Third Generation Greek-Australian Young Women:
Are Diasporic Identities Liquid?

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Abstract

Zygmunt Bauman (2005) has influenced how we should conceive of life in the early years of the 21st century, and his metaphor of liquid life offers a valuable approach to analysing the complexities of social change in the context of Western, industrialized democracies. He argues that we live in a liquid modern society in which social practices are fluid and constantly changing and individuals are therefore compelled to continually make and remake a sense of self. Bauman (2005) suggests that traditional structures of identity formation no longer provide the security that individuals in contemporary societies are seeking.

This paper, which emerges from the preliminary theoretical considerations arising from my doctoral research, offers an exploration into the ways in which Bauman’s (2005) account of liquid life can be used to explore the diasporic cultural identities of Greek-Australian young women. I argue that while Bauman’s account of liquid life enables us to explore the proposition that the diasporic cultural identities of Greek-Australian young women are contingent and responsive to liquid modern tendencies, this sociological approach lacks an appreciation of the ongoing significance of more structured, solid forms of sociality and identity (Elliot 2007) which cannot be ignored.

Keywords: diaspora, third generation Greek-Australian young women, liquid modernity, liquid life, liquid identity, Bauman
**Introduction**

The work of Zygmunt Bauman has influenced how we should conceive of life in the early years of the twenty-first century, and his concept of *liquid modernity* offers a valuable approach to analysing the complexities of social change in the context of Western, industrialised democracies. Reflecting on our presently shared conditions he offers insights into various aspects of what he calls a *liquid life*; a life that tends to be lived in a *liquid modern* society (Bauman 2005:1). Bauman uses the metaphors of *fluidity* and *liquidity* to describe the social and cultural environment of the start of the 21st century, and to signify how the self and the fabric of everyday life in conditions of liquid modernity are characterised by choice and individual decision making.

According to Bauman, the passage from *solid* to *liquid* modernity has created a new setting for individual life pursuits, and challenges never before encountered. So individuals have to be flexible and adaptable and constantly ready and willing to change tactics at short notice and pursue opportunities according to their current availability. Consequently, individuals are compelled to continually make and remake a sense of self (Bauman 2005; Elliott & Lemert 2006; Giddens 1991).

In the context of Bauman’s liquid modernity, nothing for young people can be guaranteed to stay *solid*. He sees the present condition of the world as one in which individuals have to find ways to organise their lives when traditional structures of identity formation have become fragmented, creating a situation where people’s identity has become a task rather than a given (Bauman 2005). Individuals are very much aware that they have no choice but to try to continually make and remake a sense of self in a fluid social world and cultural scene in which ‘flexibility and mobility are desirable personal characteristics’ (Blatterer 2005:5). Relying on recent social theories of individualisation in his account of liquid life, Bauman illuminates ‘the complex ways in which individual actions and choices are becoming disengaged from collective ways of doing things’ (Elliot 2007:50).
Following a brief account of the Greek diaspora of Melbourne and the diasporic identifications among the third generation of Greek-Australians, I will suggest that Bauman’s (2005) concept of liquid life may provide a valuable framework for understanding the social context in which Greek-Australian young women experience a liquid life of choice and individualisation. However, I want to suggest that there are shortcomings with Bauman’s social theory of liquid life in relation to the ‘generality of societal liquidisation’ as a mode of identity-formation in the contemporary period (Elliot 2007:60).

**Greek-Australian Diaspora**

Since the post-World War II mass migration of Greek people to Australia, Melbourne has been home to one of the largest Greek diaspora communities outside of Europe. Over 250,000 Greek and Cypriot people migrated between 1952 and 1974, and as a consequence, their children and grandchildren tend to be born around the same time period. With a low current migration level replenishing this group and the fact that most (99%) Greek migrants arrived in Australia before 1986, Greece has become one of three countries of birth with the highest proportions of longer-standing migrants in Australia (ABS 2006). Despite this, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Greek-Australians display the strongest degree of ethno-linguistic vitality of all ethnic groups in Australia (Tamis 2005). The 2006 Census reflects the considerable importance amongst Greek-Australians of maintaining the Greek language and culture.

