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We are different and the same: exploring Hellenic culture and identity in Aotearoa-New Zealand

Abstract

The worldwide rise in migration as a result of factors such as political unrest, and an expanding globalized economy and workforce, has directed research towards understanding what enables people to settle well into other societies, which often assume or expect their eventual absorption into dominant cultures. An in-depth interpretive study of culture, identity and well-being amongst New Zealand-born and migrant Hellenes from Greece, Cyprus and their diaspora explored diasporic Hellenes' international reputation for retaining relatively strong ethnic groups and identities (Gavriel 2004). This example of a small Hellenic community existing in another culturally dominant society reveals rationale and detail behind this phenomenon, discussing the matrix of factors and variables identified to affect ways these migrants create and maintain their culture and identity. It demonstrates the multidimensional, fluid nature of cultural identity and its impact on people's well-being in their daily encounters, negotiating similar and diverse cultures and worldviews, challenging assumptions about dilution of culture and identity on resettlement.

Background

Culture is a system of values, symbols, beliefs, norms, and sanctions shared by a particular group, transmitted within that group overtly and covertly through socialization processes. Its communication patterns consist

of verbal and non-verbal language cues (Gavriel 2004). Although culture has become synonymous with ethnicity, it also encompasses other concepts including religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, systems or institutions, whilst recognising the importance of history, socio-economic status and power relationships in shaping a particular cultural group (Ramsden 2002: 111). Ethnicity is a state of unique cultural, social, historical, and linguistic heritage shared with members of the same group (Bloch 1982). Although many cultures are ethnic, ethnicity is often associated with minority cultures, highlighting their different or exotic aspects (Gavriel 2004; Pizanias 1996; Ramsden 2002). Thus, culture and ethnicity are contextual, sometimes interchangeable concepts, especially when cultures coexist.

Research indicates interactions between a dominant or host society and immigrant or other cultural groups affect cultural identity through interrelated factors. This includes their reception within the society, its acceptance of diversity, policies, attitudes, individual personalities, values, beliefs, experiences, and the emphasis placed on cultural retention (Gavriel 1996, 1999, 2004; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder 2001). Many earlier studies of cultural identity compared ethnic or immigrant groups between countries or within one country, focusing on issues of culture, identity, psychological adjustment and intergroup contact. Phinney (1990) noted individual ethnic identity included self-identity, self-concept, belonging, and positive or negative ethnic group images. Mainly positive connections between ethnic identity, psychological adjustment, self-esteem and self-concept, found self-esteem indicated self and ethnic group ratings best (Phinney, Chavira & Tate 1993; Phinney, Cantu & Kurtz 1997). Phinney also noted uniqueness and diversity within and between groups created difficulty identifying and evaluating different ethnic groups. Comparison of ethnic groups with physical or racial characteristics different to the dominant culture, for example, Phinney and Alipura (1990), encountered racialization where, 'people are defined according to apparent differences of skin colour, national origin or other attributes, and assumed to be "different" to the majority population' (Robb & Douglas 2004: 28). Phinney, Cantu and Kurtz (1997) found outward invisibility among white ethnic groups by dominant Anglo or American cultures. Thus racialization can categorize people of different cultures with the dominant group, causing services or researchers to overlook,

mask or mislead cultural differences, needs or concerns, for example, including Irish and Greeks with dominant white populations in England (Aspinall 1998; Papadopoulos 2000) and with Anglo-Europeans in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Gavriel 2004).

Over two-thirds of the estimated 4–6,000 New Zealand [NZ]-Hellenes live in Greater Wellington. However, methods used to collect and report ethnicity data by agencies make official statistics imprecise (Gavriel 2002, 2004), reinforcing observations that external factors can impose on or change how ethnicity is defined and measured (Bottomley 1994). Hellenic migration to Aotearoa-New Zealand from the 1800s peaked between 1920–80 with chain migrantion and refugees mainly from Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Egypt, Rumania, and assisted Cretan women migrant labourers 1962–64 (Swarbrick 2009). Societal expectations of Hellenic immigrants and their NZ-born generations during this time reflected government policy of assimilation into Anglo-colonial culture. Policy shifts over the last 30 years towards official bicultural partnerships with Maori, cultural integration, changes to immigration policy alongside continued refugee arrivals, saw the population and range of ethnic migrants increase. The new cultural complexity, increased diversity of languages, values and religions, created pressure on limited resources and after 9/11, concerns about terrorism, all fuelled public debate about society accepting diversity or expecting migrants to assimilate. Along with other cultural groups, some NZ-Hellenes experienced intolerance, stereotyping, xenophobia or racism, resulting in strategies to ease resettlement and promote the benefits of diversity (Gendall 2004; Department of Labour 2007, 2011; Office Ethnic Affairs 2010).

