being more than risk taking behaviour such as food, diet, drinking and even smoking Avgoulas M-I and Fanany R 2026, 2025.

## Case Study 1 – Food and Diet

Food is connected to and can be described as a fundamental part of one's culture and ethnic background as it's both a marker and binding factor to their cultural kin. An interesting point made was that food intake perceptions have withstood time as they have travelled from the times of ancient Greece to today the belief *'παν μέτρον ἀριστον'* meaning *'everything in moderation'*. And in turn food preferences and eating habits are not the only things that are associated with life in Greece – home gardens are also associated and have a symbolic connection to life in Greece, particularly village life and agriculture. Not only do home gardens have physiological benefits such as exercise, vitamin D and fresh produce what we see is that they also have an abundance of psychological benefits too. As water and soil from one's homeland is often the key ingredients to overall health and well-being is something that is strongly believed amongst Greek people that does in fact give them strength and perseverance – particularly important when living in Diaspora. They praised their garden, its benefits and noted its vital symbolism to Greece, and others even mentioning that a garden meant happiness as their loved ones seemed happier or at their happiest when gardening or simply as they put it where with their garden.

Food is and can mean heritage and responsibilities tied to family, identity and cultural practices that needs to be shared and maintained, despite when people moving and relocating from one part of the world to another. The participant's shared that their food choice preferences were things they associated and knew from Greece, their cultural and Hellenic heritage despite living in Diaspora. Some examples of foods that they still perceived to be healthier and better for their overall diet include white bean soup (cannellini beans), lentils, wild greens, and fish, which they associate with experience in Greece. Older participants shared their disappointment and concerns that their children and/or grandchildren do not like Greek food much and as a result don't cook these kinds of foods, and their thoughts about this was that it's not good for their health. However, this was not a view shared by their descendant particular their views that centered around the Mediterranean diet, as they expressed love a positive emotions and thoughts when it came to Greek food and ingredients an example being the olive oil. Mentioning things such as the rich flavors and nutritious benefits of the Mediterranean diet. And in turn the teaching of their elders did in fact hit home as that they too innately avoid proceed food, eat healthy without restrictions, and eat food that they too were raised with.

Cultural fasting has a crucial role to those particularly from this community who are of Greek Orthodox faith, not only does it serve as a religious act however also as significant for theses participants health, as a means of diet and food restriction and intake. What has been documented however that was of particular interest are dilemmas and conflicts in emotions when it comes to fasting at a both microenvironments and also to the macro social environment as fasting was noted to be good however it also had a dark side. As it was perceived only good and okay to fast when one did not take medication. Another example that was quite fascinating was when it was believed it was okay not to participate in

fasting, such as when at gathering or simply when with friends. Something that also happens in Greece; examples of when during fasting periods people simply do not or cannot fast or take a break from fasting. A way parallel experiences are shared that gave permission and acceptance and that tick that it was simply okay as many times cultural membership is determined by shared practices and active participation and food is a perfect example of this.

## **Case study 2 - Religion and positive wellbeing**

Among the Greek elderly, health is closely linked to religion and God, as they conceptualize their health as a manifestation of God's will. One participant opened and shared the story of her son's illness and felt strongly that God protected her son, from his cancer diagnosis. Her prayers Virgin Mary and asking for God's help is what saved her son as his doctors were giving them no hope for survival. However, she felt that with prayer, faith and the Will of God her son's health returned. Many of the participants felt very strongly that wellbeing stems from God and His Will comes however it might be possible for a person to influence his or her own health through religious observances. What we see here is their conceptualization and close connection between religious expression and a manifestation of this expression in the form of health and wellbeing. Despite if it was illness itself or a return to health what is noted and elucidated was that religion and, in this case, the Greek Orthodox faith was a source of important emotional support and resilience.

## **Concision and final thoughts**

Emotional wellbeing and wellbeing at a social level is of great value to this population and the Greek diaspora of Melbourne more generally despite their age and various life experiences. They reflected that religion is a source of social support for them, particularly in times of illness and having this mindset gave them positivity and another level of strength and a means of comfort and support. Suggesting that religious practice as well as the interpretation of human experience helps and assists them deal with adversity, and in turn powerful source of personal resilience. An example given was that with faith in God help you deal with things, like depression and manage thing and a coping mechanism cope with what your lot is, so overall an abundance of positives noted to not only improve physiological health however emotional and mental health too. As it was elucidated that having faith and the power of religion helps you adapt and it's also a means of social connection and support as others pray with you or for you thus this and other rituals of the Church are seen as an offering continuity and a culturally tested means for coping.

The value these participants felt from their religious beliefs and background was notable. noted the connection between religious belief and formal and informal health care, saying that they go to doctors however health seeking

behaviours do not stop there as an important if not more is God's Will and their faith and associated rituals and traditions that have been handed down and withstood the test of time.

People of Greek background despite if they live in diaspora or in Greece tend to be very private, fixed in their ways and issues despite their magnitude tend to remain behind closed doors, and tend to only be discussed with family. However, what has been noted here is that by applying principles of narrative ethnography an outsider to the nuclear family was allowed in, and issues of health, illness and how to reach or maintain wellbeing were discussed and shared in a trusted and safe environment.

## References

- Avgoulas, M-I and Fanany R (2026). The Art of Dance and its Connection to Wellbeing and Identity. Athens Journal of Psychology forthcoming papers (see <https://www.athensjournals.gr/ajpsy/forthcoming>).
- Avgoulas, M-I (2025) Greek in Diaspora. Athens Journal of Demography & Anthropology 1-3 : 157-170
- Avgoulas, M-I and Fanany R (2025). The Greek language in diaspora: perceptions across three generations of Greek Australia woman. Athens Journal of Philology 12: 1-10
- Boyle J. Styles of ethnography. In: Morse J, ed. Critical issues in qualitative research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994
- H. L. Goodall, Jr (2004) Commentary, Journal of Applied Communication Research, 32:3, 185-194, DOI: 10.1080/0090988042000240130
- Koenig, H. G. (2007). Religion and remission of depression in medical in patients with heartfailure/pulmonary disease. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 195(5),389–395. doi:10.1097/NMD.0b013e31802f58e3
- Marcus G, Fischer M. Anthropology as cultural critique: an experimental moment in the human sciences. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986
- Moeran, B. (2007). From Participant Observation to Observant Participation: Anthropology, Fieldwork and Organizational Ethnography.
- Pargament, KI and Cummings, J (2010) "Anchored by Faith: Religion as a Resilience Factor," in Reich, JW, Zautra, AJ and Hall, JS, eds, Handbook of Adult Resilience, The Guilford Press, New York and London, 193-212.