



# **A Comparison of Subjective Experiences and Responses to Austerity of UK and Greek Youth**

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# A Comparison of Subjective Experiences and Responses to Austerity of UK and Greek Youth

Athanasia Chalari<sup>\*</sup>, Clive Sealey<sup>†</sup> and Mike Webb<sup>#</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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Following previous research carried out by Chalari (2014; 2015), this qualitative study explores the ways in which the younger generation in Greece and UK has been affected by austerity policy measures. These two countries have been at the forefront of intense social, political and economic transformations that have impacted particularly on young people's current and future lives. This study aims to explore similarities and differences in young people's subjective experiences and responses, as from this it may be possible to discern whether there is a general, long-term negative effect of austerity across Europe. The data shows that there are some similarities in the two cohorts' subjective experiences and responses, but perhaps more interestingly some significant differences. The study discusses what the implications of these differences might be for young people and society in these countries, in terms of their 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.

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# **A Comparison of Subjective Experiences and Responses to Austerity of UK and Greek Youth**

## **1. Introduction**

Since 2010, many European countries have faced severe economic crises, resulting in various forms of 'austerity' measures (Lapavitsas et al, 2010). Spain, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and the UK have all experienced austerity (Rudig and Karyotis, 2013), with Greece in particular enduring the most intense draconian structural, political, economic and social adjustments (Chalari, 2012, 2015, Kretsos, 2014, Papavasileiou and Lyons, 2014). Busch et al (2013) have identified that these austerity policies are having a significant impact on the European Social Model in terms of causing growing unemployment, falling real wages, cuts in the social security system and privatisation of public property across the EU as a whole. 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, according to Antonucci et al (2014: 14), in contrast to previous generations, young people in contemporary Europe experience a fragmented and uncertain reality, meaning that young people in contemporary Europe are perceived as the first generation to do worse than their parents (Hamilton, Antonucci and Roberts, 2014).

Research in Greece shows that young people have felt the impacts of austerity much more than any other demographic (Kretsos, 2014). For example, youth unemployment (under the age of 25) in Greece remains the highest, along with Spain, at almost 49% (Eurostat, 2015). Additionally, Papavasileiou and Lyons (2014: 4) highlight the fact that an increasing number of Greek Millennials (aged 18-22) must now work while studying, having lost traditional parental support due to parents' reduced incomes or unemployment. Research by Chalari, (2014a) has shown that the younger generation in Greece narrates experiences of uncertainty, disappointment, pessimism, insecurity, fear, anger, negativism, pressure, anxiety and depression. It is further argued that the prospect of unemployment is what younger Greeks (aged 20-30) mainly worry about.

In Britain, the younger generation have also suffered from continuous cuts in terms of social benefits (Unison, 2015). This has resulted in a weaker social welfare provision, higher dependency of younger individuals on family support, and greater individualism which can lead to further intensified experiences of social exclusion (Sealey, 2014). However, it seems that austerity in the UK is not as harmful as the crisis turned out to be in Greece, although it may have had some impact on the vote for Brexit.

The aim of this research is to contrast the responses to austerity of Greek and British young people to see whether similarities and/or differences emerge. Although austerity is not perceived in similar terms in these two countries, it remains vital to realise that in both cases (and perhaps in the entire Eurozone), the younger generation has suffered



the consequences of austerity to a greater extent compared to the wider population. This builds on a previous piece of research carried out by Chalari (2014, 2015), which noted that as a consequence of the significant effects of austerity evident in Greece, the subjective experiences of different generations indicate different areas of social and psychological complexities and in particular, the subjective experiences of the younger generation reveal a wide range of negative emotional destabilization associated with a severe inability to plan their future lives in a personal or professional level. This study aims to explore further whether this is also the case regarding the British young people in this research, as by studying their subjective experiences in comparison to Greek young people, it may be possible to discern whether there are general, long-term negative effects of austerity across Europe that are impacting on the ability of the younger generation in a way that has the potential to destabilize their personal and professional lives now and in the future.

## **2. Comparing the impact on young people of Greek 'crisis' and British 'austerity'**

In Greece the word 'austerity' has not been used as systematically as the term 'crisis' by the media and in everyday conversations. The reason perhaps relates to the immediate, intensive and continuous enforcement of a number of unprecedented austerity measures, which signify the economic and social disorganization of the country, along with the media's selective discourse which concentrates on the Greek crisis rather than austerity. As such, measures have not been implemented in any other EU country before (Lapavitsas et al, 2010) and

the possible political and social consequences have not been effectively calculated or, in many respects, even anticipated. In 2016 the national debt stood at 185% of GDP, according to the European Commission (2016). Further reductions in salaries, pensions and investments are anticipated according to the latest Memorandum of Understanding (European Commission, 2015), and capital controls were instituted in June 2015 to limit both the amount of money that Greeks could withdraw and send abroad. The severe measures have been accompanied by similarly severe political complications, as during 2015 Greeks had to elect and re-elect the current coalition government consisting of a far left (Syriza) and a far right (Independent Greeks) party, who together formed a marginal majority in the Greek parliament. These elections also led to the Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party being elected as the third most powerful party in the Greek Parliament. Furthermore, a referendum also took place in July 2015, which received over 60% of the Greek vote against the latest austerity measures.

