

Exploring identity in the Greek-Australian context

By Eugenia Arvanitis

The sense of “peoplehood”¹ has of course been widely discussed, but remains a fluid concept under the influence of the constant change of both social and generational contexts and ethnic boundaries themselves, including the formations of Diasporas. It is fundamental to accept that ethnic identification is more a dynamic process of ethnic change experienced by an ethnic group or individual (“a dialogue between tradition and changing social contexts: between historical experience and visions of the future”, Kalantzis1993:201), than a rigid assimilationist process toward the “mainstream” society. This argument is very apparent to the societies that have been transformed by the immigration. The strong ethnolinguistic vitality exhibited by many ethnic groups around the globe and the different degrees of their cultural maintenance thus suggests a multi-dimensional/pluralistic model of analysis/conceptualisation of the ethnic change itself. Especially the inter-generational shift observed within ethnic groups is a catalyst for such diversification. Accordingly, the issue of ethnic identity can be viewed only through a multi-dimensional paradigm and the existence of multiple personal and social roles-identities.

More specifically the linkage between the 2nd and 3rd generations and their ethnicity and the role of the institutional expression of an ethnic groups’ presence have guided me to examine the newly formed bicultural identity, namely the Greek-Australian identity.

It seems in our society that ethnic identification in the second and third generation tends to be an emotional identification, *(a kind of “latent identity” as Bottomley has noted)*, **in which ethnicity and the feeling of belonging in a specific ethnic community, “the we-feeling”**, are questionable and determined under new social and generational changes. This emotional identification of the new generations is distinct from that of the first generation Greek migrants. We are talking about a different sense of belonging and to be member of an ethnic community. These new generations are Greeks because of their descent and not because of their values, their attitudes and behaviour within a Greek cultural and social framework.

Ethnic identity has therefore been realised differently in the first, second and third generations (there is an intergenerational differentiation) as Lidio Bertelli in his comprehensive study “First and Third Generation. The case of the Italian-American” showed back in 1968.

In the case of the first generation we meet a natural setting of cultural values, attitudes, and behaviour because the people carried all this out in a viable social setting (experienced ethnicity as a way of life that expressed an individual’s ethnic identity- a personal way directed towards tradition). For the second and third generations this natural attachment to the homeland becomes more abstract and symbolic and for the third generation probably a

¹ This sense “the consciousness of kind” arises because of certain characteristics (physical, geographical, religious, linguistic, etc) that serve to define the social boundaries between one group of people to another. Moreover, “ethnicity plays a multi-dimensional role which indicates its contribution to the formation of ethnic identity through a very complex system of adaptations, identifications, inclusions and exclusions within a specific ethnic group located in a multicultural society. The expressions and manifestations of ethnicity vary with the characteristics of the ethnic group, the nature of its societal experiences and the sociopolitical climate. Expressions of ethnicity are also related to the ways in which the dominant group responds to various immigrants and immigrant descent and groups” (Bottomley ANZJS 1976:119).

matter of cognition (because of the different environment of socialisation of those children). We have a fundamentally new context for the new generations in which the old ways are not a reality. The ethnicity of the grandparents' in that sense is not viable and operative in the grandchildren. Grandchildren form their own patterns of realisation towards ethnicity and the existing social patterns. "The subsequent generations reflect the society to the point that if they had to return to their grandparents' or parents' homeland they will be strangers", as Bertelli pointed out (L. Bertelli, 1968:22)

The constantly changing social and generational context thus, acts as a catalyst to the ethnic identification process. Identification is an evolving; dynamic, complex and ongoing process that is not a static or uni-dimensional conceptualisation. Especially in the Australian context, which has been influenced by immigration patterns and in which assimilation has been a very persistent process. Under these circumstances it is important to redefine bicultural identity/Greek-Australian identity under the prism of generational changes within the Greek paroikia/community. This redefinition coincides with the multi-dimensional nature of ethnic change.

For example, research findings (see Laroche et al. 1996 for more information), have shown that affiliation and acculturation do not exclude to other or that the loss of cultural awareness, that is the knowledge of cultural traits, does not mean the loss of ethnic loyalty. In other words "an ethnic member's acculturation toward the host society does not necessarily entail his or her identification with the host society or loss of his or her identification with the ethnic origin, implying that acculturation and ethnic identification are not a parallel process in ethnic change" (Laroche et al. 1996, p. 116).

Furthermore ethnic youth of Australia has different experiences, attitudes, values and behaviours combining a bicultural context. "They are simply the products of a different generation and different personal history", according to Cahill (p.84). Their characteristics are focused on features such as bilingualism, bicultural orientation and attachment with the traditional values, adaptability and change, commitment to the Australian nation and social system and finally they are the symbols of Australia's future directions (Cahill 1987: 85).

