

## The Economic Crisis and the Rise of the Parasitic Self: A Qualitative Study of People Living through the Greek Unemployment Crisis

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Individuals who experience stress due to financial hardship have needs relating to the socio-financial crisis, with repetitive negative events, changes to beliefs, attitudes, and negative reactions toward social life. When there is a crisis, a parasitic self seems to emerge and leads to anger outbursts and social aggression, produces disorder in human relations and institutions and is organized with one-way relations that lack equal reciprocity for mutual benefit, where one exploits the other.

**Background:** Several problems and challenges exist during times of financial hardship and unemployment. This study focuses on the economic recession in Greece.

**Aim:** To explore individual reactions among educated unemployed people who are experiencing financial hardship during the financial crisis, in particular people's thoughts, behaviour, and reactions.

**Method:** The study employed a qualitative approach with descriptive thematic analysis. A total of 276 unemployed people in financial hardship answered two open-ended questions on their dominant thoughts and feelings on the Greek financial crisis. Participation was voluntary, and socio-demographics were recorded.

**Results/Discussion:** Participants' experiences of financial hardship and unemployment is the major factor giving rise to a parasitic self in the society, economy, and work where the self is angry, depends on the exploitation of others to survive and which in turn creates a cycle of socioeconomic and moral declining society. Self-sufficiency does not exist, and the person starts living at the expense of another. Using Serres's term, a social parasite is a microbe that "takes without giving and weakens without killing". Findings reflect feelings of irritation and aggression and adversely affecting mental health and emotional wellbeing. Some reported negative emotions regarding their hardship and unemployment experience. There are implications for all economic crises, including the recent Covid crisis.

**Keywords:** Socio-Economic Crisis; Mental Health; Wellbeing; Unemployment; Emotions; Self; Qualitative Research; Thematic Analysis

### Introduction

The deterioration of mental health and emotional wellbeing are both a consequence of and a risk for chronic financial hardship and unemployment increases in depression, suicide, and violent behaviour [1-5], and also a decline of an individual's perception of self-worth

and morale self-concept [6-8]. These findings are significant in the field of health and, though there is evidence that unemployment causes mental health disorders with people who have no previous mental illness [9], there is limited research and no focused interventions.

The persistence of the European financial crisis and coronavirus pandemic draws attention on the economic attainment and the citizen's wellbeing as part of each country's priorities [10-14].

Unemployment and financial hardship disrupt everyday routines, and there are adverse consequences. An established routine is important for the sense of autonomy and control that support people's sense of purpose and meaning, and any disruption of this routine may result in problems relating to moral boundaries and potentially the structure of society [15-17]. The problems in Greece's economy that began in 2007 with a debt to GDP ratio of 103.1% is a strong example of where austerity measures in Greece forced its citizens to react using formal and informal deviant behaviour [18,19] while the GDP ratio increased and reached 205.6% by 2022 [20].

According to Ezzy [21] "when a person is dissociated from established routines and relationships that normally maintain the self-concept, this sense of meaning breaks down, and the person is unable to validate their existence as a 'me'" (pg42). People have a complex self-concept but memberships of the social groups that they belong to such as "I am an historian", "I am a mother", "I am redundant" provide them with their social identity which is a sense of themselves that involves either their good fit or deviant fit membership in social groups [22-26]. Society consists of various groups which are directed by self-interest and governments which provide necessary adjustment to keep every group within its limits and ensure "automatic balance of power" in a society [27-29]. According to self-evaluation maintenance theory, if other people's actions threaten our sense of self we start engaging in thoughts and actions that aim to redefine our self-concept [30,31]. The redefinition of the self-concept develops quite independently of other people when it is driven by self-relevant based changes [32-34]. As social identity theory highlights, society often influences our concept of self and associated thoughts on how we socially interact and communicate [35,36]. Master narratives are culturally shared stories that create the story template that contribute to our self-concept and shape thoughts and behaviours [37,38].

