



'When The Crisis broke out,
our whole world went upside-down':
Special skills and knowledge that sustain us
during the economic crisis in Greece

by Margarita Katsikadelis

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Abstract

This paper details a project honouring Greek people's skills of re-claiming their lives from the troubling effects of the recent financial crisis. Canvassing a process that used a questionnaire, collective documentation, and definitional ceremony, this work identifies and celebrates special skills and knowledges that sustain people during crisis.

Key words: *crisis, questionnaire, collective document, definitional ceremony, Greece, narrative therapy*

Greece, the ancient home of Gods, is nowadays experiencing grave adversity. The financial crisis has penetrated every single aspect of the social, political, and personal lives of the Greek people. As such, I wanted to explore the ways this 'Crisis' is creeping into Greek society and identify possible steps that could be taken to prevent and respond to this. In this paper, I will share the process I undertook to interview ten Greek citizens, selected randomly, and engaged them in externalising conversations; elicited, collected, and documented their stories of resistance; and hosted a definitional ceremony.

When I was first introduced to narrative theory and practice, I was impressed with the idea that even when people are facing hardship, they often 'develop fantastic mechanisms' (White, 1995a, p. 85) that allow them to respond and survive. Honouring the special skills and the personal qualities people develop when they are faced with abuse and hardship was the inspiration for this work. I was interested in enabling people to have the opportunity 'to stand in a different territory' (White, 1995a, p. 85) where their responses in the face of exploitation, violence, and crisis might be understood as special skills and knowledge to address injustices and sustain their lives. The work of Yvonne Sliep and the Care Counselors (1998, p. 150) in externalising and personifying 'AIDS' and 'Care' also sparked ideas for me. I began to imagine how personifying the problem of 'The Crisis' might provide a focus for uniting the community and how engaging in my practice as a 'hope counsellor' might open up opportunities for participants to strengthen connections with their own stories of resistance to 'The Crisis'. In this way, I envisioned a project that could assist people 'to move from an identity of crisis to an identity of courage, hopes, and dreams' (Kochala in Sliep, 1998, p. 150).

Externalising the problem of 'The Crisis' – Using a questionnaire

Having created a questionnaire in order to engage people in externalising conversations about 'The Crisis', I asked each person:

- When did you first notice 'The Crisis' in your life?
- How long has it been going on in your life?
- Has 'The Crisis' got any allies?
- How does it affect your life? (self-image, work, lifestyle, mood, feelings, social life)
- When does it become stronger?

During a series of interviews, I was able to explore with people what 'The Crisis' was saying about who they were; how it had affected their lives, their bodies, their thoughts; how it interfered with their relationships with others; and the processes by which they were being recruited into self-blame and shame. The externalising questions assisted us to deconstruct 'The Crisis' and we made more visible the knowledges, strategies, and techniques that 'The Crisis' used. Consequently, people were then able to expand on possibilities to take action, to resist, and to challenge 'The Crisis's knowledges and practices in their day-to-day lives. Hearing people's responses, I experienced both hope and sadness. I was inspired by the steps they were taking in reclaiming their lives from 'The Crisis' and the ways in which they were having 'the last say' about who they were. I also found that externalising conversations helped them give voice to their experiences of hardship in ways that were profoundly healing to them.

Entries into alternative storylines

Having deconstructed the problem of 'The Crisis', I invited people to continue to develop and tell stories about their lives and, as such, support them in identifying 'some of the more neglected but potentially significant events and experiences that are "out of phase" with their dominant storylines' (White, 2007, p. 61). These events and experiences can be considered 'unique outcomes' or 'exceptions' and they provide a point of entry to alternative storylines. Through the following questions, I encouraged people to 'recruit their lived experience, to stretch their minds, to exercise their imagination, and to employ their meaning-making resources' (White, 2007, pp. 61–62).

- How do you evaluate your experience concerning 'The Crisis'?
- How do you resist?
- Are there times when you keep the hope alive?
- Could you relate a story which describes this (when, where, duration, and so on)?
- Which intentions and purposes have led you to this?
- Which values and beliefs are connected to those values?
- Which dreams and hopes of yours are connected to those values?
- Are there life principles that are expressed through these hopes and dreams?

- Which commitments do you stand by in your life?
- How would you title this alternative story of yours?

In responding, people became excited by aspects of their lives and relationships which had been previously unnoticed. These alternative stories had roots in histories which, when detailed, provided people with a foundation to face the problems 'The Crisis' had provoked in their lives. During the interviews, I put emphasis on researching the 'subordinate' storylines of people's lives. I was amazed how these conversations contributed to the rich development of people's alternative storylines and enabled people to express what was important to them, and their values, intentions, goals, dreams, hopes, and beliefs.

