A case study of a Greek Australian traditional dancer: Embodying identity through musicking

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Abstract

This article is a study of a bilingual and bicultural Pontian Greek Australian dancer. His musicking involves performing and teaching dancing. Dancing has been and continues to be a major part of the self-identity of the participant. This phenomenological single case study used interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyse the data collected by interview. The findings are presented thematically and address the formation of identity and its enactment via performing and teaching. Many people carry multiple identities and an understanding of one may inform the provision of opportunities for learning and teaching.

Key words: musicking, Greek dancing, Greek Australian identity, teaching and learning.

Introduction

An individual's identity is never simple or fixed but depends on the context within which "social roles are realised and our identities are displayed" (Kakava, 2003, p. 1385). The self can be understood as "fluid, fragmented and multiple" (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 339). Researchers find our self-perception of considerable interest (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003). Identity is now defined as "a collective term referring to the dynamic organization of sub-identities that might conflict with or align with each other" (Mishler, 1999, p. 8). Different aspects of our identity "manifest themselves through construction, display, or performance" (Kakava, 2003, p. 1376). Self-identity is defined as "the overall view that we have of ourselves" in which different self-concepts may remain unresolved (Hargreaves, Miell & Macdonald, 2002, p. 8) and this turmoil

often encountered by bicultural people as they attempt to reconcile the "tensions and dilemmas an individual who belongs to two worlds can face" (Kakava, 2003, p. 1384).

We construct and develop our identity by engaging with others (Mishler, 1999) as "we are ultimately social and not personal beings" (Hargreaves, Miell & Macdonald, 2002, p. 10). For bicultural individuals identity remains a work in progress that is "highly negotiable, highly sensitive to bidding on the not so open market of one's own reference group" (Bruner, 1991, p. 76). To a large degree identity is derived from a sense of belonging to a particular group or groups and should not be "oversimplified, summarized by a single word or reference" (Campbell & Wiggins, 2013, p. 12). Participation in community enables the exploration of "particular positions, narratives and categories must be worked out in practice" (Wenger, 1998,

p. 151). The individual must interpret his or her cultural context behaviours and understandings both verbal and non-verbal (Chang, 2007). These different facets of identity in culture may change with occasion and personal preference. Amongst bicultural individuals "different aspects of linguistic, cultural, gender and class identity become relevant at different points of the narrative" (Georgoulas & Southcott, 2014, p. 50). Identities unfold over time through interactions in diverse cultural contexts (Pavlenko, 2001). Language is crucial in this process as it enables individuals the opportunity to reflect on their own and others' behaviour. This is, pivotal in social constructionist accounts of identity formation and development (Hargreaves, Miell & Macdonald, 2002) and is understood as a "primary force in identity construction and transformation" (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 321).

This article explores the identity construction of a Pontian Greek-Australian bilingual Dancer. Although he operates effectively in both cultural and musical worlds there are times when integration can be a challenge and partial dissonance or disconnect may occur. Southcott and Gindidis (2014) state that "twenty-first century Australia aspires to support the different cultural identities of all its citizens" (p. 2) and all forms of musical engagement can offer ways for people to expore their own identity within the context of the complex multicultural environment in which they live and what they want future citizens and community to be. This study emphasises the sociocultural environment and the social interaction that occurs within it in the constitution of identity.

Musicking identity

Musicking is defined as "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing" (Small, 1998, p. 9). The concept of musicking is complex and one word may encapsulate many cultures,

styles and practices. Just as the self is a dynamic construct, our identities in music and dance are formed by "construction, reconstruction and renegotiation" made all the more possible and complex by increasing globalisation (Hargreaves, Miell & Macdonald, 2002, p. 2). Our engagement in music and dance may change across the lifespan which is, in this study made more complex by being bicultural. Our dance and cultural identities are enacted in how we present ourselves to others in performance.