So, a single continuum model of identification could not be described the persistence of ethnicity or the failure of assimilation process to be totally imposed. However the particular characteristics of the cultural maintenance have to be investigated. According to Clark et.al (1976), there are three dimensions of ethnicity: acculturative balance, traditional orientation and Anglo face. In addition ethnic group (via its institutional expressions) is a dynamic cultural entity² in which discontinuity or acculturation could be slowed down or even completely impeded in particular instances. Such communities (eg. the Greek Paroikies around the world) as points of cultural identification themselves could persist into the 2nd and 3rd generations depending on historical and social circumstances.

² It is crucial to understand that the different cultural traditions have not merely put together as an amalgamation within the "host" society but transformed into a new reality. Australian society in particular tends to acknowledge ethnicity only as a historical and not as a cultural contribution. Cultural pluralism as the preservation of different ethnic realities is something dead. Diversity in a multicultural society is not only a celebration, as the official policy claims, but also something more complex, which is connected with broader political themes such as structural inequality.

Thus, an ethnic group has to be seen as an appropriate “topos” and a cultural entity in order to explain inter-generational difference without closure. In the early 1960s Breton’s study of ethnic communities in Montreal, focusing on features of their social organisation, revealed that the degree of institutional competence or self-efficiency of an ethnic community was an important factor in determining its continuity, cultural attrition and relation with other ethnic groups, as well as with the host society (in Pannu, Young 1980:249)

More specific the role of educational structures in ensuring the cultural and linguistic maintenance is of great importance. The function of Greek part-time ethnic schools for instance provided a foundation of such development. Their role to identification process can be ascertained through:

- a) their close connection to the cultural group (they can viewed as an integral part of the Greek paroikia “giving the particularities of the ethnic life and culture as experienced in the family” (Eckstein, 1982),
- b) b) their performance as vehicles of cultural socialisation and identification (promoting and awareness and commitment to the ethnic language, cultural tradition and history)
- c) And c) their operation as an alternative type of schooling enhancing students’ bicultural development.

In this point I will focus on some data obtained from 2nd and 3rd generation students in selected case studies. All 46 students had either a strong or some experience of their ethnic cultural and linguistic background. Students’ family ethnic orientation and their overall positive cultural attachment were two points revealed by the findings. Furthermore, students’ responses and comments of their ethnic identification defined some of the parameters of such a process. In analysing their responses we accepted a fundamental dichotomy of 2nd and 3rd generation ethnic identity given by Rosenthal and Feldman’s (1992) distinction between core and peripheral elements of such identity. Core elements are the attitudes towards ethnic membership and the importance attached to these, whereas the peripheral elements refer to the behavioural and knowledge aspects. This study suggested that the former might be less changeable than the latter over time.

In our case students’ overall pattern of response revealed that in exploring the ethnic identity, bearing in mind the generational change, there are important parameters and distinctive elements in describing it. The self-perception of identification, the significant others’ perception, the distinctive elements of ethnic identity (language, cultural patterns, religion etc), the cultural and linguistic knowledge and finally the attitudes, the emotional attachment and the importance given to the cultural heritage, are some of them.

Self-identification versus other's perception

The "self" versus "others" is a crucial dichotomy in understanding identity. As Bottomley (ANZJS 1976:119) has argued that "identity is formed by social processes, crystallised during the early years of life, it is maintained and modified by social relations, while its maintenance depends upon recognition accorded by the various people with whom one interacts; particularly significant others".

Consequently it is important to include both aspects in discussing identification issues.

Asked to comment on their identity, students were asked their level of identification with being orthodox, Greek, Greek-Australian, a member of their particular region in Greece and finally Australian.

31A How strongly do you feel yourself to be:

	Australia n	Greek	Greek- Australia n	As Orthodo x	regional
No answe r	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	4.3%	13.0%
Very strong	13.0%	50.0%	45.7%	56.5%	19.6%
Strong	43.5%	41.3%	30.4%	26.1%	28.3%
So-So	23.9%	8.7%	13.0%	8.7%	19.6%
Not Much	8.7%	0.0%	2.2%	4.3%	4.3%
Not at all	8.7%	0.0%	8.7%	0.0%	15.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The students reported themselves as having a strong attachment to their ethnic identity as Greek, Greek-Australian and as Orthodox, although this retention of ethnicity by the second and third generation students in ethnic schools does not mean retention of the various cultural behavioural patterns.

Moreover, according to over a half of the students, their Australian friends think of them as being Greek-Australians (more than half). Also over a quarter of students believe that they viewed by their friends as Greeks, whereas only a very small group of them viewed them as Australians.