Socially corrupt governments not only have a negative impact on the economy and upon community resilience but also on the coherence of our self-concept and our freedom of choice and self-sufficiency. Without that freedom and self-sufficiency, negative feeling-thought processes towards others emerge [25,39-44] and a social parasitic self emerges.

Here we use Michel Serres [45] term parasite, describing a microbe that exploits human relations and institutions such as society, economy and work for its survival and weakens the organisation and the growth of others in what they could be. As Serres notes, it is a one-way relationship to exploit others. Through people's negative experiences, negative thoughts and irritation, a greedy creature arises that takes without giving.

Repetitive feeling-thought processes, depending on their valence and quality of the stimuli, may become part of a personality trait or part of a psychopathological condition [46,47]. Despite extensive research on the positive association between socioeconomic deprivation, negative life events and psychological distress [48-50], there has been limited research exploring how socio-financial hardship leads to emotions that are potential precursors of personality disorders in which a person has distorted thinking patterns, functioning and behaving [51-53]. Notably, untreated personality disorders can result in personal economic burdens and societal costs [54].

There is a relationship between symptoms of traumatic stress and personality disorders such as antisocial behaviour and although it remains unclear to what extent this relationship exists, individuals are more likely to develop personality disorders and experience traumatic reactions when exposed to extreme stressors [55-59]. A traumatic response may be sparked by shocking, worrying, and frightening physical or psychological events, either experiencing it or witnessing it [60]. Such symptoms may arise through social and economic factors. Though economic disasters are common, we rarely hear of the impact on people, although they can be mass traumatic events that involve many people and are frequently accompanied by loss of property, economic hardship on a large scale, emotional abuse and potentially a threat to one's life as for instance in the COVID-19 pandemic [61-64]. Traumatic events of any sort may become central to a

person's identity and life story and influence the development of symptoms of trauma with maladaptive coping and behaviours [65,66]. A meta-analysis showed that negative appraisals about the self and negative appraisals about the world were strongly related to trauma symptoms [67].

Long lasting repetitive negative events can cause traumatic memories that form a core element of identity, act as a reference point for everyday inferences and can cause a repetitive cycle of maladaptive behaviour [68,69]. Studies [70-72] agree with Maslow's hierarchy of needs [73] and illustrate that behaviour is multi-motivated with the need to feel accepted, worthy, and belonging. A failure to accomplish that results in anxiety or worry, a facet of neuroticism and possible maladjustment [74-76]. Roger's theory of personality [77] pinpoints that when a discrepancy develops between the self and experience, a state of incongruence with confusion and tensions exists. This discrepancy produces behaviours incomprehensible to the individual and others. When incongruence exists (the neurotic behaviour as Rogers called it), then the individual is vulnerable to anxiety, threat, and disorganization. Similarly, master narratives when intertwined with personal narratives interfere to individual development and identity with ethical and moral implications [78]. In support of this, exploratory studies showed that narratives of challenging experiences maybe central to the relationship between variability in narrative identity and trajectories of mental health over several years [79]. On the same lines, Izard [46,80] shows that the frequency of basic negative or positive emotions varies and is influenced by individuals' genetics or emotional character. Negative basic emotions (sadness, anger, disgust, and fear) typically run over a brief time span and may be perceived as emergencies. The frequent or constant presence of basic negative emotions in individuals' everyday routine may signal the existence of a mental health problem such as anxiety and disorders of emotional regulation such as angry outbursts [81,82]. Unemployment and financial hardship create extended levels of high stress and in many cases, lead to psychopathologies such as PTSD, anxiety disorder or clinical depression [83-85]. Additionally, unemployed people may have a fragile self-esteem, hold multiple conflicting views about the self that simultaneously influence their behaviour in a negative direction. Chronic *unemployment* may erode morale, drive people to extremism and urge them towards violent conflict [86-89]. A global meta-analysis on the association between socioeconomic status and antisocial behaviour showed that lower family socioeconomic status is associated with higher levels of antisocial behaviour [90]. Feeling useless as an effect of unemployment on mental health may cause aggressive tendencies and a "parasitic self" emerges [91,92]. The Center for Disease Control defines parasite as "an organism that lives on or in a host organism and gets its food from or at the expense of its host" [93]. The lens of parasitism can help understand the destabilization of the self-concept and the redefinition of the self with aggressive tendencies and impaired social functioning. It helps explain people's need to feed on others as a mean of supply. The aim of the parasite is to stay alive and function at the expense of another as they don't have the freedom of choice to define or redefine their self and self-worth autonomously elsewhere.