A study using interpretive methods including in-depth interviews, surveys, participant-observation and reflective journaling to explore culture, identity and well-being amongst migrant and NZ-born Hellenes (Gavriel 2004), contributes to the notion of diasporic Hellenes' ability to resettle after migration whilst retaining a relatively strong ethnic identity. Its results highlight the complex, multidimensional, flexible, fluid nature of cultural identity and its effects on well-being as people negotiate similar and diverse cultures. Four major themes it identified are presented: being different and the same; cultural identity; relationships and cultural maintenance; plus health and wellness.

Being different and the same

This theme reflected the complex, sometimes ambiguous nature of NZ-Hellenes' cultural experiences. Their ability to blend outwardly in a society that only invites particular public expressions of diversity like Greek food, music or dance at specific places or events, closeted Greeks away from the public gaze for other aspects. Participants' self-identity as Hellenes 'having a sense of Greekness', (Gavriel 2004: 12) unified them whether they came from Greece, Cyprus or the Hellenic diaspora. 'We are different and the same' was a reoccurring tension and theme in interviews. A Greek-born woman said:

> People point out my difference. They never let me forget I am not the same. Therefore, it makes you more aware you are different ... As a child, I suffered sometimes as a Greek because I wanted to be liked by everyone else, but revisiting Greece and as I got older, I discovered people are people with their differences and similarities. (Gavriel 2004: 106)

Participants noted Hellenes' diverse world-views ranged from rural, village, uneducated, narrow-minded to urban, worldly, educated or open-minded people. Some likened the NZ-Hellenic community to a village: small, conservative and full of gossip, making anonymity difficult. Sometimes cultural stagnation, unhealthy tensions or intergenerational conflicts produced ambiguity conflict or disharmony in extended families. Increased ability to visit homelands challenged conservative or rigid world-views created through distance or isolation from other Hellenic communities. One NZ-born Greek said, 'When I was younger, my parents weren't so flexible and understanding, they were too strict. Now I have retrained myself not to make it a big problem' (Gavriel 2004: 102). Another said:

> I think it's changing. In the older style community you always had to conform, they didn't tolerate difference. I remember disliking it. It turned me off the community for a while... Although my generation are bicultural, we have absorbed things from our parents that interfere with liberal attitudes beginning to be part of NZ society. (Gavriel 2004: 102)

Cultural identity

Interviewees' descriptions of cultural identity highlighted its ability to be flexible and relative to particular factors and situational contexts: significance, length and degree of interaction, for example, work family, social or education;

theirs and others' cultures; their age or life stage; as shown by a Cypriot-born man's comment:

Growing up in NZ and living … where there weren't many other Greek families at the time, the dominant influence on me was probably my schooling and my Greekness got submerged in a desire to be Kiwi … What makes me feel Greek? Well memories of my grandmother, talking to her in Greek, she never learnt English that always made me feel very Greek. My mother's cooking … So, the food, the language, my grandmother, her stories and memories of Cyprus all these make me feel Greek. The special feeling I get when I hear Greek music on the radio … also lots of beliefs from before I left Cyprus when I was nine I had already absorbed lots of religious spiritual beliefs … I cherish my memories of Cyprus … Moving to New Zealand was a huge adjustment. Having my uncle and his family here helped tremendously, but I think emotion, the climate, everything, everything, those first two years were difficult. I am not sure how I survived it. I call myself Cypriot, then if people ask me 'Greek or Turkish?' I say 'Greek-Cypriot.' I am very proud now of my Kiwi connection, my Kiwiness. I consider both places similar, you know, small countries with very different but proud traditions. It's very nice to be able to claim both. I think I have as much right as anyone to. So, when it suits me, I am a Cypriot and when it suits me, I am a Kiwi … and I am very resentful if someone tries to pigeonhole me in one or the other … If I am down here I am very Greek-Cypriot with my family of origin, in England I am slightly, in [NZ city] I am moderately, because a couple of Cypriots visit me. (Gavriel 2004: 106)

