

Positive Youth Development in Global Contexts of Social and Economic Change

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YOUTH ADAPTATION DURING THE CURRENT GREAT ECONOMIC RECESSION IN GREECE

Risk and Resilience

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During the past eight years the international community experienced one of the deepest economic recessions since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It was triggered by a financial meltdown that started in the United States but soon spread around the globe. Great economic recessions involve aggregate or systemic shocks that occur in the wider economy of countries. They differ from idiosyncratic economic shocks in that large segments of society are affected simultaneously and systematically (Lundberg & Wuermli, 2012). Individuals and families experience such shocks through job loss, a decrease in income, debt, repossession of houses, and evictions, which lead to economic pressure and uncertainty.

Many countries in the world were, and some still are, struck by the latest economic recession. However, significant diversity was observed in the degree to which the recession affected different countries (UNICEF, 2014). In Europe, southern European countries (Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Portugal, Spain), as well as Croatia and Ireland, were among the worst hit. Great variability was also observed in the way countries responded to the crisis and supported the vulnerable parts of their population (UNICEF, 2014). Some countries were better positioned to weather the economic shock. They had strong social protection measures already in place and were able to rapidly and effectively roll out safety nets. A few European countries, such as Finland and Norway, were actually able to decrease poverty for children in vulnerable households, such as for children

from migrant and single-parent families, and/or from low socioeconomic status and large families.

Greece is one of the countries where child poverty increased the most (UNICEF, 2014). The number of children whose families were income-poor (income below the poverty line) increased between 2008 and 2012 from 23% to 40.5%, and those who were severely materially deprived (e.g. cannot afford to pay rent, heat their home, eat meat, or proteins regularly etc.) from 10.4% to 20.9% (see Kokkevi, Stavrou, Kanavou, & Fotiou, 2014a; Kokkevi et al., 2014b). A report commissioned by UNICEF (Kokkevi et al., 2014a) revealed that in spite of parents' best efforts to protect their children from experiencing the negative consequences of the recession, 11–15-year-old adolescents were fully aware of the economic problems troubling their families.

Economic recessions have the potential to disrupt and do permanent damage to the adaptation, mental health and development of young people (Lundberg & Wuermli, 2012). However, they are macro-level phenomena concerning the wider economy of a country. How do they come to have such a negative impact on youth? It has been argued that it is not necessarily the economic recession per se that leads to problems in the adaptation of young people (Lundberg & Wuermli, 2012). Instead, it is mainly the effect that it has on the family and other proximal contexts (such as teachers and schools) that affects their development.

Thus, the objective economic strain may result in economic pressure and insecurity in the family, which in turn may increase parental anxiety and depression, and relatedly family conflict, thus altering in a negative direction youth's developmental context (Conger et al., 1992). What is at stake in the long run is the development of healthy, productive, and effective adults.

The purpose of this chapter is to address the question: "Who among youth living in Greece during the period of the Great Recession adapt well and why?" We examine group and individual differences in youth's adaptation and mental health from a risk and resilience developmental perspective. Thus, the chapter focuses on positive adaptation during the economic crisis and revolves around two axes, one related to risk (Does the Greek economic crisis constitute a risk for youth's adaptation and well-being?) and the other to resilience (Why do some young people adapt well while others do less well?).

We address these questions based on results from the Athena Study of Resilient Adaptation (AStRA) Greek project as well as based on results from other studies conducted in Greece during the crisis. The AStRA project involved a comparison between two well-matched cohorts of adolescents living in the greater Athens area, one assessed before the crisis (see Motti-Stefanidi, 2014) and the other in the midst of the crisis (Motti-Stefanidi & Asendorpf, in press). Data were collected in both cohorts from schools in the same socially disadvantaged neighborhoods with a high proportion of immigrants. A total of more than 2,000 12-year-old adolescents, at wave 1, were followed once a year

for 3 years through middle school. We assessed different domains of adaptation and well-being, as well as potential risks and resources for adaptation with repeated measures, using multiple methods and informants.

The chapter is organized in three sections. The first section examines core concepts of the resilience developmental framework. The second section examines whether the economic recession places youth adaptation and mental health at risk. The third section examines social and personal resources that promote and/or protect positive immigrant youth adaptation during this period.

