

*Original Paper*

# The Subjective Experiences of Three Generations during the Greek Economic Crisis

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## **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to investigate how Greeks as individuals experience the ways society is changing and to understand the lived experiences of the Greek economic crisis, as an example of the global economic crisis. This study focuses on the ways three different generations experience the Greek crisis: the younger (20-30), the middle (30-40) and the older (40-55) by examining the different ways that lived experiences are revealed. It has been confirmed that the impact of the dramatic economic, political, historical and social transformations in Greece is twofold: there has been an undeniably negative and harmful effect on Greeks' everyday lives as well as a re-prioritisation of ways of thinking, acting and behaving. The Greek case serves as an example of a society that is currently undergoing significant social, political and economic alterations reflected in the dramatic change in everyday living, thinking and acting. This study may provide an initial overview of the possible effect of social changes that individuals have to confront in their everyday lives due to the consequences of the economic depression.*

## **Keywords**

*modern greek society, crisis, subjective experiences, different generations, social change*

## **1. Introduction**

Greek society has always suffered from certain dysfunctions especially with regard to economic and political orientation. Modern Greek society (especially since 2008) is currently undergoing additional complexities due to the global economic recession, which it has not been able to handle or control. The reason for such incapability lies with the extremely poor politico-economic foundations, which inevitably allowed Greek society to become exposed and particularly vulnerable to such crisis. The main failure of Greece remains its inability to handle the uncontrollable debt inherited from older generations, which has magnified during the last ten years. In 2010 the national debt played at 112% of GDP and it was expected to rise to 149% by 2013 (Knight, 2012 (a), p. 353).

For that reason, and due to its membership in the European Union (EU), Greece has asked for the contribution of the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which in turn have implemented a sequence of unprecedented austerity measures in their (so far) unsuccessful attempt to control the country's enormous debt. Such measures, however, have consequently caused analogously disruptive destabilization in Greek society and this has dramatically affected the everyday lives of Greeks. Since such measures have not been implemented in any other EU country before, the possible political and social consequences have not been effectively calculated or, in many respects, even anticipated.

One serious consequence of the economic crisis relates to the large increase in suicides. Greece used to have one of the lowest rates in the EU, however, according to the Hellenic Statistical Authority,<sup>1</sup> suicides and suicide attempts increased by 17% between 2007-2009 and thereafter there has been an annual increase that could be up to 22.5% (although it is estimated that since 2012 this percentage has increased to 40%). According to the Greek media<sup>2</sup> 1,245 suicides (attempted and carried out) were reported between 2009-2012, although the Ministry of Public Order estimates that the actual number is 3,124. According to Knight (2012a) the increase in suicide rates in Greece has become an commonplace topic for public discussion, whereas before the crisis, suicides were less of a norm. Durkheim (1951), in his classic study on suicide, further confirms that suicide rates increase during periods of depression and weak social solidarity.

Another negative consequence relates to the increasing rates of unemployment. According to Hellenic Statistical Authority<sup>3</sup>, the unemployment rates reached 28% in 2013, and those who suffer the most are women and the younger generation (64.2% for ages up to 24 years old). One in ten university graduates have emigrated; and many are overqualified for their present employment. Six in ten university graduates are willing to or planning to do the same.<sup>4</sup> Inflation is at a 13-year high of 5.4% and the economy has contracted by 4% in 2010-2011 and 3% in 2012-2013 (The Economist, 2010). The basic salary has dropped from 780 Euros per month in 2008 to 562 in 2013.<sup>5</sup> The average pension is currently estimated to be around 425 Euros per month.<sup>6</sup> Further reductions in salaries, pensions and investments have already been implemented according to the new Mnemonium.<sup>7</sup> These changes include capping annual holiday bonuses, freezing public sector wages for even longer, further rises in fuel, tobacco and alcohol, freezing pensions, increasing taxes on new contraction and reducing the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statistics.gr/> (visited 10/7/2103)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_kathremote\\_1\\_28/06/2013\\_506314](http://www.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_w_articles_kathremote_1_28/06/2013_506314) (visited 10/7/2013)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> [idec.gr/iier/new/metanasteusi.pd](http://idec.gr/iier/new/metanasteusi.pd) (visited 10/7/2013).

<sup>5</sup> [http://photo.kathimerini.gr/kathnews/graph/graf\\_04-04-08/s27.pdf](http://photo.kathimerini.gr/kathnews/graph/graf_04-04-08/s27.pdf) (visited 10/7/2013).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.libertylife.com.cy/default.asp?id=96> (visited 10/7/2013)

<sup>7</sup> <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B6cSqBSkv6F5d3BEUVpuTEw5OHM/edit?usp=sharing> (visited 10/7/2013).

over-inflated public sector. VAT increased from 17% to 23%, and retirement age has been raised to 65 for both men and women (Knight, 2012 (a)).