This article explores how people facing ongoing uncontrollable stressors such as unemployment and financial hardship, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, can experience personality change. It aims to create a framework to explore specific events such as unemployment and financial hardship that may produce distorted perceptions but consistent emotional reactions that lead to personality change and a "parasitic self" which works against the self and/or others.

## Methodology

### Study design and setting

The study utilizes an inductive qualitative approach that involves understanding of participants lived experience and uses grounded theory [94-96]. The study was carried out in Greece.

### Recruitment

Ps were recruited between 2015 and 2017 from social networks, a Hellenic mental health webpage and a Hellenic financial newspaper. An information letter about the study's aims, procedure, confidentiality, and the right to end participation from the study at any time was provided with the consent form.

## **Sample**

The uncertain future and psychosocial stressors in the working environment influence all workers but white collar workers maybe more affected [97]. Purposeful sampling was selected to ensure rich data and provide insight into the research questions. The selection criteria included men and women aged over 20 years, employed or unemployed, with a higher education degree (BA/BSc, MA/MSc, PhD). It has been argued that white-collar workers experience job loss with more function conflict, stress and other adverse psychological effects than blue-collar workers [98,99]. The exclusion criteria included long-term illness, and self-employment.

There were 276 Ps (65% female, n = 179, and 35% male, n = 97) with a mean age of 38.6 (sd 12.27). most were residing in Athens (85%). Most experiencing financial hardship (61%). More than one in four were unemployed (26%) with 13% stated that their current employment status was "other" (pensioner, studying, temporary work).

## **Study and translation**

The study included two open-ended questions to allow Ps to comment on their thoughts in relation to the socio-economic crisis [100]. The questions were: 1) What types of things have made you upset in your society? and 2) How did you react to those situations?

All questions were in Greek. Questions were translated into English prior to analysis by an English Literature professor and a Special Needs Physical Education Sports instructor with the assistance of the first author. The English Literature professor has dual Greek and Canadian nationality, lives in Greece, with more than 20 years of experience in translation. The Special Needs Physical Education Sports instructor has dual Greek and British nationality and lives in both countries. This process followed the rigorous word by word translation actions suggested by Brislin [101] whereby accuracy was checked by back translation from English to Greek.

## **Data analysis**

Grounded theory was used to systematically search for patterns within the data and to attempt to capture its qualitative richness [96,102]. The inductive analytic process led to "codes", words and phrases that served as labels for sections of data, which helped develop deeper appreciation of the content [103,104].

Grounded theory is a methodology for developing theory that is founded in data systematically gathered and analysed (inductively) and involves the progressive identification of categories of meaning from data, offering analytic categories that share central characteristics with one another was applicable to the area of inquiry [102,105]. Putting the essential analytical constructs (or building blocks) into grounded theory, grouping together instances (events, processes) follows Aristotle's intentional process of consciousness (noesis and noema) that this study adapts as its ontology [106].

## **Ethical approval**

The study obtained research ethics approval from the university of Nottingham, United Kingdom.

## **Results**

Financial hardship and unemployment had a negative influence on psycho-social health. The two key themes that emerged were I) social decline, and II) the parasitic self.

### **Theme I: Social decline: Income inequality and ethical issues**

Participants felt shocked from the threat-effect of financial crisis in their country and everyday life. Everything was seen to happen for profit and there was financial hypocrisy among the leaders while there are pay cuts without reducing hours, unpaid labour, undeclared workers, high tax invasion, and "Indifference to other people, fake hypocrisy" (P28). Society was seen as going through a great change: "Everything is happening for profit and only one law exists, 'your death = my life.' It is inconceivable that people should die from hunger just because some others do not care, or do not have the intelligence to understand. Let's not mention the 'popularity' of fascist monkeys, people appearing as saints offering love but giving hatred" (P14).

