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The Self in Crisis: The Experience of Personal and Social Suffering in Contemporary Greece

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GreeSE Paper No.92

Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe

JUNE 2015

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THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

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Acknowledgements

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Hellenic Observatory. The authors warmly thank the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their many insightful and constructive comments and suggestions on the manuscript.

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Charalambos Tsekeris [#], Nikos Kaberis ^{*} and Maria Pinguli ⁺

ABSTRACT

The current Greek crisis is not only financial or economic, but also political, and touches on deeply entrenched social and cultural values and processes. Obviously, the Greek society is in a fluid and prolonged state of suffering, precariousness, and transition. But the same applies to the *Greek self* that confronts the strong and painful dismantling of dominant sociocultural structures, narratives and imaginaries. The central aim of the present work is to demonstrate and discuss the complex relationship between self-suffering and such dismantling, from an interpretive phenomenological standpoint, with special reference to health professionals, members of the Greek middle class. In this regard, the paper elaborates on the analytical basis of the four main imaginaries of *Metapolitefsi*, namely the imaginaries of the boss, of economic growth, of occupational stability, and of representative civil democracy. The conclusion arguably calls for the reflexive embracement of diffused uncertainty, as well as for the critical exploitation of emergent biographical risks.

Keywords: Economic Crisis, Self-Suffering, Uncertainty, Middle Class, Greece

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1. Suffering and the Greek Crisis

In contemporary Greece, a huge mass of large-scale draconian austerity measures, cuts and layoffs, has led to increasing social disintegration: “No other European state has undergone such pain in the last fifty years or more” (Featherstone 2014). Since 2010, the bailout agreements proposed by the Troika, an external body consisting of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have been closely correlated with widespread distress, destitution, and despair: “The pain has been much stronger than initially anticipated, the suffering has lasted longer, and the fairness of its distribution has left much to be desired. As income kept falling and more jobs were lost, fewer Greeks continued to believe (or hope) that the particular therapy could cure them. They tended to see themselves as guinea pigs in a nasty experiment” (Tsoukalis 2013, pp. 36-37). Therefore, personal suffering has been variously mixed with intense feelings of indignity and humiliation, as well as with painful processes of social and self-identification as a subject “at-risk”.¹

¹ According to Cassell’s (2004, p. 32) comprehensive definition, suffering is a complex and multilevel phenomenon pertaining to “the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of person”. Thus, suffering puts in danger various aspects of personhood: “the lived past, the family’s lived past, culture and society, roles, the instrumental dimension, associations and relationships, the body, the unconsciousness mind, the political being, the secret life, the perceived future, and the transcendent-being dimension” (Cassell 2004, p. 32). See also Wilkinson 2005.

Today's Greek society can be seen as comprised of individuals denied a dignified existence; most young people cannot escape from unemployment and are almost reduced to a "meaningless triviality" (Arendt 1968, pp. 7-8); large groups of the population are breaking apart under the corrosive and de-moralising effects of the unanticipated collapse of stable frames of reference and of the social network as a whole; the middle classes experience no hope of fulfilling their human potential so long as they become excluded from the labour market, health services, the wealth, or resources and opportunities of a privileged few.

As Eric Cassell rightly observes, people "suffer from what they have lost of themselves in relation to the world of objects, events and relationships. Such suffering occurs because our intactness as persons, our coherence and integrity come not only from intactness of the body but also from the wholeness of the web of relationships with self and others ... [from] all the aspects of personhood" (Cassell 2004, pp. 38-42). Individuals seem to get violently disconnected from the social contexts that bestow their lives with meanings and motives for action, as well as with roles and identities. For many people, loss of job equates with loss of positive meaning for society and "loss of self" (Charmaz 1983). The crisis-ridden Greek self is engaged in a dramatic daily fight for survival and satisfaction of basic needs.

Interestingly, in the modern Greek moral imagination, suffering resonates with an "agonistic" ethos and an alternative view of life as a constant struggle, as well as with a symbolic metaphor of indignation and "a solid foundation for criticizing visible examples of injustice and

inequality in the World economic order (such as the current economic crisis)” (Theodossopoulos 2014, p. 491). In the same line of anthropological inquiry, Daniel Knight (2013) shows that past crises and suffering (embodied) experiences from poignant moments of Greek history, pertaining to famine, suicide, death, colonisation and financial collapse, potentially serve as points of collective reference that encourage solidarity and empower people to overcome the current situation.

In such analytical setting, suffering functions as a central symbol and metonym. Hence, Susana Narotzky perceives suffering (a) as “a psycho-physical fact and interpretation of the position of the self in the real world” (Narotzky 2011, p. 100) and (b) as “the immediate homology that should unite all those that share the hardship of earning a living” (Narotzky 2011, p. 110). This arguably highlights the positive side of the concept: “Those in the younger generation who try to organize some sense of collective purpose put suffering as the cornerstone of any possible unity ... collective suffering, the shared embodiment of work and hardship, is seen as being the basis for any possible collective identity and action” (Narotzky 2011, p. 105).