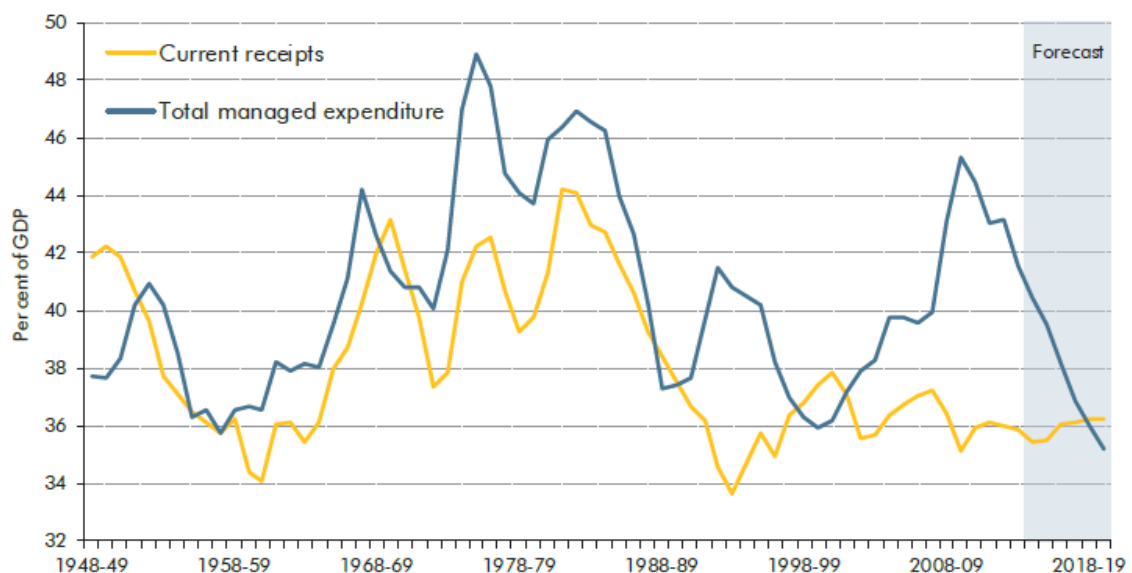
The crisis has particularly affected the lives of young people in greater intensity compared to other groups (Kretsis, 2014). The main areas of young people's lives that have been altered significantly are unprecedented youth unemployment rates (Kretsis, 2014) and massive youth emigration of waves of qualified and over qualified young people (Labrianidis/Λαμπριανίδης, 2011). Given the high rates of youth unemployment, a high, albeit unidentified, number of graduates have emigrated, most of whom are overqualified, probably over 120,000 young professional (Koniordos, 2016). A large part of Greek youth or 'new generation' (as this young age cohort has been defined by Manheim, 1997; Joshi et al 2011), has formed large waves of highly

qualified professionals migrating to EU, US and Canada (perhaps the highest ever) as limited prospects of professional stability or improvement are offered back home. Chalari (2014a) has highlighted that the narratives of the younger generation in Greece reveal experiences of uncertainty, disappointment, pessimism, insecurity, fear, anger, negativism, pressure, anxiety and depression. She further argues (Chalari, 2015) that the prospect of unemployment is what younger Greeks (aged 20-30) mainly worry about. Although Greeks (and particularly the younger people) are suffering the negative consequences of the prolonged austerity measures, limited evidence is available regarding any form of collective form of resistance. Although a large number of anti-austerity protests have been organised in Greece (and Southern Europe) since 2010, according to Karyotis and Rudig (2013) only 29% of their interviewees stated that they had engaged in a protest against austerity measures. Such evidence indicates the relevantly limited collective reaction (particularly deriving from younger people) towards austerity in Greece. Edmunds and Turner (2005:562), in their work on emerging global generations, also explain that generations alter from being passive into becoming politically active and self-conscious, when they are able to exploit recourses (political/educational/economic), to innovate in cultural, intellectual or political spheres. It therefore seems that the Greek younger generation remains rather passive, as it has not been able yet to exploit adequately any available resources.

