

Coming to Terms with the Greek Crisis: Highly Educated Young Women's Employment Struggles in Conditions of Economic Austerity

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Abstract

The global financial recession which began in 2008 has led to significant economic and social consequences for youth, with the case of Greece being a notable one in terms of severity. Repeated political-economic 'shocks' to the structure of Greek society have manifest in common situations of unemployment and underemployment. Although impacting heavily on the working classes, severe curtailments in medium-high-skilled labour have also been observed among the middle classes as well. Following these contexts, the article examines the experiences of highly educated young women in Greece ($n = 36$) as they navigate precarious employment within the midst of the Greek economic crisis. It is argued that rather than their educated status offering opportunities to deploy resources to help withstand the crisis, their high education levels create frustrations and barriers towards achieving suitable employment. These perceived mismatches between high education and low status and/or poor-quality work conditions are assessed in the context of research on emerging adulthood.

Keywords

aspiration, austerity, emerging adulthood, middle class, unemployment, youth

Introduction

Understood in the context of austerity policies in Europe and beyond (Matthijs, 2014; Overbeek, 2012), we have witnessed notable risks and hardships faced by young people during their pathways between work and education. Heightened risks of unemployment, challenges finding work appropriate for their educational skills, as well as struggles operating in work environments commonly consisting of insecure, short-term, contractual positions, all rank as common concerns highlighted (Standing, 2011; Tsekeris et al.,

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2015). Scholars have further identified this linkage between education and work as a primary feature of ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2004; Seiter and Nelson, 2011), with implications beyond financial security, impacting on emotional well-being and aspirations for future lives.

Following Arnett (2004), one component of ‘emerging adulthood’ is that the status of being ‘not quite adult’ provides opportunities for work to be exploratory, ‘laying the groundwork for an adult occupation’ (p. 9). Because their identity status as ‘adults’ is not fixed, ‘emerging adults’ commonly regard their futures as a ‘phase of possibilities’ – ‘an age of high hopes and great expectations’ (Arnett, 2004:16). As I will argue, however, the optimism and career possibilities, described by Arnett, dismiss important institutional, social, cultural, and cross-national variations in shaping adulthood transitions (Mitchell, 2006). The context of the post-2008 financial crisis witnessed in extreme form in nations, such as Greece, puts such a ‘phase of possibilities’ in considerable doubt. Since the 2008 financial crisis, Greece has seen a growth in temporary, poorly paid employment, as well as high rates of unemployment, especially among its youth. However, while young people, as a generic group, have received much attention on previous studies examining markers as unemployment (i.e. Galanaki and Leontopoulou, 2017), the gendered effects of the crisis have yet to receive scholarly attention. More specifically, whereas for young men (aged 15–29), unemployment rates in Greece fluctuated between 30.9% and 37.6% between 2011 and 2015, for women, these rates were higher during the same time frame, ranging from 45.9% and 48.1% (Eurostat, 2020).

Curtailments to medium-high-skilled labour have imposed ‘new’ risks on highly educated youth (Labriandis, 2014), in conjunction with what Antonucci (2016) argues to be a mismatch between the perceived benefits of a university education within suppressed labour markets. Studies have also documented that young women have elevated unemployment risks compared with men (Kretsos, 2013; Papadakis et al., 2015), partly as a result of shortage of available employment matching their educational qualifications (Cairns et al., 2014). Despite the progress accomplished in the last few decades with women’s entrance into the labour market and better performance in higher education, the current financial crisis has resulted in differential impacts on men and women – the focus on the latter group being the emphasis of this article.

The article draws on interviews with 36 highly educated young women in Greece. Greece serves as a fertile ‘case study’ with which to assess the long-term consequences of the financial crisis on its youth population. Rather than gaining advantage because of their class and educational status, it will be explained how these women have generally faced working conditions which are unfavourable, demotivating, and increasingly insecure. It will be argued that the majority of these young women perceived their academic qualifications as offering little payback for the opportunities of achieving a secure and stable income, or indeed for even acquiring any source of employment in some instances.