Given that individuality is intersubjectively constructed (Mead 1973) and formed through both internal and external conversations (Archer 2007), the present paper will proceed to show the complex relationship between the suffering self and the disintegration of the social (including its symbolic constitution) in contemporary Greece, from an interpretive phenomenological standpoint. This also emphasises on the irreducible dialectical interdependence between the psychological, the

sociocultural, and the political level of analysis, in the sense that “complex responsive processes of human relating form, and are formed by, values, norms and ideologies as integral aspects of self/identity formation in its simultaneously individual and collective form” (Stacey & Griffin 2008, p. 11).

2. The Political Psychological Context of *Metapolitefsi*

In the post-authoritarian period of Greek politics and society, that is, the period after the collapse of the military junta (1974), frequently referred to as the period of *Metapolitefsi*, democracy became deeply consolidated and strongly characterised by unprecedented stability, reconciliation, growth, and prosperity. In addition, the middle classes have witnessed a surprising increase of their economic, social, cultural, and political power, as well as of their internal differentiation. This complex dynamics also offered them a comfortable cultural illusion of immunity from any potential systemic crisis.

Enthusiastic feelings of massive and rapid (upward) social mobility, economic growth, and symbolic domination had been more intense for those professional groups that occupied key-roles within the private sector and, mostly, within the state and the party system. Individuals belonging to these groups seemed to have a permanent impression of being unaffected from the multiple consequences of the Capital-State relationships, at both domestic and international level.

During *Metapolitefsi*, the phenomenon of *partitocrazia* (Lyrintzis 2011), which systematically marginalised any autonomous political organisation

of disadvantaged social groups (Diamandouros 1983), has been rendered dominant and almost ubiquitous. In specific, particularistic individual micro-motives/preferences and party-centered political interests, strongly defending a wide social network of patronage, self-serving dealings, and protective client-oriented relationships, reflexively led to social inertia, institutional suffering, and counterproductive macro-behaviours (e.g., populism, cynicism, corruption, bureaucratic client state, informal economy, and so on).² The traditional models of entrepreneurship (the entrepreneur self) thus became largely intertwined with the satisfaction of myopic and short-term profit-driven individual interests, rather than a civic-minded, socially beneficial and environmentally responsible behaviour (Tsekeris et al. 2014).

The evident *structural incongruity* between real social needs and state institutional orientation implicitly nurtured a counterproductive sense of *egoistic individualism*, an all-pervasive individualistic culture (accompanied by hyperconsumerism), which led to grave impairment of the sense of collectivity and taking care of one another, as well as of community, solidarity and shared responsibility within Greek society.

² In truth, Greece has never been able to integrate its economic interests with the clientelist form of politics that has been pre-eminent in the post-junta period, nor has it found a way to successfully reform the underdeveloped societal and governmental institutions that still exist within the country. *Rent-seeking* is a ubiquitous phenomenon in Greece: an embedded structural condition whereby individuals act on the basis of their own self-interest rather than on an interdependent or civic-minded basis. Therefore, insider institutions and structures are still powerful and immune to whatever political party rules. Independent of ideological identifications, political favouritism, patronage, corruption and vested interests continue to dominate the distribution of spoils within Greece. Against this backdrop, passing significant structural reforms is far easier said than done. The reforms which have been achieved under the current bailout programme have produced some short-term effects in macro-economic terms, but have neither produced growth nor gone to the heart of the country's deeply dysfunctional political system (Tsekeris 2015b). Of course, this strong contrast between self-interest and civic-mindedness does not exclusively pertain to a stand-alone, unique "Greek case". That is, it can be thought not only within the bounds of Greek Metapolitefsi (and of the Greek sovereign debt crisis), but also throughout the wider context of European fiscal crisis and the social consequences thereof, as evidenced in recent anthropological work taking place in Spain (Narotzky 2011; Sime 2013), Italy (Pipyrou 2014), and Portugal (Frois 2012; Gray 2013).

Individual, familial, corporatist, and local interests regularly championed over the common good.

According to Stelios Ramfos's (2011) bleak description of the Greek self (a self *bifurcated* between modernity and tradition),³ civil consciousness has never been fully adopted by the ordinary individual; the closed, pre-modern, and non-reflective "entrenched self" almost always prevailed over the Western model of the open, active, and socially responsible self, that is, the most essential unit for the construction of a genuine civil society (Paraskevopoulos 2001).

With the gradual collapse of almost any official indicator that bespeaks conventional social ties, social cohesion and solidarity,³ a widespread tax-evading mentality arose – one that cuts through, both transversely and vertically, the whole of Greek society. It is therefore not surprising that, in the relevant European ranking regarding the degree of social trust and solidarity, Greeks steadily occupied one of the last positions (see e.g. Poupos 2010).

