Mental health research during the socioeconomic crisis years: a critical appraisal

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During the sovereign debt crisis years people of all ages living in Greece have been hard pressed to adapt to economic, political, and social adversity and precariousness. Their everyday lives, practices, and existence have been plagued by perpetual change, declining living standards, family malaise, debt, and instability. The social milieu has been marred by a dilapidated health and welfare infrastructure, political upheaval, poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, and the demoralizing and crippling effects of a ‘default’ that have dominated media coverage. This social situation has been framed as an “experiment” and a “nasty” one at that. This, along with the copious media attention to the “Greek case”, “tragedy” and “drama” has stimulated social science research focusing on ‘the crisis.’ Psychological research has lagged behind, yet, certain mental health issues have received some attention. That empirical literature has focused on maladaptation and has encompassed; suicidality, depression, stress, and anxiety and other ‘mental disorders’. As the crisis has deepened and become chronic and enduring researchers’ attention has focused on the mental health delivery system and on the burden of care that professionals believe to be ‘insurmountable’. This presentation will examine this research corpus and critically analyze the discursive ramifications of what have, thus far, been the foci and targets of mental health research in an austerity-ridden social landscape. The ‘psychologized’ and ‘medicalized’ descriptions of the psychosocial extremities that have prevailed risk shifting policy and intervention initiatives from the sociopolitical dimensions of the ‘crises’ to mainstream discourses and therapeutic praxis that individualize the distress and the responsibility to adapt to it. On the other hand, the findings from these same empirical studies have highlighted the severe impacts and destabilizing effects that austerity has had on people’s psyches and lives. The presentation will close with a discussion of the challenges social science researchers face in conducting ethically and socially responsible research that can lead to personal and/ or policy transformation.