Generating a collective document

The stories that this interview process brought forth inspired me to find audiences to these discoveries. I wanted to share this hard-won knowledge with other people and contribute

in this way to shaping identities of hope. However, I realised that it would be an exhausting process to listen and respond to ten separate stories. As narrative practice offers many different types of written documentation, such as poems, lists, certificates, therapeutic letters (White & Epston, 1990), and collective documents (Denborough, 2008), I began to think about how documentation could support this process of presenting the stories, and decided to construct a collective document which could be shared and responded to.

The following document is double-storied. Its subject involves difficult circumstances, grief, and sorrow. At the same time, it richly conveys the skills and knowledge, values, hopes, and dreams of Greek people responding to the damaging Crisis effects. The purpose of this document is to collectively convey a range of hard-won skills and knowledge, and provide rich acknowledgement of the circumstances in which these knowledges have been acquired. The members of the team didn't experience the same hardships or use the same forms of sustenance. As such, using phrases such as 'some of us' and 'sometimes' leave space for people to identify themselves with a particular theme or not (Denborough, 2008).

Dealing with life while being subjected to the hardship of the Greek Crisis: The special skills and knowledge that sustain ten people chosen randomly within the Greek society

When 'The Crisis' broke out, our whole world went upside down. Whatever we used to know up to this moment ceased to exist. It was like we woke up in a different life after a long sleep. We were depleted at work as friends and colleagues were made redundant because someone decided they were not useful anymore, and that 'The Crisis' is their fault. Suddenly, beloved people among family and friends went abroad because they were made redundant. There was darkness everywhere! We kept having the same discussion everyday: 'We are lost'; 'What are we going to do now?' Some people we treasured passed away, not necessarily due to 'The Crisis'. This loss made our life even darker. 'The Crisis' became more intense and cast its burden on us: 'How are we going to keep on living this way?' 'We should do something.' 'Let's respond!'

Nature as a supporter in difficulties

Before the 'The Crisis', we were so consumed in the pursuit of money and success that we failed to look around us. When we ceased to define ourselves through money and extravagant expenses, we acknowledged certain things we weren't even aware of: walking in the sun, leaving ourselves to its touch, and feeling its warmth! Moving through greenery, strolling on the seashore, and enjoying the breeze. Many of us discovered an element that is given to us abundantly in our country: the sea! We understood swimming and sunbathing like never before. Through these activities we experienced carefreeness, release, joy, redemption, peacefulness, and tranquility.

Falling head-over-heels in love and escape from the darkness

What terminated darkness for some of us was falling head-over-heels in love. Sharing infinite hours alongside another human being, entering their world, and letting them enter yours. 'The Crisis' storm, no matter how cunning, couldn't deal with love. While being on the rosy cloud of love, we were untouchables! There was such a strong desire for companionship and sharing our joy and sorrow!

Love and respect ourselves: A response to self-accusation and shame

Through the process of searching ourselves, we came in touch with values almost forgotten, such as respect and love for ourselves, authenticity, and decisiveness. Our workers' rights being neglected, with less financial means than ever (if we were lucky not to be unemployed), we found out that we couldn't live feeling as if we were hanging on the line, as nothing within work environments was guaranteed any more. Some of us decided to start up our own businesses. We used our abilities to restart and named it 'a reset' and realised that our dreams can still come true. Having the knowledge that came through self-awareness, we cried to ourselves and to others who wanted to diminish us: 'We deserve the best!', and there came a commitment: to improve ourselves and our relationships with the others.

Inherited values, knowledge, commitments, principles, intentions

Not giving up in difficulties, courage, patience, and perseverance; the realisation that life brings difficulties but we can fight them and become winners! Those are some of the legacies we inherited from our ancestors. Our mothers taught us to be patient. We reinterpreted this value thanks to our soul-searching, because the crisis obliged some of us to dig deep inside. This knowledge has helped us through the dark hours of our lives. Thanks to perseverance, we went on with studies, struggling for a better day to come in our lives. Our fathers' legacy was not to let ourselves down when we are faced with difficulties. There is a very precious knowledge of being healthy and all the possibilities that come with this and of course the ability to be alive and enjoy the moment of everyday life. We did our best at work and found our effort reciprocated. Leaving our old selves behind, we saw the light from the other side of the tunnel and glanced at the sky, instead of lowering our gaze.