3. The Imaginaries of the Middle-Class Self

In the present period, under the overwhelming weight of the acute and continuing socioeconomic crisis, a large number of professional groups and individuals are increasingly being excluded from, or deprived of, what they have achieved (in educational, symbolic, or economic terms),

³ To put it sharply, the Greek self is a *bifurcated self*, existing isochronically in both the formality of modern public discourse (with Western ways of life and self-exposure) *and* the informality of closed community contexts, or culturally intimate rural settings. For Theodossopoulos (2013), who draws heavily on Herzfeld (1997), in Greece "there is a profound ambivalence—a *disemia*—between public self-presentation (which is expected to be in line with Greece's classic and European heritage) and private introspection (which relates to less Western, intimate identities)" (Theodossopoulos 2013, p. 205, original italics).

according to the dominant social paradigm. Also, the diffused illusions of immunity from any potential systemic crisis are now being faded away by consolidated crisis conditions, which seem to dismantle both individual and collective prospects and identities within an increasingly fragmented social structure.⁴

The severe economic recession in Greece has had direct negative consequences on the vast majority of the population, mostly affecting the economically vulnerable groups and increasingly weakening the welfare state and social cohesion. It is now believed that the hitherto powerful political networks that took shape and flourished during *Metapolitefsi* are no longer functional, either because of the great economic adversity (with the de facto loss or obsolescence of the abundant financial pre-crisis benefits), or because of the significant loss of their social underpinnings (i.e. loss of trust). These two reasons are profoundly matched together and mutually reinforcing each other, since there was a systematically direct and close interdependence between the social-political underpinnings and the economic social benefits (Tsekeris et al. 2014).

In particular, the members of the Greek middle class (i.e. the main corpus of the post-war Greek society) are now experiencing an extended and heavy subjective and social suffering, resulting from the sudden

⁴ The field of healthcare professionals, on which our research focused, can be considered as an “urban microcosm” for the systematic study of the multiple psychosocial and identity consequences of the current “Greek crisis”, particularly upon the “third sector” employees, that is, the varied Greek middle class, which constitutes the backbone of the fragmented Greek society. For sure, crisis experience and self-suffering cannot be generalised or essentialised. These consequences are perceived not in all-encompassing or homogenous terms, but in myriad and nonlinear ways, substantially idiosyncratic and different among the *Greek selves* (in plural), that is, selves with such complex localised histories that radically pluralise crisis experience and meaning (even within middle-class families and individuals sharing basic cultural traits and aspiring to common certainties, promises, or imaginaries). We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping us point this out more clearly.

demise of personal strategies, visions, and ambitions, as well as of the four central mythologies or imaginaries (or symbolic constituents) of *Metapolitefsi*:

1. *The imaginary of economic growth*: the narrative of a linear, progressive and cumulative economic development (resulting in individual life satisfaction and well-being), associated to social development and understood as almost self-evident and taken-for-granted.
2. *The imaginary of occupational stability*: this pertains to individuals working in the third sector of the economy; working in the private sector, or (even better) as a civil servant (*dimosios ypallilos*), is somehow attainable for everyone and ensures permanency, safety, economic success and social recognition (symbolic capital).
3. *The imaginary of the boss*: the widespread social assumption that everyone has potentially the chance to be a successful entrepreneur and thus avoid being a worker subject to exploitation and the capitalist mode of labour.
4. *The imaginary of representative civil democracy*: that is, people's sovereignty, regularly exercised through elected spokespersons, trustworthy political "experts", and political institutional bodies, such as the Parliament.

This is how hitherto Greek society perceived itself. Such demise is taking place within a *state of emergency*, that is, a situation in which "the state is virtually bankrupt, sovereignty on fiscal policy has been lost, pensions and salaries have been severely reduced primarily in the public and also

in the private sector resulting in a drastic deterioration of the economic conditions for the majority of the population” (Lyrintzis 2011, p. 16). It is also reinforced by additional frustrations, involving the dramatic failure of personal and family strategies linked to social stagnation and the wider social decline (e.g., financial poverty, destitution, misery, staggering unemployment, loss of income, occupational flexibility, flexicurity, precarity, and so on).

Modes of personal and social suffering are nowadays pervasive in everyday life and ordinary experience: worsened socioeconomic conditions lead to greater morbidity, increased suicidality, major depression, less utilisation of health services, significant health inequalities, and a deteriorated mental health status in general (Economou et al. 2013; VANDOROS et al. 2013; ZAVRAS et al. 2013). This is also evidenced from the widespread negative feelings of ontological insecurity, hopelessness, inferiority, uncertainty, anxiety, despair, depression, and *loss of purpose and identity*, as described by Zygmunt Bauman (2013). In other words, prior (established) forms of social recognition and distinction are now being replaced by new ones, which are fragile, provisional, and inefficient, or even senseless.