The Resilience Developmental Framework

The resilience developmental framework guided the research questions addressed by the AStRA project and provided the lenses through which other Greek studies on the effect of the economic crisis on youth are examined. Resilience refers to the capacity for adaptation to challenges that threaten the function or development of a dynamic system, manifested in pathways and patterns of positive adaptation during or following exposure to significant risk or adversity (Masten, 2014). Resilience in an individual is inferred from two fundamental judgments about the individual's adaptation: First, the person must be, or have been, challenged by exposure to significant risk or adversity, and second, he/she must be "doing ok" – functioning or developing well in spite of exposures to adversity or risk.

Positive adaptation in young people often is defined based on how well they are doing with respect to age-salient developmental tasks (Masten, 2014; McCormick, Kuo, & Masten, 2011). These tasks reflect the expectations and standards for behavior and achievement that parents, teachers, and societies set for individuals over the life span in a particular context and time in history. As they grow older, children usually (though not always) come to share these criteria and evaluate their own success by these expected accomplishments. Adaptive success is multidimensional and developmental in nature.

Developmental tasks vary over the life course of the individual. Each developmental period is characterized by a group of salient developmental tasks that provide criteria for judging who is doing well. During adolescence, positive adaptation with respect to developmental tasks may be judged based on external behavior, such as success in school, having and maintaining close friendships/being liked by peers, knowing or obeying the laws of society, civic engagement, or on internal adaptation, such as establishment of a cohesive, integrated and multifaceted sense of identity. Success in these developmental tasks does not mean that youth should exhibit "ideal" or "superb" effectiveness, but rather they should be "doing adequately well."

It should be noted here that whereas resilience investigators define positive adaptation as doing adequately well or "okay", the Positive Youth Development

(PYD) framework, which guides researchers' thinking and research in many chapters of this book, stresses indexes of optimal functioning. For PYD researchers, thriving is a key index of positive adaptation during adolescence and emerging adulthood. However, the question arises whether socialization agents across the globe consider thriving a key developmental goal and an index of youth's positive adaptation. The validity of this assumption needs to be tested in other cultures. The resilience approach to positive adaptation allows socialization agents from different cultures to define their own criteria for positive adaptation.

Why are these adaptation indices important? Families and societies value and attend to achievements in salient developmental tasks because these accomplishments are widely assumed to forecast future success (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). Thus, how well developing individuals do with respect to developmental tasks of an earlier stage forecasts how well they will do with respect to developmental tasks of later stages. Research has shown significant continuity in main domains of adaptation, including major domains such as peer acceptance, academic achievement, externalizing (vs. rule-abiding conduct), and internalizing symptoms (see Masten, 2014). Furthermore, research has shown that over time the quality of functioning in one domain of adaptation may spread or cascade to other domains. For example, conduct problems in childhood have been shown to have negative cascading effects later in life, leading to lower academic achievement by adolescence, and indirectly, through academic achievement, to increases in symptoms of anxiety and depression in young adulthood. In contrast, positive adaptation in childhood with respect to key developmental tasks predicted success in early adulthood, through multiple possible cascade pathways (Burt, Coatsworth, & Masten, 2016).

To identify resilience, there also must be evidence of past or present threat, trauma, or negative life experiences in the life of the individual. Such hazards often co-occur or pile up in the lives of individuals or families and as risk levels rise the level of average problems or symptoms often increases as well, suggesting a cumulative risk (or dose) gradient (Obradović, Shaffer, & Masten, 2012). In the absence of risk or adversity, positive adaptation is not considered an expression of resilience but rather of competence. The resilience literature includes studies of many different kinds of risks, such as high-risk status variables (e.g. immigrant status, low SES, single-parent family), exposure to traumatic and stressful experiences (e.g. maltreatment, community violence, war), or biological risk markers (e.g. low birth weight, physical illness).