Employment and ‘emerging adulthood’ within conditions of economic austerity

Employment is a central component of ‘emerging adulthood’. In Arnett’s (2004) sample, participants referred to the importance of finding work as an expression of their

self-identities, rather than solely based on wage-based criteria. Although uncertain about the possibilities of finding good careers, for Arnett, one consequence of ‘emerging adulthood’ (e.g. delayed marital age, prolonged education, owning property) is that the discovery of good employment can occur without the added pressures of providing for family which were experienced more prominently by past generations.

Arnett’s (2004) explanations regarding the importance of work during ‘emerging adulthood’ do have plausibility, especially in nations with greater economic prosperity, and positive work opportunities for well-educated youth (i.e. degree level and above). Given considerable differences in the life chances of youth underpinned by socioeconomic status (e.g. Berrington et al., 2017; Cote & Bynner, 2008), and complicated further by gender and ethnicity, questions remain about the generalisability of the ‘emerging adulthood’ perspective in explaining employment outcomes for youth. Young people in most industrial countries face a higher risk of unemployment than the rest of the population (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Giuliano and Spilimbergo, 2009; Kretsos, 2013). Yet, the paths have become even more precarious in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and policies of economic austerity (Dietrich, 2013).

The effects of the financial crisis have not affected young people evenly. A large body of research on social class maintains that unemployment tends to affect more often the socioeconomically marginalised (e.g. Wyn et al., 2011). Recent evidence questions whether conditions of economic austerity impact solely upon working-class youth (e.g. Allen, 2016). As Antonucci (2016: 2) writes, across Europe, we have witnessed a growing ‘mismatch between the anticipated benefits of a university education and the race to the bottom in terms of living conditions during and opportunities after university’. While differences in terms of young people’s life outcomes can be observed across nations with stronger family and/or welfare systems (Antonucci, 2016), further issues concentrated on certain sectors of work also require recognition. Tsekeris et al. (2015) argue that the middle classes in Greece – those that constitute the main corpus of Greek society – are now experiencing sustained income inequality alongside the working classes (see also Molokotos-Liederman, 2016).

The presentation of middle classes as overly optimistic about their future (Arnett, 2004), in contrast to working-class young people who accept their fate and consider any work better than no work at all (e.g. Silva, 2013), requires critical assessment. More specifically, middle-class emerging adults have been described as confident about their future quality of life, financial prosperity, career achievements, and intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000; Seiter and Nelson, 2011), contrasting to working-class young people who perceive having few people to provide assistance and support (Silva, 2013). As Galanaki and Leontopoulou (2017) explain, levels of optimism towards their futures are lower among young Greeks (even those with higher education levels) compared with other nations, and in general, run counter to the view of ‘emerging adulthood’ as a period of self-exploration and optimism (Arnett, 2000).

Greece is an important case study to assess the impact of austerity policies on its youth population. In 2007, before the crisis arose, 22.7% of young people aged 15–24, were unemployed, which increased to close to half the population between 2014 and 2016 at the height of the crisis (Eurostat, 2018). These data only record those persons who register with the State as unemployed, and do not provide insight into the pay and conditions of work in

Greece, all of which have been significantly curtailed since the 2008 crisis (Drydak, 2015). The effects of unemployment have also been gendered, with women experiencing higher unemployment risk (Kretso, 2013; Papadakis et al., 2015). Unemployment for women has risen, in part, due to budget cuts in education, health, and sectors which have traditionally employed higher numbers of women (Walker, 2009). This has been consistent in other European labour markets since the recession of 2008, with women being more exposed than men to higher risks of under/unemployment (Kamerade and Richardson, 2018). Research from other austerity-hit nations, such as Portugal, finds that despite being overrepresented in tertiary-level education compared with young men, young women face considerable challenges entering work after their studies (Cairns et al., 2014). Partly, this may be the result of choices to pursue certain subjects for study, which may render job prospects weaker as a result. In the work of Cairns et al. (2014), students studying computing and health subjects were more likely to weather the storms of the crisis better than those studying the arts and humanities, for example.

