

## The Greek People in Melbourne, Australia

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*Melbourne has a large and well-established Greek diaspora that began to form in the 1950s. Since their arrival in Australia, the oldest members of this community, who represent the original immigrants, have tried to recreate as many aspects of their life in Greece as possible. Today, many of the institutions and practices institutionalized by these older members of the community have been maintained and adapted by their children and grandchildren who were born in Australia and are increasingly integrated into the English-speaking mainstream. This research integrates the results of two qualitative studies involving more than 60 participants that illustrate how the Greek diaspora in Melbourne has maintained aspects of the culture of origin of its members and also changed and evolved over time. However, its findings indicate that a reciprocal process of change also occurred as older community members changed their ways and views to accommodate the perceptions and interests of children and grandchildren who are Australian. The resulting constructed diaspora identity will be discussed and described, along with its specific components and meanings to each generation studied across the two studies.*

**Keywords:** *health and wellbeing, diaspora identity, Greek community of Melbourne, culture*

### Introduction

Greek people started arriving in Australia during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with an increase noted by 1940. This paper specifically examining and providing an analysis from the findings from two studies, the first that was undertaken in 2011 qualitative in nature looking at “Cultural Understanding of Health and Adjustment to Cardiovascular Disease among the Greek elderly”. A total of 13 participants, +60 years old, took part in this study. Specifically examining in this study, the health beliefs of elderly Greek Australian and the way they understand health and disease. In 2012 a second study was undertaken (that was part of a PhD research) that investigated, “Health Beliefs and Practices in Three Generations of Greek Australian Women in Melbourne”. This too qualitative that explored 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 generation spoke about the meaning they had to various life experiences associated to health, illness and wellbeing from their cultural lens. Both studies having an epicentre Greek people in Melbourne, Australia and the meaning of this.

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Before however proceeding its vital to highlight the position of health and the provision of healthcare in this country. As Australia has made a promise to provide culturally appropriate health care and services, and this is part of Medicare<sup>1</sup> (Department of Human Services 2012). In order for this declaration to become a reality in-depth understanding of the cultural needs of all Australian ethnic groups is a must, for example part of this being a comprehension of the significant position that both language and cultural background has of various communities and in turn how this could be a contributing factor to overall wellbeing and attitudes towards health care and healthcare professionals. In Australia's one of the larger major cultural communities are people made up of individuals of Greek background. This community population has been in in Australia since 1827, with the most people arriving in the period following World War II and the Greek civil war aboard the many ships that left from Piraeus, Athens (Avgoulas and Fanany 2015).

Furthermore, the first author of this paper (Avgoulas), holds both an insider and outsider position she is a member of this community and a researcher. This was an advantage in both studies for many reasons some being – language and Greek speaking abilities as many older individuals are more comfortable using Greek and cannot fully express their ideas and perceptions in English. Also, she had a very sound understanding of the cultural assumptions this being extremely important in developing a comprehensive picture to overall well-being as understood by the participants.

### **Health, Wellbeing and Culture**

Culture is a very important and significant aspect of the human experience and can be seen as a collection of practices and way of life associated with a specific population that shares a way of life and collective experience. Culture has sometimes been viewed as a two-way experience (Edberg 2012) among members of the groups in question but may be challenging and difficult to explain to outsiders. Perception about ways of life may vary as may daily practices as well as more abstract concepts that shape experience. Culture provides a guide to a way of life that seems inevitable or unquestioned to those within the group (Campos and Johnson 1990), and, in the context of health and wellbeing, may provide an explanation and meaning for the events of the life course (see for example Kagawa-Singer et al. 2010, Spector 2004). Cultural knowledge may provide a framework for decision making, highlighting the significance of understanding individual and population cultural background in, for example, providing healthcare and meeting diverse health needs. This may relate to cultural consonance, a perception of groups and individuals that relates to the extent to which life expectations coincide with the norms and ideals of culture Dressler et al. (2005) discuss the ways culturally determined behaviors may predict health outcomes. While cultural consonance has often been applied in connecting clinical signs to

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<sup>1</sup>National healthcare system.

cultural expectations, it is important to note that lack of cultural consonance may impact on mental health as well (Dressler et al. 2007).

In the context of migration, there may be significant variation between the culture of origin and the culture of settlement. Culture can influence the meaning given to illness as well as the interventions that will be seen as appropriate and acceptable. Edberg (2012) notes that the concept of what is “healthy” is not necessarily agreed upon by all cultures, but the role of culture, whatever its nature is, in the context of health and wellbeing is well documented (see, for example, Diener and Diener 1995, Diener et al. 1995, Arrindell et al. 1997). Cultural identity, then, is central to perceptions of health and well-being, and group-defined health and illness behaviour has the potential to support or undermine health (see, for example, Phinney et al. 2001, Phinney 1990).

