

Γρεεκ Αμερικανσ  
(Greek Americans)

Spring Moffitt  
Culture in Health Care Tuesday 12:30pm  
Fall 2004

## Introduction

Ms. Catherine is a woman from an older generation. She grew up in Chicago a short distance from the Greek Church in an area that was populated mainly by those of Greek decent. Her father was from Greece and her mother was a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrant. Ms. Catherine has been going through some rough times emotionally, psychologically, and physically. I listened to her and cheered her on. She is a wonderful woman that has led a fascinating life. She provides a tower of strength for those around her. Everyone needs someone to lean on, even if it is just to help lift the burden by listening. I would like to think that I was able to provide her with some support in this manner.

## Family and Organization

### Social status

Education is highly important for both males and females. Social Status in Greek society often has to do with educational levels and the type of employment members have.

Shame plays an extremely large role in Greek society. If one family member is shamed, it is reflected on the entire family. According to Scourby (1984), “Honor and shame evolved as adaptive mechanisms, an ideological tool, to strengthen the identity of the family and to enlist the loyalty of its members.” Family members bear responsibility to the others. This causes a strong sense of closeness within the nuclear family. Members are expected to have loyalty, concern, and respect for each other (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine certainly believes that these are important values and raised her children to have these values as well.

### Gender roles

The very popular Greek proverb, “The husband is the head, but the wife is the neck that decides which way the head turns”, demonstrates that while publicly the husband is the leading figure, the wife has considerable influence over him (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Usually women tend to the

home life and men take on the role of breadwinner (Scourby, 1984). As Greek Americans continue to assimilate into the American culture, there tends to be a greater shift towards an egalitarian system (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine and her husband consider themselves equal in both decision-making and financial matters, however her husband has said that if they could not agree on something of importance, “that he would have to steer the ship to give it some direction.” Sons are very important and there is much emphasis placed on them. Ms. Catherine told me of a woman who’s father would tell people he had two children and a daughter when relaying to others that he had two sons and one daughter. Daughters are very protected. Dating and sexual behavior are expressly forbidden and participating in such activities will bring shame to the family. Chaperones escort young women when they go out (Scourby, 1984). Ms. Catherine related that she was not allowed to date and she was hampered from socializing outside of the Greek community. The use of chaperones is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. She feels that when it came to her own children, her boys also were given more leniencies than the girls were.

### Marriage

While some families still believe in arranged marriages, the Greek American’s are moving away from that tradition of the Greek culture. Neither Ms. Catherine’s marriage, nor that of her parents, was arranged which was very uncommon at that time. It is still customary for a man to ask her father for her hand in marriage. Greek Americans customarily did not marry outside of their groups. Ms. Catherine remarked on the high rates of intermarriage and high incidences of inbreeding seen in the Greek population. This tradition has also changed over time. Statistics from Greek Orthodox churches in the 1960’s document that three in ten marriages were between a Greek orthodox and a non-orthodox Christian couple and by the 1980’s the numbers had jumped to six out of ten (Korologos Bazzarone, 2001). Out of Ms. Catherine’s four children, only the oldest child has a Greek spouse.

The betrothal ceremony is known as the blessing of the rings. After a priest blesses the rings, they are placed on the left hands of the couple. The rings remain on the left hand until the point in the wedding ceremony when they are moved to the right hand. The rings used for the engagement are the same rings that are used for the wedding bands (Sofas Solutions Inc., 2000, 2001). Ms.

Catherine informed me that while the Greek tradition is to wear the wedding ring on the right hand, most Greek Americans move it back to the left hand after the ceremony. This may possibly be due to the influence of familiarity with the American tradition.

Traditionally the bride pays for the wedding ceremony, while the groom pays for the bridal veil.

The best man or woman, whom is chosen by the groom, picks out and buys the tray and crowns used in the ceremony. According to Sofas Solutions Inc. (2000, 2001), the crowns, (which are called “*stephana*”), symbolize the bride and groom becoming the queen and king of the household.

The tray, which is purchased as part of a tea set, is used to carry the crowns and afterwards becomes a wedding gift to the couple.