Karakatsanis (2001) argues that traditionally in Greece, patriarchal norms have been responsible for why women tend to experience higher levels of unemployment than men. Greece has seen women entering the formal labour market at a time period comparably later than women in Northern European societies, which Karakatsanis attributes to traditional cultural norms regarding women maintaining the home. In Mediterranean societies, women are more likely to juggle different family duties and responsibilities than men, due to cultural expectations, and also in the absence of institutional settings caring for older people (Brenna and Novi, 2016).

Unemployment is, however, only part from the story of a wider range of difficult experiences of working conditions for these young women in Greece. As will be described through the data, working in poorly paid, temporary jobs, and often in hostile environments, are commonplace for the young women in my sample. The seeming consistency and lack of feasible end to these conditions of work further result in a status position which is more aligned with a fear of *having no job than any job*. Coming to terms with these working conditions and accepting their fates, can lead those women towards a re-orientation of a new existential order, and a renegotiation with their expectations and work–life aspirations.

Method

This study, based on interviews ($n = 36$) with Greek women aged between 20 and 37, attempted to identify the ways that the current economic and social crisis has affected their understandings and experiences of their emerging adulthood. The financial crisis in Greece has imposed considerable difficulties on young people's ability to afford property and sustain jobs, which likely impact on levels of 'independence' which are central to the 'emerging adulthood' concept (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005). Subsequently, the decision to draw on a wider range of ages than those typically associated with emerging adulthood was used to assess any potential differences in the ways that young women respond to the crisis.

The majority of those women were university-educated and from middle-class backgrounds. The multiple, and sometimes, diverse qualifications my participants had

accumulated at school and later on at university were extensive and significantly above average rates of education for Greek citizens (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Russell and O'Connell, 2001). Most of my participants were not unemployed, but rather had compromised with jobs which were below their graduate qualifications, and only a minority ($n = 6$) had what they perceived to be 'nice jobs, that is, mainly administrative positions at Universities and other institutions (e.g. law firms), with only two out of 36 participants feeling happy with their incomes'.

The research was completed in the summer of 2015. Half of the fieldwork took place in Athens, the capital and largest city of Greece, with the other half of fieldwork conducted in the city of Thessaloniki. Following initially speaking with past contacts who had graduated from universities across Greece, I was invited to attend various social and cultural events that gave me additional opportunities to speak with further associates (galleries, arts events, and historical cultural events). Those recruited from these social and cultural events were not people that I had met previously. The majority ($n = 28$) of participants were recruited following attendance at these events. The research was also advertised using flyers in unemployment centres as well as coffee shops. In total, I recruited eight participants from this method. The women who responded to my adverts had similar social and educational backgrounds to the women recruited from the snowball sample, which was in line with the sample characteristics of my research design.

All interviews, which lasted on average 90 minutes, were conducted in Greek (by the author), and were then translated and transcribed into English for coding and thematic analysis. Following Miles et al. (2014), I started by transcribing and analysing data after each interview. This approach allowed me not only to better connect to the data, but also group general topics and patterns of the findings, which I gradually narrowed down and refined to finally analyse the very specific themes which arose (DeVault, 1999). After completion of the interviews and formal thematic analysis of the interview data, I undertook a staged approach. This started with grouping general themes in the data to assess broad topics and patterns. The interviews were semi-structured through interview themes, but driven by a principle of free and open discussion, driven primarily by the participants' experiences.

Findings

Educational mismatch and the role of personal networks

This section focusses on the crucial role of education and full-time work for the journeys women face into adulthood, enabling or restricting their structural positioning in society. I will start by drawing on the highly problematic and risky transitions to work for young women, as well as the role of personal networks in achieving employment in Greece. And as will be discussed further below, the severe impact of exploitative and toxic working conditions on my participants' emotional resolve and well-being has fundamentally shifted their expectations about work and futures.

For the majority of my participants, it is the unmet expectations between education and career options, together with either continued setbacks in finding employment or otherwise hostile work conditions, which resulted in difficult life outcomes. One key

feature of the financial crisis in Greece is the shortage of work in medium-high-skilled occupations (Molokotos-Liederman, 2016; Tsekeris et al., 2015), which has impacted certain industries especially hard (e.g. arts, legal sector, social work/social services).