This article focuses on one Greek Australian's musicking identity as a dancer. To adapt Hargreaves, Miell and Macdonald (2002) his engagement in musicking may be understood as identities in dance (IID) and/or dance in identities (DII). The latter is how dance may be used to develop other aspects of our personal identity. The former addressed how identity as dancer is employed and understood. This includes aspects of dance praxis such as 'dancer', 'choreographer', and 'teacher'. These roles are negotiated within the powerful influences of social and cultural context. Dance can be a powerful form of communication that provides "a medium through which people can construct new identities and shift existing ones in the same way as a spoken language. The continual construction and reconstruction of the self through autobiographical narratives can occur in music as well as language" (Hargreaves, Miell & Macdonald, 2002, pp. 10-11). The musicker in this study has a complex identity influenced by a range of musical genres, dance styles and the sociocultural context in which his musicking occurs. The participant in the case study is Pontian Greek Australia.

Research Context: Greek migration to Australia

After World War II over 160,000 Greeks migrated to Australia, mostly to Victoria in a pattern known as 'chain' immigration in which one person migrates and then assists other members of their immediate family or network to follow (Angouri, 2012). The

majority of Greek migrants found work in factories or farms as unskilled or semi-skilled labours. The bulk of Greek immigrants arrived between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. In 1952 the Australian-Greece Assisted Passages agreement provided a financial incentive for Greeks to leave their homeland that was in economic and political turmoil and move to Australia. As Greek law at that time restricted the migration of single women, the first migrants were overwhelmingly young, single men. With a change in the law in 1962, families predominated. They came largely from mainland, rural Greece, particularly Peloponnesus and Macedonia, travelling by ocean liner, such as the Kyreneia, Patris and the Ellenis which began regular service between Greece and Australia in 1949. Between 1947 and the early 1980s a quarter of a million Greeks came to Australia (Clogg, 1999) but, very few in this generation of migrants had post-secondary qualifications (Tsounis, 1988). From the late 1950s the Greek Orthodox Community and its institutions became the centre of the social, cultural and political life of the Greek community in each Australian capital city (Tsounis, 1988). Angouri (2012) notes the centrality of institutions in diasporic communities in "creating and maintaining a repository of the community's capital and discourses associated with the homeland" (p. 98). Since the 1960s, Greek immigration to Australia has declined somewhat but despite this, by 2006 approximately 54,000 Victorians were born in Greece. These Greek-born Australians are fiercely proud of their Greek heritage (Museum of Victoria, 2012).

Today there are approximately 500,000 Greeks living in the State of Victoria. The capital city, Melbourne is known to have one of the largest Greek communities in the world (Greek Care, 2013). In 2006, nearly 150,000 people in the Melbourne Statistical District claimed Greek nationality, either singly or in combination with another nationality. Nearly all Greeks have elected to become Australian citizens. In Australia Greeks seek to maintain their cultural heritage and an important part of this

cultural heritage has been the establishment and continued presence of Greek dancing groups that perform and transmit their culture to younger generations. Dance has always been central to community life in Greece.

Greek dance

According to Hunt (2004) Greek dancing has traditionally been one of the most ancient forms of community entertainment that has been maintained to this day. Greek dance events "incorporate dance, music, song, food and drink, all of which individually and collectively promote the idea of an ideal lifestyle" (Kalogeropoulou, 2013, p. 59). Leonidou (2000) affirms that, "Greece is one of the few countries in the world where folk dances are as alive today as they were in ancient times" (p. 1). References to dances can be found in the writings of Plato and Socrates and others (Hunt, 2004). It is affirmed that, "the greatest men were not above showing their sentiments through their dancing. Sophocles danced around the trophies of the battle of Salamis. Aeschylus and Aristophanes danced in various performances of their own plays" (Carnaval. com, 2015). Leonidou points out that, "Greeks would dance at religious festivals, ceremonies, weddings, to prepare for war and celebrate victories. Almost every dance has a story to tell" (p. 1). For the Greeks dance was "regarded as one of the highest forms of art" (Leonidou, 2000, p.1). In the Greek ancient times, dancing was seen for its educational value and it was considered "essential for developing personality as well as preparing for battle" (Leonidou, 2000, p. 2). Dance combined with music, writing and physical exercise was the basis of the educational system. In ancient Athens "men were taught to dance and pupils would stage an annual display of their accomplished skills which all citizens would attend" (Leonidou, 2000, p. 1).