The goal of resilience research is not only to identify who is well-adapted in spite of adversity, but also to identify the processes that explain how positive adaptation was achieved. To account for group and individual differences in adaptation in the context of risk, potential predictors of positive adaptation have been examined at multiple levels of context and analysis (Masten, 2014). Two

broad types of influences that counteract or mitigate the potential effects of adversity on adaptation and development have been described. The first type of influence or effects is called promotive, referring to factors that have a generally positive effect on adaptation independent of risk level. These factors reflect “main effects” in statistical terms and these effects are sometimes described as assets, resources, compensatory effects, or social and human capital. Promotive factors support positive adaptation independently of risk or adversity in the individual’s life, with observable effects both in low and high adversity. The second type of influence or effect is conditional, with greater effects under more adverse conditions. These influences reflect moderating influences on risk or adversity, suggesting protective roles. Protective factors have a special function when conditions are adverse or risky, and they reflect interaction (risk \times moderator) effects on adaptation.

However, risk, promotive, and protective effects are functional in nature, defined in part by the context (see Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). The same characteristic of an individual or a family can serve different functions depending on the domain of adaptation under consideration, the context, or the nature of the threat. In the context of maltreatment or war, for example, fearfulness and vigilance may well be adaptive and protective, whereas in a safe and supportive context, the same behaviors could be maladaptive. Similarly, parents who monitor their children closely in a dangerous environment may be viewed as “overprotective” in a safe context.

Is the Economic Recession a Risk for Youth’s Adaptation?

In this section we will examine whether and how the Great Economic Recession in Greece has affected the adaptation and well-being of adolescents. Has the crisis placed their adaptation and well-being at high risk? The presentation will be structured around key developmental tasks and indices of mental health, which were assessed in the AStRA project (see Motti-Stefanidi & Asendorpf, in press). As was already mentioned, two cohorts of adolescents were compared, one in middle school before the economic crisis and the other during the economic crisis. Wherever results from other Greek studies are available they are also reported. These studies, which are often conducted by child psychiatrists, have mostly focused on psychological symptoms and disorders. Interestingly, the literature reveals a paradoxical mixture of risk and resilience.

First, we studied the effect of the economic recession on youth’s school engagement. School engagement is an important index of adaptation as it may protect students from dropping out of school early (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Two economists, Ferreira and Schady (2009), reviewed on behalf of the World Bank a number of studies that examined the effects of economic shocks on children’s schooling and engagement. They found that in middle-

and high-income countries, such as Greece, education outcomes during a major economic crisis are counter-cyclical; school enrolment, engagement, and attendance increase, instead of decreasing.

The AStRA project included two indices of school engagement, namely teacher-rated behavioral engagement and students' unexcused absences (Fredricks et al., 2004). The cohort comparison on these two indices produced contradictory results. Whereas crisis-cohort students' behavioral engagement did not differ from that of the pre-crisis cohort, the former had significantly more unexcused absences than the latter. However, the increase in absenteeism during the crisis seemed to be driven by a few students in particular classrooms that were often absent. These results held for Greek and immigrant students alike. Thus, students' motivation and investment in school did not diminish during the economic recession.

Second, we studied the effect of the economic recession on youth's academic achievement. For this purpose, we retrieved from school records students' GPA in core courses. In general, the extant literature shows that youth who live under conditions of socioeconomic disadvantage have lower academic achievement than their better off counterparts (McLoyd et al., 2009; Schoon et al., 2002). Even though economic loss incurred during a great recession may not necessarily push a family into poverty, it may expose its members to circumstances and stressors that usually chronically poor families experience (McLoyd et al., 2009), such as low per capita income, unmet material needs, and difficulty making ends meet (Conger & Donellan, 2007). In this line, Elder (1974) reported worse academic achievement in children of the Great Depression whose families experienced economic hardship.

Counter to expectations, results from the AStRA project revealed that crisis-cohort Greek students, compared with pre-crisis-cohort Greeks, had significant better academic achievement. Immigrant students' academic achievement was in the same direction, but did not reach significance due to a large standard error. This finding is consistent with the finding on school engagement. Youth in middle school during the crisis, compared to youth before the crisis, seem equally, and in some cases more, motivated to do well in school. Greek families have traditionally considered education as a vehicle for upward social mobility (Charalambidis, Maratou-Alipranti, & Hadjiyanni, 2004). It may be the case that in the context of the economic recession Greek families may consider education as the means for their children to overcome its impact.