By attempting to manage these adverse psychosocial conditions, including their self-image (cf. Goffman 1959), individuals usually employ ineffective strategies, thus intensifying discontent, despair, and self-suffering experiences. Individuals’ spontaneous reactions may include either anger and aggressive behaviours, or personal withdrawal, which inevitably render them more vulnerable to political manipulation from

both “progressive” and “conservative” parties, or by both “systemic” and “subversive” ideologies.

Our special research attention is now turned upon the analytical level of the self in the Greek crisis, that is, a self-experiencing a heavy dismantling of the real conditions of existence, being abruptly disconnected from the social structure and its symbolic underpinnings, that is, the aforementioned imaginaries, which used to feed personal narratives with a strong sense of autobiographical continuity, linearity, certainty and stability.

4. Methodology

4.1 Taking an interpretive phenomenological standpoint

The often invisible and deep complex processes regarding personal and social suffering can arguably be better described and understood by collecting and analysing relevant empirical data from an interpretive phenomenological standpoint. The research design pertains to the conduct of semi-structured, qualitative, in-depth interviews with employees in the public and private health sector.

In direct contrast to the positivist paradigm, the interpretive phenomenological approach intersubjectively reveals complex situations of life and creates empathic knowledge (Letiche 2013); it is principally qualitative, seeking “to remain as faithful as possible to the data of experience. In other words, it seeks to understand rather than to explain, and, by so doing, it searches for meaning rather than seeks to

collect facts” (Spinelli 2005, p. 212). Its essentially relational character brings it close to symbolic anthropological concepts, which “can help us appreciate the complexity of local discontent in ways that move beyond statistics, mathematical models, and hard data” (Theodossopoulos 2013, p. 209; see also Narotzky 2012).⁵ In particular, the interpretive phenomenological approach theorises the self as a fluid social process and as an interrelational meaningful outcome constituent of lived experience, which is neither intrapsychically located, nor able to be defined in isolation, as something “in and of itself” (Spinelli 2005; see also Tsekeris 2015a).

Most importantly, an interpretive phenomenological approach seems useful in exploring how participants make sense of their personal and social world, as well as of the specific meanings attached to subjective states or experiences (Reid et al. 2005; Smith & Osborn 2003). An informant’s reflection on how she perceives of (or responds to) the experience of economic crisis, or austerity measures, offers a good example. In the present research framework, the interpretive phenomenological perspective is both valuable and necessary, since our central aim is to *qualitatively* understand participants’ accounts on suffering, self-formation and self-transformation under conditions of economic crisis.

⁵ In general, ethnographic research becomes increasingly crucial to understanding contemporary crisis phenomena, as it allows us to see “people’s internalized political ideas and activities as they are integrated into the conditions of their social lives, and enables us to evaluate their activities from within a broader perspective” (Rakopoulos 2014, p. 328). In his case, Theodoros Rakopoulos elaborates on anti-middleman activists who “locate their everyday practices of conducting food distributions without middlemen in a context of political activity based upon an agenda of social change” and “recognize solidarity as both an immediate and a future concern” (Rakopoulos 2014, p. 328). See also other relevant anthropological works focusing on solidarity/protest movements (Sutton et al. 2012) and various forms of resistance and collective action (Dalakoglou 2012) in the context of the current Greek crisis.

The participants are ten health professionals, 6 women and 4 men. Their ages range between 27 and 48 years old. All of them belong to the middle class and are employed full- or part-time, 4 of them are married and 6 are single. Also, they all have higher education qualifications in their respective discipline, graduated either from high technological institutes or from universities. Three of them are working as nurses, two as doctors, two as radiologists, two as health visitors, and one as a psychologist. Half participants are working in the wider public sector, such as public hospitals, and the others in the private sector (private clinics).

All participants live in Athens (where the majority of the population lives) and they pertain to a middle or lower socio-economic status. Sampling was based on snowball technique (Oppenheim 1992), also taking into account the fact that health professionals are now experiencing the current economic crisis in Greece through a *double perspective*, that is, both as social members *and* as agents of alleviating suffering (caregivers) at the same time.

A general semi-structured interview guide was administered to each participant during the period 1 March to 30 November 2014. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes approximately. The three authors jointly participated in the whole process. The selection of the interview location was left to the interviewees in order to make participation as comfortable as possible. Some interviews took place in participants' workplace and others in public cafeterias. All participants were fully informed about the process and the aim/objective of research. They also signed a consent form ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The

interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded, and translated into English.

The principal aim of conducting these in-depth interviews was to investigate the subjective experiences of health professionals within the Greek economic crisis. The interview plan was consisted of open-ended questions, designed to guide to a free and uninterrupted conversation between the researchers and participants. Through this process, interviewees had the opportunity to reflect upon themselves and the significant others of their lives.