The effects and conceptualization of culture in the context of health has been observed to affect individuals, groups and populations at all levels. Dinesh and Poole (2011) note that culture generally withstands the test of time, exists prior to and beyond the individual and continues when it is transmitted and maintained but can also evolve over time. This suggests consistency in cultural response and hence in possible impacts on health and well-being that can be seen across generations. Schönplflug (2001, 2009) notes that cultural knowledge is generally transmitted or handed down from elders to members of younger generations, which is one mechanism by which attitudes, perceptions and knowledge are maintained and sustained. This process occurs naturally and is not necessarily forced. General cultural practices and beliefs simply become a way of life into which younger individuals are socialized by their elders from birth. Transmission usually involves values, skills and behaviours and overall is necessary for a culture to be maintained. In this way, ways of life that have shaped a group and are markers of its identity may persist over time (Schönplflug 2009, 2001). Phinney et al. (2001) note that group attitude also determines the extent to which transmission will occur. For example, among immigrant communities whether individuals want to maintain and transmit their culture and the degree to which they are willing to acculturate into the culture of settlement may be determined by community attitudes.

### **Health and Wellbeing Among Older Greek Australians in Melbourne**

While cultural transmission does not automatically occur and may represent a challenge for a migrant population, the Greek community of Melbourne, has maintained many aspects of culture and identity, despite the challenges of living in a largely English-speaking environment. Rubino (2007) notes that cultural maintenance in the Greek community of Australia has tended to be high, possibly due to this greater cultural distance from the Australian mainstream. In this instance, cultural distance has been seen as protective of the culture of origin in the Australian context.

For the Greek community specifically, it has been noted that a high degree of dual acculturation is common (Ballotis 2005). Individuals tend to maintain very

close, extended family networks that form their central social institutions (Francis and Papageorgiou 2004) is supportive of cultural maintenance. The presence of reciprocal relationships, between parents and children, older and younger relatives, and so on, have traditionally been a source of strength in times of adversity, including illness, and have allowed for greater resilience than that experienced by some other immigrant groups.

The existence of strong social networks that create a supportive environment and may reinforce beneficial cultural patterns (such as a Mediterranean diet associated with lowered risk for heart disease) have been especially significant among Greek Australians whose mortality from cancer and cardiovascular disease is lower than for other groups (Anikeeva et al. 2010). Nonetheless, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes is estimated to be three times higher for this population than for the Australian born, and levels of obesity are higher as well (Hodge et al. 2004), suggesting the possible advantageous effects of cultural maintenance are complex and exist alongside other factors that also impact on health.

Cultural maintenance for Greek Australians tends to center on interaction with others from a similar background, whether family members or friends, and this type of interaction is often seen as crucial for the maintenance of health by the people involved. A lack of participation in social activities, either through unwillingness or inability, is frequently seen by Greek Australians as both a sign and a cause of mental illness such as depression which is understood by them to be chronic and social in origin (Kiropoulos and Bauer 2011). This stresses the importance of social networks in the conceptualization of health held by many members of this community and is also an indication of the role social networks play in maintaining and transmitting traditional views, perceptions, and behavior. Health beliefs for this cultural group may derive from shared perceptions and attitudes associated with customary ways of understanding experience that are maintained and transmitted within the community.

A health belief can generally be understood to be a phenomenon that is formed and shaped by family and social groups through interpersonal interaction. People's beliefs in life often emerge from their culture of origin, way of life and ancestral customs. However, beliefs of this kind, despite enduring for generations, are not usually grounded in medical fact. Instead, they often reflect and "evolved" understanding that has become trustworthy because it is embedded in high value social concepts deriving from culture. This is exemplified in the Greek population of Melbourne, whose understanding of heart disease and the factors associated with risk as well as the social and cultural determinates of risk behavior.

One aspect of the culture of the Greek population of Melbourne is religious observance, which tends to be at the center of cultural identity for many community members. For the migrant generation, religion, and the traditions of their culture, is of great significance, and many describe these things as their most valuable possession (Avgoulas and Fanany 2012a). The majority of these early migrants arrived in Melbourne with few material possessions but a large store of information about their culture and way of life as they understood it. It is not uncommon for these elders to say, "water and soil from your homeland equals health and prosperity". This sentiment reflects the notable drive among members

of the Australian Greek community to maintain various aspects of their traditional culture and to pass these elements of “Greekness” on to the younger generations. The result is that Greek culture and traditions, including religious observance, has become a continuing source of pride in the community as well as the defining framework for cultural identity.