The austerity measures in Greece forced its citizens to react using formal and informal deviant behaviour [18,19]. The perceived excessive regulation and the corruption of some financial institutions led to antisocial behaviour [107] and even fascism [108]. Under Greek law, articles 312 and 121 of the penal code, antisocial behaviour is defined as socially unacceptable behaviour which is contrary to a legal-criminal rule [109]. Economic crises are related to aggressive behaviours [110] and highlight that socio-cultural factors influence the behaviour of people, and how exploitation, political exclusion and unequal access to resources results in people being desensitized within society.

Exploiting others in harmful ways is also perceived as part of a government which obliges citizens to make unfavourable decisions regarding their career choices [111] and social factors such as having to move from rural areas for economic reasons [112].

A perceived lack of meritocracy, corruption, and the punishing economic crisis in Greece since 2009 are the main reasons that forced Greeks to emigrate [113,114]. However, there are incomplete or ambivalent evaluating criteria for achieving a meritocracy. There is a: "Lack of meritocracy in the system, with greed, being too weak to accomplish our goals, and being forced to follow a different - unwanted - professional path" (P20).

Government figures are the source for the sense of participants' feelings of: "Injustice, unfair treatment, nepotism, [a] refusal to change" (P81). Social and personal networks have a: "Lack of fairness. All are based on self-interest and knowing the right people to find a job, knowing the right people is more important than qualifications" (P246). The elements of greed and unlawful actions interfere with and promote incompetence and poor performance in society.

### **Theme II: Parasitic Self: a socially angry person who only takes without giving**

Participants suggested that the synonym of unemployment is "Unemployment and not providing people with opportunities" (P238). However, work is not the only opportunity that participants are deprived of. Lack of money introduces many complications in daily life and taxes, violence by the state and unfair and partial legislation creates a dead end for the people who start feeling that there is nothing they can do to help themselves and the others: "Unemployment and social injustice. It is unfair for people not to have the necessary things for their survival" (P192). Deprivation of opportunities, injustice and double standards in the world leads first to helplessness and then the inequality provokes anger [115,116]. Subjective experiences of inequality influence the way participants feel and their social behaviour: "Unemployment is the main concern of today regardless of age. I feel helpless to help people in need that once had a home and now they live in the streets. It is tragic to see people live in that way and there is nothing you can do. I feel hurt, helpless and very angry with those that decide badly for all of us" (P3).

Along with the poverty, unemployment and social injustice different forms of discrimination tend to appear not only "in the head" but also "in the world" and affect the way people behave socially. There is: "Racism at all levels" (P165).

Crises can drive citizens apart. Participants say that the crisis gave birth to indifference, a social distance from other people or social groups and a lack of knowledge or information: "social analgesia, political apathy, lack of education" (P71). There is an instinct to survive and promote your own interests at the expense of others and starting to behave more angrily: "Due to anger and despair people turn to 'ideal' nationalist and violence" (P48), and "the apathy of the responsible to do something and change it" (P117).

The financial and social suppression of the last decade in Greece displays an arrogant contempt for the wishes and needs of the majority: "I do not deal with society," (P27) and can trigger harmful behaviours regarding common welfare, but mostly it triggers anger and disgust in participants. In this case, it appears that the opposite sides of the coin, cruelty, and compassion, are related to survival needs and exist simultaneously. The only law that matters is, according to one participant who suggested that society is breaking down: "Everyone will do anything to survive - they are stepping on corpses" (P32).