Eleonora's experience was typical of the majority of my sample in failing to achieve a job which matched their degree-level studies. Despite the reduction in supply of labour market opportunities, my participants still continued further studies as a means of 'keeping busy', and also with the hope conditions may change in the future. Seven years on from when Eleonora completed her undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in history, and after struggling to find work for some time, she eventually settled on the prospect of finding any job which would provide a source of income.

I can't find a job in Greece, especially a relevant one to what I've studied. And I've tried really hard to achieve those degrees . . . Sometimes I go back home and I feel emotionally empty. I've let all my dreams and wishes go wasted, plus all those years that will never come back. At the time I was studying, I was expecting a much better routine, a different pathway, different choices, better incomes . . . I was not expecting that in my 33 years I would be feeling lost and concerned about the future. I was assuming that I would have already taken decisions about my life, I would have a decent career, a family . . . I would live as a proper adult . . . (Eleonora 33, Thessaloniki)

Eleonora added that her monthly incomes were not more than 600 euros per month, an amount which did not allow her take control of her life, nor achieve financial independence. Here, the 'standardised' emerging adulthood stage, that Arnett (2000) explains, looks impossible for young women like Eleonora, whose qualifications and training failed to provide anything close to a successful 'transition to adulthood'.

In similar ways, Martha was experiencing what Antonucci (2016) described as a growing mismatch between university education and real-life living conditions. Martha described her despondency about her perceived mismatch between her academic achievements and the absence of any career options in Greece. University education is free in Greece. Yet despite being free, students are now more likely to terminate their studies because of difficulties receiving financial support from parents (Mouza, 2015). Martha stressed how much she had emotionally invested in her studies to achieve a career. When asked during the interview to expand on her feelings about her current life situation, she used a metaphor of a bicycle wheel – a representation of her 'effort' and her 'sweat and blood'. Interestingly, the majority of my participants compared their lives with friends who had moved overseas. This barometer of life expectation typically created even greater frustration and reflection that their lives were considerably worse than those that had left the country.

While the likes of Martha and Eleonora were disappointed by the mismatch of their education and work opportunities, approximately 10 out of 28 employed participants were able to frame their predicaments in alternative ways by stressing their ability to compromise and accept the societal conditions displacing their career opportunities. Roxani, for example, had completed a social science degree and after going through a prolonged period of unemployment, decided to apply for a job as a waitress in a fast food restaurant.

As soon as I reached a point where I started going crazy being at home all day, I decided that it would be nice to do any kind of work just to take my mind off. Therefore, I started working in a fast-food restaurant which I liked as an experience, because it helped me mentally very much. (Roxani 29, Thessaloniki)

Ironically, despite popular assumptions surrounding work in fast food enterprises as easy to find, Roxani emphasised that this was not the case, and only her friendship with the manager helped secure the post. Personal networks (*meson* in Greek) are common features in Greek society, increasing opportunities across different aspects of social life, including employment. The role of personal networks to achieve employment has been frequently stated in previous research (Bermeo and Pontusson, 2012; Lekakis and Kousis, 2013), yet in Greece, the significance of personal networks can be traced back to the cultural fabric of Greek society, where bartering and informal personal favours are commonplace (Konstantinidis and Xezonakis, 2013; Tsekeris et al., 2015).

A survey, conducted in 2014 by Kathimerini, demonstrated that one in three people had found a job with the help of immediate or extended family and friends, including politicians. This challenge was also shared by participants, with nearly all seeking assistance from personal networks to find work. Soula and Mina's stories are reflections on common experiences in these respects. Soula at the time of interview was completing her second master's in education, and was working part time in a local supermarket. When asked about what led her to pursue so many academic degrees, she responded that her initial hope was to 'get a good job'. Yet, while realising 'how things work in Greece', she described carrying on studying just to keep busy.