The wedding ceremony consists of several specific parts: The lighting of the candles consists of the bride and groom holding two large white candles and lighting them. The joining of hands happens when the best man/woman takes the wedding rings and crosses them over the couple’s hands three times then places the rings back onto their fingers. Then the crowning ceremony occurs; the crowns, which are joined together by a ribbon, are criss-crossed three times then placed on the bride and groom. A ritual reading of scriptures is conducted. The drinking from the common cup follows this where the couple drinks from a communal cup of wine (Korologos Bazzarone, 2001 and Sofas Solutions Inc., 2000, 2001).

### Aged

Families have a strong sense of responsibility to care for their aging or widowed parents (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine’s mother-in-law lived with her family for quite some time before

they were no longer capable of caring for her. The impression I received was that the experience of having to put her mother-in-law into a nursing home was very upsetting for Ms. Catherine.

### Alternative lifestyles

According to Purnell & Paulanka (2003), alternative lifestyles are not usually seen, as the Greek community is a conservative group. Having an alternative lifestyle may bring shame onto one's family and provide for loss of social status. Ms. Catherine has a very open mind on most subjects and her view is to live and let live.

### **Birth and pregnancy**

#### Fertility practices and views toward pregnancy

Greek American's usually keep the size of their families limited to their ability to provide adequate care and education for the children. Although the Greek Orthodox Church condemns birth control, it is widely used in a variety of forms. Even though abortion is considered an act of murder, except in extreme circumstances, many unmarried women have abortions to protect their family from dishonor and shame. The infertility of a couple is also deemed a cause for shame (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

A pregnant woman is given great respect. It is considered one of the highest stations in life. Ms. Catherine's father-in-law would always joke and tell her that she had value as a producer.

One of the beliefs is that if the baby is carried high, it will be a boy and if it is carried low, it will be a girl. It is also considered bad luck to prepare for the baby. Everything is bought after the baby is born. Ms. Catherine thinks this tradition may stem from before medical facilities were so modern, many women suffered from miscarriages or infants dying shortly after birth.

#### Post partum

When the baby is born there is a custom referred to as "silvering the child" where the new baby is given gifts of silver (Korologos Bazzarone, 2001). Ms. Catherine recalls that most Greek

Americans used the large silver dollars. When the baby is brought home, a knife is placed on the floor so that when mother and new baby come through the door, the mother steps on the knife.

The mother is considered unclean for forty days after giving birth. At the end of forty days, both the baby and mother go to church to be blessed.

Purnell & Paulanka (2003) states that babies are usually breast fed, although in Ms. Catherine's experience, when she chose to breast feed her children, the Greek community was appalled at her decision. She was told that cows nurse their young, not humans. She believes that this was due in part to many of the first and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants wanting to "fit in"; the American thing to do was to bottle-feed.

## **Communication**

### Languages & dialects

Throughout Greece, the written form of Greek is consistent, but when it comes to the spoken, regional dialects can be found. Greek is usually taught down the generations that follow immigration as the language is considered an important part of maintaining the culture (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine can both read and speak Greek, though she admits that her spoken Greek is quite rusty.

### Interaction

The Greek community values warmth, expression and spontaneity. Speech is usually expressive and may be accompanied by frequent hand gestures. Direct eye contact is expected. The personal space observed by Greeks is closer than that of most European Americans. Friends and family members are often embraced (Turkington, 1999 and Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

When it comes to outsiders Greeks will often appear friendly and superficial. While anger is freely expressed, other personal feelings such as anxiety and depression are not (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). It is very important to never blame a Greek for a mistake even if it is obviously the Greek's

fault. This is because to a Greek making a mistake means losing face and is cause for shame (Turkington, 1999). In the Greek culture, deeds are held in higher regard and more important than words. Ms. Catherine informed me that the Greeks are great braggarts and like to talk much.