Since a poor socio-economic situation is socially detrimental, some participants manifested emotional difficulties or internalized emotions such as "hate, rage" (P176 and P209), "anger, disappointment" (P18), or strong irritation "loathing rage, injustice" (P119). Constant

irritability and anger are emotional symptoms that alert someone to a problem who should then find a way of stopping the symptoms [117,118]. This shows that something needs to change and if it doesn't then it will lead to disappointment through the non-fulfilment of one's hopes. The worsening of the situation in Greece made participants feel angrier and they reacted to the extreme austerity measures and structural constraints of the crisis with extreme reactions "rage, anger, and indignation" (P125) along on the grounds of anger and unfairness is where the parasite gets its power and the emerge of the parasitic self not only wishes to exploit others but also want to destroy that part "organizing their professional and not only destruction to the point of their destruction" (P108) Participants begin to be social or self-destructive and sometimes they feel of losing the control of their reactions "I worry that I do not know how to react and very often I honk my car horn or get very angry" (P137). Uncontrolled anger can turn to self-destructive actions in personal relationships, social interactions, and work environments [119].

## **Discussion**

The two key themes, the declining society, and the parasitic self, both demonstrate the close relationship between individuals and society. The evidence for declining society in Greece comes from both the economic literature increasing unemployment, poor balance of trade, national debt [120] and, in this article, from the responses of the people who are fully aware of the problems faced in society. The parasitic self is an argument for the close link between how society is functioning and how individuals' function. The emotional responses of individuals within society depend on how society is functioning. The findings here only touch on the key characteristics of societies and people that impact on this relationship, and only in relation to Greece, but there are general lessons to be learned.

Socioeconomic deprivation influences the behaviour of people and unequal access to resources result in desensitized people and society. Financial hardship and unemployment had a negative influence on some people's psycho-social health. Financial restraint and unemployment have a negative effect on the sense of self-worth and efficacy and can change individual's personality, but there are significant individual differences in coping behaviours in managing stressful experiences [121,122]. Further research is needed in light to examine the role that individual differences play in a society's dynamics of fair practices and harmony.

The narratives of the two themes, social decline, and the parasitic self, focus on struggling with what people experience (injustice, hypocrisy, and exploitation) and an irritability that leads to parasitic behaviour in the future. Further research is needed to understand which one comes first, the failing society or the unhappy person that results to parasitism and causing harm.

Work has a fundamental and influential role in a person's life. Past experiences provide the motivation to succeed. Comparisons with the past self are highly predictive of psychological distress among the unemployed. This can be seen in James's [123] belief that self-esteem is a set of perceptions of the individual for himself and his abilities. When this perception is violated and distorted with repetitive failures of finding a job the same can happen regarding individual awareness of the "I", the experience of continuity, distinctiveness and volition become disrupted.

Participants words include irritability, a sense of injustice and a sense of hypocrisy. All these are seen in theories of emotion arguing that gap between a person's ideal self (i.e. who they would like to be and their actual behaviour (self-image) can lead to emotional problems [124-129].

Participants' struggle to escape from financial constraints and unemployment (stress, agony, doubt, worthlessness) and what they experience (failure, injustice, exploitation, stagnation) is in accordance with Allport's [124,130] idea that the perceptual field of self consists of a personal reality, the existence of which the individual is fully convinced of, regardless of whether or not it really exists. Rogers [131] also supports this since he believes that humans and their subjective reality is based on the present context which changes constantly and of which they are the centre. Rogers emphasizes the actualization of people's potential, the ability to form a concept of themselves and to act in accordance with it. However, the idea that a person can pursue ideals that are "bigger" than the self and that everyone can rise above their circumstances and achieve success is not accommodated by Roger's theory, but he strongly believes that a supportive environment with freedom of choice is essential otherwise people became maladapted and destructive [132]. Empirical investigations

on self-concept are in accordance with Rogers [133] views that self-concept change over time, as the perception of self-alters, behaviour alters too [134], and environment is one of the biggest factors in that change [135,136]. All people are socialized by the master narratives of identifiable agents such as family, media, legal system, and economic systems and play an important role for the development of positive self-concept and the self-regulation of deviant behaviour [137-139]. Humans are inherently social [140] that seems to build and strengthen individual's social and personal resources. Under the evolutionary approach the social bonds as adaptive function was not only for reproduction but were also likely to protect from a possible attack thus searching for the company of others was essential element of adaptive behaviour [141,142]. From this perspective, people are viewed as relational beings and involvement with external referents as sense of belongingness protects their mental health, facilitate their social adaptation, and become resilient to stress [143-146]. Interestingly, people can be disturbed (alienated) by emotional states and social conditions and this result in "parasitism" towards themselves and others [147]. Under a multifactorial approach parasitism happens only when the parasite was relatively host specific and only among host species living in stable groups [148]; a research idea that needs to be considered since the 2020s is the decade with the covid-19 pandemic, poverty, social inequality, and social alienation to be the greatest concerns worldwide.