Experiences of life after migration to Australia had been shaped by feelings of loss and nostalgia for a ‘homeland’ left behind. Memories of remembered places served as symbolic anchors of community for Greek migrants in the diaspora (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). These sorts of anchors are used to ‘construct imaginatively their new lived world’ (Leonard 1992). Australia’s early immigration policies, during the time of mass Greek migration to Australia, were guided by the belief that migrants would become indistinguishable from the majority population. However, migrants did not
assimilate, and faced with the challenge of defining ‘who [they]…expect to be, who
they are allowed to be, and who they choose to be’ (Hawley 1997:183), they cultivated
a ‘homeland’ culture born out of nostalgia and resistance. This consequently lead to
Greek communities remaining socio-economically insulated, concentrated into
particular occupations and residential areas and significantly reliant on one another
(Tamis 2005). It has been suggested that unified by a desire to maintain the culture of
a remembered homeland, the Greek diasporic identity came to be characteristic of a
lifestyle all but lost in Greece. Establishing a complex web of relationships amongst
their language, family relations, clubs, community organizations, church and schools
ensured that Greek-Australians maintain a distinctive subculture in Melbourne (de
Stoop 1996).

These experiences faced by first generation Greek-Australians extended over to their
Australian born children (or their children who migrated with them during infancy or
early childhood). They grew up in homes that insisted on preserving the national
identity, faith and language of their parents and on maintaining the torch of tradition of
the ‘homeland’ (Tamis 2005:54). In her experience in focusing on the cultural
identities of second generation Greek Australian women, Tsolidis (2009:180) suggests
that these women occupy spaces ‘in-between’ being Greek and Australian and most
often, they also make an effort in order for their children to also identify with cultural
spaces ‘in between’.

Greek-Australians form an ‘imagined community’ of a kind whose traditions were
invented in Greece, but have been upheld by the immigrant community. Research also
suggests that cultural attrition has not led to a dissipation of the resilient maintenance
of Greek culture amongst successive generations in Australia (Douminas 1999). This
resilience in maintaining culture denotes the experience of ‘being from one place and
of another, identified with the idea of particular sentiments towards the homeland,
whilst being formed by those of the place of settlement’ (Anthias 1998:565). This
condition has come to signify postmodern versions of diaspora (Hall 1990; Gilroy
1993; Clifford 1994; Douminas 1999) in which notions of diaspora identities and
experiences tie in with globalisation and the growth of non-nation based solidarities (Robertson 1992; Appadurai 1990). Recent research supports the view that the bonds of ethnic ties and the fixity of boundaries have been replaced by shifting and fluid identities (Back 1996; Bhavnani & Phoenix 1994; Modood et al. 1997). Such approaches suggest that diasporic identifications and cultural reproduction are taking on a new significance; becoming contingent and responsive to liquid modern tendencies that are energised by process of globalisation and the fluidity brought about by mass migration, transnational production and consumption (Tsolidis 2001).

The third generation of Greek Australians have not shared the same migration experiences as their parents and/or grandparents. Displacement, ‘homeland’ nostalgia and cultural memory have not directly contributed to their identity, except through the beliefs, customs, stories handed down from generation to generation. However, these elements play a key role in ‘diasporic processes of identification and cultural reproduction’ in which complex, dynamic and critical processes lie at the heart of new understandings of cultural identifications (Tsolidis 2001:193). For them, the production and representation of the self as a member of a diasporic community represents something different to previous generations. If diaporas are ‘fluid, changing with history, not fixed or pre-given’ cultural reproduction is a creation of something new (Hua 2005:204). Diasporic identities are not the representation of difference based on the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition (Bhabha 1994) but frame a particular way of thinking about social relations, consumption and identity at the start of the 21st century.

Agnew (2005:14) proposes that the diasporic individual often has a ‘double consciousness’, a privileged knowledge and perspective that is consonant with post-modernity and globalisation. She suggests that the dual nature of diasporic consciousness is one that is caught between ‘here’ and ‘there’. Diasporic individuals may focus on their attachment to the symbols of their ethnicity, and may continue to feel emotionally invested in their ‘homeland’. Yet this attachment and sentiment is experienced simultaneously with their involvement and participation in the social,
economic, cultural, and political allegiances to their home in the diaspora. In the context of a multicultural city such as Melbourne, cultural legitimacy enables the reproduction of traditional practices associated with ‘being Greek’. However, in a ‘liquid modern’ society (Bauman 2005), assumptions about cultural authenticity may have less influence on identity exploration and expression. The contemporary Greek diasporic community of Melbourne consists of third and succeeding generations of individuals whom appear to have adopted a hybrid identity and endow it with fresh meaning (Esman 2009).