Many members of the large group of post-World War II Greek immigrants, because of their age, are now experiencing the chronic conditions associated with later life and interact intensively with the health and social care sectors. For these older people, a cultural understanding of advancing age suggests that illness at this time of life is part of an individual’s fate and must be approached with acceptance. Acceptance of a predestined lot, a perception that has a religious dimension, can be seen as a means of adjustment to illness among people of Greek background because they tend not to see fate or luck as random. The events of an individual’s life are viewed as being determined by God, and religion serves as the link between the individual and the divine. In this sense, religion can be viewed as a coping mechanism providing a source of resilience in managing life’s misfortunes (see Avgoulas and Fanany 2012a). In addition to drawing personal strength from their religion, this group tends to view its experience through the lens of faith, which suggests a meaning for these events (Avgoulas and Fanany 2012b). Religion, then, supplies an etiology for illness and also suggests various means by which it can be addressed through personal behavior, prayer, ritual, and other activities that give the experience meaning. Meaning based resilience has been observed to be a very strong and more enduring basis for coping, especially among the elderly (Folkman 2008), and religion is one of the most powerful sources of this kind of meaning. For older people of Greek background in Melbourne, religion provides a means for adjusting to and coping with the problems of older age but also represents an important link to their homeland and culture of origin.

There are certain events in an individual’s life that, upon later reflection, may be seen by the individual involved as moments of impact that interrupt the expected progression of the life course. Illness, an accident, or even a sudden romance or a separation may all fall into this category. Events of this kind may have a profound effect on the way a person perceives his or her experience and may result in a lifelong desire to understand their cause. For many older people of Greek background, such events do not just happen; everything in life has a reason and purpose. These older individuals accept that each person has a predestined lot, which comes from God and is not random. The nature of health, illness, and physical and mental state are all part of this divine plan. Without fail, the older people involved in the studies summarized here believe that their state of health is an aspect of fate or luck (τύχη) that they do not have control over and must simply accept because it comes from God and is part of his divine will for them. More specifically, the belief held by this group is that health at an advanced age is a matter of lot and is associated with an element of luck in that their overall fate that has been predestined. Their destiny, in turn, has been determined by God in accordance with His judgment for them and cannot not occur. For this reason, they view every occurrence, including those with negative outcomes such as illness, as having a specific meaning and purpose in their life.

Almost uniformly, these older Greek Australians described health as absolute happiness, as their most significant and important possession, as “a treasure and a gift from God.” This understanding of the etiology of disease, as resulting from divine will and not from individual risk factors, is of significance because this perception suggests that there is no real need to change one’s behaviour or do anything special about illness. It is the case that many older Greeks feel that following health advice might be viewed by God as them making an effort to take care of themselves, and hence beneficial in terms of pleasing Him, but not necessarily changing the outcome of their condition or improving their health in the way doctors or other health professionals intended.

For this reason, many older Greek Australians comply with medical advice and instructions, not for themselves, in the sense of potentially influencing the course of their illness, but for others in their social and family network. In other words, they may see accepting medical treatment for the chronic conditions of older age as important to their children and grandchildren or as facilitating their own participation in social activities they enjoy but usually do not believe that these efforts will materially change their own health status or outcome of their condition. One individual, for example, mentioned that he only took part in cardiac rehabilitation, and hence changed his diet, to be allowed to care for his grandson.

“My heart attack took away my independence, and, more importantly, my daughter was worried that I’m too unwell to care for my grandson and told me that I can only win her trust if I listen to the doctor’s advice. I agreed, as picking up my grandson from school and taking him to soccer is more important than a large amount of sugar in my coffee. My daughter thinks that sugar and my unhealthy diet caused my heart attack; she doesn’t understand that we cannot avoid destiny.”

This statement echoes a view held by many older people in the Melbourne Greek community, and, as a result, they are often concerned that any illness they experience be manageable. They may feel no particular distress at receiving a diagnosis of cardiovascular disease or other serious, chronic condition. Instead, their distress may centre on the possibility that worsening health might prevent them from fulfilling their social role and isolate them from their peers and families. These social activities are a major source of happiness for older people in the Greek community, the possible loss of which is intolerable for many.

Absolute happiness is of great significance to many older Greek Australians and is something they described as “a gift from God.” A gift of this kind must be protected by the recipient who should not be anxious and stressed and, more importantly, should not question what he or she has been given. The divine origin of happiness, as understood by these older people, suggests that a method for coping with stress and anxiety is through religious expression and by seeking strength in their faith. For example, one older woman described her religion (the Greek Orthodox faith) as helping her accept a chronic health condition and preventing her from asking, “Why me?” Like many of her peers, this individual believes that questioning God's will can be perceived as a sin. Nonetheless, many

older Greek Australian feel it is wholly appropriate to request God's intervention in protecting the health and well-being of their loved ones, if not themselves.