Desire for peace, a better life, chain migration, arranged marriages or family reunification attracted Hellenes to Aotearoa-New Zealand. Individual migratory histories, whether the migration or destination was by choice or force, influenced resettlement and identity. Place of birth, age at migration, length of residence, being NZ-born or their generation post immigration influenced their identity, ability to articulate their culture and answer the question, 'Who am I?' Migrants who arrived as mature adults acknowledged their Hellenic identity, which deep cultural immersion sometimes made difficult to articulate. Other migrants' culture became frozen in time. Contact with the host culture affected ability to move between cultural worlds with ease. For example, an elderly woman immigrant was anxious when left alone in English speaking situations because she never learnt English during her

50 years residence, remaining at home raising her family, socializing mainly with Greeks, whereas her Greek friend, who learnt English working with New Zealanders, engaged confidently in wider society.

NZ-born Hellenes experienced a different socialization process to their overseas-born counterparts. Negotiating differing cultural world-views of family, other Hellenes and society made development and maintenance of cultural identity and skills a more conscious process. Immigration before adulthood created issues of adjustment in a new society. Both groups described intergenerational conflicts. Their experiences creating awareness and accommodation of different cultures within their identity, networks and lifestyle, developing understanding and skills required to reflect, interpret, negotiate or appreciate other cultures. A NZ-born Greek said, 'If I didn't have these two perspectives, I would be less accepting or tolerant of other cultures' (Gavriel 2004: 111). A NZ-born Cypriot man said:

> My sister married, built a house on the land where my mother grew up in Cyprus, so I totally relate to the notion of Maori land rights, I understand what they go through. It's not until you have a historical connection to land that goes back many generations you can understand that ... claim like Maori it's their home. (Gavriel 2004: 79)

Some incorporated more than one cultural identity:

> I accepted I am who I am ... I have accepted my Greekness ... I feel very comfortable being in Greece and being in New Zealand, I am proud of being a New Zealander ... I am a watered down Greek ... influenced so much by the culture I have been brought up in, which is English culture in NZ culture ... I was born a Greek, brought up by Greeks, patriots who instilled in me a love for Greece ... I'm proud of where I was born, my ancestors, Greece's contributions. (Gavriel 2004: 106,108)

Study participants highlighted several ways cultural knowledge, experiences and images kept Hellenic culture alive and relevant including knowledge and skills learnt, practices and participation in customs, beliefs, Greek Orthodox faith, positive or negative Hellenic images or stereotypes held and portrayed. One adult child immigrant commented 'Education is the transmission of a culture' (Gavriel 2004: 101); another, 'Rituals and traditions that's the key; they are things that make me Greek, the strong things that tie me to my country, give me a strong sense of identity and purpose, make me feel comfortable' (Gavriel 2004: 116). There was no single significant factor,

'Although you don't speak Greek fluently, you understand Greekness, the spirit of the culture, that feeling of being Greek … It's like a germ inside you that flourishes' (Gavriel 2004: 108).

Relationships and cultural maintenance

Relationships provide meaning, context and value to cultural identity. Factors include the person's primary and secondary socialization, the degree of cultural homogeneity within the family, the importance of cultural maintenance for family members, their social circles, and how links are retained with Greece, Cyprus or other Hellenic communities. A Cypriot-born man said:

> *Hellenes believe a close-knit family is important, as is a loving, welcoming home. Extended families support each other here and in their homelands. Your family is your social services … the first port of call or support in stress or crisis: financial, social, emotional or physical. (Gavriel 2004: 203)*

A NZ-born woman with Cypriot and NZ parents said:

> *A lot of our friends are family … Family values are different … the expectation of children growing up, leaving home, going flatting … having their own life isn't really in our vocab. They can go flatting … but I don't think they ever leave home … We socialise with all of our family as a way of keeping us all together … when the chips are down those people will help, we would all support each other unconditionally. (Gavriel 2004: 91)*

Various sources provided socialization for NZ-born and young migrants to develop and maintain Hellenic cultural identity and skills, such as extended family, various Hellenic cultural, social or religious associations, clubs, events or rituals, for example, Greek Orthodox weddings or baptisms, sports teams, Greek schools and NZ-Greek radio programmes. Geographically isolated migrants relied more on family or social networks. In intercultural relationships, attitudes of significant non-Hellenic family members were important for self-esteem, confidence and belonging. Did such people permit, accept or support Hellenic cultural participation or engage with it themselves? Socialization also required negotiation of other cultures through, for example, school, work and friendships. Maintaining connections overseas reinforces culture through family, friends, marrying Hellenes, sending remittances, and visits. Everyone thought returning to one's homeland powerfully clarified

and strengthened identity while reinforcing and reviving cultural bonds. Two typical comments: a Greek-born immigrant said, 'Every three to four years I go back ... These trips are important because they renew my Greekness almost like an injection' (Gavriel 2004: 116). A NZ-born Cypriot said:

I am one of the few of my generation who can speak Cypriot and Greek ... because I speak it fluently, I feel more Greek than many of my generation, I was born here but spent six years of my childhood in Cyprus. (Gavriel 2004: 116)

Health and wellness

Experiences premigration and postmigration influenced attitudes to health, disability and illness, similar to Hellenes elsewhere. Participants considered cultural identity and maintenance essential to mental well-being for individuals, families and their community, positioning self in the world through Hellenic culture, self-esteem and belonging, as this poem reflects:

Belonging

To unearth the real
To know your mountain
To know you have a history, a home,
a place where you are not alone.
To know the stories of your people.

(Gavriel 2004: 107)

Some participants moved with ease within and between cultural worlds to explore their world-views and experiences demonstrating a sense of belonging, an understanding of self and others. A Greek migrant said, 'People need identity ... To be Greek is to really value something ... to be Hellenic is not bound by land or borders ... We are survivors' (Gavriel 2004: 121). One NZ-born of Cypriot and NZ-Anglo parents: 'My Cypriot identity is important to my mental health ... I didn't have to stop, have a big crisis about who I was ... My parents curtailed that by taking me to visit Cyprus,' (Gavriel 2004: 121). Another of Greek and Russian-Greek parents said:

Knowing where you come from is important for mental health in every sense of the word. People need to cling to a sense of identity ... My two nieces are second

generation NZ-Greeks and sixth generation New Zealanders. One embraces her
NZ existence, the other doesn't. (Gavriel 2004: 107-108)

Traditional healing knowledge and practices transferred from mother
to daughter were diminishing due to immigration, intercultural marriages,
scarcity of resources, practices considered archaic or unacceptable in the
new society, available and affordable modern medicines. Orthodox religious
practices continued to safeguard health and healing, coexisting alongside
contentious beliefs about Magi as healers, the evil eye, curses and other
superstitions. Attitudes to mental illness, disabilities and social issues,
for example, divorce and children flatting, reflected diverse world-views;
sometimes creating intercultural tensions when values or attitudes clashed
with professionals. Dis-ease occurred with disconnection or dislocation
from their world, sense of self or belonging. NZ-Hellenes needing support
found other New Zealanders' romanticized stereotyped assumptions of large
extended Hellenic family networks providing practical support stressful,
because such networks were uncommon after international migration often
separated families.

Many overcame negative experiences. A Romanian-Greek refugee
experiencing prejudice at primary school, found strength in the symbolism
of the poem 'Who goes to school at night time' taught at Wellington Greek
School, originally recited by children going to secret Greek schools during the
Ottoman rule:

It taught me to be Greek is to really value something. We are survivors ...
descended from people who were oppressed ... our history is of vast importance
to being a Modern Greek ... we carry an important inheritance ... The West owes
the basis of their civilization to our ancestors; concepts of politics, democracy,
republics etc ... I was taught to value myself, who I am culturally ... The secret
schools ... all made me proud to be Greek. It's something I can hand on to my
children. When I was small, had bad self-esteem, this is what I held on to, I am
important, special because I belong to this type of people. (Gavriel 2004: 143)

Pressures of meeting family and community expectations affected
mental health, especially self-esteem and self-confidence. Two common
examples were criticism if NZ-Hellenes did not master Greek language,
and cultural expectations to care for ageing, disabled or ill family members.
Sometimes a Spartan attitude of, 'survival of the fittest' meant people did

not ask for help or accept it when offered, especially from welfare agencies. Without positive cultural images, an attitude of survival was uncommon. Some believed their situation was beyond their control, or luck or fate influenced it. A comment from a Greek-born woman:

> *They have some control over their destiny and their health. Attitude is the biggest problem, for example the extreme Greek attitude to divorce, 'It was my bad luck', without realizing they've contributed ... people don't know how to find things out or help themselves. (Gavriel 2004: 139)*

A comment from an NZ-born woman:

> *Greeks' attitudes tend to be more fatalistic, they aren't so much into self-help, they'd say, 'Oh well, what can we do, such is life', just grin and cope. Instead of being proactive, they'd expect health professionals to fix them. (Gavriel 2004: 139)*

Participants' concerns that family members' inability to master English or understand systems such as health, education or welfare would be disadvantaged, created reliance on family or friends for support (Gavriel 2004, 2011). Although they expected frontline professionals to inform them, they often felt isolated and uninformed about systems or services like community support, interpreters or consumers' rights, because information was in English. Subtle cultural barriers emerged from differing values, cultural practises or ignorance. This sometimes led to culturally unsafe attitudes and responses affecting health outcomes. In one case, an elderly NZ-born Greek woman's stressful experiences with community nurses culminated in their reluctance to change a treatment time for her to attend her father's memorial service. Feeling demeaned after her concerns were dismissed, she refused to use the service, losing access to necessary treatment, which resulted in frequent hospitalizations. Lack of cultural or historical understanding or making assumptions can affect professionals' approaches to a situation or cause misdiagnosis, especially in mental health. Current sensitivities to refugee health issues directed towards newer arrivals and their official refugee entry status, exclude Hellenic migrants' traumatic journeys or histories. In one instance, a Cypriot experienced trauma from the 1974 invasion through combat, multiple losses and displacement, before migrating and marrying. Later, being unaware of Cypriot history, assessors disregarded the context, significance of triggers or symptoms, initially misdiagnosing him, overlooking post traumatic stress disorder and difficulties trusting authorities, including health professionals.

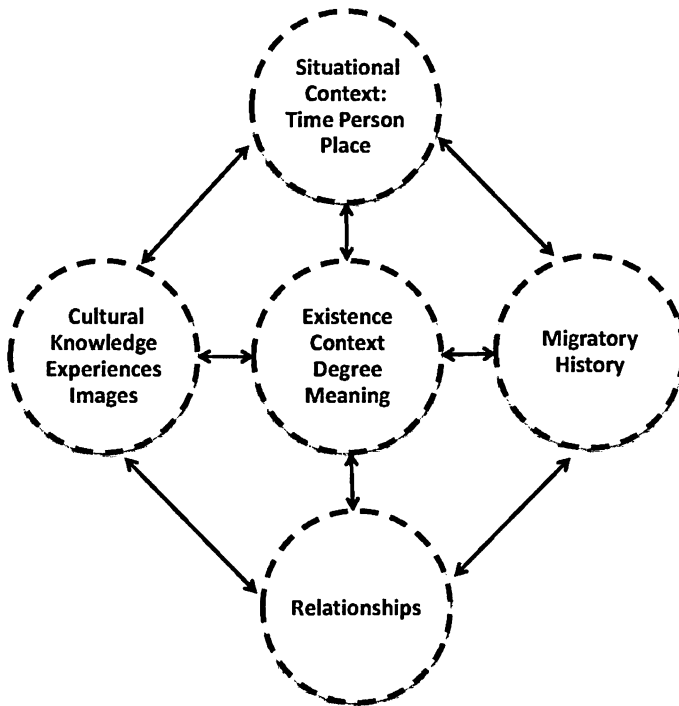## Variables and factors that affect culture and identity

Figure 1: Variables and factors affecting cultural identity and its maintenance.

Discussion

This research reveals dynamic, multi-dimensional processes that contribute to creating and maintaining cultural identity (see Figure 1), affected by factors in areas of situational context, migration, relationships, cultural knowledge and experiences, connected to variables such as existence, degree, context and meaning of a phenomena or event (Gavriel 2004: 115).

Previous international and local studies identified Greek language, culture, education, religion, intermarriage, ethnic community activity, size and cohesion as determining factors for Hellenes' relatively strong cultural retention post-migration (Baddeley 1977; Burnley 1969, 1972; Gavriel 1985a, 1985b, 2004; Georgas et al. 1997; Tripp-Reimer, 1983). This study found all

of these factors important. Participants did not consider cultural dilution after migration inevitable, sighting historical experiences of Hellenic culture's survival living under occupation, persecution or sometimes generations of Diaspora. They used these as templates to face their own life challenges. Participants acknowledged diversity within their culture meant cultural values and characteristics, such as close family, language, religion, valuing education and children, although significant also varied, therefore should not be used to define Hellenes prescriptively, as this reflection illustrates:

What is a Greek?