I was distributing my CVs to all the child play schools in Thessaloniki. At some point I came across a lady who was working in one of them and said to me 'because I liked you, let me ask you a question . . . Have you got any network which could help you out?' I responded 'no'. Then she said to me 'and then, why are you wasting your time going back and forth to the play schools? It doesn't work like that!' Since then my wings are broken and I never tried again. . . (Soula 28, Thessaloniki)

The shortage of employment options for well-educated young women (and men) in Greece create different kinds of vulnerabilities, increasing demoralisation, and despair faced as competition for work increases. Use of personal networks was referred to as a key part of increasing opportunities to find work, but by the same token, a major source of disappointment if no such networks existed, or if these networks did not provide pay-back. In fact, Soula, along with the majority of my participants (30 out of 36), had never directly benefitted from any political or other personal networks to gain employment, despite their social status as middle-class, university-educated young women. Unlike other research that has shown that working-class youth often struggle to find quality work, in part because of insufficient networks (e.g. Silva, 2013), for the educated, middle-class participants in my sample, there were similar experiences (See Allen, 2016).

Another common response was the perceived lack of fairness in finding work. Mina who worked as a retailer in a shoe shop, had completed her Maritime studies degree a

few years before our interview, but as she remarked, it is a sector that demands an expanded social network that she did not have. After several unsuccessful endeavours to approach key people who would offer her a job in a shipping company, Mina decided to get a job as a retailer. Her account was more political than others, with the source of her personal predicament resting on the failures of Greek society to offer opportunities:

It is not fair offering somebody a job just because they are friends with an authority figure from the Church or the Parliament. It is just so wrong. But we can't really talk about equal opportunities in Greece . . . (Mina 34, Thessaloniki)]

The mismatch between education and labour market, as well as the role of personal networks, are however only part from the story of a wider range of difficult experiences of working conditions for these young women in Greece. As will be described, working in poorly paid, temporary jobs, and often in hostile environments were commonplace for the young women in my sample. The extreme precariousness and highly toxic working conditions they confront raise several questions about the broad literature on emerging adulthood. In such contexts, the nature of work conditions and restrictions on the security of employment further place women in vulnerable social positions, independent of their position as middle-class women.

Toxic employment and its impact on the self

Of those participants who were in employment ($n = 28$), routine instances of employers violating rights and welfare were raised during interviews. These instances included depriving staff of statutory annual holiday, removing bonuses, as well as asking longer hours to be worked without being paid extra. Although negative, the biggest cost referred to by these young women was their personal well-being and lack of respect and understanding from their employers. There is evidence, for example, that in England, the timing of austerity policies has disproportionately impaired mental health, especially for younger women (Thomson and Katikireddi, 2018). Eugenia's experience was a common one shared among the participants. At the time of interview, she worked in a bakery shop in the historic centre of Athens. She called her employers 'devil' and gave me a few examples of her employers' inhumanity towards her colleagues and herself.

When I first started working there, I was in an incredible need to earn some money. Unfortunately, my employers got it and started manipulating and using me. First of all, I work for 12, 13 or even 14 hours and I don't have any rights on my tips. My employers said to me from day one 'I offer you the job, but the tips are mine'. They never pay me for the extra hours I usually work, while they pay for my insurance partially only – two days out of six. And I accepted everything. And I strongly believe that these are the outcomes of the crisis, because there are no jobs available like in the past, where you were looking for a job and you could find one within three-four days. Nowadays you don't know when and whether you will manage to find a job. We've got a massive sense of insecurity and fear! And this is something that our employers are aware of and they seize the chance to exploit us. (Eugenia 27, Athens)

These conditions of hostility also concerned the few who had remained in more middle-class modes of employment. Lena who worked as a school escort in a private school in Athens used derogatory words for herself, such as ‘rubbish’, who had been systematically treated with disrespect by her employer.

My job is rubbish. I am rubbish too. I feel like I haven’t achieved anything in my life. I am zero. I hate my working environment. I have no rights whatsoever because I work in the private sector. My employer treats me like rubbish. The other day he called me ‘stupid’ in front of the students, and he told me that I don’t do my job properly. And this annihilates me . . . Don’t call me stupid; just tell me that I’m wrong and I’ll try to get better . . . Seriously, I’ve reached a burnout point! (Lena 29, Athens)