Of particular significance to the exploration of the diasporic cultural identity of third generation Greek-Australians are the experiences shared by young women in the complex, dynamic and critical process of shaping new understandings of cultural identification. In the context of the fluid and liquid nature of the social and cultural environment of the start of the 21st century, third generation Greek-Australian young women find themselves to be part of a diaspora community in which they occupy a unique, critical and central role in the creation of the new identifications and understandings of cultural identity and cultural reproduction. While the stories of second generation Greek-Australian women are commonly constructed as the stories of ‘culture clash’ (Tsolidis 2001), the third and subsequent generations of Greek-Australian young women are constructing their role in cultural identification in response to their diasporic experience, but also to the conditions of liquid modernity.

**Identity in a ‘Liquid Modern Society’**

Bauman explores life and identity in conditions of liquid modernity. He argues that many of the traditional structures of identity formation in a liquid modern society no longer provide the security that individuals are seeking. For Bauman (2005) consumption has become an important expression of identity, way of life and a basic role in further individualisation, in liquid modernity. He argues that consumer culture and liquid modernity are attuned to each other and reinforce the influences on the choices individuals may realistically make. Bauman (2007:52) suggests that in a liquid
modern society, individuals are ‘unreflexively’ engaged with the consumerist culture, embracing and obeying its precepts to the best of their ability. Individuals take part in a never-ending activity of identity-making and remaking and are subsequently judged and evaluated mostly by their consumption-related capacities and conduct.

As a consequence of these developments, consumerist performance turns into the ‘paramount stratifying factor and the principal criterion for exclusion and inclusion’, guiding the distribution of social esteem and stigma. In a liquid modern society, consumer culture is promoted, encouraged and enforced as the sole, unquestionably approved choice and condition of membership (Bauman 2007:53). Bauman (2007:6) argues that individuals are ‘enticed, nudged, or forced’ to engage in this consumer culture as consumers, but also as commodities who try as hard as they can to promote and sell themselves. He suggests that in a society of consumers no one can escape being an object of consumption. Individuals constantly engage in self-scrutiny, self-critique and self-censure so as not to share the same fate as the objects deemed to be ‘old’ and ‘outdated’, and therefore ready to be consigned to waste (2007:21). This threat means that individuals are continuously prompted to ‘hurry up’ and make the decisions required in order for them to ‘belong’ and to ‘stay ahead’ (2007:84). In liquid modern society, identities are not given, let alone given once and for all in a secure fashion. Instead, Bauman (2007:110) suggests that they are self-propelling and self-invigorating projects to be ‘undertaken, diligently performed and seen through to infinitely remote completion’. He argues that the strategies and tools for liquid modern individuals to continuously make and remake their self-identity are ever-changing commodities, and in this sense a final settlement and any consummate, perfect gratification that calls for no further improvement is impossible (Bauman 2007).

Bauman (2007:110) argues that even the identities that pretend and/or are supposed to be ‘given’ and non-negotiable require the obligation to undertake an individual effort to appropriate them and then struggle daily to hold on to them. In this sense, the self-definition of the liquid modern individual is characterised by the urge of selection and the effort to make the choice publicly recognisable. Individual identity is driven by the
need to ‘commoditise’ oneself, and subsequently individuals are under constant pressure to remake themselves, ‘obliged to find a market niche for the valuables they may posses or hope to develop’. Even ethnic identities derived from, and developed in, diasporic communities oblige the individual to produce and to hold on to them.

The ongoing formation of the self compels individuals to continuously make choices under conditions of uncertainty. Motivated by the ‘fear of being caught napping, of failing to catch up with fast-moving events, and of being left behind, of missing the moment that calls for a change of tack before crossing the line of no return’, the formation of the self is an ongoing and perpetually unfinished re-formation (Bauman 2005:2). A looseness of attachment and revocability of engagement are the precepts guiding everything in which individuals engage and to which they are attached (Bauman 2005). Bauman (2007:2) argues that living life in this condition is not a choice but a ‘take it or leave it’ necessity. He argues that in a liquid modern society, individuals are compelled to make choices which further their own interests but at the same time, alienate them from the world. He suggests that even consumption that happens to be conducted in company is a solitary activity. The solitary pursuits characteristic of a consumerist culture leave little room for the maintenance and perseverance of practices, handed down from generation to generation, which rely on lastingness and continuity. The criteria of a consumer market stands in jarring opposition to the nature of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices which have survived the demise of ideas of durability, tradition and continuity.