Third, we studied the effect of the crisis on students' mental health. Conduct was teacher-rated and the two indices of psychological well-being examined, namely self-esteem and emotional symptoms were self-rated. The extant literature shows that family economic pressure increases the likelihood that youth will present depressed mood and externalizing behavior (e.g., Conger et al., 1992; Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989; Solantaus, Leimonen, & Punamäki, 2004). However, socioeconomic disadvantage is more strongly linked

with externalizing than with internalizing problems (Duncan, Magnuson, & Votruba-Drzal, 2015; Solantaus et al., 2004).

The AStra project results show a pervasive increase of conduct problems during the economic crisis in both Greek and immigrant students. The difference between pre-crisis and crisis cohorts on conduct problems was not only significant but also large. This finding is in agreement with a number of studies (e.g. Conger et al., 1992; Lempers et al., 1989; Solantaus et al., 2004). The family stress model of economic hardship can guide the formulation of the hypothesis that economic pressure on the family may affect parenting and, thus, lead to conduct problems in children and youth (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). This point will be further discussed in the next section.

However, contrary to expectations, crisis cohort adolescents did not report worse psychological well-being (either lower self-esteem or more emotional symptoms) than pre-crisis adolescents. This finding held for both Greek and immigrant students. Kokkevi et al. (2014b), who also studied a normative Greek sample but focused on more serious mental health problems, did not find an increase in the rate of attempted suicides and running-away from home among 16-year-olds during the economic crisis. Actually, they report that the prevalence of both behaviors was very close to the averages in other European countries. One hypothesis is that parents and extended family might play a protective role for youth's mental health during these trying times (Georgas, 2006). Greek grandparents play a key role in children's lives providing emotional and financial support, often from their very low pensions, to their children and grandchildren.

Two more studies based on nationwide data, which included young people, focused on emotional disorders and found contradictory results. Fountoulakis et al. (2013), based on official data concerning completed suicides, accidental falls, and poisoning retrieved from the Hellenic Statistical Authority, found no increase in suicidality during the economic crisis in Greece and no relationship between suicidal rates with socioeconomic indices either. In contrast to these findings, Economou, Madianos, Peppou, Patelakis, and Stefanis (2012), who conducted two nationwide cross-sectional telephone surveys, one before and one during the crisis, found that, among others, young people were at increased risk during the crisis, compared to before the crisis (prevalence rates 8.2% vs. 3.3%, respectively), for developing major depression.

At first glance, some of the findings presented in this section seem contradictory. On the one hand, we found first, that students exhibited more conduct problems during the crisis compared to students before the crisis, and, second, that they continued to be motivated to do well in school, and, actually received better grades. On the other hand, some of the other studies focusing on youth psychopathology during the crisis found a significant increase particularly in the prevalence of major depression. How could we explain these seemingly contradictory findings?

In what concerns the AStRA project results, they seem to be inconsistent with the within-cohort positive correlation between positive conduct with engagement and achievement. However, the different correlations of conduct with engagement and achievement *within* versus *between* cohorts suggest different causal mechanisms for the *within* versus *between* effects. Thus, some antisocial students may determine the increase in conduct problems during the crisis, whereas other students may invest more in learning and doing well in school in order to cope with the crisis. These hypotheses refer to two different crisis-specific mechanisms. In what concerns the suggested increase in serious internalizing problems during the crisis, we could argue that this finding strengthens the argument that there are significant individual differences in the way young people react to, and deal with, the economic hardship afflicted by the Great Economic Recession.

Why Do Some Young People Adapt Well during the Crisis While Others Do Less Well?

In the previous section, we examined whether and how the Great Economic Recession in Greece affects youth's adaptation and well-being. Evidence indicates a mixture of risk and resilience. Some youth show resilient adaptation during the crisis whereas others are not as successful. These findings suggest that certain resources contribute to youth's positive adaptation despite the adversity in their lives. What makes the difference for youth who do well in spite of the social challenges that they face?