Sharing our sorrows

For some of us, we noticed our fellow human beings. There were some relatives of ours who were so affected by unemployment that they couldn't afford to fix the cooker. We said, let's help them purchase another one. We should offer them their favorite chocolate pie and be filled with their sweet words of gratitude. Encouraged by friendship and companionship, we decided not to give up. 'The Crisis' wanted us confined in our home, not being in the mood for seeing anyone, and be depressed, tied up, and stuck. Camaraderie provided us with warmth, closeness, and decisiveness. We made up our mind to react, not to belittle ourselves, to get rid of depression, and open up to others. It was our family bonds that gave the answer when some of us had to pay the loan and the pocket was empty. Being approached by friends and relatives, we cared about them in turn when they were in need. Our intention was to soothe the pain and discomfort of the others by offering them a chocolate pie that they would enjoy. Children's smiles also played their role in enriching our optimism in facing not only every day's difficulties but other losses as well. So, we were made aware of our ability to keep relationships alive. Love, humanity, support and co-operation are some of the core values we stood for during this tough period of being subjected to the effects of the financial crisis.

Oral ritual - 'Seeking communitas'

Once the document was finished, the process moved from 'the written word to an oral ritual' for a ceremonial retelling (Denborough, 2008; Myerhoff 1982; White 2000). The oral recitation of the collective document generated a shared sense of unity. It was not only the story of hardship that was retold, but also the responses – courageous and caring actions – and, as such, a particular type of 'communitas' (Turner, 1969) was created. Not only an acknowledgement of shared suffering, but also of shared values, dreams, goals, skills, and knowledge. We hope that documenting and performing these testimonies of hardship and survival will also contribute to the strengthening of our collective memory, as according to Bruner 'what does not get structured narratively suffers loss in memory' (1990, p. 56).

Definitional ceremony - Recruiting outsider-witnesses

Outsider-witness practices challenge the isolating and individualising effects of problems. It was my hope that through recruiting outsider-witnesses and hosting a definitional ceremony that the people I was working with might come to experience themselves and their preferred identities as part of a community of acknowledgement. As such, I convened a gathering and after the collective document was read, I focused on the role of outsider-witnesses in authenticating people's identity claims. In therapeutic practice, definitional ceremonies are divided into multi-layered tellings and retellings of the stories of people's lives.

(White, 2005, p. 15) and our definitional ceremony was structured accordingly:

1. The telling of the significant life story by the people for whom the definitional ceremony is about
2. The retelling of a story by the people invited to be outsider-witnesses
3. The retelling of the outsider-witnesses retelling which is done by the people for whom the definitional ceremony is for.

A representative of the team of ten people, a 48-year-old woman called Ariti, read the collective document aloud. I then used the four categories of outsider-witness enquiry (White, 2005, p. 17) to ask questions of Ariti. First, I asked her which expressions caught her attention or captured her imagination, and then went on to enquire if any images had come to mind as she was reading the document. I suggested that these images might have taken the form of certain metaphors about people's lives. During this second stage, I encouraged Ariti to talk about what these metaphors and mental pictures might reflect about her own and others 'purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, aspirations, and dreams', and about what she and the others intended for in their lives and what they valued most. I then urged Ariti to focus on her understanding about whether these expressions and images struck a chord in her own personal history, to establish her own embodied interest and to speak about what experiences in her own history came into memory related to these expressions. Finally, I invited her to speak about the ways in which she might have been moved on account of being witness to the stories of life presented within the collective document, and where this experience had taken her with regard to her own thoughts, including her reflections on her own existence and her understanding of her own life.

I then recruited Chrysa and Eleni, two women in their early thirties who weren't members of the team, to reflect on hearing the collective document. I asked Chrysa and Eleni:

- What were you drawn to in what you heard?
- What picture of the subject of their life does this bring to your mind?
- What does this suggest about what is important to them, what they are hoping for, or what they aspire to?
- What is it in your own life that this struck a chord with?
- How have you been affected by listening about these people's lives?

- What new understandings of your own life do you have?
- How might this affect your own actions?