One of the main points of reference during such conversation was the change perceived at societal and personal level during the period of crisis. Participants were asked to present and reflect upon their subjective views regarding the changes they were experiencing in their workplace, their intimate relationships, and their personal sense of (dis)continuity within time and social space (social networks). Some core questions included to the interview guide are the following:

- What kinds of changes have occurred in your workplace during the last years?
- How do you feel about them?
- How current economic changes affected your personal, professional, and social life?
- What has changed recently in your relationships with your colleagues, your family, your supervisor, and with yourself?

- What has changed in the behaviour of service seekers (help seekers) with whom you socialise?
- Which are the feelings that better describe your mood when you return home after a day at work?
- What would you change in relation to yourself in order to feel and perform better?
- What are your expectations concerning your job and your life?
- How would you imagine yourself a decade from now?

4.2 Data and analysis

Interviews transcriptions were encoded by the authors and the interpretative phenomenological framework was undertaken for data analysis. The authors read and re-read interview transcripts carefully in order to get an overall feeling of participants' accounts. This is a very detailed and meticulous process (Storey 2007). A discussion followed concerning the theoretical background.

Finally, we categorised the data into two overarching phenomenological themes. At this stage, we identified several similarities and patterns among participants' accounts, mainly concerning remarkable changes that had taken place in their interactions with significant others and with themselves.

Hence, it was inferred that the economic crisis was the catalyst that sparked transformations in the communicative interaction of the individuals with themselves and society, that is, a dialectical process of self-construction, as described in the pragmatist perspective of George Herbert Mead (1973).⁶ Except from the two main phenomenological themes, or *superordinate themes*, the detailed analysis of transcriptions discerned a number of emergent *sub-themes* supporting the more general ones.

A. Superordinate theme: Accounts on participants' roles, feelings, and self-perception

A.1 Sub-theme: A perception of the crisis as an opportunity to renew and regenerate ways of life

"In my opinion, the economic crisis is a way to reconsider what is really important ... redesign and reorganisation at several levels..." Giorgos, 48 years old, married, psychologist, working part-time in the private sector

"Hmm... I feel a stronger sense of responsibility for many things now, and I have become more strong-willed and assertive, whereas in the past many things seemed simpler..." Christos, 37 years old, unmarried, doctor, working full-time in the public sector

"Before the crisis, we had excessive needs and were dominated by consumption ... [pause] ... but nowadays we have considerably limited

⁶ For Mead, meaning is not based on the mere psychological (esoteric) constitution of the individual, but rather on the relational and interdependent "structure of social praxis" (Mead 1973, p. 69). Therefore, any human act indeed produces meaning if only it sufficiently contains an element of social reflexivity, which ensures the presence of symbolic consciousness (Mead 1973, p. 90). The everyday lifeworldly process of thinking and internalising the *generalised other* is "the very first stage of experience in the creation and development of the self" (Mead 1973, p. 147). As Charles Cooley put it, "self and society go together, as phases of a common whole" (Cooley 1907, p. 678).

this tendency.” Yannis, 34 years old, unmarried, nurse, working full-time in the public sector

Processes of social crisis and alteration potentially signal the beginning of a more reflexive conceptualisation of the constitution of everyday life and its routine elements (Elias 1994). In other words, when “crises” occur, it is observed a significant lack of fit between subjective dispositions and objective positions, and therefore reflexive strategizing enters the scene. In such cases, social subjects are obliged to think otherwise, perhaps more radically, as well as to abandon the taken-for-granted orientations and to adopt more self-conscious modes of operation (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 131).

A.2 Sub-theme: Feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and fear for the future

“Nowadays, I’m trying harder to control my emotions and my anger ... although, there are times that I feel I can’t manage my stress, especially in my workplace.” Maggie, 28 years old, unmarried, nurse, working full-time in the private sector

“[Nowadays] I have more anxiety for my survival ... [pause] ... I feel uncertainty and insecurity for my future and my job...” Eleni, 33 years old, unmarried, health visitor, working full-time in the public sector

In Kelly’s construct theory, anxiety involves a subjective feeling of being outside the range of convenience pertaining to the personal construct system (Kelly 1955). Our construct system is always in strong association to the relational circumstances we are dealing with (Fransella 2005). As Farhad Dalal perceptively stresses, “the anxiety is not that we are essentially alone, but comes from the thought that we cannot be other

than connected to others, and so we cannot ever do exactly what we want. In other words, one is always constrained by others and what has gone before” (Dalal 2000, p. 61). In general, feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are in a constant flux, reflexively contributing to the formation of collective identities.