This pessimistic situation in Greek society and economy is accompanied by even worse political confusion, as the biggest political parties shrink enormously due to people's lack of trust in politicians. Indicatively the Greek Socialist Party received 43.9% of the Greek votes and won the elections in 2009, whereas for the first time in its history, in the 2012 elections, the percentage dropped to 12.28%. The same year, the percentage of the Greeks who didn't vote was the highest ever (38.8%).<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the popularity of the extreme right ideology is increasing dramatically. The Greek fascist party - Golden Dawn - received 7% of the vote in 2012, whereas in 2009 they received only 0.29%.<sup>9</sup> It is suggested that those who vote for this party are mainly angry Greeks who want to punish politicians in power.

The aforementioned dramatic transformations in present Greek society signal a new era in its history associated with how Greek society change. Social change refers to "relatively lasting transformations of social features, such as structures and institutions, norms, values, cultural products and symbols" (Calhoun, 1992, cited in Silbereisen et al., 2007: 73); it "may occur gradually or become the result of sudden and dramatic transformations of political, social and economic institutions as was the case with the breakdown of the communist system in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union" (Pinquart and Silbereisen, 2004: 289). The case of Greek society falls into the second category, since most of the economic and political alterations implemented are a result of rapid and dramatic transformations in recent years.

### *1.1 Greek Society*

According to Knight (2012(a)), "the current economic crisis in Greece is not a situation devoid of history; it is rooted in social and cultural practice, global networks and political policy" (Narotzky, 2004; cited in Knight, 2012(a): 354). As I have discussed elsewhere (Chalari, 2012), Modern Greek society and state have suffered ongoing discontinuities over a prolonged period, which has caused significant delays in terms of social, political and economic development. A variety of explanations have been proposed in order to evaluate and understand the reasons behind the inability of Greek society to become synchronized with fellow European societies and Western culture. Tsoukalas (2008) and Alexakis (2008), for instance, believe that the lack of rational organization of the Greek state allows the dysfunctional operation of Greek society, whereas Mouzelis and Pagoulatos (2003) emphasize the lack of solidarity and civil society. Mouzelis (2012) also believes that certain elements in the Greek mentality derive from the fact that Greece was under the occupation of the Ottoman Empire for over four hundred years and certain customs and patterns of behavior have therefore become

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ypes.gr/el/Elections/NationalElections/Results/> (visited 10/7/2013).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ypes.gr/el/Elections/NationalElections/Results/> (visited 10/7/2013)

inherent in the way Greek society and state operate (e.g., the word ‘rousfeti’<sup>10</sup> is Turkish).<sup>11</sup> Alexakis (2008) and Voulgaris (2006) explain that one of the main characteristics of the Greek mentality involves a tendency to act in an individualistic manner, investing in their own personal rather than in the collective interest; they maintain that such patterns may relate to the struggle of Greeks to protect themselves and their families during the ‘dark’ years of Ottoman occupation.

Panagiotopoulou (2008) agrees with Mouzelis (2012) and explains that it was extremely difficult for Greek society to follow the development and fully absorb the values, principles and ways of thinking of Western Europe, since it had been influenced by the Eastern (Ottoman) way of life during the time that Western Europe was evolving mentally, scientifically, politically and socially. Furthermore, the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century was extremely turbulent for Greece<sup>12</sup> in terms of political, social, economic and especially historical stability, which did not allow Greek society to be formed and organized freely and fully. Pinquart and Silbereisen et al. (2007: 76) argue that the way individuals handle changes depends on their resources and opportunities, whereas they are also constrained by these and by social transformations; this means that the Greek cultural and historic heritage is a major parameter in terms of how Greeks handled the current crisis.

Sotiropoulos (2004) explains that, especially after the fall of the Military Junta (1974), democracy in Greece was restored rapidly but not systematically and thoroughly. Elder (1999) would explain that human agency is limited by social, historic and economic change, meaning that Greeks had to find a way to adjust to a constantly recreated social reality which was already distorted. For Hughes, “some people come to the age of work when there is no work, others when there are wars...Such joining of a man’s life with events, large and small, are his unique career, and give him many of his personal problems” (Hughes, 1971: 124). Therefore in order to understand how Greeks are experiencing the current situation it is vital to understand that Greek society over the last centuries, has been constantly reinventing itself. For Knight (2012(a): 354), “people’s understanding of critical events are not devoid of component parts: cultural proximity with past events contribute to the contemporary formations of crisis management”.

