



## PROJECT LEADERS/AUTHORS:

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# Open Forums in Crisis-Struck Athens, Greece

*"It's the sense of touch. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other just that we can feel something."*

“Crash” (2004)

## INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES PARTICIPATING

### Open Forum Preparation Team

A volunteer group of 20 participants who meet for two hours every fortnight, in the time periods between town forums. Meetings include preparation on practical issues concerning the forums (space for the forum, microphones, chairs, etc., invitation content and production, networking with potential participants, etc.) as well as ongoing group process around the various aspects of the crisis as they arise in the team members' life experiences. The group also focuses on the relationship dynamics arising between team members during the group meetings.

## SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT AND SCOPE OF PROJECT

This project was initiated by Lena Aslanidou, Vassiliki Katrivanou, Nancy Papathanasiou and Lily Vassiliou in the face of the economic crisis that struck Greece in May 2010. The Greek government had asked for the support of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union and the first loan agreement (**memorandum**) was about to be signed. This was the beginning of a long line of austerity measures. On May 5th 2010, in the largest demonstration downtown Athens had seen in many decades, with hundreds of thousands of people in the streets from all walks of life, a bank had been set on fire and three people were burned alive. Officials claimed that the fire had been set by “anarchists”, various political parties & social groups claimed that the fire had been set by government provocateurs, in order to take things to the extreme, and aiming in terrifying people off the streets.

As social tensions started to rise, the need for public forums where people from various social groups who did not speak to one another would have the opportunity to come together and interact in a non-violent way became evident to us. In our experience and perception, Greek society was in shock and democratic dialogue was challenged. The threat of the country's “**default**” was bombarding people daily in the news. Insecurity, fear and anxiety had become increasingly the reality for many parts of society. Groups and people were scapegoated (immigrants, public employees, politicians) and there was no easy answer to the question “**who is to blame?**” Massive demonstrations against the austerity measures were dispersed with violent police interventions (tear-gas, flash-bang grenades) and ended up in battles between the riot police and groups of citizens. The open forums were and are attempts to come together to co-create a space where diverse and opposing voices, experiences and points of view are heard, and awareness of the underlying deepest feelings is encouraged, as a way of furthering interactions, which can give rise to the collective wisdom of the group in this process of self-discovery.

## DESCRIPTION OF METHODS

These forums were designed, organized and implemented using Process Work's approach to work with large groups and open forums. The facilitators were/are Process Workers, trained in group facilitation.

The format we followed in the Open Forums was:

- **A short introduction by the facilitators** presenting the process-oriented perspective of groups as fields of which we are all needed parts the format of the discussion, the way it was going to be facilitated and the ways that people can participate.
- **Small groups of four to five people** in one's sitting area introducing themselves, and talking about what brought them here and what they would like to focus on.
- **Discussion in the large group**
- **Discussion in small groups** about what they have experienced and what has remained unsaid
- **Discussion in the large group where each small group reports back to the large group.** Following that, the facilitators summing up and framing the discussion of open forum, as well as requesting feedback on the forum.

According to people's feedback, having small group discussion in the beginning of what has brought people to the meeting and what experiences they would like to share in the large group has helped people “arrive” in the room and feel safer to participate in the large group. The small group discussion after the large discussion is also especially helpful for those who do not feel at ease addressing the large group. Coming back to the large group again after the small groups to put together what has been discussed and close as a large group gives a sense of the whole ending together.

## PROCESS AND OUTCOMES OF PROJECT

### PROCESS

The following is a brief description of the process of the three forums we have had:

- In the **first forum (December 2010)**, a central polarization that emerged was between those who spoke for the ones who have been living in the margins for many years suffering, struggling to survive, going unseen by the rest living in prosperity, and those belonging to the middle class currently in shock by the sudden loss of their standard of living and threat of survival. A “tyranny of the oppressed” of sorts manifested through unacknowledged revenge of those speaking for the people who have been suffering for a long time against those who had been prospering. Meanwhile, tension from a second polarization that was simultaneously present, was manifesting in hot-spots, which had to do with the expression of each viewpoint as “the one and only truth,” and the reaction this creates against it.
- In the **second forum (July 2011)**, the issue of responsibility and accountability came to the foreground - who is accountable and who will take responsibility for what has happened in the country, the difference between personal and political responsibility, a reaction against the attempt from the politicians to create a sense of collective guilt -“we all profited”-in order to deflect their responsibility and put it onto the people, while at the same time an attempt to take responsibility as a citizen. Dialogue between the older generation and the younger one emerged in which the older person apologized to the younger person for the mess his generation has created. The citizen who asks the politician to intervene to secure a job for the citizen's loved one was unfolded, to uncover the attempt to take care for his loved ones. Tension erupted about the absence of a politician who stands and takes the political responsibility for the on-going corruption. The rage that people felt and the fear of that rage also emerged. Lastly, the polarization between focusing on feelings and talking about things, versus focusing on thinking in order to make a strategic plan for action. In the small groups people saw in corruption the underlying network of relationships as a potential power of the culture that could be used for the benefit of all
- In the **third forum (April 2012)**, the diversity in the room, in terms of people's backgrounds and walks of life, came more to the foreground. A transsexual person spoke about her invisibility, asking others present why she has not been seen by them all these years. Another citizen spoke about her inability to look at other people's suffering, her fear about what is ahead in her own life, and her reaction of hiding her head in the sand. A person identifying with an “anarchist” ideology questioned the value of talking, bringing the need for action, and subsequently two of the most extreme polarizations currently in the field of Greece came to the foreground:
  - a) The polarization between those whose survival is threatened by the current austerity measures, and those whose ability to maintain their previous standard of living has not been affected. The voice of those whose survival has been under threat long before the current crisis hit the country's door also came to the foreground.
  - b) The polarization between a politician present in the forum and a citizen, along with an internal dialogue between the citizens about whether they wanted to interact with the politician.

## AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE FACILITATION OF FORUMS INCLUDE

- Facilitation which focuses on helping people express their thoughts and go into their feeling experiences, noticing their momentary experience as it changes in the interaction.
- Avoiding talking about peoples' interactions in a meta-communicative way, so one does not inadvertently stop the emotional interaction by bringing people back into their heads.
- Supporting people to speak for their experience of abuse created by the unconscious us of rank and power of another person, but also bringing awareness to the cycling of abuse that occurs in interactions in the form of forceful attacks which continue, despite of signals of understanding coming from the other side, out of a sense of revenge.



## OPEN FORUM PARTICIPANTS

People living in Athens, or other places in Greece who were visiting Athens at the time of the forum. The participants of the **first forum (December 2010)** were people who had been invited by the preparation team. The participants of the **second forum (July 2011)** were also people who had been invited by the preparation team reaching out to people from more diverse backgrounds and walks of life. The participants of the **third forum (April 2012)** were invited by the preparation team and also people who saw the announcement of the forum on the processwork.gr blog on the internet or through social media (facebook & twitter).

## PREPARATION TEAM PARTICIPANTS OF THE LATEST FORUM

**Kristina Anastouli**  
psychologist, working with children with autism, in the public sector

**Adigoni Avgerinou**  
high school teacher, teaching French in private lessons

**Venetia Bouronikou**  
psychologist, self-employed

**Maria Fazou**  
youth worker, working in the private sector

**Georgia Felliou**  
mental health counselor, self-employed

**Eleni Houvarda**  
psychologist, unemployed

**Sofia Iliia**  
psychologist, unemployed

**Nopi Kehaoglou**  
social anthropologist, working in the public sector

**Stelios Koulis**  
hairstylist, small business owner

**Katerina Kouni**  
catering and tourism industry professional, unemployed

**Tina Ligidopoulou**  
youth worker, self-employed

**Eirini Madalenaki**  
crafts artist and seller, small business owner

**Evi Makadasi**  
social worker, working in the public sector

**Sotiria Papalouka**  
mental health counselor, self-employed

**Apostolos Sabaziotis**  
psychologist, mental health care, self-employed

**Katerina Sideri**  
graphic artist, unemployed

**Aggeliki Sifaki**  
elementary school teacher, working in the public sector

**Katerina Soilemezoglou**  
psychologist, employed in private sector, administrative position

**Anna Stavropoulou**  
psychologist, drug rehabilitation therapist, working in public sector

**Alexandra Vassiliou**  
psychotherapist, Process Work Diplomate, self-employed

**Anni Vassiliou**  
youth worker, self-employed

**Ioanna Vetali**  
psychologist, dance-movement therapist, unemployed

**Greg Vellios**  
Process Work Diplomate, unemployed

### OUTCOMES

- The Open Forum functions as an awakening to the various social situations in our communities and society before they touch our lives in more immediate ways. They awaken us to the marginalization, the suffering, the struggles and the issues of those groups, but also to the strength and beauty of the people belonging to them. It is also an awakening to the various forms of rank, and its momentary interchangeability in relationship interactions.
- The Open Forum brings together people from different backgrounds and walks of life, who usually do not have the opportunity to be meet and interact with one another, as we tend to stay within our comfort zone and do not make the effort it takes to meet and interact with people from different walks of life.
- Open Forums provide space for interactions that are usually avoided in times of social tension and extreme polarization.
- Open Forums light a spark for conversations that need to be had. They leave us feeling there are further conversations we need to have with one another who were present in order to complete interactions, but also conversations we now feel the need to open with people in our lives, which we have not opened before.

## LEARNING POINTS

- Facilitating the preparation team and the open forums has challenged us to develop our teamwork, see one another's experiences as inner voices, and become more skilled in relationship work.
- There seems to be a connection between what we have processed in the meetings of the preparation team and how deep we unfolded the interactions between us, with the unfolding of the processes in the forums.
- Noticing inner experiences and working with them on the spot, while in the role of the facilitator, is crucial to the ability to notice identifying with one part of the field. This allows us to regain awareness of the whole, and the ability to facilitate the interactions in the polarization.



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