In the UK, it was the election of a coalition government in 2010 that signified a focus on 'deficit reduction', as expressed through the austerity measures in public expenditure and specifically social policy

expenditure. As Johnson (cited in Erlanger, 2015) states, ‘by historical standard there has been significant austerity’ in the UK. For example, there has been £36 billion worth of public expenditure cuts at the end of 2014, with another £55 billion worth of cuts planned for 2015-2019 (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2014). This means that, as Graph 1 shows below, at the time of writing total public expenditure is projected to fall to its lowest levels in 80 years by 2018-19.

**Graph1.** Total public expenditure and receipts, 1948-2019.



Source: OBR, 2014.

Following the notorious statement in 2012 regarding Greek corruption, of the Greek socialist politician Theodoros Pangalos “We all ate it together” (e-kathimerini.com, 2012) a consistent and totemic slogan from the British government in relation to its austerity measures is that ‘We’re all in this together’, meaning that the impacts of austerity have been shared among different groups. However, this claim has been challenged by a number of authors (see, for example, Steans and Jenkins, 2012; O’Hara, 2014; Bradshaw and Main, 2014). In particular, such authors argue that the effects of austerity are unequally

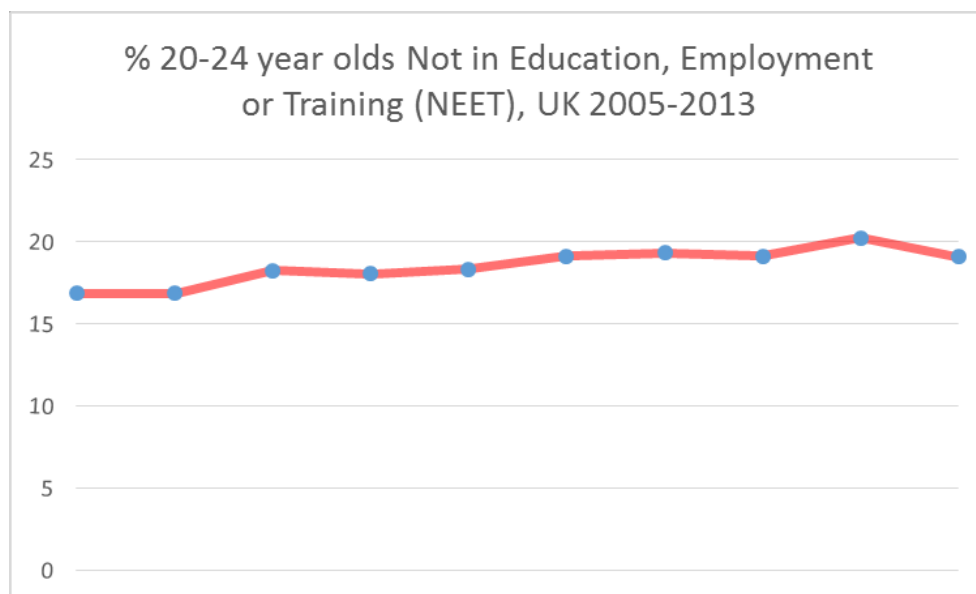
distributed, and it is young people for whom the cuts have had the most effect in a number of ways. For example, since 2010 young people in UK have seen continuous changes in their entitlement to social policy benefits. In some instances, benefits have been removed altogether, such as in relation to the Education Maintenance Allowance for young people in further education. Young peoples' benefits have also been cut and made more selective, such as in relation to the Connexions careers advice service, and the Youth Service which has seen up to 2000 jobs lost and around 350 youth centres closed (Unison, 2015). But perhaps the most evident social policy change has been the tripling of higher education tuition fees from £3,000 to up to £9,000 per year, a change which was strongly resisted by many young people, but which nonetheless was carried through. As Sealey (2014:89) observes, 'This and other changes [have] eroded young people's social rights in important areas of social welfare, such as employment and housing, [resulting] in a shift for young people away from dependence on the state to a prolonged period of dependence on themselves and/ or their family'.

However, the possibility of such dependence on themselves especially has been undermined by changes that have occurred in the labour market, wherein according to Blanchflower (2015) it is the young who have been the biggest losers of austerity in the UK, as they often cannot get jobs, and even when they do they are often temporary, low-paid and with fewer hours than they would like. For example, youth unemployment is at a record high and three times higher than unemployment for older adults (Hills, 2015). This is evident in Graph 2

below, which shows the occurrence of 20-24 NEET status (Not in Education, Employment or Training) between 2005-2013.

As Graph 2 shows, the % of NEET young people increased continually, peaking at just over 20% in 2012. And although NEET status has declined recently, it is still higher than the OECD average (Mirza-Davies, 2015).