One of the defining features of the interviews was the ways that any notions of typical middle-upper-class professions, such as teaching, medical practice, and law had also been severely affected by the crisis. This picture – that professional occupations have been affected by neo-liberal restructuring – is not solely isolated to Greece (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Russell and O’Connell, 2001), but research suggests that it has certainly been far more extensive in Greece in terms of cuts to wages and length of working hours (Featherstone, 2014; Kretsos, 2013). Kali, for example, worked as a lawyer in Athens and dealt with the indebted households since the crisis commenced. She explained how her clients’ ‘stress and anxiety lest the banks confiscated their properties’ were ‘killing’ her. People’s ‘dramas, tears and sobs’ made her feel more like a ‘counsellor’ than like a lawyer. Kali’s experience of work was deteriorated by her employer’s lack of respect and intention to exploit her as much as possible:

I hate my job . . . It doesn’t make me feel happy. It stresses me, I’ve lost my sleep. . . I feel so negative about everything . . . My job kills me. It’s been like that for over four years now, I can’t take it anymore. My soul feels black. Whatever job you do, you should be able to offload and unwind when you go back home. But I don’t have that luxury with my job because my clients call me on the phone, they shout, they swear, they sob, and it happens so constantly . . . And every time they call me I think ‘help me God, I don’t want to talk to them!’ I haven’t managed to handle my job and it has now affected my private life and well-being. (Kali 30, Athens)

Kali indicated that she received 900 euros per month, of which 330 euros were paying for her insurance. Although she had continuously requested from her employer to cover her insurance expenses, they kept responding with threats, such as ‘there is a queue of junior lawyers out there for me’. Kali had been in that profession for about 8 years, during which she had experienced a deterioration of her working conditions and relationship with both her employer and clients. The latter made her feel further hopeless about her future in the law profession, a feature quite common across my older participants, as a result of drawing comparisons pre- and mid-crisis.

As well as impacting heavily on the affective experiences of these young women, such work conditions were also directly linked to a degradation of the self. Working as an actress for several years with her husband, Antigoni had seen her incomes reduce year on year as a result of State cuts to the arts industry. In turn, most people could no longer

afford to pay for a ticket to watch her performances. After being funded by the State for a large performance, Antigoni conducted all the preparations by paying the running costs with money she had borrowed from the bank. Yet, soon after creating a substantial debt, the State's finance office advised her that there were no resources to cover her performances anymore. The latter devastated Antigoni.

The truth is that this country has broken my legs . . . My wings! I was going through a period where I was trying to develop myself as an artist and I was very knowledgeable and experienced. I got my wings broken, because I was in a phase where I had started big productions. And the crisis broke my wings. I had to hold back and restrict myself dramatically. This suffocated and distressed me very much. (Antigoni 32, Athens)

Antigoni shared her deep disappointment using the expression 'it has broken my wings', a common expression used in Greece to describe personal devastation or extreme helplessness. Antigoni also shared her conviction that structurally nothing would change for Greek people, fatalistic in her belief that the economic situation in Greece had gone from bad to worse in a short space of time. Instead of *optimistic*, as the emerging adulthood concept suggests (e.g. Arnett, 2004), the majority of my participants noted feeling rather *pessimistic* regarding their options for any career prospects, regardless of their training and efforts (Galanaki and Leontopoulou, 2017).

So far, I have presented how negative working conditions, such as long working hours, wage cuts, as well as lack of respect and understanding from employers can impact overall well-being and expectations for the future. Faced with few options to either challenge their treatment by employers, or to be able to find alternative sources of work, these young women faced obvious political and structural barriers, and also had to reconcile their personal situations within these conditions.

A reality check: compromises amid a financial crisis

As demonstrated as far, most of my participants ($n = 28$) were not unemployed, but rather had compromised with jobs which were often far below their level of education. Repeated experiences of strain and personal injustice led to some young women changing their expectations about work, from finding a good job to finding any kind of job, accepting bad working conditions because it provided an income, and disregarding the hope of finding full-time or permanent contract work. At the time of the fieldwork, Greece was in a period of deep financial crisis with over half of young people unemployed (Eurostat, 2018). Subsequently, these experiences of 'making do' or 'accepting one's fate' should be carefully understood in these contexts.