A.3 Sub-theme: Loss of self-esteem and self-image

“My role as a [health] professional has been degraded due to the fact that I don’t have the means to apply technically efficient practices to increase the quality of the services provided...” Katerina, 32 years old, married, radiologist, working part-time in the private sector

“Hmm... my feelings are contradictory and totally contingent on the circumstances ... Sometimes, I feel that by offering something to those in need, it helps to improve my work progress ... [pause] ... In other instances, I feel as if I'm running on a treadmill and, as I'm trying more and more, I end up to zero...” Eva, 30 years old, unmarried, health visitor, working full-time in the public sector

When the expected course of life is disrupted by unanticipated events, the self is left wounded and its habitualised actions become stagnated. The self thus feels not capable of generating understanding and needs others to do so, often searching for new significant others and fellow sufferers in order to find sense in life. Charmaz’s (1983) relevant concept of the loss of self (loss of self-esteem or self-worth) pertains to a painful experience of losing the solid foundation on which subjective self-

experience is constructed, as well as to the collapse of interdependency between the personal and the social.⁷

A.4 Sub-theme: Less tolerance in irresponsible behaviors and more emphasis on altruism and reciprocity

“There is greater need for solidarity and collectivity ... The Greek state must eliminate bureaucracy ... In addition, the welfare state must be updated and focus on the commonweal.” Giorgos, 48 years old, married, psychologist, working part-time in the private sector

“...I demand a merit-based career system ... [pause] ... I can’t anymore accept people being placed in the wrong places, not being able to take up their own responsibilities ... I can’t bear people keep saying ‘oh adelfe’...” Eleni, 33 years old, unmarried, health visitor, working full-time in the public sector

Ohadelfismos (to “get by” without caring about tomorrow and about the people next to me) and *volema* (to get into to remain in a position that works exclusively for one’s own personal benefit without considering others) have been functioning as mainstream common mentalities in *Metapolitefsi*.⁸ But the current socioeconomic crisis seems to gradually strengthen the general feeling that individuals are integral part of a reciprocal social whole and that the survival of the one necessarily depends on the survival of the other; in other words, existence is interdependence (Stacey & Griffin 2008). Citizens have therefore started

⁷ See also Michael Bury’s (1982) notion of *biographical disruption*, which pertains to pain and suffering as factors that destroy the taken-for-granted assumptions about life and “bring individuals, their families and wider social networks face to face with the character of their relationships in stark form, disrupting normal rules of reciprocity and mutual support” (Bury 1982, p. 169).

⁸ See also K. Tsoukalas’s (1991) notorious concept of *tzampatzis* (free rider), referring to those who parasitically and narcissistically care about their own personal benefits, interests, desires and advantages, thus contributing to an anomic social environment and a dysfunctional and ineffective political system.

to alter established mentalities and embodied behaviours, primarily on a personal and interpersonal level (Chalari 2014).

A.5 Sub-theme: Self-suffering echoing the failure of social support systems

“...Feeling lucky to have a job ... [pause] ... I usually tolerate some bad treatment from others, as well as more workload in my job.” Olga, 36 years old, married, radiologist, working full-time in the private sector

“Hmm... each of us should lose something at a personal level, so that we could be able to reevaluate and to reclaim it.” Katerina, 32 years old, married, radiologist, working part-time in the private sector

“...Sometimes, I feel sorrow that I can’t help families through the public structures, but only personally, by advising and informing them ... Also, I feel that my work has no future and no chance to get better...” Akis, 40 years old, married, doctor, working full-time in the public sector

Dramatic social changes produce the failure of social support systems and a painful sense of loss of control (Pinquart & Silbereisen 2004), with adverse consequences to everyday life and personal well-being (de la Sablonnière et al. 2010). According to Margaret Archer (2007), people construct themselves (and society in general) in and through intrapersonal dialogue, or *internal conversation*, which articulates their intimate desires and clarifies their needs and existential concerns. To a large extent, the dialogue with ourselves and significant others defines who we are and what we care about in life. The self is therefore a conversational reality. Many people are nowadays threatened by the collapse of the internal structure, or the cohesion, of the individual and

social self, as well as by the collapse the connection with the outside world (including social support mechanisms). This potentially leads to the breakdown of the most vulnerable groups of the population.

B. Superordinate theme: Accounts on participants' intimate and social relationships

B.1 Sub-theme: Adaptation in new circumstances

"...There is so much workload and so many people that I have to serve on daily basis that there is the need to put priorities in the provision of the services I accommodate..." Christos, 37 years old, unmarried, doctor, working full-time in the public sector

"Hmm... before the crisis the only thing I was responsible for was doing my job ... [pause] ... Now I have to find solutions to additional issues, such as bureaucracy, health insurance, medications, etc." Melina, 31 years old, unmarried, nurse, working full-time in the public sector

"...I play the role of 'fireman' more often [laughs] ... many times, I intervene to resolve conflicts that arise between my colleagues and the service seekers, while I wouldn't have done it so frequently in the past..." Yannis, 34 years old, unmarried, nurse, working full-time in the public sector

"I now have to deal with more complicated tasks, trying to adjust myself to the new order of things and not just to complain..." Katerina, 32 years old, married, radiologist, working part-time in the private sector

Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004) observe that, in periods of dramatic social change, subjective claims disconnect from objective resources and

this creates the need to efficiently adapt to the new circumstances. In the same line, Silbereisen (2005, p. 3) maintains that such negative developments reflexively produce complex “adaptational pressures related to the new social institutions, and the loss of former frames of reference”. The spontaneous *need to adapt* entails inventing and developing new (perhaps radical) ways of behaviour to cope with the emergent challenges, that is, a difficult process that may change the individual’s life-course (Chalari 2014).