**Graph 2.** % of NEET 20-24 year olds, UK 2005-2013.



*Source: OECD, 2015*

Such continual increases in NEET and the evident lack of policy action addressing it suggest an indifference towards young people in policy (Sealey, 2014). This indifference has been compounded for young people by increases in their income disadvantage that have occurred at the same time. For example, Emmerson et al (2015) identify that while real earnings have fallen across the board since 2008, there has been ‘a clear pattern’ of larger falls in earnings at younger ages, meaning that young adults have been one of the groups for which such falls have been the most substantial. One reason for this is that cuts in real hourly wages

that have occurred since 2009 have been most severe for workers aged 25 to 35 (Lupton, 2015). Additionally, 'under-employment' (defined as workers working fewer hours than they would like), has also 'disproportionately' affected young people (ibid). This has meant a widening of the 'intergenerational gap' in incomes and wealth since 2010, wherein 'those on lower incomes and those in younger age groups are now less financially secure than on the eve of the downturn' (Broughton et al, 2015:4). Such an intergenerational gap is increasingly evident in areas such as home ownership, with falls in the likelihood of owning a home and increasing household debt, as well as the tripling in student tuition fees outlined above. Specific social policies have also widened this intergenerational gap, such as the 'triple lock' guarantee for the state pension, which has ensured that pensioners' income and living standards have fallen far less than those of young people. More recently, the social policy marginalisation of young people has continued, as evident in recent proposals from the main political parties, such as removing entitlement to housing benefits from some of those aged 18–21, and the tightening of the system of entitlement to jobseeker's allowance for those aged under 21. Perhaps not surprisingly in the context of such austerity, young people's subjective experiences suggest that the current welfare system is failing them in a number of ways (YMCA, 2014).

There have been two discernible instances of resistance to such austerity changes from young people. Firstly, in 2010 there were several countrywide demonstrations against the tripling of student tuition fees, with the main one in London attracting up to 50,000 mainly young people. Secondly, in 2011 several cities in the UK experienced

disturbances and riots over a week-long period. Those involved were mainly young and male, and demonstrators outlined a number of motivating grievances for their involvement – from the increase in tuition fees, to the closure of youth services, and the scrapping of the education maintenance allowance (Lewis et al, 2011). However, perhaps emblematic in this respect was the fact that not only were the central claims of these and related instances of resistance ignored, but the political discourse articulated in their aftermath, particularly after the riots, suggested that the response should focus on a tough, criminal justice reaction to the ‘troublesome youth’ who caused the riots (Cooper, 2012). Prime Minister David Cameron, in particular, was keen to make this point in his speech to the House of Commons a few days after the 2011 riots:

*The young people stealing flat screen televisions and burning shops; that was not about politics or protest, it was about theft ... At the heart of all the violence sits the issue of the street gangs. Territorial, hierarchical and incredibly violent, they are mostly composed of young boys, mainly from dysfunctional homes. (Hansard, 2011)*

This was stated despite the fact that the majority of those charged were actually ‘adults’, not ‘juveniles’ (Ministry of Justice, 2012). This dual response of ignoring and pathologising young people’s initial resistance to austerity may go a long way to explaining why subsequently, instances of resistance have not been as evident. Additionally, the Brexit referendum in July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016, revealed that younger voters were much more likely to vote in favour of United Kingdom to remain as a part of the EU (BBC, 2016). This may be an additional indication that the younger generation in Britain remain unable to control their own future



as the older generations decided the destiny of Britain as a non-EU member, whereas the younger generation will actually be the one who is going to bear any long-term consequences of this decision.

It is therefore evident that although UK and Greek economies are not equally affected, and therefore austerity measures are concentrated in different areas and perhaps are implemented in different ways, the younger generation, as a population group, has been affected in a profound and intense way. Perhaps the main difference compared to older generations is that the younger generation has not been able to secure forms of social, political and economic privileges enjoyed by previous generations. As a result, any kind of austerity measures aiming at a present or future change of social, economic and political circumstances leaves them more exposed compared to older generations, who might (although not necessarily) have had the chance to secure some kind of safety net (through education, employment, pension rights, secured property) (Chalari, 2015).

### **3. Methods**

This research builds on previous research carried out by Chalari (2014; 2015), and replicates qualitative methods used in the previous study as a way to compare the experiences and responses of participants in the two countries as closely as possible. As in the previous study (consisting of 36 in-depth interviews with Greek participants), we employed semi-structured interviews, with the questions from the previous study as a guide. In line with accepted ethics guidelines, researchers ensured that factors such as voluntary participation, informed consent,

confidentiality, anonymity, and data storage were adhered to during the research process. An opportunistic sampling process was used, as participants were undergraduate social science students at the University of Worcester. Research consisted of twenty semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting on average 60 minutes. Transcribed data was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013). The thematic analysis process entailed the systematic familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and writing up of the transcribed data.

## **4. Findings**

### 4.1 Context of current circumstances

This section compares and contrasts the similarities and differences in participants' current circumstances, principally their economic circumstances. It highlights how austerity impacts on participants' everyday lived experiences.