One participant described religion as a good luck charm (φυλαχτό) stating, "In the morning when my children leave for work, I pray for them to be safe and I know this protects them." This religious act reassures the person involved and allows them to put their concern aside, resulting in peace of mind and acceptance of whatever occurs. Similar ideas are readily expressed by older members of the Greek community who have experienced a serious illness, suggesting the role religion plays for them in accepting their situation. This demonstrates the kind of meaning based resilience described by Pargament and Cummings (2010) among others. The rituals of faith offer patterns of behavior in times of trouble but also provide a vehicle for the expression of emotion as well as reassurance and connection with the larger community of faith.

For this population, religion is, in fact, a source of resilience and can also offer a framework into which illness fits as an expected potential life experience. The older members of the Melbourne Greek community, in particular, have maintained their traditional culture and Greek way of life. Cultural maintenance has been of great importance for these migrants and has become a key characteristic of this group that links them to Greece. Interestingly, as recent economic problems in Greece have led to a new wave of migrants coming to Melbourne, the nature of the Greek culture of these older migrants has become more observable. While these older people feel themselves to be fully Greek, their recollections of their original country and its culture reflects an idealized view, softened and attenuated by many decades of life in Australia. As a result, the newcomers tend to see Melbourne Greeks as "more patriotic," and Melbourne is said to be more culturally oriented, while Greece has changed over the years to align with 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe. The aspirations of the original migrants have resulted subsequent generations of Greek Australians growing up within the cultural context created by these older people with firsthand memories of life in Greece, despite being highly assimilated in other ways. It remains to be seen, however, whether faith and religion will play a similar role for these younger community members and whether they will serve them as a source of resilience as they move through the life course. It also remains unclear whether the memory culture that was created by the original Greek migrants will be maintained by 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Greek Australians and how the new wave of migrants may influence the Greek community of Melbourne.

For the current population of older Greeks, however, their religious faith and culturally based worldview is an integral part of their personal and group identity that affects every aspect of their experience, including the inevitable health issues that are to be expected in an aging population. This situation has significant practical implications as more members of this group require health care and support as their age increases because many of their views are incompatible with the principles of evidence-based medicine and may contravene the usual practices of the health care sector. While this issue is not unique to the older members of the Australian Greek community, their perceptions and experiences point up some of

the difficulties that may emerge in relation to aging and age-related health care for culturally distinct population groups relative to the majority culture.

### **The Maintenance of Greek Culture in First and Second Generation Greek Australians**

People of Greek background who were born in Australia are very different from their parents and grandparents (the migrant generation) in a number of significant ways. They tend to be fully integrated into the Australian mainstream, and many are primary speakers of English. The children of the migrants are often bilingual in Greek and English, but their Greek reflects the usage of their parents, which reflects temporal as well as educational and experiential variants associated with their background in Greece. Younger people, who are the grandchildren of migrants, often do not speak Greek well or even at all and are more like their English-speaking peers in terms of cultural orientation.

Language is an extremely important factor in the transmission and maintenance of cultural attitudes because of the complementary relationship between language and culture. This relationship has been studied in depth by linguists, sociologists, anthropologists among others, and it is generally accepted that cultural structures may give rise to language conventions and rules, but, conversely, the nature of language may affect the way cultural precepts are expressed by native speakers (see Riley 2007, for detailed discussion of this). It is for this reason that language is sometimes used as a proxy for culture and why language maintenance may be a crucial factor in cultural transmission.

While the migrant generation has been in Australia for decades, many of its members remain reluctant to use and even disclose their ability to speak English. A number of them report only very limited and basic language ability. Many encourage their family members to speak Greek to them and imply they cannot understand spoken English. Despite this, these older people often use English words in daily interaction, suggesting that they had, in fact, adapted to the Australian context. Some examples of these loan terms are “homemade”, “rest”, “stress”, “healthy”, and “computer” among others. These speakers are aware of this borrowing and often cannot explain why they switched languages. One older person noted, “There are times that by accident I speak in English as I have forgotten the Greek word. This also happened to me in Greece. I don’t know how this happens.”

Switches between languages are also common among the Australian born generations. In their case, however, they tend to use Greek words while speaking in English, generally when talking about culture, food, and the Greek Orthodox religion. This is notable because these three domains are often the most visible aspects of culture and are also ones where English may lack appropriate terms or the ability to conveniently express culturally-determined concepts that relate to Greek customs and practices. Table 1 shows some of the Greek terms commonly used by members of the Australian born generations in Melbourne.