31b do your Australian friends think of you as:

Greek	37.0%
Australian	4.3%
Greek-Australian	58.7%

Total	100.0%

In both cases (students' identification and significant others' perception towards their identity), we can see that students perceived themselves as having either a dual identity or a "Greek" one. The bi-ethnicity element is vividly present whereas the "Australian" identification is manifest but to a lesser extent. Their attachment to their regional identity is less widespread. Students thus have a distinct role to play in their daily social interaction.

Furthermore, in exploring Greek-Australian identity, based on the dichotomy core and peripheral elements of it we can see that this particular group had a very positive attitude, accepting its bicultural orientation.

Core elements and their attitude towards language, culture and church.

Students' attitude towards the Greek language, culture and the Orthodox religion was very positive, generally speaking. For instance when students were asked to nominate the most important part of being Greek-Australian, over half of them replied "speaking Greek". The second important element was to follow the Greek customs and finally attending mass in church. Students' preference for the Greek language indicates the central role of the Greek language within the Greek cultural heritage and tradition.

31C what is the most important part of being Greek-Australian?

Speaking Greek	58.7%
Going to Church	15.2%
Following Greek customs	26.1%
Total	100.0%

However, the importance given to the Greek language escapes the strictly utilitarian (communication) purposes to a more symbolic/emotional identification. Moreover the positive attitudes towards the cultural tradition and students' strong attachment to it reveal their determination to accept their bi-cultural identity, although their linguistic behaviour/patterns and cultural knowledge might be less activated.

On the other hand religion is still of great importance in students' family life. More than half of them replied that the Orthodox religion is very important element of their family life, while over a quarter said that it is an important one.

Q. 33 How important is the Orthodox religion in your family life?

Very important	52.2%
Important	32.6%
Not very important	8.7%
Not important at all	2.2%

Not sure	4.3%
Total	100.0%

However the Greek Orthodox Church has a different approach towards ethnicity. While the Church could be the second strong language domain, after family, for language maintenance (as Clyne has noted 1982:74) the persistence of the Orthodox Church to use a different language in its social interaction and liturgy prevents this role. In addition since mid of 1980s there has been a strong tendency to employ English in an attempt to attract younger generation into the congregation (Tamis 1985).

Finally, the intra-ethnic social interaction (students'/liaison with their ethnic-cultural group and the importance given to it), is an important factor reinforcing ethnic identification. Ethnic schools can be viewed as an organised "topos" of social interaction. While the friendship networks seems to be, as Clyne has argued 1982, a factor that can determine language maintenance and language shift. In our case students consider as one of the good points of their part-time ethnic schools, the existence and association with friends. ("*meeting your friends, having good friends, lots of friends, new friends*", are some of the expressions they used)

The vast majority of students revealed an interest in being among Greek people in their family network of friendships, in celebrations and, finally, in church.

37are you interested in being among Greek people?

	celebrations	church	Family friends
No answer	2%	4%	2%
Yes	96%	93%	98%
No	2%	3%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Peripheral elements behavioural and knowledge patterns

On the other side the behavioural pattern of students in this group follows in lesser extent their very strong attachment to the cultural tradition. There is slight decrease in exhibit specific linguistic and cultural modes, although the Greek paroikia in Australia has indicated strong ethnolinguistic vitality as has been shown by research findings (Clyne 1982, Tamis 1985).

The following tables illustrate students' behaviour patterns in some of the aspects of their ethnic identity.

Comparison

LANGUAGES SPOKEN AT HOME

	Students' preference	1 st
Greek	24 (52, 17%)	
English	20 (43, 47%)	
Cypriot	1 (2,17%)	
missing	1 (2,17%)	

The majority of them consider as being very important the fact to be able to speak Greek.
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How important is for you to be able to speak your Greek language?						
No answer	Very important	Important	Not very important	Not important at all	Not sure	total
0.0%	65.2%	30.4%	2.2%	0.0%	2.2%	100.0%

In addition, a quarter of students has a limited attendance pattern in Greek events.
 Q.36 how often do you go to Greek events/functions?

No answer	2%	
Very often	35%	
Often	37%	
Sometimes	22%	
Rarely	4%	
Never	0%	
Total	100%	

The Greek language seemed to be an alternative medium of communication among students and their Greek friends. The reason for such behaviour was the need to communicate in a distinct way.

Do you like speaking Greek with your Greek friends?

No answer	0%
Very much	13%
I like it	28%
Sometimes	35%
Rarely	20%
Never	4%
Total	100%

Finally, students think it is high likely they will go to Orthodox Church, will send their own children to the Greek school and finally will speak Greek, although there is a fairly big uncertainty towards the language and school.