#### 4.1.1 Personal circumstances

Participants were asked about the particular effects of austerity on their personal circumstances, and some highlighted specific impacts, either to themselves or to other family members. These included problems accessing healthcare, lack of money, having to work more than one job to make ends meet, and rising costs in relation to food. A number of British respondents identified the current labour market as a specific concern, with high unemployment in particular as a significant issue, but this was mainly in terms of impacting on others rather than themselves.

The concerns about unemployment in particular were similar to those made by the younger participants in the Greek study.

The specific impacts of welfare cuts were detailed in a number of ways such as lack of youth facilities, curtailed access to health services, reductions in benefits paid to certain groups, and changes in living standards. A number of participants identified the effect of the welfare cuts on families as a particular concern:

*I think looking for work is a big one because there's just not as many jobs out there especially with the service sector cuts and stuff like that. It just affects everything like food and how much money families have then that can affect education and what sort of an education you get. (C2P2)*

This particular concern with welfare cuts is in contrast with the Greek study, where there seemed to be a more general concern with the impact of personal labour changes such as salary reductions, losing their jobs or being unable to find a job. This might mean: a) UK offers a more advanced welfare support system and therefore any cuts have real effects on many people, and/or b) British people rely much more on welfare support compared to Greeks who rely more on family support (due to lack of welfare state).

Participants were also in the main aware that their economic circumstances in general for young people had changed in relation to previous generations. This was related to the housing market, but particularly to the change in the labour market away from being able to achieve employment on an almost continuous basis, as described below:

*... so I think that compared with, say, two generations like my grandparents' parents who just walked out of school and get a job straight away and so did my mum to a certain extent she's been in the same job for like 28 years or something. And I don't think that opportunities there as much for people my age. (C2P2)*

Two particular consequences of this were a shift away from reliance on the welfare state to having to rely either on family members for support or on their own self, as indicated below:

*Yeah, I think currently with the current government we have that it's more on yourself I don't think that's a positive or negative thing but I think it's more in we should be working to make our own personal lives and values better rather than relying on state funding. (C3P3)*

In comparison to the responses of Greek participants, family has been the main support system for the younger generation in terms of economic and emotional difficulties and needs. The contribution of the state is limited, and perhaps for this reason it is not even discussed by the participants.

#### 4.1.2 Increased tuition fees

As all the participants were students, they would all have been affected by the increase in tuition fees in 2011, from £3000 to up to £9000, as well as the increased shift from grants to loans, and this was something that was specifically outlined. One particular consequence of this was a need to work, and the majority of participants worked, some in more than one job, or had to rely on other family members for financial support. As a result, interviewees expressed a specific anxiety about life post-university, especially the possibilities for finding financially

rewarding work, and particularly about their ability to pay back their student loan in the future:

*Yeah, well obviously I'm gonna have a high debt which means I probably won't be able to get a mortgage till I'm older and it's just not that great having a lot of debt I think if I would have enjoyed myself more at uni I wouldn't have had this on my shoulders as well so. (A7P7)*

This was not the case for all participants however, and there were quite a few who were not particularly worried about the effect of the tuition fees. There were a variety of reasons for this, such as not seeing it as a debt, not concerned about the £21,000 payment threshold, the possibility that it could get written off, and seeing the education they were receiving as value for money in the longer term in relation to the income they would earn:

*Yeah, yeah, I think like knowing I've learnt how much we have to pay off an when like it's the whatever we're earning above £21,000 for example not the whole lot gets taken away, and then it gets written off after 30 years. But also my degree will really take me to a career rather than doing another degree which I still have to do then, so yeah that's the reason the good degree itself is valuable. (M3P3)*

The status of being a student had a contradictory impact on participants' current circumstances. On the one hand, the financial consequences of going to University meant that there was a degree of pessimism about the debt that resulted from it, as also indicated in the quote above, and this was reflected in the other responses.

On the other hand, for some participants the fact of being a student had improved their economic circumstances and made them feel better off:

*Well, like I said before I feel very guilty because I'm better off, I'm as a student even though I know most of it is loans, I'm living a better life than when I was that's generally because I've moved 130 miles. But then it's hard to look back, I'm very grateful for where I am but then I want everyone else to be happier. (A3P3)*

The entire discourse regarding the negative or positive effects of the increased tuition fees is at odds with the narratives of Greek participants, as in Greece higher education remains (in most cases) free of charge. The status of a student in the Greek context is usually perceived in two ways: a) a kind of 'privileged' position as the expenses associated with the student's studies are primarily covered by the family (although very often students work part-time on a temporary basis to support their income); or b) a kind of 'deprived' position as students are usually seen as a potentially qualified unemployed work force. In both cases, tuition fees do not constitute a main concern.