### *1.2 Different Generations*

This study focuses on the narratives of three different generations, as participants coming from each age group (20-30, 30-40, 40-55) can offer distinct perspectives and understanding regarding the Greek crisis. For example, Hood and Joyce (1999), while referring to their study on crime in London, further

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Rousfeti’: a word used very often in the Greek language and denoting clientalism.

<sup>11</sup> The first independent Greek state was formed in 1827. This means that, compared with most Northern European states, Greece is a relatively young state.

<sup>12</sup> The main historical episodes in Greece during the 20th century are the following: 1914-1918: 1st World War; 1940-1944: 2nd World War (German occupation); 1946-1949: civil war; 1950s and 1960s: massive migration waves; 1967-1964: military junta; 1974: restoration of Greek democracy.

support that different generations experience same events in different ways. The most appropriate way to understand these differences and comprehend how society changes is to look into the ways people live their everyday lives, how they change or maintain habits, routines and ways of thinking (May, 2011). In fact, Archer (2010: 136) explains that the ways individuals experience the New Millennium (as she terms Late Modernity), varies widely since people are called upon to “re-locate, re-train and re-evaluate shifting *modi vivendi*”. Regarding different generations, Archer explains that cultural capital inherited by older generations is no longer as useful to the younger generation, since different skills are now needed in the job market. This means that the new generation cannot repeat the routine actions of the previous generation, and cannot use the cultural capital inherited from them, because such practices and ways of thinking are no longer as productive and rewarding, for example because of increased computerisation (Archer, 2010a). Karl Mannheim (1997) states that each generation is held together due to common experiences of historical events especially if such events are traumatic. He adds that generations radicalised by traumatic experiences can transform society by challenging customary thought and offering new political and cultural visions. Following Mannheim’s argument I have previously supported (Chalari, 2012 and 2012a) that Greek society has indeed started getting transformed. This transformation derives from a tendency of Greeks to become more critical towards established mentalities and begin considering appropriate forms of personal or collective resistance. However, this study focuses on whether participants coming from different age groups perceive and evaluate the crisis in different ways. It is particularly important to explore the similarities and differences between the lived experiences of the crisis, of three different age groups, in order to reveal a more complete understanding of how each generation contribute (or not) to the transformation of Greek society.

### 1.3 Subjective Experiences

The impact of the socio-economic crisis and change in Greece, does not only affect the social structure, economic growth and political stability. The psycho-social impact on individuals can be tremendous and may vary dramatically among agents coming from different age groups, as their subjective experiences disclose different levels and ways of engagement with the crisis. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963), Silbereisen et al.(2007:74), Evans, 2007, Elder, (1999) and Stetsenko (2007) social change or crisis affects social institutions as well as psychological development and therefore social change not only takes place on a collective/social level, but also touches upon individual characteristics. Silbereisen (2004: 292) explain that different age groups perceive social change and crisis in different ways and that there are different perceptions regarding stress management and coping strategies. Pinquart and Silbereisen et al. (2004: 76) further argue that structural forces significantly affect human agency. Silbereisen et al.(2007:76) more categorically explain that “agency effects are stronger in more versatile transition periods, but are never as strong as the influence of structural forces on human agency”.

The impact of social crisis on the individual is undeniable, yet in the Greek case is somehow neglected.

Relevant literature clearly indicates how dramatic social alterations could have a hugely negative affect on individuals and their psychological development (Chalari, 2009). In cases where social change is related with worsening rather than improvement of conditions (as in the Greek case), Silbereisen (2005:3) explains that “the high rise in potentially distressing encounters (...) such as increasing unemployment rates, reductions of social benefits, adaptetional pressures related to the new social institutions, and the loss of former frames of reference (...) result in impaired levels of well-being and negative self-related attitudes”. Sablonniere et al. (2010) also argue that during periods of dramatic social change, collective deprivation does impact personal well-being. Cheung and Leung (2010), in a study conducted in Hong Kong also emphasise the negative effects of social change and Grumer and Pinquart (2011) in a study carried out in Germany, concluded that there is a strong association between dramatic social change and psychological depression.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1 Participants and Procedure*

32 semi-structured, in-depth narrative interviews (Bryman, 2008) took place in Greece during August and September 2011 and 2012. The selection criteria of the participants included: diversity of age: 20-55, average age: 35.1; coming from the following sub-groups: 4 from the age group of 20-25, 5 from 25-30, 5 from 30-35, 6 from 35-40, 7 from 40-45, 2 from 45-50, and 3 from the subgroup 50-55; as equal division of gender as possible (12 male, 20 female); class diversity: participants from upper, middle and lower socio-economic backgrounds (16: medium, 11: upper, 5: lower class); varying employment statuses: most were employed full or part-time (22/32); relationship/family status: most were married (18/32), some were parents (11/32) and educational status: many had university degrees (20/32).