Throughout the Greek diaspora traditional folk dancing is an important activity (Panagakos, 2003). Greek dancing "reflects the emotional spirit and nature of the Greek culture (Riak, 2007, p. 55). Traditional Greek dancing was passed down from

generation to generation. Men and women barely danced together until recently. The order of dances and styles of dances varies from region to region in Greece. The main regions of Greek dancing include Epirus, Macedonia, Thrace, Thessaly, Central Greece and Peloponnesus. The Islands include the Ionian Islands, Aegean Islands, Dodecanese islands including Crete (Leonidou, 2000, p. 2). Riak (2007) asserts that, "Dance performance defines a culture. Particular dances and their significance to both cultural conceptions and their contexts that the dances are performed" (p. 39). In Greece dance events are both a means of socialising and entertainment and can be understood as "ritualistic practices that symbolically bond the cultural collectivity" (Kalogeropoulou, 2013, p. 60).

It is thought that the strong dancing tradition prevalent among the Greeks was likely inherited from Crete that was conquered by Greece around 1500 BC (Carnaval.com, 2015). Cretan music is dynamic and fast with characteristic springing movement of the feet and legs of the dancers. According to Sfakia (2009) Cretan people are "deeply connected with music and rhythm. Through their music they express their feelings, the joy, the sorrow, the love, the passion for life" (p. 1). After conquest, the Greeks synthesized Cretan music and dance traditions with established practices. In the case of northern Pontian Greeks this meant that Cretan/Greek styles were fused with Persian dance styles. This single case study concerns a Pontian dancer.

Dance from Pontus is very distinctive and may be recognised by its nervous energy, use of knee bends and shoulder tremors. This style is characterized by small, quick, precise steps, arm swings, syncopated knee bends and abrupt pauses. The rhythm of these dances is very difficult and it is important that the dancers move as a unit. The leader at the front of the circle calls out signals to the dancers. The music of Pontus is characterized by the sound of the Lyra or lyre that is sometimes accompanied by the large drum (Leonidou, 2000). Traditionally the Pontians had lived in the Pontus region on the shores of the

Black Sea and in north-eastern Anatolia. In 1923 as a result of the Lausanne Treaty, as well as Orthodox Christians and Muslims, Pontians were exchanged between Turkey and Greece (Zografou & Pipyrou, 2011). The Pontians brought their traditions and customs with them and it was from this time that Pontian dances were danced in Greece (Pontus World, 2015). Like other refugees the Pontians "engaged in selective remembrance and forgetting in shaping their identities as simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged members of Greek society" (Zografou & Pipyrou, 2011, p. 425). In diasporic communities "various forms of popular cultural production become key in constructing new conceptualizations of cultural identity and the 'homeland'" (Chacko & Menon, 2013, p. 99). The Pontians brought their histories, personal narratives, language, religion and dance and from these constructed their collective identity. In Greece with the advent of a socialist government in 1981 there has been political and cultural shift to celebrate and promote local dance identities and in this "sociohistoric framework, Pontian dance identity started materializing on the national level as a celebration of difference" (Zografou & Pipyrou, 2011, p. 441). Pontian dance has been incorporated in the school curriculum and was included in the closing ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games. Dance is a vital part of Pontian society. Most of the Pontian dances are danced in a closed circle. There is "no improvisation in the leader occurs. There are also no solo dances, the bulk of the dances are done in groups of two or more" (Pontus World, 2015, page/paragraph).