Fani is one of the many participants who had begun to change their expectations about work, compromising with bad working conditions which provided *any* kind of income. She had completed her studies in Physics 2 years before we met for the interview and tried to find a job as a teacher in a private school, only managing a small number of home tutoring hours paid at 5 euros per hour. Although Fani was not happy with her casual job, calling her earnings 'pocket-money', she argued that it was the result of the general devaluation of any academic achievement and expertise in the context of the crisis. Fani

earned up to 100 euros per month, which she was satisfied with on the basis that she *had* a job and was not unemployed.

I am not asking for lots of money. I would be happy even with 400 euros/month; because let's be honest, we all need to learn how to live with this amount only. (Fani 24, Thessaloniki)

The constant devaluation of her academic qualifications and the disappointment she experienced even before she completed her studies made Fani more adaptive and resilient to the Greek reality. Rather than challenging the fact that 400 euros were not enough to cover her monthly needs, Fani preferred to reshape her priorities.

Fani's response was also shared by other respondents, like Katia who completed financial studies and had been looking for employment in this field since graduating. After a long period of unemployment, Katia compromised with a job in a clothing company, where she worked full time. Katia felt that she was being exploited by her employers, who were not compensating her adequately for the long hours she was working. However, her long-lasting period of unemployment made her appreciate her job, which at least was allowing her to pay her bills.

Although I don't like my job, I feel very productive, because I've been in a position of being unemployed, feeling useless, waking up in the morning upset and stressed, looking up for jobs, and sending CVs literally everywhere without receiving any correspondence from anywhere. I prefer receiving 600 euros/month than nothing at all, because at least it gives me the ability to cover some of my expenses. (Katia 25, Thessaloniki)

Interestingly, Katia challenged the views of many young people whom she argued 'constantly complained' about the current socioeconomic situation in Greece, consolidating this with the argument that 'at least she had a job' and 'things could have been much worse'. That sense of gratitude for 'having a job' was common among my participants, such as Dimitra who worked for a Greek airline for over 4 years and was earning 1500 euros/month. Yet, due to financial restructuring by the company Dimitra along with 24 other colleagues lost their jobs 'within a night' without any pre-warning. Dimitra had to move on and look for another job, and she considered herself lucky for having managed to gain temporary employment as a secretary in a university in Athens.

I used to earn 1500 euros, whilst now I get 700 euros per month. Yet I still feel very lucky, as I've got friends who have been completely unemployed for long periods. I can't complain really . . . (Dimitra 32, Athens)

Dimitra explained the fact that she had to adapt herself in a working regime different to what she had known so far, within the context of having well-educated friends who were still unemployed. Like the participants above, Anna, whose dream since she was a child was to work as an archaeologist, eventually gained a part-time job in a local medical clinic. By comparing herself to her friends, who although qualified were still struggling to find a job, Anna was grateful for having a job which kept her busy and out of the house.

Although I don't like my job, I'm grateful I've got it because it keeps me busy, socialized, and I've got something to be looking forward in the morning, as I don't have to stay at home in my pyjamas all day. I get dressed, wear my make-up, I feel that people at work appreciate and love me, and feel good about that. (Anna 30, Thessaloniki)

These career explorations, far from being an active choice on the part of these women, instead are dependent on survival in a labour market which offers few aspirations. The acceptance of jobs, which were well below their graduate status, not only created a sense of disappointment and failure, but contributed to a bitter-sweet feeling – one of resignation and hopelessness, but with *some* source of income. Here, it is important to note that the younger participants seemed more open not only to the idea that they worked in professions which mismatched their qualifications, but also to the 'new rules' of the labour market which taught them how to live with the little they earned. As I have presented though, some older participants shared a similar view on becoming more resilient and accepting of their situation (i.e. Dimitra, Anna). However, these participants either still maintained more middle-class professions (secretaries at clinics or universities) and/or had rare levels of significant financial support from their parents.

Conclusion

As several scholars have argued, the deficits of the 'emerging adulthood' idea concern the failure to address how class and structural conditions of a given society impact youth employment experiences (Labrianidis, 2011; Papadakis et al., 2015). Following this deficit, the article investigated how conditions of employment are impacted by economic austerity among young women in Greece – a nation which has been at the extremes of structural change post 2008, with the consequences of the economic crisis persisting since. Three themes have been addressed.