**Table 1.** *Greek Words Used by Australian Born Individuals when Speaking English – (the English Translation in Brackets)*

<b>1<sup>st</sup> generation</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> generation</b>
Μάτη (evil eye)	Κυτο (garden)
Ευγελεο (Holy Unction)	Νιστια (fasting)
Γιαγια (grandmother)	Σελήνιο (celery)
Χαμομύλι (chamomile tea)	Ευγελεο (Holy Unction)
Αγιασμός (Holy water)	Σταυρο (cross)
Χοριο (village)	Χοριο (village)
Προσευχή (Prayer)	Πάτερ ημων (Lord's Prayer)
Προσφορο (offering bread)	Μοναστήρι (monastery)
Παναγία (Virgin Mary)	Προσφορο (offering bread)
Ρίγανη (Oregano)	Χαμομύλι (chamomile tea)
Μύρο (Myrrh)	Γιαγια (grandmother)

Language switching among these speakers is indicative of the level of adjustment to the Australian context among younger people of Greek background. While members of the migrant generation remain primarily Greek in their outlook, at least by their own evaluation, members of the Australian-born generations are, in fact, English speakers. Their use of Greek shows the influence of their heritage, as conveyed to them by their elders, and acts as a marker of their identity in the context of other Australian ethnic and cultural groups. In this, it is not necessary for them to speak Greek; the use of culture-specific terms shows group membership and serves a signal to others from a similar cultural background. This identity is a source of pride for each of the generations, regardless of age or primary language, and, as such, contributes to their personal identity as an individual. For all of them, their Greek background is an important element of their health and well-being, both for the specific health behaviours they associate with this culture but also because of the positive impact group membership has on their quality of life.

For Greek Australians of all ages, there can be no doubt that their quality of life is greatly enhanced by their connections to the Greek way of life, culture, language, and religion. Each of the generations feels that it maintains a specific form of Greek identity that has distinct characteristics that derive from the experiences of its members in Australia. While this is not different from other ethnic and cultural groups in Australia, it is notable that even Australian-born individuals of Greek background tend to consider themselves Greek, even though this means something very different in practice from what it does to their migrant parents and grandparents.

One aspect of Greek culture that is shared by all Greek Australians of all ages and seems to have changed little across the generations is adherence to the Greek Orthodox faith. Even those who do not consider themselves fully religious tend to turn to faith as a last resort or at times of great despair. One second generation individual commented that she doesn't necessarily wear a cross every day but, when life becomes too challenging, she puts on her cross as a source of protection. This exemplifies the role religion plays for members of the Melbourne Greek community as a symbol of social support and a source of resilience. This role of religion is seen in many cultures and groups around the world (for a detailed

discussion see Pargament 1997, Pargament and Cummings 2010, Koenig 2007). More than language or other cultural practices, religious faith seems to be more durable among the Greek Australian community in Melbourne, which may reflect both its centrality to Greek cultural identity but also its adaptive role in resilience and coping.

### **Greek Australian Culture Into the Future**

As the migrant generation ages and younger members of the Greek diaspora community in Melbourne continue to integrate into the larger Australian community, the nature of being Greek in Australia will inevitably change, as it has changed in the decades since the first migrants arrived. It is evident that the children and grandchildren of the original Greek migrants are investing heavily in maintaining their culture, what they understand to be the Greek way of life, and their links to Greece. The continued existence of Greek schools, Greek social and sporting organisations, restaurants and businesses catering to Greek tastes and practices, and so on all reflect a concern and commitment to cultural maintenance. While many of the Australian-born individuals regard themselves as Greek, their attitudes and behaviour nonetheless reflect the norms of the English-speaking community. This will undoubtedly affect long-term changes in their health and well-being as compared to that of their parents and grandparents who spent their early years in Greece. Despite many other changes including shifts in outlook and attitude, one of the most important sources of well-being for the immigrant generation has not shifted in the diaspora community. The role of the Greek Orthodox Church and the religious faith associated with its rituals and practices are a constant across generations and are likely to remain central to the health, well-being, and resilience of Greek Australians. The importance of religion as a source of resilience to the migrant generation (see Avgoulas and Fanany 2012b) is one of the most important aspects of transmission of values and attitudes observable between older people of Greek background and the Australian-born members of the community. These values and attitudes are not dependent on language or first-hand experience of life in Greece and, as a result, have become a central aspect of Greek identity in Australia and may well become the most important culture-specific factor in the health and well-being of this community in the future.

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