Greek Dance in Melbourne

In Melbourne "immigrants and their families from Greece have continued the tradition of Greek dances as part of family occasions like name days, parish festivals and the broader Greek Community celebrations" (Greek Care, 2013). Dances are a prominent part of celebrations such as weddings, christenings and birthday parties. Greek dancing is seen as celebratory, participatory

and entertaining. It is also thought to benefit health by helping people be more physically active in an enjoyable shared musicking experience. In Greece and throughout the Greek diaspora (including Melbourne) more than 4,000 traditional Greek dances are performed (King, 2015). Greek dinner dances (hosted by the many Greek associations) are also quite popular in diasporic Greek communities. In Melbourne there are more than "800 smaller Greek associations … thus there are also many Greek dinner dances for Melbourne's Greek population" (King, 2015). Riak (2007) explains that, "Greek dance is a strong, emotional validation for solidarity and an importance means of expressing both the individual and collective spirit of personal and cultural identity" (p. 54). There are many Greek dance groups in Melbourne that perform both Greek regional styles and national dances. These groups support people from particular regional backgrounds to get together and dance to their traditional dances. These groups perform at a variety of festivals that occur throughout the year in Melbourne at different venues. Greek dancing is an effective way to meet new people in a social atmosphere and many clubs and Greek dancing schools offer instruction.

Many schools around Melbourne teach Greek dancing as part of their school curriculum or as an extra-curricular activity. Students can meet other students from their age group and get to dance a variety of Greek traditional dances such as the Kalamatianos, Hasaposerviko, and Tsambiko. The Kalamatianos is a 12 step dance in 7/8 time performed in a circle with a leader (Hunt, 2004). This popular Greek dance is frequently performed at social gatherings. As is the case with most Greek folk dances, it is danced in circle with a counterclockwise rotation, the dancers holding hands. It is a joyous and festive dance. The Hasaposerviko (also known at the Zorba) is a 6 step dance that is also danced in a circle with a leader. It is a fast, lively hopping and skipping style dance. Riak (2007) defines the Zorba dance as "mythically [capturing] a spirit of life" (p. 40). The Tsambiko is a slow and stately dance and is traditionally danced

by men. The dance follows a strict and slow tempo. The steps are relatively easy but have to be precise and strictly on beat (Hunt, 2004).

Methodology

The phenomenological approach employed in this study attempts to discover how people understand experiences. Willig (2001) describes phenomenology as "ways in which human beings gain knowledge of the world around them" (p. 49). The most common method in phenomenological qualitative enquiry is a case study. This research explores a single participant's lived experiences understandings. The participant is a very experienced director and performer in a Pontian Greek dancing group. Southcott (2009) points out that "A single case study can provide insights by which the particular can illuminate the general" (p. 144). Data were collected by semi-structured interview that is used commonly used in case studies (Dilley, 2004). According to Longhurst, (2010) "a semi-structured interview is a verbal exchange where one person, the interviewer attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions" (p.103). Semi-structured interviews can give informants the opportunity to freely express their views and describe their experiences and such interviews can provide reliable, authentic data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Denscombe, 2003). In semi-structured interviews the researcher prepares a list of topics and questions that may function more as a checklist for discussion as "semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner" (Longhurst, 2010, p. 103). In this study the questions explored the participant's opinions, understanding, and feelings about traditional and popular Greek dance in Melbourne. Ethical Permission to undertake the research was gained. The interview was fairly informal and recorded as more of a chat but gaining as much information from the participant as possible. To accomplish this, the interviewee needed to be made to feel comfortable so the interviews were undertaken at a café. The researcher who

undertook the interviews speaks fluent Greek and translated any Greek words used throughout the interviews. To maintain privacy the participant selected a pseudonym. He chose Mithri which is short for Mithridates. Mithridates VI ruled Pontus and Armenia Minor in the first century BCE and is often considered to be the greatest king of Pontus.