First, the disjuncture between education and employment has recently been highlighted as a problem emerging out of the twin processes of university expansion and economic contraction seen especially in austerity-hit nations in the Mediterranean (see Antonucci, 2016). The majority of the sample of young women perceived their academic qualifications as offering little payback for the opportunities of achieving a secure and stable income, or indeed for even acquiring any source of employment in some instances. This finding corresponds to similar research in the UK, where young women do not enjoy the same return from their educational achievements compared with their male competitors during economic recessions (see Kamerade and Richardson, 2018). Personal associations were sometimes the only way to access a job, regardless of whether or not my participants invested time in high-level qualifications. Yet, even with access to such personal networks, the sheer shortage of work options placed limits on the capacities of these young women to draw on said resources. As Lodovici and Semenza (2012) describe of other austerity-hit nations, such as Spain, restrictions on career profile through precarious labour and skill mismatched employment remain an additional strain which may restrict future career options.

Second, the article focussed upon women's experiences of precariousness and difficult working conditions. The nature of work conditions and restrictions on the security

of employment place women in vulnerable social positions, independent of their position as middle-class women. The negative consequences of the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy on the middle-class professions are not unique to Greece (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Russell and O'Connell, 2001), yet in Greece, it has more extreme dimensions both in terms of wage cuts and length of working hours (Featherstone, 2014; Kretsos, 2013). Located in conditions of economic austerity, multiple forms of exploitation were discussed during the interviews, with deprivation of their annual holiday leave, insurance (with severe consequences on their future entitlement to pension schemes and healthcare cover), overtime, and bonuses being some of them.

Finally, the article shed light on those women's aspirations of employment. The extreme precariousness and highly toxic working conditions they confront raise several questions about the broad literature on emerging adulthood, in the wake of the argument that work has a key role to play in identity exploration, guided by finding the 'right match' for a career path (Arnett, 2004). Under conditions of austerity, findings indicate that these explorations are far from desirable for these young women, and moreover more accurately framed as a means of survival and compromise than 'identity development'. Charting the emotional side of unemployment or negative conditions of employment of the young women, the outcomes for these young women have been altered from aspirations of finding a good job and starting an independent life, to competing for any work, which either temporary or/and poorly paid, offer bleak hopes of financial security and stability. There are notable gender differences in how young men and women experience economic hardships following under/unemployment, with differential impact on masculinities highlighted in previous research (e.g. McDowell, 2014; Nayak, 2006). Yet, general frustrations with achieving meaningful work, as well as respectful working conditions are likely to persist for both young women and men.

This article has further challenged many of the common assumptions about the ways that gender and class operate in a structural context of high unemployment, low wages, and the impact that these processes have on my participants' everyday lives. Unlike the argument that the higher educated youth are usually able to weather the storm of economic crises more smoothly than the working classes (Silva, 2013; Tsekeris et al., 2015), there are doubts that experiences of emerging adulthood are distinctly class-based. This is largely because the impact of the crisis in Greece has been so extensive to impact a significant proportion of youth. Yet, we should be cautious in recognising that this article focusses on a sample of middle-class young women, with some degree of parental support (whether material and/or emotional). For working-class youth, the circumstances of the crisis are likely to be more extensive (Athanasziades et al., 2018).

To conclude, compared with Arnett's (2004) developmental theory, participants' feelings and experiences of instability were not the outcome of explorations of different career options, but rather the outcome of the structural deficits in crisis-affected Greece. Instability is not a choice that young people in Greece tend to make as part of an adventurous self-exploration to work (Arnett, 2004), but rather a condition that has been imposed on them by the socioeconomic situation of the country. The 'emerging adulthood' concept, while compelling and widely applied in the field of youth studies, requires closer connection with cross-cultural contexts, as well as economic cycles which impose hardships on cohorts of young people (e.g. Elder, 2018). Arnett's (2004) theory of lengthy

explorations of identity and optimism as cornerstones of 'emerging adulthood' should be understood as acutely dependent on climates of economic austerity brought about by periods of intense financial crisis, which also produce new risks on different categories of youth, including highly educated youth. These climates of austerity impose further challenges on young people whose educational investments become existentially fragile when few feasible options for secure or well-paid employment are available.

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