### *2.2 Participants' Location*

12 in Athens, the capital (population: around 5,000,000, 10 in Thessaloniki (population around 1,000,000) the second biggest Greek city) 5 in Ermoupolis, a town on the island of Syros, as a relatively proximal, peripheral, medium-sized town (population 13,000; 77 nautical miles from the capital), and 5 in Eresos, a village on the island of Lesbos island, as a small village on a remote, peripheral island (population: 1,600; 190 nautical miles from the capital). These localities were chosen as being representative of different Greek sub-cultures according to the geographical proximity to the capital, the size and geographical/urban specifications (islands/mainland, urban centres/town/village).

### *2.3 The Interviews*

The research questions addressed during interviews were informed by the research literature and were asked in an open-ended format (Kvale, 1996). In order to capture how participants subjectively experienced the Greek crisis, I employed in-depth interviews as my main qualitative methodological route. In attending to the narratives of the participants they were asked to describe how they lived their lives during the period of crisis, if and how they were affected by it in their everyday lives, whether

they would change something if they could, and how. They were also asked to compare the current situation with the past (their parents' generation) and finally to describe how they envisage their lives in the future and how they could materialise their expectations. Each interview, later transcribed and translated into English, lasted on average of one hour and participants were encouraged to tell their stories regarding how they experienced the Greek crisis since its occurrence in 2008. Themes emerged as part of participants' responses to the questions regarding their views on the way they lived their life in contemporary Greece. Participants were encouraged to express their personal concerns and evaluations associated with the transformation of Greek society by describing how their way of living has been affected and the ways they have experienced everyday transformations (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2005:144).

#### *2.4 Analysis*

Thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) consisted of repeated readings of the translated transcripts of the interviews, focusing on meaningful and relevant categories and themes associated with the lived experiences of three generations (younger, middle and older). According to most of the contemporary sociological literature on generations, the conceptualisation of generations is based on age-cohorts. This approach enables the operationalisation of the concept but limits the kind of sociological questions that can be asked (Edmunds and Turner, 2005: 560-561). In this study, the three different generations were divided according to the three main age groups used in data collection: 20-30 (9 participants), 30-40 (11 participants) and 40-55 (12 participants). The questions asked were identical for all respondents in terms of content and order.

#### *2.5 Trustworthiness and Sampling*

All participants agreed to participate by signing a consent form stipulating confidentiality and anonymity. Names have been changed. They were also informed that they were not obliged to participate in the research and that they could stop at any time, refuse to answer a question or ask for clarifications. The recruitment strategy in Athens and Thessaloniki used 'snowballing' (Becker, 1963), with some of the participants introducing the researcher to others. 'Gatekeepers' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2009) were used in both Syros and Lesbos, as a local 'mediator' was needed in order to secure trust between researcher and participants. The study focused on the exploration of subjective experiences of 32 participants and therefore a representative or random sample was impossible to achieve in statistical terms. It would therefore be more appropriate to refer to this study as an exploratory investigation (Hoaglin, Mosteller and Tukey, 1983) which revealed possible tendencies concerning the subjective experiences of the Greek crisis. The participants were adults and were fully informed about the process; the questions did not raise any sensitive issues and therefore no ethical authorisation had to be considered.

#### *2.6 Limitations*

A key issue raised during interviews relates to the possible bias that might have occurred by the researcher's subjective interpretations regarding the interviewees' responses. The researcher's

subjective evaluation and understanding is indeed one of the main limitations in qualitative research. However, in this case, the researcher's Greek origin and deep contextual understanding of Greek society (in terms of language, culture, social norms and mentalities) allowed the interpretation of the meaning of the participants' views to be as accurate as possible, as opposed to a researcher coming from a totally different culture. Possibly, an additional quantitative component of this study might have contributed more measurable and generalisable findings; nevertheless, this study as it presently stands offers an initial, albeit indicative, analysis of the tendencies related to the organisation of everyday Greek reality.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

The present study aims in revealing the subjective experiences of the Greek crisis by focusing on the attitudes of three different generations on how this crisis is experienced, handled and ultimately how participants manage to survive it. Following the findings of the initial study conducted few years back (Chalari, 2012), and are further supported in the present study, it was revealed that participants actively engage in social change and crisis by becoming more reflexive towards themselves and the social environment. The initial study also supports that participants recognise their part of responsibility regarding the crisis by becoming critical towards established harmful mentalities and attitudes inherited by older generations (like those of 'volema'<sup>13</sup>, 'meso'<sup>14</sup> and 'ohaderfismos'<sup>15</sup>). At the same time though, they explain how difficult everyday life has become and how they try to cope with such difficulties, primarily on a personal rather than a collective level.