### Time

Turkington (1999) notes that Greeks are not known for their punctuality and for a business meeting one can expect to find oneself waiting for at least a half hour for Greek counterparts to make an appearance. Ms. Catherine blames her frequent work tardiness on her Greek heritage. According to Purnell & Paulanka (2003), Greeks have different orientations in regards to various subjects. There is a past orientation that encompasses Greece's rich history. Ms. Catherine related that she believes many of those who immigrated from Greece often had a greater past orientation as well. Scourby (1984) and Purnell & Paulanka (2003) agree that family issues and needs seem to ground Greek Americans in the present, while there is also a focus in the future when it comes to education and occupation. Ms. Catherine holds the philosophy of savoring the moment and living each day for today. She also feels that most of those from a Greek upbringing have a fatalistic view on life. "The Greeks are a very negative people."

### Names and Greetings

Greek names are considered an important sign of heritage. The children are traditionally given the first name of the grandparents and the middle name of their parents (Sofas Solutions Inc. 2000, 2001 and Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine's first three children were named after their grandparents, but the fourth one was given a unique name.

Titles are often used to denote respect. It is appropriate for a stranger to address a Greek American by Mr. or Mrs. (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

## **Bio cultural ecology**

### Skin color and variation

Greeks usually have dark hair and skin; however some from the Northern provinces have blonde hair and blue eyes (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

### Prevalent diseases and heredity issues

An increase in diabetes and heart disease has been seen over the last 30 years (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). According to Ms. Catherine, most of the Greeks she has known have had heart problems. She attributes this to the style of eating and an increased exposure to fast foods.

Two genetic conditions have had a large impact on the Greek community. The first is Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase, (G-6-PD), which is an enzyme essential to maintaining red blood cells, without it they will lyse. Usually the deficiency of this enzyme is only significantly important during times of exercise, infections, and if given oxidant drugs. When exposed to oxidizing drugs, this condition can cause a life-threatening hemolytic episode. The gene for this enzyme is found on the X chromosome, so it is more prevalent in males to have this enzyme deficiency. Thalassemia is the second. It is the slow production or failure to synthesize hemoglobin chains. There are two types of thalassemia, but only thalassemia major is of considerable concern. Persons with thalassemia major have very low hemoglobin levels and fragile red blood cells. If it is not treated there is an accumulation of iron, which damages the heart, liver, and spleen, followed by death. Regular blood transfusions and preventing iron buildup can help resolve the problem with this medical condition (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine told me that her husband's two youngest siblings died from genetic disorders, but she never mentioned what they were.

## **Nutrition**

### **Meaning of food and diet**

Food plays a keynote in the lives of Greek Americans. Hospitality almost always includes food and drink. Social events, holidays, and ceremonies have special foods associated with them and the Greek Orthodox religion has specific rules about fasting (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

The Greek diet consists of an extensive range of foods. Examples of some foods eaten are: Meats eaten are usually fish, chicken, and lamb. Vegetables consumed include potatoes, eggplant, zucchini, olives, spinach, and cauliflower. Breads often consist of pita and egg breads. Fats are taken in the form of olive oil. Dairy products incorporate yogurt and cheeses (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

### **Deficiencies and food limitations**

Do to the Greek diet encompassing a broad range of foods and having no limitations on things that can eaten, (except when observing certain religious holidays), it is rare to see nutritional deficiencies in Greeks. Almost all foods that were available in Greece are also readily available here in America (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Purnell & Paulanka (2003) also makes note that those who inherited a G-6-PD deficiency can experience hemolysis if they ingest broad beans and that about 75% of the adult Greek population has problems ingesting lactose.

### **High-risk behavior**

Those with a Greek upbringing were found to have less involvement with recreational drugs, alcoholism, and high-risk sexual behavior than other groups of people. The impact that participating in such activities could have on the social standing of one's family is the biggest factor in preventing such high-risk dealings. On the other hand, Greeks tend to have a higher percentage of obese and smokers than most other groups. Standard preventive measures such as seat belt and

helmet use were found to often be disregarded, however participation in screenings for health issues such as blood pressure and breast cancer was high (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

When Ms. Catherine was growing up, women were not allowed to smoke, but Ms. Catherine remarked on the high number of closet smokers that existed among the Greek women she knew.

She also feels that most of the Greeks she knows are overweight and thinks part of it can be linked to exposure of fast food and the importance that food plays in the Greek culture.