#### 4.1.3 Comparison with other countries

Furthermore, a number of participants stated that their current economic circumstances were good, or that they felt or were feeling better off than before. For some, this feeling of being better off was a result of a direct comparison of the situation in other countries:

*...I'm aware that we're in a better position than other countries so that's good. (M3P3)*

*I'd say they were improving but I think we've got a long way to go currently, I think it's better than some other*

*countries I think in the EU but not as good as others. (C3P3)*

*I think over here in the UK we're better off than most other countries, but other countries are suffering more and things like that. Yeah, so I'd say we're better off than others, but we've not always been like that. (A7P7)*

*Erm, I mean I think that in Britain we are really we do really well like we are a western country for such a small island really, we do do quite well just think there's some things that need to be sorted out. Yeah, but I mean I feel I don't feel great about it but I think that I am very pleased and happy and grateful to be born in Britain considering the economic circumstances. (A5P5)*

This is in contrast to the Greek participants, who unanimously and unequivocally agreed that the economic situation had gone from bad to worse. So whereas uncertainty and insecurity were the main themes from the Greek interviews, this was not the case for the British interviews.

To summarise this section, there were specific impacts on British participants as a consequence of austerity, and this impacted on their current circumstances. The most obvious impact was in relation to the increase in tuition fees, but there were also impacts in the labour market and other welfare provisions, as with the Greek participants. There were some negative outcomes from these changes as described by participants, but we would perhaps have expected the participants as young people to be more pessimistic and anxious about the changes that have occurred, as was the case with the Greek participants, bearing in mind that it is young people who have borne the brunt of welfare changes. However, a significant proportion saw either no negative

impact or positivity in the changes to their circumstances, especially in comparison to other groups, and this is a significant difference from the Greek participants. This was primarily linked to being a student, which seemed to cushion the impact of the changes on British young people, whereas the Greek young people were not necessarily students and so were not cushioned in the same way.

## 4.2 Emotions

This section provides a comparison of the emotions expressed by participants in their response to austerity. Its focus is on how austerity is driving these emotions, and concomitantly how these emotions are driving their actions.

### 4.2.1 Similarities in emotions

Both British and Greek participants shared feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, worry about high unemployment rates, and concerns that the future would be worse. They all detailed that economic restrictions were being experienced first-hand and this resulted in prolonged feelings of pessimism and disappointment. Most of the British participants reported negative and pessimistic feelings about the future and especially about the prospects for unemployment, and expressed anger and worry that new cuts would be introduced and unemployment rates would increase. Additionally, many British participants expressed the fear that things would get worse, and expressed pessimism for the next generation of young people:

*I feel sorry for the next generation. Erm, I think it's gonna be harder for them when they grow up, especially as a parent myself that's why I have my concerns of how my*



*little one's gonna get on and how he's gonna be able to progress in the way that the situation is at the moment.*  
(A2:P2)

Greek participants also reported clearly negative projections about the future of Greece and fears about even more difficulties. This negativism is quite clearly expressed through their pessimism about the future and how hard they have to try in order to live with such uncertainty and to adjust to the new reality.

British participants' negativity about the situation was also expressed through disappointment with and disconnect from the government. This disconnect made itself apparent in a feeling of powerless and a concomitant disengagement from wider society:

*...a lot of people feel quite disengaged from like society on things like that...Like they don't feel like they have the power to change anything so they just kind of go along with it as such but don't agree with it.* (C2P2)

Similarly, Greek participants of all ages, regardless of social/economic class, gender, geographical area, displayed a lack of trust and disengagement towards the government.

#### 4.2.2 Differences in emotions

A key difference between the emotions expressed by participants of the two countries was the emphasis given towards anxiety. While both did express anxiety, the way they expressed them was different.

The frustration reported by certain (not all) British participants described circumstances of suffering which not only related to themselves, but also to others, especially in relation to other students as detailed above. The

reported feelings of frustration about the current situation was not so much on a personal level, but about the impact of the welfare cuts on others. For example, a central (and repeated) worry raised by various British participants concerned the current and prospective enlargement of inequality:

*But generally speaking not personally I would say quite pessimistic in terms of the wider public might not because of the growth and inequality and everything that goes with it. (A4P4)*

Such narratives reveal the increased anxiety about the current but also the anticipated future circumstances on a personal and more collective level, a concern that was also evident in the Greek responses.

Anxiety was also reported by British participants in relation to class and a class divide:

*I think there's gonna be a divide whether the people who are like higher that class and whether you've got the work in another class. (A6P6)*

Such an expression of anxiety was not revealed in the Greek responses. One of the reasons for this difference might be that although class in Britain is somewhat implicit and unspoken about (The Independent, 1998; Cannadine, 1998), in Greece it is more explicit, and therefore not such a surprise as it is to British participants. This means that austerity has made the class inequalities more evident to British participants, hence the strong emotions regarding this topic. This is in contrast to Greek society where class consciousness is not as structured, which results in a more fluid class structure in Greece, and hence less of a point of issue to Greek participants.