#### 3.1 Younger Generation: 20-30 yrs

Younger participants expressed their anxiety and concern about the current situation in Greece, as well as the future. Some of them were more optimistic than others but no matter the geographical area of origin or their gender, they all seemed to share common agonies and concerns particularly regarding unemployment. Uncertainty and insecurity were the main themes in all interviews. Kety, 26, a postgraduate student from Athens explains that:

There is a lot of anger and disappointment and we are all scared of what more can happen. The main problems are the despair we all feel, the fear and insecurity about the future.

Lina, 27, who works part-time in the private sector from Syros said that:

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<sup>13</sup> 'Volema': to get into, or remain in, a situation/position that works for oneself without considering others.

<sup>14</sup> 'Meso': the medium – usually a political figure – who helps to accomplish what needs to be accomplished.

<sup>15</sup> 'Ohaderfismos': to 'get by' without caring about tomorrow.



This situation creates additional anxiety for a young person who is starting her life. It feels that I am not allowed to dream anymore. There is so much uncertainty about the future and I just don't know if I will have a job tomorrow.

Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004: 291) explain that in times of social alteration "the proximal developmental contexts such as family, school or work place (...) effect the individual development"; this is evident in this study's data, as younger participants, even as students or young professionals, experience a wide variety of damaging feelings such as uncertainty and insecurity in an intense way. The authors (p. 292) note that social change causes disparity between claims and resources and this leads to a sense of loss of control. Therefore people try to adjust to the new situation by developing new ways of behaviour to cope with the new challenges. This process may change the individual's life-course. So for example Emma (27, unemployed from Athens) explained that

Whatever we need we have to think twice before buying it

and Antonis (29, a part-time teacher from Syros) said that:

The situation is unbearable, I am thinking of the future and I don't even know if there will be a future! There is no desire to take a walk or to buy something. I need to think about it again and again because I do not know what tomorrow brings.

Therefore as structures change (frequent enforcement of new measures, cuts and layoffs, uncertainty about adequacy of educational qualifications and increased possibility of unemployment), this influences the younger generation in a profound psychological manner, which includes feelings of pessimism, anxiety, disappointment, dissatisfaction and change of habits such as consuming patterns and even ways of living or the life-course itself. Generally, participants acknowledged that they now think more thoroughly about their future, possible plans and solutions and ways to cope with the situation.

Marios, 22, a student from Thessaloniki said that:

My main concern is what is going to happen in the future. I won't be able to have my own family any time soon. Most probably I will be another unemployed graduate.

The prospect of unemployment is what most participants of a younger age worry about. According to

the Eurobarometre (Spring 2013)<sup>16</sup> 62% of Greeks (of all ages) believe that the economic situation will get worse in the future when in the EU, only 11% express a similar concern. The same survey also revealed that Greeks are pessimistic in regard to their personal job situation with 35% saying things will get worse and the two key issues the country faces being unemployment (65%) and economic status (49%). Those figures confirm the fears of the participants regarding their future. Even those who have a job are afraid of losing it, like Emma (27, Athens)

This situation influences my personal goals. We are now afraid of getting unemployed

and Antonis (29, Syros)

Professionally, I don't know if I will have a job tomorrow.

Some participants had even considered leaving Greece and going abroad (therefore changing their life-course) like Kety (26, Athens):

Now there is a possibility to go abroad, which is something very common in my age. This is something I wouldn't like but it is now a possibility

and Petros (23, Thessaloniki) explained that

I want to continue my studies abroad, get as much experience and knowledge as I can and then come back and help my country.

As discussed, six in ten Greek university graduates consider the option of going abroad which seems like an alternative solution to the crisis. Sablonniere et al. (2010) explain that dramatic social changes as well as social deprivation affect personal well-being; according to participants' narratives there seems to be homogeneity in terms of the ways their lives and concerns have changed. They clearly struggle coping with the present difficulties and they find it particularly difficult to make plans for the future. 68% of Greeks (of all ages) and 35% of EU citizens say the current situation does not allow them to make plans for the future and that they live day to day (Eurobarometre, Spring, 2013). As Emma, 27 from Athens, very characteristically said:

We see our dreams to get destroyed and our hopes for a better future to disappear.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)

### 3.2 Middle Generation: 30-40 yrs

Like the younger generation, the middle generation perceive the current situation in Greece mainly in pessimistic terms and they are also worried about the future. However there is an agreement in their narratives primarily regarding harmful mentalities<sup>17</sup> and they reveal a more critical attitude towards Greek society and themselves. For instance, Ira, 38, civil servant from Athens said that:

Many mistakes have happened in public administration and money have been taken by politicians. But a part of society is also involved mainly in terms of mentality since citizens have a relationship of 'volemato's<sup>18</sup> with the politicians.