Burns [149,150] claims that status, prosperity, aims, and goals synthesize the self-concept, which is learned, and since it is learned, using external evidence it can change and adjust direction. Participants in a financial crisis and unemployment not only feel an erosion of self-esteem with feelings of hopelessness, self-doubt, personal devaluation and a pattern of frustration which reduces adaptive thinking as Dean [151], Feather [152] and Warr [153] suggest but also the new emerged self is acute, self-limiting and highly unprincipled when society is dysfunctional. Unfairness and indifference on the part of social organisations for people in need ensures the continuance of an unfair world.

Social interaction and social support are reduced through unemployment into isolation. This is in accordance with Fagin., *et al.* [154] who claims that a lack of purpose in life results in feelings of alienation from others and society. On the other hand, it may stimulate a person to explore how the past, present, and future selves are "works in progress" which might explain how people make meaningful changes in their lives and how when there are social difficulties hidden parts of the self may emerge, both positive and negative.

Even after 12 years of economic crisis in Greece some participants had a different view from Cooley's [155] concept of the looking glass and observing the reactions of others as a vital element of a person's image of themselves. Cooley thought that individuals learn to see themselves based on how society views them, but some of the ps showed that individual differences in self-worth play an important role. This is in accordance with the developmental perspective of integrative approached in the 1980's with regard to understanding the determinants of self-regard or self-worth [156,157]. How you perceive yourself and how others perceive you involve a dynamic interaction of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and locus of control.

### Limitations of the Study

The focus of this study was on unemployment and financial hardship, and it was part of a larger mixed method study "Emotional reactions in the unemployed during economic recession in Greece: Construction of a self-report emotional scale for use in unemployment". The sampling represented people with a degree, and the use of open-ended questions provided useful in-depth and meaningful data from the Ps related to the situation of interest. However, this is time consuming for the participant, so the answers often lacked depth, as there was no interlocutor to encourage further detail. The need of bilingual translators to generate comparability and handling cultural differences also had problems, particularly in determining accurate translations of brief complex concepts. It is important to understand the complexity accurately, and to capture not only implicit and explicit meanings from the words but also culturally specific words, expressions, belief systems and values.

### Conclusion

The findings indicate that financial hardship and unemployment have a negative social impact on individual. In this study, Ps revealed unemployment feelings mostly as signs and symptoms of social and psychological discomfort. As the results indicated financial hardship

and unemployment is a factor leading to compromise of employment needs and standards. It has a negative effect on the sense of self-worth, morale and efficacy and socio-economic restraints can negative change individuals' personality. Participants words include irritability, a sense of injustice and a sense of hypocrisy that led them to a parasitic behaviour to exploit other people for their own advantage and to have psychological, and socio-economical dysfunctions. Moreover, our understanding of the rise of the social parasitic self is far from complete, and much remains to be determined regarding the triggers, causes, and consequences of this phenomenon.

### Significance

Mediterranean countries are still economically fragile and Covid in 2020-22 has led to a worldwide economic turndown. This article focuses on the experiences of repetitive negative events of financial hardship and unemployment and explores the emergence of a parasitic self of people based on exploiting interactions. The findings of this study can inform policymaking regarding objective well-being, develop social policy interventions and strategies for employment, education, community and crime.

### Data Availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly for the privacy of individuals that participated in the study. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Sample Credit Author Statement

Ioanna Karaoulani: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation. Nigel Hunt: Supervision, Data curation, Validation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

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