#### 4.2.3 Fear vs transformation

The specific question asked to British participants in relation to austerity was 'This research is about austerity in the U.K. What do you understand about austerity'. This question was not asked in the same way while collecting data in Greece. However, Greek participants repeatedly spoke of a 'Greek Crisis', even if they did not use the words 'austerity' or 'economic recession'. Rather, they were clearly experiencing collectively a prolonged period of an 'economic, political and social crisis'. It seems that the kind of impact the 'crisis' has on young Greek participants has to do with the experience of specific negative and rather harmful feelings like those of uncertainty, depression, anxiety and fear about the future. It seems that the 'crisis' is experienced as something like 'a new modus vivendi' radically different and new, primarily characterised by fear and uncertainty and usually associated with a disastrous outcome.

However, British 'austerity' is not experienced as a new 'modus vivendi', but rather as a gradual or even on-going transformation, or as an on-going suffering process, and as something that will affect the future rather than the present.

*I think that the quality of life will kind of decrease for a greater proportion of people in the UK, because of the cuts that are having to be made, and the focus that the government are putting on [the cuts]. (M3P3)*

*I think it can go one of two ways but I think it's gonna go one way, I can't see that it's gonna really change in terms of economically at all, I can't see that it's gonna get any better for like working classes or anything like that. (C2P2)*

*I'm hoping that obviously the economy's just gonna kind of grow and just get kind of stay stable or just keep getting better but obviously the recession came round quite quick so you never kind of, it's almost as if I'm waiting for something to go wrong but I'm obviously hoping that it's just gonna get better. (C1P1)*

We should remark here on the role of media, as the concept of Greek 'austerity' is not used as much in Greek (or even international) media. However, this is another indication of the difference in the levels of how intensively the economic recession is perceived, evaluated and ultimately experienced. The repeated use (by the media and public) in Britain of the term 'austerity' denotes and implies a 'controllable' problem, able to be resolved, rather an 'economic crisis out of control'. It also implies gradual and smoother, rather than immediate and radical, economic adjustments.

#### 4.3 Levels of optimism

There was a marked contrast in the levels of optimism, notwithstanding the pessimism outlined above. For instance, some British participants regarded the current economic situation as 'good' compared to other countries, and they also seemed more optimistic about the future:

*I'm confident that they're just gonna get better to be honest I feel like I think the progress that has been made I don't think it's all just gonna go to waste I think it's just gonna carry on getting better. (C1P1)*

Some realised that they were in a better situation because as students they had access to a steady income from tuition fees, and felt lucky as a consequence of this, and had optimism that a university degree would secure a better future:

*...now I know I stand a chance of getting that so I do have optimism there. (A4P4)*

None of the Greek participants expressed any kind of optimism, although many of them were students who had similarly secured the funding for their studies (through family support). They did not feel that any degree might help them to get a job and they were focused on what was going to happen after they graduated rather than evaluating their privileged status as students. For example, the notion of leaving the country as a response to the current economic circumstances was something that was evident in a number of the Greek respondents, but this was not mentioned once by the British respondents. Thus, there is a contrast, wherein it seems that the kind of impact the 'crisis' has had on young Greek participants is particularly damaging. This orients the crisis period experienced as something radically different and new, and the definitive feeling that things will ultimately end badly. However, the British participants' experience is of a gradual or even ongoing transformation that could eventually end up making things worse particularly for people with lower income.

To summarise the analysis, there were similarities in terms of the negativity and pessimism towards the future expressed by participants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this negativity and pessimism made itself apparent in a disappointment and disconnect with not only the government, but also a concomitant disengagement from wider society. On the other hand, while anxiety was a key emotion expressed by participants in both countries, this was expressed in different ways, collectively in Britain and individually in Greece. The expressions of anxiety towards growing class inequalities in Britain presented a

particular contrast. For Greek participants, it seems that the ‘crisis’ is being experienced as something like a new ‘modus vivendi’ radically different and new, primarily characterised by fear and uncertainty and usually associated to a disastrous outcome. This is in contrast to the British experience as a gradual, long-term transformation, or as an ongoing suffering process, and as something that will affect the future rather than the present. And while none of the Greek participants expressed any emotions of optimism, this was in contrast to the optimism of certain British participants. This orients the emotions experienced by the Greek participants as definitively bad, which is divergent from the British participants’ emotions as something which could eventually end up making things worse, although not at this point in time.

