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Perceived Stress of the Undergraduate Students in Greece due to the Economic Crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to identify whether Greek undergraduate students realized increased stress levels in 2013 compared to 2009 due to the economic crisis. The USQ-83 instrument was used to assess the commonness and the severity of the undergraduate perceived levels of stress related to college and non-college activities. Demographic variables like gender, year of study, place of residence and economic status were considered. The main differences between the years 2009 and 2013 were identified. The participants were 223 undergraduate students of Business Administration Department for the year 2009, and 200 for 2013. A multiple linear regression analysis was applied, and all necessary tests have been performed in order to validate the results. Regarding commonness and severity, females, seniors and students with low family income perceived higher levels of stress in relation to college and non-college activities for both years, noting that acuter stress was observed for 2013. Students living at the local town, away from their families, realized high levels of stress only for 2013. The results indicate that the policy makers and the academic staff should consider developing a suitable and efficient stress management program which is necessary for reducing stress and its adverse effects due to the economic crisis.

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1. Introduction

The Greek economic recession has unfavorably affected society since drastic family income restrictions have

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negatively influenced living conditions and often led the members of many households into despair (Walker, 2011). Moreover, the high rate of unemployment and job insecurity degraded the quality of life, causing in many cases, mental disorders such as stress and depression. Relevant studies showed a close relation between the adverse effects of the economic crisis and mental health of individuals. (Economou et al., 2013; Madianos et al., 2014).

It is evident, therefore, that undergraduate students also experience the repercussions of the current recession. As a result, the levels of stress and the subsequent depression followed an upward trend since students were forced to cut down even on their daily spending (Stein et al., 2013). In some cases, they had to quit their studies since their families could not afford all expenses required.

Insecurity combined with questionable job career is steadily increasing given that the rate of unemployment reached 56.9% among young people aged 15-24 in 2014 (Hellenic Statistical Authority 2014). Thus, many of them see emigration as the sole solution while the majority is forced to work in jobs not related to their field of studies. It is noteworthy that quite often it is questioned whether a degree award can compensate for all sacrifices on the part of the students and their families. All these lead to increased levels of pessimism, stress and depression among young people (Anagnostopoulos & Soumaki, 2013).

The most generic definition of stress was the one proposed by Hans Selye: "*Stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand*" (Fink, 2009). Individuals are stressed when they feel that everything expected from them exceeds their own capabilities. The response to stressful events differs depending not only on the situation itself but also on the individual's personality (Dyson & Renk, 2006). With this in mind, it may be useful to conduct further investigation regarding the kind of reaction caused by the economic crisis.

It was traced that undergraduate students' stress was significantly correlated with the negative effects of depressive symptoms (Demirbatir, 2012; Hamer et al., 2007), while a high rate of distress has been identified (Stallman, 2010; Dahlin et al., 2005). Stress associated with academic activities has been also linked to poor health (Ginty & Conklin, 2011) and poor academic performance (Stallman, 2010). Many kinds of undergraduate life events were found to be stressful reflecting pressure too and in some cases were associated with uncertainty on getting a job after graduation (Guo et al., 2011) and financial problems (Ibrahim et al., 2012).

The main reason that prompted the author to undertake this research was the first observed evidence of undergraduates stress in 2009, when the economic crisis started in Greece although the results for this year showed no particularly increased levels of stress. In 2013 the research was repeated in order to trace any possible differences between these two time periods by assessing the commonness and the severity of the undergraduate perceived levels of stress related to college activities with respect to non-college ones. In both cases some demographic variables like gender, year of study, residence and economic status were considered.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 223 undergraduate students (109 men and 114 women) for the year 2009 and 200 (94 men and 106 women) for the year 2013. All participants were attending the lectures of the Department of Business Administration of the Technological Educational Institute of Central Macedonia (Greece). Distribution of the participants' demographic statistics is showed in Table 1.

2.2 Procedure

Questionnaires were handed out during lectures over a three week period between April and May, before the final exams of the studied years. Instructions were also provided regarding the proper completion of the questionnaire. Participants filled them out during a period lasting approximately 20 min. Participation was voluntary and the questionnaires were completed anonymously.

2.3 Instrument

The Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (USQ) developed by Crandall et al. (1992) was used to assess the

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