### **Health care practices**

#### **Traditional and self-medicating practices**

Greeks are used to a number of practitioners including herbalists, midwives, bonesetters, and *magissa*, who cures the “evil eye”. Those in America may see a wise woman from their family.

Sometimes a *matiasma*, a woman gifted in diagnosis and healing, is sought. The may also seek out a priest (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine has used every form of medicine possible from herbs to homeopathy to prayer to medical doctors and chiropractors.

Traditional Greek medicine practices include *practika*, *vendousas*, and the prevention and curing of *matiasma*, (the evil eye). *Practika* includes using chamomile for stomach problems, liquors to fight colds, and garlic to help blood pressure. *Vendousas* involves cupping practices and cutting in an effort to renew circulation and draw poisons from the body.

#### **Responsibility and barriers to health care**

Most Greeks attribute health problems to powers beyond their control such as punishment from God or evil spirits. While the majority of Greeks have health insurance and access to health care, they do not use it. Distrust of health care professionals is the reason many Greeks tend to seek the advice of family members and friends before they will go to a doctor causing a delay in medical care (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

### Mental health barriers

Mental illnesses carry a negative stigma that affects both the afflicted person, as well as their family. Having a family member that is mentally retarded or has psychiatric issues will often result in social isolation. The idea of a polluted bloodline comes from the belief that mental problems are hereditary (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003).

### Health care practitioners

#### Status of health care providers

Most Greeks have a general distrust of professionals and will often visit a number of doctors to get a “second opinion” without informing the doctors of this. This use of multiple physicians may actually lend to greater suspicion of health care providers if there are inconsistent opinions and recommendations given by the doctors as well as possible drug interactions occurring from using multiple drugs prescribed (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine has made use of multiple health care practitioners. Last I spoke to her she was seeing a medical doctor, a chiropractor, and a homeopath.

### Death rituals

Last rites are usually administered to dying Greeks. The Greek orthodox religion does not allow for suicides or cremation, though Ms. Catherine would not mind if she were to be cremated. The bodies of the dead used to be prepared in the home by the women (Korologos Bazzarone, 2001).

This is no longer the case as things are now handled by funeral parlors. The Greek women still sing wailing songs. Mourners are not supposed to look in mirrors; so all mirrors are covered (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine said that when one is mourning, one is not supposed to be concerned with how one looks. She also said that the families of deceased are dismissing this tradition more often. This may be because families now leave the homes to go to funeral parlors rather than having the body in the home. Greek Americans at one time bought large family plots

with an elaborate headstone or statue for the family, but this too has gone by the wayside. Burial is usually held three days after death. This is attributed to Jesus arising on the third day. There is a dinner held after the burial.

### **Spirituality**

#### Dominant religion and use of prayer

One of the main cultural identifiers of the Greek heritage is religion (Scourby, 1984). Purnell & Paulanka (2003) estimate that 98 percent of the Greek population is part of the Greek Orthodox Church. The most important holy day is Easter. Women place faith as an essential factor in getting well (Purnell & Paulanka, 2003). Ms. Catherine believes prayer is a very powerful healing tool. Purnell mentions two saints that are invoked frequently in relation to healing, Cosmas and Damian. The belief in miracles is strong even after several generations of living in America. Ms. Catherine talked about her strong belief and miracles that she herself had witnessed.

## Bibliography

- Scourby, Alice. (1984). *The Greek Americans*. Boston. Twayne Publishers.
- Turkington, Carol. (1999). *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Cultural Etiquette*. Indianapolis. Alpha Books. Pgs 163-174.
- Purnell, L.D. and Paulanka, B.J. (2003). *Transcultural Health Care: a culturally competent approach*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Philadelphia. FA Davis.
- Korologos Bazzarone, Ann. (2001). Center for History and New Media. George Mason University. *Stories: Greek American Experiences Between Two Cultures*. Retrieved September 29, 2004 from: [www.chnm.gmu.edu/greekam](http://www.chnm.gmu.edu/greekam).
- Sofas Solutions Inc. (2000-2001). Retrieved September 29, 2004 from: [www.greekamericanmall.com](http://www.greekamericanmall.com).