## **5. Discussion**

This study revealed some similarities in participants’ experiences of austerity, but some profound differences. In both instances, we saw what we can refer to as forms of ‘social change’, which broadly concern ‘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). However, as Pinqart and Silbereisen, (2004: 289) observe, social change ‘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’. In this context, one particular difference was how 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. Thus, they experienced the changes as akin to the disorganization of the social, political and economic system, which was followed by 'challenging customary interpretations of reality and undermining established routines' (Elder, 1974: 10). 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.

That anxieties and tensions were evident is not surprising when considering, as set out in the introduction, UK youth are the demographic for whom austerity has had the most negative impact within the UK, in terms of policy changes and outcomes. Within the research, some of these negative impacts were apparent, such as an increased level of debt, the increased reliance on self, and the concern with rising inequality. From such outcomes we could expect participants' responses to reflect research studies which have shown that the effects of austerity measures are affecting young people more strongly than

other groups (Hamilton et al, 2014). On the contrary, however, what is striking is the level of optimism and positivity for the future that certain 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. This acceptance and concomitant optimistic outlook could also explain the lack of direct resistance shown by the participants to the austerity changes in general, as evident in the interviews.

One of the reasons for this optimism for the future was from the status of being a student, which seems to have shielded students from the worse effects of austerity, and so the sample frame itself might have been a contributory factor to this optimism, and a different sample of non-students might have provided a different response. Notwithstanding this possibility, there might have been some expectations that this increased level of debt might have had a negative effect on participants' outlook, but this was not really evident. Rather, there was an explicit acceptance of the increased debt as something that could be lived with in the future, and so this did not have an effect on participants' outlook. So the question remains why such an optimistic outlook, despite the changed circumstances?

Possible reasons for this could be indeed that as they described, on the one hand the participants in the study were indeed better off than previously, and so this optimism is grounded in reality. This could be a direct impact of the increased tuition fees on participants' monetary circumstances (i.e. securing funding for studying at the University),



which improved their economic circumstances and acted to cushion participants from the worse effects of austerity. It could, alternatively, be reflection of the primarily lower middle class background of students who were interviewed. Despite being from such a background, the participants were not the working age adults who have been typically outlined as having been most affected by the austerity measure. Other studies have referred to this and related groups as 'generation rent', struggling to access homeownership; as 'skivers', struggling to cope with cuts in unemployment benefits levels and increased sanctions; or as the 'squeezed middle', experiencing falling real wages earnings (Lupton et al, 2015). In this sense, the fact of being at University and having access to stable and secure monetary sources that they might not have previously had access to seems to have enabled them to overcome the 'precarity' that has been part of the process of deindustrialisation. This precarity has been intensified by changes associated with austerity, particularly factors leading to downward mobility such as temporary and insecure employment, causing temporary and insecure income (Standing, 2011). Rather, the UK participants' responses suggested a stability and security in their status that is in contrast to the expectation that, as young people, they would feel this 'precarity' resulting from austerity, as we find in the Greek study. Furthermore, Standing (2011:8) argues that the class characteristics of the 'precariat' are as follows:

*It consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state, making it quite unlike the salariat. And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states. Without a*

*bargain of trust or security in exchange for subordination, the precariat is distinctive in class terms.*

The research does not really support this, in the sense that the financial stability of support given to them as students seemed to provide a social contract with participants that may have accounted for their lack of impetus towards direct resistance. However, the increased UK student debt is a current austerity measure that will have a definitive impact on the future of many. For instance, there is the real possibility that while employment will be possible, employment at a level that enables them to pay back their debt is not necessarily guaranteed. This is where the notion of the precariat will have relevance in terms of limiting their ability to secure housing, to pursue leisure activities and to plan for their or their children's future.

This point 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, whereas the Greek debt problem is experienced as more of a macro-economic, social and political problem, wherein the debt from austerity is subjectively felt as something impacting on the future stability and economic prospects of the whole country, on the other hand in the British context it is more of a micro-economic individual problem, wherein the debt from austerity is subjectively felt as something that is individualised to the person, and therefore within the control of that person. This of course does not include the wider government debt. Concomitantly, the Greek circumstances show us that once debt becomes an emotional and social concern, it has the potential to have impact by facilitating prolonged experiences of disappointment,

uncertainty, fear, pessimism, insecurity, anger, pressure, anxiety and depression. In the longer term this will have implications not just for individual countries, but also for the wider European prospect for prosperity. Again, this finding may well be contingent on the chosen sample frame, and more research on this would help us to understand whether other students and other groups of young people are experiencing and responding to austerity in similar or different ways. However, what remains evident, especially after the Brexit referendum, relates to the increasing need to understand, explain and explicitly recognise the younger generation's limited access to the shaping and planning of its own future. And such recognition should perhaps be further expanded beyond British or Greek national, cultural, political or economic borders, as the younger generation has been customarily restricted in terms of future policy planning and making.

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