Once transcribed, data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA studies typically involve small numbers of participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2010). The interview transcripts are analysed in an intensive and detailed manner. Verbatim accounts are "generally captured via semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or diaries, and the analysis then proceeds such that patterns of meaning are developed, and then reported in a thematic form" (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p. 103). This allows the participant to answer the questions and tell their own story in their own words from their own perspectives. Data are analysed thematically with the researcher identifying emergent themes by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Themes are highlighted, then grouped and connected. This is done in an orderly manner by using a table. Once the transcripts have been analysed the themes are hierarchically presented. Direct quotations from the participant are included into the text, presenting the voice of the participant. It must be acknowledged that thematic analysis is a "reflection on one's own perception, conceptions and processes" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2010, p. 80).

The participant – cultural background

Mithri was born in Australia. His Greek-Australian mother was also born in Australia. His father was born in Greece, and he is of Pontian descent. His father was heavily involved in a Pontian organization and when Mithri was 4 or 5 years old his father became president of a Pontian club. Being president of the club mean that the family was "heavily committed to football, representing a Pontian club [and] every Pontian club had a

dancing group". Mithri learnt to dance when he was 6 years old. His teachers were professional teachers who were usually daughters of other community members. These women had been taught dances and their cultural contexts. Mithri had 5 or 6 different teachers during his time of learning. He found this interesting as "everyone had their own way of dancing the same dance. So we invariably got taught the same dance in maybe four or five different ways [which] allowed me to learn early on that dancing is a form of expression." He reflected that it was important to know the steps but then it was important to infuse them with "your personality [but even then] you had to dance in five different ways because everyone is different, and that is all about expression". Ultimately he thought that his dancing was influenced by "being taught differently" by a range of teachers, both formal and informal.

Mithri's background very heavily influenced the dances he performed. Up until he was 13 he explained that, "the world that I was used to with regard to Greek dancing was not just Pontian – for me Greek dancing was actually like the Kotsari." The Kotsari (or Kochari) is a type of Pontian folk dance that originated from Kars (north-eastern Asia Minor) (Pontus World, 2015). When he went to a Greek bilingual school he learnt a different dance every week. He then realized that the world of "Greek dances is so rich". Growing up Mithri's parents were very good dancers. His mother did not learn any Pontian dancing before her marriage. His father is the only one who had seen "proper" traditional Pontian dances and thought that it was vital that his family, particularly his son, learn about this tradition. Reflecting, Mithri compared Pontian dancing in Australia and Greece and stated that they were very different. He explained that, "It used to be very different tricks [steps and moves], we had different styles of dancing. Dancing evolved differently, and then we had cross culture, we had one dancer from Greece come down to Australia and then you had the Internet and then you had people, teachers in Greece producing video content and people from Australia buying that content."

Mithri discussed his musicking as dance performer, as a member of a dance group and as a teacher and community worker. Mithri's first performance was when he was at Greek School. Even though he knew Pontian dancing it was the traditional Greek costumes that he had to learn about, such as the *fustanella* (skirt) and the Tsarouhi Pom Pom shoes. The tradition male costume from Pontos consists of a black long-sleeved cotton shirt that featured a row of bullets, highlighting the warlike traditions of Pontos. The pants (*zipka*) were "made from black woolen cloth and ended at the knees. The sash was typically fashioned from wool or silk and was made to be 3-4 meters long. The boots that accompany this costume were called *tsapoulas*" (The Hellenic Dancers of New Jersey, 2015). Mithri's first performance to a large audience was at the age of about 13, and it was a linear dance at a social function for about 300 people. Dancing and doing well in school were two things that kept him going during tough times growing up as a teenager. Dancing allowed him to deal physically with some emotional issues. For Mithri it was a chance for him to shine and connect with community. He described it as "a joyous thing and it's a strong community thing. You really get to feel it. The real reason why I would dance is that there is an element or connection to the culture which really is linked to my identity."