Maria, 37, who works at the private sector in Athens further explained that:

Unfortunately in Greece there is the tendency of "ohadelfismos"<sup>19</sup> which means that I try to do the best for myself and not to care about the people next to me. There is a system that forces you to concentrate on yourself and care only about what is good for you.

Tsoukalas (2008) emphasises that the Greek mentality of 'tzampatzis'<sup>20</sup> is the main reason why Greek society remains dysfunctional and incapable of forming and maintaining a comprehensive and efficient state and effective political system. Participants became more specific about how their everyday life is affected by the crisis and compared to the younger generation, they explain that it is not only a matter of uncertainty or insecurity. It is also about all the things that never worked properly in Greek society and because of that the situation is even worse. Eleni, 34, a part-time secretary in Athens believed that:

The economic growth of Greek society has always been fake. Greeks got used into extensive consumerism through borrowing money without limitations or control.

Grogoris, 34, a manager at a private company in Athens, explained that:

The economic crisis has influenced all of us but the bigger problem is the bad habits Greeks had for over a decade. I can't only blame the politicians, I believe that the main part of responsibility is our own.

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<sup>17</sup> Like the mentalities of 'volema', 'ohaderfismos' and 'tzampatzis' discussed below.

<sup>18</sup> "Volema": to get into to remain in a situation/position that works for oneself without considering others.

<sup>19</sup> "Ohadelfismos": to 'get by' without caring about tomorrow.

<sup>20</sup> Tzampatzis= 'free rider': those who are only concerned about their own personal benefit.

Participants display a more clear view regarding the causes of the crisis. And they are willing to become critical towards their contribution. Also there is a homogenous narrative that concerns the harmful Greek mentalities, which allowed the crisis to get magnified; at the same time participants describe how they have been affected by the crisis. Compared to the younger generation, this age group is not as fearful. Their narratives reveal repeatedly the aspects of disappointment, lack of trust, recognition of the state's unreliability and recognition of their own responsibility. According to Eurobarometre (Spring, 2013) 90% of Greeks (not only the young generation) tend not to trust their government, while a similar view on the country's parliament has 89% of our fellow citizens. Also, in terms of confidence in political parties in the country, only 4% of Greeks trust political parties and 80% of Greeks do not trust the EU. It is thus confirmed that participants, and particularly the middle generation, are more concerned about the reasons behind the crisis, like lack of trust. Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004: 292) explain that different age groups perceive social change and crisis in different ways and that there are different perceptions regarding stress management and coping strategies. Individuals may respond similarly at a collective manner but individual well-being and personal development are usually affected differently for each human being. The narratives of this specific age group seem to confirm Stetsenko's (2007: 111) view, that "people are created by the social conditions of their life at the same time as they also actively create and shape these conditions".

### *3.3 Older Generation 40-55 yrs*

Life experiences of the older age group appeared similar to the younger age groups examined, in terms of the feelings of uncertainty, disappointment, anxiety and lack of trust. However, the anxieties of this age group relate more to financial concerns, as most of them have families and loans and the repeated cuts in salaries and the increasing taxes cause them more profound difficulties:

Popi, 40, unemployed from Thessaloniki described the changes in her life:

Especially during the last two years I have seen huge difference in our family income but also in the way we live our lives. I cannot afford to pay my son's English exams fees!

This generation has struggled in an even more intense way as they have had more to lose. This may be one reason why they express their anger more explicitly. Mara, 52, a journalist from Thessaloniki stated that:

As we are getting poorer we will become even more in need of help as nation and this is a disgrace! I am supporting my husband who is unemployed for the last two years and I am also supporting my son who is a student and also working. But I will never be the same person again; after all I have been through! I am tougher and more vulnerable at the same time! But as a citizen I feel very angry! And I hope that others feel the same!

Vaso, 42, self-employed from Athens further supported that:

I oppose to the mentality of the ‘guilty society’ we are not all to blame. No, it is not everybody’s fault! ‘Golden Down’ received so much votes because people were angry and disgusted towards those who have governed all these years.

Compared to the two previous generations, there is a slightly different emphasis in terms of how the participants evaluate the current situation and the role of politicians regarding this. The aspect of anger is more evident and the disappointment is even more profound. According to Sablonniere et al. (2010), although the ways people cope during crisis vary significantly, there is a tendency for some groups to evaluate their group’s status by comparing it with what it was at another point of time. The reason for that is that dramatic social change destabilises many aspects within their current environment. The older generation seem to experience this destabilisation more intensely compared to the younger generations as they have lost more, since salary cuts were greater to senior workers, they have more taxes to pay if they have families and they have lost more privileges since they had more time to establish them during their life. At the same time, 68% of Greeks (of all ages) believe that the worst is still to come in terms of the negative impact of the crisis on the labour market (Eurobarometer, Spring, 2013). As discussed, Silbereisen (2005: 3) explains that distressing encounters faced by people during periods of dramatic social change result in impaired levels of well-being and negative attitudes to self. But many participants in this particular age group have become much more critical and disapproving of politicians’ roles and responsibilities. Anger is once again expressed here; for example, Giorgos, 41, a civil servant from Eresos said that:

I am not sure that politicians are punished to the extent that they ought to. There is no justice!