Critics of Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity argue that by ‘focusing attention on the liquidisation of the self and social relations, he tends to neglect the ongoing significance of more structured, solid forms of sociality’ (Elliott 2007:55). Elliott argues that Bauman neglects the many ways in which liquid modern societies still depend on things like traditions. Elliot (2007:59) suggests that the generality and sweep of the theory of liquid modernity threatens to recede into the shadows the point that ‘all of us have multiple identities, some overlapping, some contradictory, and that at any moment these identities are interacting with- incorporating, resisting and
transforming broader social values and cultural differences, shaping and being shaped by modernity’.

Bauman’s (2007:11) suggestion is that liquid modernity promotes the smooth flow of the self-centred pursuits of liquid life, in which the preservation of things unfit to serve or no longer able to serve are, according to liquid life’s reasoning, irrational to preserve: ‘their right to be preserved for their own sake cannot be easily argued, let alone proved, by liquid life’s logic’. Consequently, there is a lack of interest in, and attention to, the aspects of common life that resist a complete and immediate translation into the current targets of self reform. This has lead Bauman (2005) to question whether or not anything which can not be legitimised in terms of market value can survive in a liquid modern society.

According to Bauman, every choice and life pursuit embodies an element of consumption. Consumer freedom in the construction of identity extends into choices made regarding relationships, education, work, parenthood and consumption. Since individuals in a liquid modern society are primarily engaged as consumers, the spreading of consumer patterns embrace all life’s aspects and activities. Bauman (2007:83) suggests that there is a consumerist logic in which a hierarchy of recognised values dictates the liquid fashion in which choices and decisions are made. He argues that in the pursuit to appropriate the content to construct the identity of one’s choice, individuals have been encouraged to embrace the endless novelty of appropriation through speed, excess and waste in the place of possessions and enjoyment that lasts.

Elliot (2007:58-59) argues that ‘by conceptualizing liquid lives as the dominant mode of identity constitution in the current era’, Bauman’s approach ‘neglects other modes of self-constitution’. He suggests that while ‘liquidised forms of experience and identity, with their emphasis on short-termism and relentless self-transformation, are undoubtedly characteristic of large areas of cultural life’, the analysis of identity and subjectivity is best conceptualized via attention to private life, in which the psyche, emotions, memories and desires are considered, as well as the attention to social
changes. For Elliot (2007:59), Bauman’s analysis is ‘finely honed on the latter of these concerns’, while ‘the adequacy of his conceptualization of the former’, he suggests, is open to question. Consequently, he suggests that a ‘more systematic analysis of the complexity of subjectivity and its relation to modernity’ would provide a more detailed account of the link between liquidisation and identity (Elliot 2007; see also Elliot 1996).

**Conclusion**

Bauman ‘extends his social theory to cover all forms of self-definition and life-strategies in contemporary societies’ (Elliot 2007:59) offering an approach to understanding young people and the choices they make within new patterns of living and new approaches to life. The lives of young people have changed quite significantly in the past few decades (Furlong 2009) and these changes may be understood through Bauman’s metaphor of liquid modernity and liquid life. I suggest that Bauman’s concept of liquid life may provide a valuable framework for understanding the social context in which Greek-Australian young women experience a life of choice and individualisation. However, by ‘conceptualising liquid lives as the dominant mode of identity constitution in the current era; he neglects other modes of self-definition’ (Elliot 2007:59). Therefore I argue that there is a need for research which explores the ways in which liquid identity is influenced for individuals who are part of a diasporic community that shares a durable and long-lasting culture. By focusing on the subjective understandings, meanings and significance of being Greek-Australian and having a liquid life, I will identify and analyse how changes that have occurred in Western societies influence the ways in which young women’s sense of being Greek-Australian shapes a liquid identity and the choices faced by young adults in a liquid modern society.
References