Resources, just as risks, may stem from youth's social context and/or from their own individual attributes (Masten, 2014). As was previously discussed, the crisis is not expected to directly affect youth's adaptation and well-being. Instead its influence is filtered through, and transmitted by, youth's proximal contexts, mainly the family but also schools, teachers, peers etc. Contexts where the young person is in direct interaction with others are the drivers of their adaptation and development. They may render young people vulnerable to the impact of the economic hardship but have also the power to buffer them from its effect.

The role of the family in youth's adaptation during times of economic hardship has received the lion's share of attention from scientists. Parents' psychological reaction to the crisis, potential marital conflict, and their parenting have been shown to mediate the relation between economic hardship and youth's adaptation and mental health (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Conger et al., 1992; Lempers et al., 1989; Solantaus et al., 2004). The family's inability to make ends meet (e.g. pay bills, provide for children), and the pressure to cut back on everyday expenses in order to live within available means may result in their feeling inadequate and hopeless, as well as in a loss of status. These may lead to increases in parental anxiety and depression, and in some cases in

substance abuse, which in turn may lead to severe family conflict, domestic violence, and family abandonment. As a result, parents may withdraw from their children, even become hostile towards them. There may be a decrease in learning and cognitive stimulation within the home, and in enforcement of rules and routines.

There is a lack of empirical evidence on the role of the family, or any other proximal context, on youth's adaptation during this period of economic recession. We examined based on the crisis-cohort longitudinal data of the Greek AStRA project whether different dimensions of parenting longitudinally mediated the relation between, on the one hand, family economic problems and hardship and, on the other, different domains of youth's adaptation (Motti-Stefanidi, Pavlopoulos, & Asendorpf, 2016). We found that the effects of family variation in economic problems on student self-efficacy and conduct are fully mediated by parenting for both boys and girls, and similarly for Greeks and immigrants. These results, which are based on longitudinal, rather than cross-sectional, mediations, corroborate previous findings.

Thus, depending on the way the family navigates through, and copes during, these difficult times will either place their children at risk for adaptation difficulties or may, in contrast, function as a resource for their adaptation and mental health. Some families have personal and social resources that support them during times of adversity. The argument presented earlier, that the extended Greek family, and particularly grandparents, often provide emotional and financial support to their children and grandchildren, is a case in point. However, this is a hypothesis which needs to be tested. In our own AStRA study it would require to test for a moderated mediation on the findings previously presented.

Even though contexts play a preponderant role for youth's adaptation, they are clearly not its sole determinant. Young people are active agents in their development. Their personal attributes are expected to contribute, both independently and in interaction with contextual factors, to their adaptation during times of high adversity, such as this. We tested this hypothesis based on our two matched (pre-crisis and during the crisis) cohorts of adolescents (Asendorpf & Motti-Stefanidi, 2016). We examined whether the Big Five personality factors moderated the relation between cohorts (historical effect) and different domains of youth's adaptation.

We found that youth's personality characteristics played a special role during the crisis. For example, before the crisis, low emotional stability predicted lower self-esteem than high emotional stability. However, during the crisis youth rated high on emotional stability did not differ from their counterparts before the crisis, whereas youth rated low on emotional stability had significantly lower, and with a large difference, self-esteem. Thus, emotional stability played a protective role for youth's adaptation during the economic crisis.

Conclusions

The Great Economic recession has had, and actually continues to have, a significant impact on people in Greece. It has brought great economic hardship to families, which often had to drastically change their style of living in order to make ends meet. The AStRA project data as well as other studies conducted in Greece during the crisis reveal that youth's adaptation with respect to core developmental tasks, as well as their mental health show signs both of risk and resilience. Sometimes in agreement with the international literature and other times contrary to expectations, significant individual differences emerge in the way young people living in Greece cope and adapt in the context of this adversity. Some young people seem more motivated, try harder, and invest more in their learning, others show heightened conduct problems, and still others exhibit serious psychological disorders. An examination of factors and processes that either place at risk or protect youth's adaptation shows that both context and youth's characteristics contribute to their adaptation and mental health. More research focusing on positive adaptation, instead of on psychopathology, and on younger ages, as well as on the role of other proximal contexts, such as the school, for adaptation during this period is needed. Findings will help us understand how to support youth to better cope with the situation and how to promote and protect their positive adaptation and development in these challenging conditions.

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