At the same time though, this age group becomes willing to self-reflect and acknowledge that some of this may be their responsibility. Although not all of the participants felt the same way, most of them realised that it is not only politicians who are responsible for what has happened. Soula, 51, civil servant from Thessaloniki became particularly self-critical:

I think that we need to change as citizens not only as people. We should stop thinking what is our personal benefit, our own interests. We should start evaluating the politicians not only in terms of how we will get benefited by them, or who is going to cover our personal and family needs. But in terms of what is beneficial about our neighbour, city and country.

The older generation is becoming more engaged with the consequences of the crisis, as the economic measures have affected their everyday lives the most. 98% of Greeks (of all ages) describe the situation

of their national economy as “poor”, according to a Eurobarometer survey released on July 2013. As regards in particular the situation of their household, 78% of Greek citizens believe that things are “bad”, while 58% of them believe that their personal job situation is bad. According to Cheung and Leung (2009) people with a low quality of life before a crisis will be affected the most, and this seems to be the case for participants who had low incomes before and after the Greek crisis. It is also important to note that as Bandura (1997) suggests, people who avoid risks or have low self-efficacy beliefs will probably stay in their old patterns of thinking and behaviour as long as possible. For example Giannis, 47, unemployed from Syros confessed that:

I would have liked not to do the same things again but unfortunately I know that I will. What should I do if I do not have enough money? I am forced to avoid asking for a receipt! In the past I used to do it as a habit. But now I have to do it consciously because I know that I can't afford doing differently. I know that now my responsibility is even bigger but still, I will do it!

There are more examples like the one above which show that on the one hand, the older generation has realised what are the harmful behaviours and patterns that have contributed to the intensification of the crisis, and on the other, that this generation feels trapped and cornered as it seems practically very difficult for them to change old habits. Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004) remind us that in times of rapid social change it is difficult to foresee future behavioural alterations. For Silbereisen et al.(2007), in order for individuals to change their reactions and for institutional reforms to follow, time is needed; this is an ongoing process, which requires repeated circulation of social action. Therefore it remains to be seen whether such damaging behavioural patterns will be finally disrupted or if they will resist current social change.

### *3.4 Family and Responsibility*

The two most characteristic common elements discussed in all age cohorts concerned the concepts of ‘family’ and ‘responsibility’. Regarding ‘family’, participants discussed particularly about their children or about the family they would have liked to create. These concerns mainly involved the values and principles participants wanted to pass on their children. So, for instance, the younger generation expressed concerns about the prospect of even being able to have a family and support it. Lina, 27, from Syros explained that

I don't even know if I will ever be able to have a family

and Ioanna, 21 a student from Thessaloniki said that

I hope that one day I will be able to have kids and raise them with better principles and values.

The middle generation was even more sceptical about how to raise a child. Maro, 37 an artist from Athens wondered:

My big dilemma is: should I have a child? What kind of values should I teach it?

However Georgia, 38 from Eresos, stated that

I have three children. The way to change society is to raise my kids with better, stronger values than the ones my parents followed.

Finally, the older generation expressed even more severe concerns about their children. Popi, 40, from Thessaloniki explained that:

What worries me the most is my child's huge disappointment. My son fails to see the reason why he should study; he tells that his school is such a mess that he sees no point in moving on. He refuses to cope with this disappointing situation.

Thodoris, 44, self-employed from Eresos added:

I am worried so much about my children. What are they going to do with their lives? The only way I can help them is through my personal truth. To give them an everyday example so that they will grow up according to certain principles. But is this enough?

Finally Dora, 55, civil servant from Thessaloniki acknowledged that

The only way out is to be a better person, a better parent. But I wonder, what if it is too late?

Therefore, although all three generations were concerned with the future of their own children, each age group concentrated on different aspects. As younger generations feel that the future is still in front of them, most seem to be optimistic and willing to improve the ways their children will be raised. However the older generation is much more concerned and sceptical as their children are already raised and they probably feel that there is not much more they can do for them.

