

# Contrasting Greek and UK Youths' Subjective Responses to Austerity: Lessons for other European countries

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By Athanasia Chalari and Clive Sealey



Greek demonstrators protest against the imposition of austerity. A photo by Pan-African News Wire File Photos on Flickr.

Since 2010, many European countries have faced severe economic crises, resulting in the implementation of various forms of 'austerity' social policies, and Greece and the UK have been at the forefront of the implementation of such policies. While it is important to note that these austerity measures are affecting different groups in different ways, the impact on young people can be seen as particularly deleterious. For example, in contrast to previous generations, young people in these countries are now experiencing intense social, political and economic transformations that have impacted particularly on their current and future lives, and are very likely to be the first generation to do worse than their parents.

Previous research has noted that as a consequence of the significant effects of austerity evident in Greece, the subjective experiences of different generations indicated different areas of social and psychological complexities and a wide range of negative emotional destabilization associated with a severe inability to plan their future

lives in a personal or professional level. Our research contrasted the responses to austerity of Greek and British young people to see whether similarities and/or differences emerged in relation to these previous findings.

In this context, one striking difference was the level of optimism and positivity for the future that UK participants displayed, and this is also significantly different from the almost universal levels of anxiety and pessimism from the Greek study. This is perhaps contrary to what we might have expected, bearing in mind the changed circumstances of young people in the UK. Additionally, Greek participants described their experiences as akin to an intense and rapid change of the prominent norms, an almost violent transformation of their everyday life, of their feelings, their concerns and ability to cope with the rapidly changing reality.

In contrast, British participants did not describe such a sudden and dramatic transformation; rather, participants referred to a continuing and perhaps even calculated process of change and readjustment, wherein while they were able to depict several enduring social transformations that were taking place, this was experienced as a gradual, albeit sometimes unfair and painful adjustment. Thus, it seems particularly appropriate to characterize British participants' experiences of austerity as challenging and infused with everyday anxieties and tensions, which, however, seem more like a continuing life struggle rather than a series of unexpected and threatening social, political and economic transformations.

This difference is reinforced when we look at the experience of young Greek people, where debt is having a real impact on their ability to produce long-term plans on a personal or professional level. Therefore, the Greek circumstances show us that once debt becomes an emotional and social concern, it has the potential to facilitate prolonged experiences of disappointment, uncertainty, fear, pessimism, insecurity, anger, pressure, anxiety and depression. This suggests a general, long-term negative effect of austerity across Europe in terms of its impact on the abilities of the younger generation in a way that has the potential to destabilize their personal and professional lives now and in the future.

**Dr Athanasia Chalari** is Principal Lecturer in Sociology, Subject Leader in Sociology and Criminology at the University of Northampton.

**Dr Clive Sealey** is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy and Theory at the University of Worcester.

***A research seminar on this topic will be presented by the authors on January 17, 2017 at the Hellenic Observatory – [read more here](#).***