35. When you have children of your own, will you:

	Speak Greek	Go to church	to Greek school
No answer	6.5%	4.3%	2.2%
Yes	71.7%	80.4%	76.1%
No	2.2%	2.2%	0.0%
Not sure	19.6%	13.0%	21.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Of course all these findings need further elaboration.

Conclusion: **Hellenism new trends towards a new identification process**

After all!!!

The need for the Greeks around the world to reconsider and re-define their role and identification within a context in which globalisation and international trends penetrate the boundaries of the state it is apparent. However there is a new realisation: that the individual is now a global person meshed in powerful globalising processes. I consider as one of the most indicative challenges the matter of Greek identification and its adaptation within the social context in which it is placed each time.

The issue of Greek identification within a global and national level seems to be in a process of a significant transformation. For the first time ever, Hellenism and the Greek Diaspora are redefining themselves in the global context, by introducing new ways of conceptualisation. For example the official academic cycles³ have acknowledged the different types of Hellenism around the globe, by introducing new terms and definitions of the so-called Greek identity. The term "intra-Hellenic inter-culturalism" signifies this change, although it is closely associated with the emotional identification and the desire to be Greek. (The self-determination)

Based on my research findings I can support that there is still an attachment with the Greek language, culture and religion as the primary elements of the Greek identification among the key community personnel and the group of students that I interviewed. However, there is not a standard and solid consideration of being Greek. I still consider it is important to address some questions when dealing with the identification of 2nd and 3rd generation Greeks such as "how the fact that someone is Greek is being expressed in his or her everyday life? Is it enough for him or her to say, "I am Greek"? The new developments (the fact that children of 2nd and 3rd generation Greeks are Australian citizens and have been raised and have grown up in a multicultural and multilingual environment, as well as, mixed marriages) require new thinking about the role of language and identity and Greek education in Australia. Until now the official understanding of Hellenism was extremely narrow as it considered this notion with the limitations of an ethnocentric point of view. Greece was the centre of the Greek Diaspora and the resource of how one should define matters such as Hellenism, identification, and the future, without paying attention to the different types of Hellenic presence around the world. In more recent times the Greek state took the initiative of broadening our vision and understanding of these matters with the establishment of the "Council of the Greeks Abroad (SAE)", which has been a very important initiative although it needs development and collaboration.

For the first time ever the institutional organisation such as by the Greek government and the extensive network of the Internet have been employed to facilitate the understanding of Hellenism and the need for its interpretation in the international context. However the formation of the Greek Diaspora, now cemented in Greek legislation with Australian representation on the Board advising the Greek parliament, can only occur through the Greek language. Language and culture are inseparable aspects and if the language diminishes then culture diminishes too. However, as key personnel stated "language is an

³ ISTAME conference 1998, Greece.
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equal point of identification among other cultural elements. If someone does not speak Greek this does not mean that she or he could not be Greek. Identity could be ensured without language, but it is more difficult. The Greek language ensures 100% the Greek identity”.

Finally, the new technology and the occurred international links create a new impetus. Now it is possible for the language to be renewed more quickly, while the contact with the homeland can be sustained in a more frequent and vivid way ensuring the future development of the Greek-Australian identification process.

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Exploring identity in the Greek-Australian context.

Abstract [200 words]

The present paper will discuss the issue of identity through a multi-dimensional paradigm; the existence of multiple personal and social roles-identities, based on data from a doctoral study on Greek ethnic schools. The focus will be the ethnic identification process in a bicultural/multicultural context and its implications for the post-immigration generations. There is a need to reconsider and re-define terms such as ethnic identity and biethnicity in the context of the new global and international realities. The issue of Greek identification within a global and national level seems to be in a process of a significant transformation. For the first time ever, Hellenism and the Greek Diaspora are redefining themselves in the global context, by introducing new ways of institutional organisation such as by the Greek government and through the extensive network of the Internet. The formation of the Greek Diaspora, now cemented in Greek legislation with Australian representation on the Board advising the Greek parliament, can only occur through the Greek language. The new developments require new thinking about the role of language and identity and Greek education in Australia.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Eugenia Arvanitis was born on the Ionian island of Lefkada in Greece. She graduated from the Department of Primary School Education at the University of Ioannina, Greece, completing her undergraduate thesis. She is currently undertaking post-graduate studies (Ph.D) with the University of Ioannina. As part of her studies she is involved in research about Greek ethnic schools in Australia, in association with the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services at RMIT University. Her research interests are multiculturalism, intercultural and multicultural education and ethnic identity. She has attended and presented papers at several conferences in Australia. For the past two years she has been working on various projects with the Division of Modern Greek Studies, teaching at Greek ethnic schools and facilitating at seminars for the professional development of ethnic schools teachers under the auspices of the Directorate School Education. She is currently working as a research fellow with RMIT University – Greek-Australian Archive Museum and Learning Centre.