Both the outsider-witnesses said they could see 'courage' and 'the will to take life into their own hands' through hearing the document. They said that the positive energy was 'contagious' and that 'a rosy cloud swept them off their feet!' In particular, one outsider-witness said that, 'What mostly touched me was escaping through nature but also other stories relating to solidarity, sharing, support, and this relieving feeling of love'. Another witness shared that, 'The phrase that drew my attention is: "I deserve the best!" This opens up a whole new world for me'. All this triggered images in their minds and they said, 'We were stuck in the mud and it took a tremendous effort to release ourselves, but there is hope; we can see the light'. Another image was: 'I see us sunk in the sea, deeply inhaling in order to get out'. One woman said that through the stories she had witnessed, she came to believe she was a person of value and this belief helped her manage to get rid of anxiety and fear. The whole process triggered the witnesses to think deeply, to connect with courage and positive thinking through the resistance of the others, and to apply their optimistic message by taking life into their own hands.

I then asked a number of those who had contributed to the document what was it that drew their attention in what they had listened to, what resonated with them, and where it took them in their thinking. Here are their responses:

Leda: The day I was interviewed for your research, I felt like the day was brighter because I realised what I had done. This interview brought out my positive traits; it made my day! It was an extraordinary experience because I realised that depression is a state of mind and I also realised that I was taking positive steps. I was made aware of my resistance and it felt bright. I also felt that I was not alone in hardship and the problem became smaller and smaller until it almost disappeared.

Kostas: Listening to parts of my story being commented by the narrator and witnesses, I was honoured that my experience was singled out. I also felt a bit embarrassed and naked due to my timid nature. I was aware that my experience was not for nothing but instead contributed and inspired others and I felt that I was helping witnesses taking some elements off their chest.

Irini: I will refer to the narrative interview of the research and the whole procedure. I felt relieved and left with a smile on my face. I thoroughly enjoyed

the procedure. Coming to the outsider-witness ceremony and the related story, I was touched very much when it comes to my everyday life. I was also intrigued that all responses have a positive element in them, and I have made some notes about them. For instance, the sea, nature, the desire to share yourself emotionally.

In the end, I asked the rest of the audience if they would like to make a statement about what they had witnessed, what had mostly drawn their attention, and whether they had any questions about the whole event. Here are a number of responses:

Salome: What drew my attention was that whatever happens, even if we take the wrong steps, we dust ourselves up and move on.

Maria: I was impressed by the fact that all these people were able to overcome obstacles and elevate themselves.

Michael: It was extremely impressive to me that all those people reacted in a positive way.

Smaragda: Experiencing all this procedure, it felt like 'The Crisis' was gradually shrinking to the point of disappearance. I appreciate your work and I focus on the new self that is emerging through all this. We are all related to each other; it's like a red thread connecting everybody. There are skills and a positive side to every one of us.

Lia: What really impressed me was the value of feelings. We leave the material world behind and enter the emotional one. For example, friends helping each other and, in order to do so, they leave arrogance behind and turn to their fellow human beings. Attending all this procedure, I was fascinated by this intense emotional world having to do with love, solidarity, respect, hope, and originality.

I then turned back to address Ariti and I invited her to speak about the outsider witnesses' reflections about hers and the other nine people's life stories contained in the collective document. Ariti responded with the following statement:

'What drew my attention is that all the people whose responses to 'The Crisis' contained in the collective document felt the need to do something about this situation ... Witnessing all these stories of resistance, I have the image of ten people walking across a dark forest, trying to find their path, their footprints, and to get out in the light. I can see their struggle for survival, but I can also see the sun they looked at. I can feel the warmth of their family bonds, their love for their fellow human beings. I think all ten of us have a positive trait within us, and 'we deserve the best' as it has been said. I have been through all this hardship, on financial, family, and personal levels but I acknowledge that there is a positive change: 'when you hit rock bottom, you can get out of this'. It's like you are stuck in a well but you are able to grab and climb to the light! Hearing what the witnesses had to say about our lives, I feel I am a positive person and I liked inspiring other people to see things from a different perspective. I noticed that the outsider-witnesses received an extremely positive energy and this is what I most keep with me'.

Conclusion

It's an understatement to say I was profoundly touched by the accounts I heard. I am deeply convinced that all these people were able to manage and respond to 'The Crisis' thanks to their core beliefs and inherited values. What touched me most was the way this work enabled people's special skills, values, beliefs, knowledge, and commitments to be honoured and authenticated by people attending the event. I believe this project helped the participants and people attending the ceremony to engage in a reinterpretation of 'The Crisis' and that through their accounts of getting in touch with values, beliefs, and skills (almost neglected although instilled in their souls by their ancestors), people who attended the definitional ceremony left the presentation joyful, optimistic, full of positive energy, and with ways to escape 'The Crisis' hardships. It seems that they were able to migrate from an identity of 'The Crisis' to one of hope.

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