B.2 Sub-theme: Psychological distress emerged from conflicts within social relationships

“I have to deal with more conflicts with the service seekers, with my colleagues, and with my family ... [pause] ... I feel that they are more demanding on me...” Maggie, 28 years old, unmarried, nurse, working full-time in the private sector

“...Interaction with the public and personal contact is diminished, and there is tension ... [pause] ... Service seekers facing us as servants of the state and [thus] relieve the stress that they feel ... So, there is more frustration and less patience in dealing with the service seekers ... In the past, I was more genteel and more supportive...” Yannis, 34 years old, unmarried, nurse, working full-time in the public sector

For Ernesto Spinelli, who follows a Sartrean line of thought, relatedness essentially entails anxiety and uncertainty, as well as “co-operation with one another not because we have eradicated the conflict between us, but rather because our attempt at ‘being for’ one another arises through the mutual recognition of the inevitable conflict between us” (Spinelli 2004, p. 62). Conflict, as an inescapable condition of human existence,

potentially leads to fundamental questions about the quality and purpose of life.

B.3 Sub-theme: People are developing more supportive intimate relationships

“...My relationships with significant others are more intimate, whilst my social relationships with the third are more superficial ... Hmm... for example, the relationship with my wife is more supportive, while my relationship with my colleagues has become difficult as there is a strong sense of job insecurity...” Giorgos, 48 years old, married, psychologist, working part-time in the private sector

As Ketokivi and Meskus (2015) rightly point out, the individualistic notion of the “capable agent” can be seriously doubted and challenged by the *permeable boundaries between the self and the other*, as well as by the fact that a wider figuration of actors always matters; mostly “any action accomplished, such as simply continuing to live, is relational, rather than individual accomplishment” (Ketokivi & Meskus 2015, p. 43). In particular, they discuss an empirical example about the choice for selective abortion after an ascertaining diagnostic test:

“The intense embodied relationality of pregnant women, their partners, health care personnel, the expected child, the medical tests, public views of disability and many other factors collide with the understanding that the choice about the fate of the expected baby is personal and therefore justified. This underlines to us the relational basis of moral agency” (Ketokivi & Meskus 2015, pp. 46–47).

In the same terms, youth's prosocial self emerges from the relational, that is, interpersonal and communal, nature of family coexistence, but it is also critically shaped by youth's exercise of personal agency and freedom:

“agency and prosociality are positive developmental outcomes. This assumption is tenable. It appears to be almost always valid for prosocial behavior and initiative, but agency and social capital skills, in themselves, are not necessarily constructs of goodness or virtue. They are so only to the extent that they are applied towards goals that benefit self, others, or the common good...The fact that qualities of self, especially as they are still emerging, are neither beneficent nor maleficent suggests the need for a firm moral grounding in social groups where these qualities arise...The goodness that resides in positive family relations and the largely beneficent nature of family capabilities direct youth's developing agency towards the good” (Reyes & Fernando 2015, p. 65).

5. Discussion, Conclusion and Outlook

Personal accounts and narratives are always very complicated and embedded in deeply affective history and culture. They also bring to center stage how “common” or “ordinary” people reorganise their social and economic lives, reconfigure their values, reshuffle their moral obligations, and attempt to make life worth living for themselves and for future generations (Narotzky & Besnier 2014). In the relational line of inquiry adopted here, informants' comments on everyday life in the

crisis and their personal imaginaries of the future, anxieties, employment troubles, self-esteem, or altruism, cannot be separated from the fabric of aforementioned social and historical imaginaries, which substantially help society and social members define themselves.⁹ In a sense, social and historical imaginaries express the “objective possibilities” for people’s hopes of a better life – that is, hidden possibilities allowed by the social and economic framework of human existence (Bourdieu 1997).

What also emerges here is a *resonance* between social and personal suffering, between the dissolution of the social and the fragmentation of the self/identity, or between the disintegration of the social network and the collapse of the ego. Institutional failure feeds a subjective experience of ambivalence, as well as of *living at risk*, thus rendering the social subject more vulnerable, less capable, and more manipulatable.

Respondents’ accounts appear to stress the inherent need of human beings to control or regulate the “evil”, rather than to discover or uncover the “good”. This is in line with Bauman's (1993, p. 18) observation that “humans are normally ambivalent: ambivalence resides at the heart of the ‘primary scene’ of human face to face. All subsequent social arrangements – the power-assisted institutions as well as the rationally articulated and pondered rules and duties – deploy that ambivalence as their building material while doing their best to cleanse it from its original sin of being an ambivalence”.

⁹ This relational interdisciplinary approach, in other words, attempts to link phenomenology and sociopolitical analysis and to do justice to, or to frame, both an analytical macro-orientation and the qualitative data (highly-detailed, nuanced social experiences of crisis) in a comprehensive, integrative and holistic way.