The second key theme that emerged in all age groups was that of 'responsibility'. Participants were asked if they believed they had contributed to the formation of the current situation. The responses of the participants varied according to their age group. The youngest participants of the younger generation (ages 20-25) were reluctant to acknowledge any part of responsibility. Xanthos, 24, a student from Thessaloniki explained,

I don't think that young generation had the chance to contribute. We are not the ones to be blamed!

But Petros, 30, working part-time at the private sector from Syros believed that,

Of course I have contributed by doing nothing to change the situation

and Emma, 27, from Athens confirmed that,

We have all contributed more or less.

The middle generation is more homogeneous in their responses as all participants admitted that they have responsibility for the current situation in Greece. Characteristically Nicos, 35, from Athens working in the private sector said that,

I have contributed in a passive way. I didn't react the right time at the extend I should have reacted

Ira, 38 from Athens acknowledged that,

I have engaged to the so called 'clienatlism' so I guess this makes me responsible,

and Christina, 36, a teacher from Athens added that

Of course I have contributed to this situation. I used someone I knew to help me get a job. I am not proud but I had no choice!

Finally, most of the participants of the older generation became even more descriptive about their own responsibility, although not all acknowledged that they had contributed. Avery characteristic example is that of Mara, 52, from Thessaloniki:

Of course I have contributed! I have bought few staff from the black market. I have contributed as 'opinion leader'; because this is my job, I am a journalist. I have also contributed as politician since I got elected as MP once!

It is therefore understood that all three generations shared common anxieties about the crisis and experience everyday life in similar ways and forms. All participants displayed a clear understanding of



the difficulties they have to cope with and they all express their frustration and concern about the crisis. Furthermore, participants tend to become even more critical (compared to my previous study Chalari, 2012) in all generations regarding harmful established attitudes and beliefs or damaging behaviours and habits. At the same time, each age group focused on areas of the crisis that distressed them the most. They processed the difficulties in different ways and displayed different levels of engagement with the current situation as their lives may have been affected in diverse manners. Noticeably, the life experiences of the older generation seem more complicated as it appears that they are affected in a more profound way by the crisis. The subjective experiences of the participants' narratives during the crisis reveal, on the one hand, the undeniable negative impact of the crisis on the everyday lives of Greeks and on the other, the willingness of the participants to critically consider what went wrong and how they have contributed.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The life experiences of the Greek crisis were examined through the perspectives offered by the narratives of three different generations. Variations were evident regarding how each generation have processed the dramatic social, economic and political changes that currently take place in Greece. At the same time similarities emerged, especially regarding the ways participants feel about the current situation and the future prospects of Greek society. Some of the common themes emerging from this study include the aspects of disappointment, pessimism, insecurity, fear, anger despair, depression, anxiety, dissatisfaction and lack of trust about the present situation and fear, insecurity and uncertainty about the future. All three generations experience such feelings, probably in different ways and with a variation in intensity. The issues of family and responsibility were also discussed by all age groups. However, all narratives clearly revealed the difficulty of the participants to cope with the present situation and their inability to make concrete plans about the future. At the same time, each age group emphasised different angles of the crisis. The younger generation was mainly concerned about their future and the prospect of getting or maintaining a job. The middle generation was particularly critical towards established harmful mentalities that enabled the magnification of the crisis, and the older generation was more concentrated on the losses they suffer because of the crisis and they were particularly critical towards politicians. Each age group displayed homogeneous concerns and an understanding of the crisis and expressed comparable agonies about the current situation, despite participants being interviewed in different geographical areas and coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, although participants displayed critical understanding and awareness of the current situation and seemed willing to disrupt the prolongation of damaging old attitudes, what remains unclear is how the statements of participants can potentially be transformed into action. As Dietz and Burns (1992) explain, agents are restricted in producing action due to structural constraints, or because actions may be seen as necessary or as impossible because of structural rules, or because agents' actions might be

restricted by other agents. Edmunds and Turner (2005:562) also explain that:

Generations alter from being passive cohort into politically active and self-conscious cohort, when they are able to exploit recourses (political/educational/economic) to innovate in cultural, intellectual or political spheres. (...) Recourses, opportunity and strategic leadership combine to constitute active generations.

As the situation in Greece remains fluid and uncertain, agents may feel restricted in producing collective courses of action because they cannot operate on a stable basis while social, political and economic structures alter continuously. It seems that Greeks remain in a defensive mode as they anticipate further difficulties, and feel threatened and cornered by the prospect of additional measures. Therefore, even if the conditions or the emergence of action may appear to be available, it seems that, as things stand, participants feel more confident in producing a different course of action at a personal and interpersonal level, rather than in organising a collective form of reaction (Chalari, 2012 a). They have already started altering established mentalities and embodied behaviours on a personal level; collective action may follow. As social, political and economic circumstances remain fluid in Greece any form of action or reaction may occur at any point in the near future.

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