Performer and teacher

Although Mithri has danced solo and as part of an ensemble, now he sees himself more as a teacher. For the participant, "Pontian music has got a very regimental, very regimental break, four steps and it's very specific". In his experience most Pontian dances are now performed with a band or music from a CD that is played by guitar and drums. This is a modern concession to the unavailability of the traditional lyre. Despite the regimentation that he recognizes in some of the dances, he considers his teaching style to be collaborative. He gives students more autonomy and encourages them to take ownership of their performances and "decide what

they want to perform, how to bring it all together and then come to me and ask for my opinion". His intention is to "allow them to be able to make their own mistakes and have fun in the process." He described public performances on stage as "a true reflection of the art, of the dance." He described a recent performance that began with someone singing a Pontian song. The community audience enjoyed this but it "wasn't dancing". When the Pontian dancing began, "the whole room of 150 people just lit up and people came to the floor to dance. Mithri considered that Pontian dancing is "really big and catchy" and he thought that even "non-Greeks find Pontian dancing more interesting."

Mithri is President of a Pontian club that he formed for young people where he teaches dancing and culture. He considers himself a non-traditional president as he prefers to focus on the artistic side, mediate and offer direction rather than give instructions. He has other people who help with the group and manage finances, promotion, logistics and events such as taking part in the Antipodes festival that is an annual community celebration of Greek culture. Dance is central to this group as it is in dance that "music is at its fullest performance". Consulting with the club members, Mithri selects dances from different cultures and music from different ensembles. The dancers perform at cultural events and concerts across Melbourne and overseas more than for social gatherings such as weddings and celebrations.

Discussion and conclusion

Mithri strongly identifies with his Pontian heritage and enacts this through his musicking as a dancer and teacher. His involvement with dancing brings him closer to his Pontian and Greek heritage. His self-identity as a Pontian Greek-Australian influences how he performs and teaches. This has shaped his career decisions as a dancer and teacher. Initially Mithri was a performer but he soon changed his self-perception to that of being a teacher who maintains and shares Pontian culture and dance. He hopes to instill his love of Pontian

dance in his students and to empower them to make their own decisions about their musicking and their cultural engagement. Mithri's teaching has offered him the opportunity to have an influence on young people's lives. In his community work he has worked with people of all ages and he has observed the impact of dance on all he has worked with, including students, parents and other members of the community. Mithri explained that Greek-Australians may not be so "different to our cousins, our brothers in Greece and across the world such as German Greeks and American Greeks". He thinks that, "what makes us unique is that in comparatively small Australian community there is a big Greek community". In Australia "we have a very strong connection with Greece … if I am looking at our dancing it is similar" which contrasts with how Greek culture was celebrated in Melbourne twenty years ago.

Underlying Mithri's understandings are questions of being a bicultural Pontian Greek-Australian. He must decide who he is at given times, places, performances and studios. He negotiates his dancing and cultural identity by deciding which dances to perform, which language to speak and teach in. For example if the decision is to engage in Pontian dancing then which style of Pontian dancing will be selected, which costume will be selected, which language (Greek or English) to teach the dances and to which background of students to teach and which audiences to perform in front of. Mithri states that Pontian dancing has evolved and "that different regions dance [and] you teach the reasons why these styles are different. You also teach how things have changed, and what they have been told today not be 150 years old."

Like others with similar identities, Mithri identifies dance as a "chance to shine". For Mithri dance is the core of his personal identity. He states that dance and culture are "an anchor, something spiritual [and] emotional". For Mithri dance has become a major part of who he was and is. Musicking as a dancer has helped him develop as a boy, young man and adult. Through dance he has

also found a way to give back to his community, sharing his love of dance with younger generations. As a Pontian Greek Australian dancer and dance teacher Mithri is bicultural and bilingual. He is skilled in his chosen mode of cultural engagement and through his performances and teacher he has made an important contribution to the maintenance and transmission of this form of Greek culture in the multicultural society of contemporary Melbourne. This research has attempted to explore one Pontian Greek Australian's understanding of the maintenance of his culture in Melbourne specifically its dancing. The findings demonstrated that to the participant the preserving and sharing Greek culture in Australia is a vital part of embracing complex bilingual and bicultural identities.

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