To say because I am Greek I must have this or that quality,
attitude or value,
Is to say that of all the colours of grains of sand on a beach,
Greeks are only the grains of one colour.
The sand has its consistency and colour because of its
composition.
To separate the grains makes it something different,
No longer the sand of that beach.

Greeks are Greeks because of each and everyone's uniqueness and
similarities.
Sand on one beach is different in consistency and colour
To sand on other beaches,
But we are all a part of the ocean of life,
and connected to it
Through the grains of our humanness.

Does it matter which beach we belong to or come from?
Yes and no.
To acknowledge my Greekness, is not to deny my humanness,
My Cypriotness, my Kiwiness, my Pacific home.
To acknowledge my humanness, is not to deny my Hellenic roots.

Nothing is straightforward or clear cut,
It is all different and the same.
Hold it together,
Ying and yang,
Soft sand from hard rock,
Stark dry rocky Mediterranean shores
Washed by sapphire blue seas
Tree clad lush Pacific shores
Washed by deep green seas
Hellenes are there too.

(Gavriel 2006: 57-58)

These NZ-Hellenes' demonstrate health and illness are cultural constructs using holistic health beliefs, which combine physical, psychosocial, emotional, spiritual and environmental aspects with cultural knowledge, including history, religion, traditional healing, Greek philosophers, scientists, myths, heroes and icons that provide examples of strength, wisdom and survival. Research supports their belief that cultural identity and maintenance are essential for mental well-being of individuals, families and their community, positioning self in the world through Hellenic culture, self-esteem and belonging. Cultural attitudes, values and languages creating barriers, such as to accessing welfare or health services and treatment, was one of the few disadvantages concerning participants about living in another culture, although asking for help also remained a challenge to their psyche.

Several forms of cultural identity, adaptation and retention can result in acculturation processes: assimilation, integration or isolation, separation or marginalization in society (Berry 2001, 2003; Gavriel 1993, 2004; Hutnik 1986; Yinger 1981, 1983). This research challenges as too simplistic scenarios which portray a one dimensional lineal progression towards cultural dilution and absorption over time. The complex dynamics of cultural identity and its maintenance are fluid and multifaceted as people move between different states of being, as illustrated in Figure 1. Ability to resettle or adjust well whilst accommodating often more than one cultural identity, requires a combination of society's acceptance and inclusion of difference, and an ability

to develop and maintain cultural identity, supported by their sense of self-belonging, self-respect, self-esteem and self-worth. Cultural images: positive or negative perceptions and stereotypes from inside or outside the cultural group influenced this, reflected by how or if they remained connected to the diasporic community. Attitudes towards diversity and difference, intolerant attitudes like 'When in Rome do as the Romans do', appear more likely to suppress than eradicate diversity, resulting in tensions which could create more harm to a healthy society. Although not specifically researched, further generations of NZ-born descendants' capacity to embrace their Hellenic identity, develop cultural knowledge, skills and confidence was noted.

Conclusion

This article used research with adults from the New Zealand Hellenic diaspora whose world-views and life experiences were explored to provide insights and increase understanding about cultural identity, its formation, retention and maintenance. It supported conclusions of previous international studies about the strength of the Hellenic diaspora's cultural identity and retention by providing detail and insights into this phenomenon. The history of migratory journeys, the reception of the host country, resettlement of new and NZ-born migrants into the Hellenic community and wider society, all affect their well-being and desire to retain their Hellenic culture, sometimes accommodating more than one cultural identity. These diasporic Hellenes experienced cultural identity as a dynamic complex process, forming and reforming, multidimensional and fluid in nature. Many factors, including positive strengthening cultural images and stories, contributed to creating a positive cultural identity used to sustain internal conflicts, external prejudices, stresses, crises and to enhance well-being. People adhered to their Hellenic cultural identity although it sometimes led to negative or discriminatory experiences. This work ends with a reflection about inclusion in the wider society.

Sweet As?

OK?
Yeah I'm OK.
You?
Sweet as ...
I am a chameleon,
I adapt to the situation.
A magician,
Bag of tricks for parties, events,
A song, a dance, some yummy ethnic food,
Sweet as sweet for you.

Like some unusual ornament
Placed on the mantelpiece of society's lounge,
Still, silent, no waves, no ripples,
Nothing to disturb the peace
By wanting a piece of the action:
Sitting in the lounge joining in the conversation
Alive, a part of life,
Open and out there
Yeah, that would be 'sweet as' for me.w

(Gavriel 2007:20)

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