Interestingly, exploring the complex experience of the Greek crisis, one can discern new kinds of ambivalence: “the desire of the overwhelming majority of Greeks to remain in the Euro-zone but not abide by the economic rationality that (purportedly) will guarantee Greece’s position in the Euro-zone!” (Theodossopoulos 2013, p. 209). Dimitrios Theodossopoulos ethnographically shows that “the threat and experience of austerity in Greece is negotiated in terms of contradictory and complicated ‘indignant’ views, the ambivalent ‘poetics’ of discontent” (Theodossopoulos 2013, p. 209).

In fact, discussing with our participants, whose daily lives were shaken by crisis, offered a strong sense of *emotional roller-coaster*, fluctuating between two extremes, that is, negative and positive emotions and thoughts.

On the one hand, participants expressed gloomy scenarios and pessimistic or even threatening attitudes toward their future. They appeared to consider themselves as part of an unbearable and irreversible collective suffering, decline, or decay, doomed to a permanent loss of life chances and quality of life.

On the other hand, many signs of resistance, courage and hope were manifested, usually linked to new ways of social relating based on empathy, compassion, and solidarity. Such positive signs seemed to fuel themselves from participants’ dedication to loved ones, that is, their deep emotional concern and responsibility for some significant others, but also for the young generation in general. This arguably disclosed an unexhausted inspiration for alternatives and counter-projects regarding both personal and collective life.

However, social behaviour is, more or less, unpredictable; no one can offer us promises or guarantees about the future, so we need to adjust to a constantly changing environment and embrace uncertainty (Bauman 1993; Tsekeris 2010).¹⁰ It seems that, in an age of rapid change, instability and precariousness, linear modes of thinking cannot help any more. Thus, suffering can be better alleviated by the reflexive acknowledgement and enfolding of discontinuity and contingency, as well as by the self-confident exploitation of chaos and emergent biographical risks.

In this analytical context, contemporary social science, instead of being a “detached observer” of human affliction and social loss, must responsibly equip individuals and groups with critical skills and practical competencies to exploit increased social complexity, nonlinearity, turbulence and chaos. It must also empower the suffering individual self to reflexively re-connect with the social and its support mechanisms, as well as to effectively search for new fruitful configurations regarding social, political and economic citizenship (given the general disaffection towards old or traditional forms of citizenship). For contemporary social science, in some sense, this is a heavy task of carrying “the weight of the world” (Bourdieu et al. 1999), which oppresses people and causes them to suffer in numerous ways.¹¹

¹⁰ Many people, who used to avoid risks, in times of crisis, attempt to stay attached to their old (linear) patterns of thinking and behaviour (Bandura 1997).

¹¹ To use Z. Bauman’s words, social science should be strategically aimed at “disclosing the possibility of living together differently, with less misery or no misery: the possibility daily withheld, overlooked or unbelieved” (Bauman 2000, p. 215). Furthermore, a genuine critical approach, which *discovers the social in the individual* (Bourdieu et al. 1999), should teach how to effectively avoid locating the causes of poverty, exclusion and suffering in individual failings – that is, how not to revive the naïve, scientifically ungrounded and politically dangerous classification of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.

From the relational standpoint adopted here, social change must not be understood as a sole consequence of economic, political, or historical factors, but rather as the uncertain upshot of the citizens' daily praxis and actions. For the traumatised Greek society to survive and re-emerge from the current crisis, it must set up an ethical vision of a community based on creativity, innovation, trust, cooperation, solidarity, empathy and mutual understanding. This would possibly heal individual and social selves seeking sensible ways to re-establish or repair their lost coherence and meaning, after the overwhelming collapse of the middle-class imaginaries, which obviously continues to have a destabilising, or even disintegrating, effect upon the Greek selfhood.

Arguably, a structured and enhanced psychological and social capital could gradually stimulate and shape an appropriate resilient institutional and societal environment for the crisis-inflicted Greek self and its creative redemption, that is, for an empathic, responsibility-taking and other-regarding self. The critical dynamics of these types of capital is nowadays apparent, particularly in the form of generating informal collectives, or formally structured solidarity and social economy groups (see Sotiropoulos & Bourikos 2014; Kantzara 2014; Rakopoulos 2013). Grass-root social movements promote radically new (bottom-up) governance structures, thus enabling diversified forms of social participation and self-expression in an equitable and collaborative relationship between the state and its citizens, the government and the governed (Tsekeris et al. 2014).

These concluding remarks could probably be of significant value in assessing ongoing processes of meaningful self-reproduction or self-

transformation in contemporary Greece. They could also be utilised in the systematic design and application of an overall social and labour policy, over against the emergent middle-class pathologies, as well as against variegated and diffuse phenomena of social marginalisation, exclusion, injustice, inequality, subordination, and suffering

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