

Approaching collective empowerment in the Greek anti-austerity movement: An interview study

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Collective Empowerment

- There has been an increasing interest on collective empowerment and its relevance to collective action over the past few years.
- Collective empowerment can be defined as “a social-psychological state of confidence in one's ability to challenge existing relations of domination” (Drury & Reicher, 2005, p. 35).
- Collective empowerment represents the link between psychological and social change (Drury & Reicher, 2009).
- As people come to see themselves as agents of social change, they become more empowered and, therefore, more inclined to act or continue acting towards achieving that goal.

Empowerment and Efficacy

What is efficacy?

- In most recent social-psychological studies of collective action, psychological power has been examined through the concept of efficacy.
- Collective efficacy represents a person's belief that he/she can improve his/her group's social position.
- Collective efficacy has been extensively studied in relevance to collective action and has been found to be an important predictor of the latter (e.g. Hornsey et al., 2006; Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008).

Empowerment and Efficacy

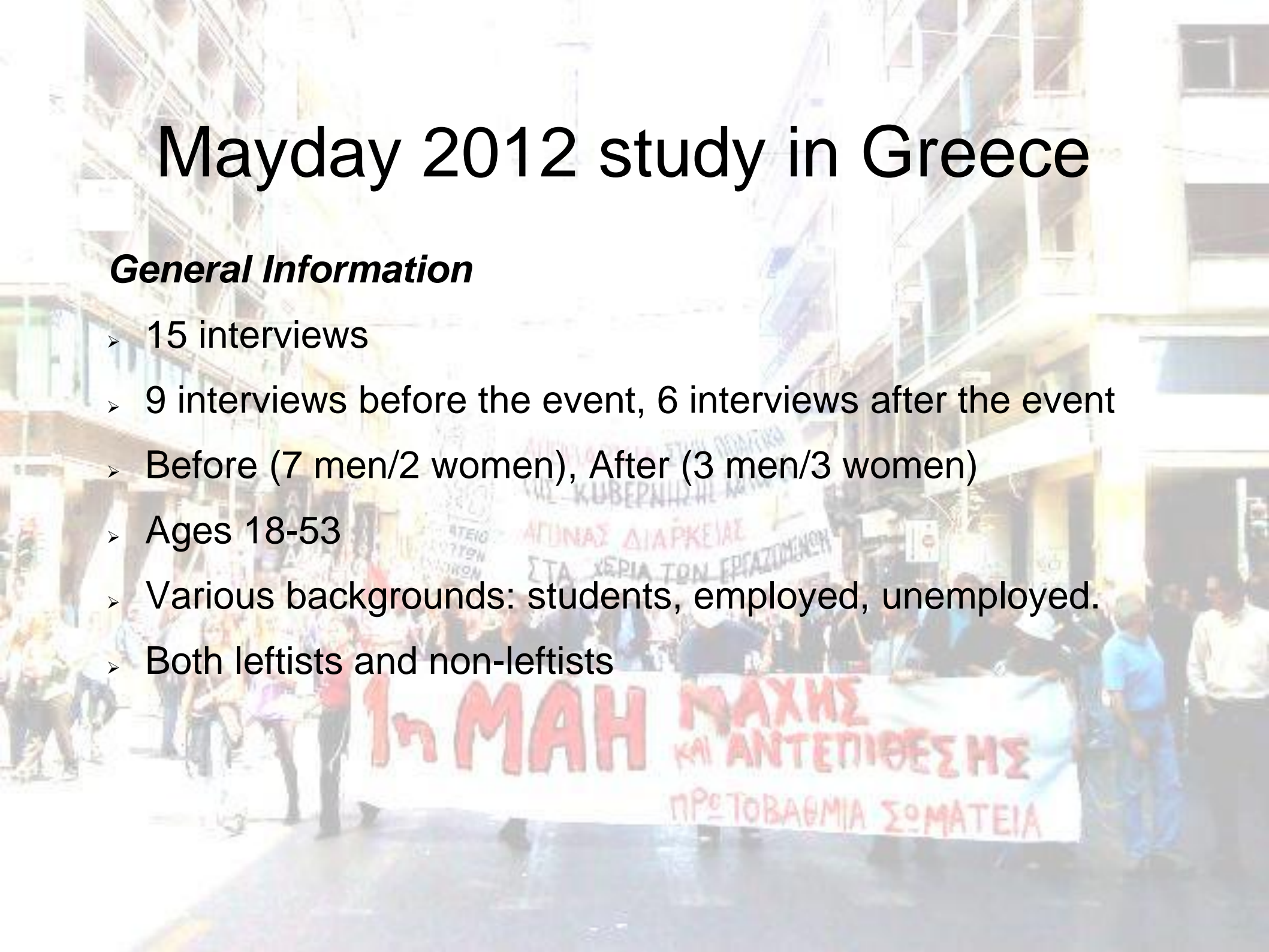
Limitations of Efficacy

- Efficacy addresses subjective power as a belief, disregarding the emotional and experiential aspects of empowerment as those can be seen in participants' and eye-witnesses' accounts of collective action events (e.g. France 1968, USA race riots, etc.)
- This perspective further limits the concept of psychological power seeing as it is regarded simply as a “efficacy” and not as a tangible, real experience.
- Moreover, efficacy has been studied mainly as a predictor of collective action whereas field studies and secondary data seem to suggest that it can also be a result.

Mayday 2012 study in Greece

General Information

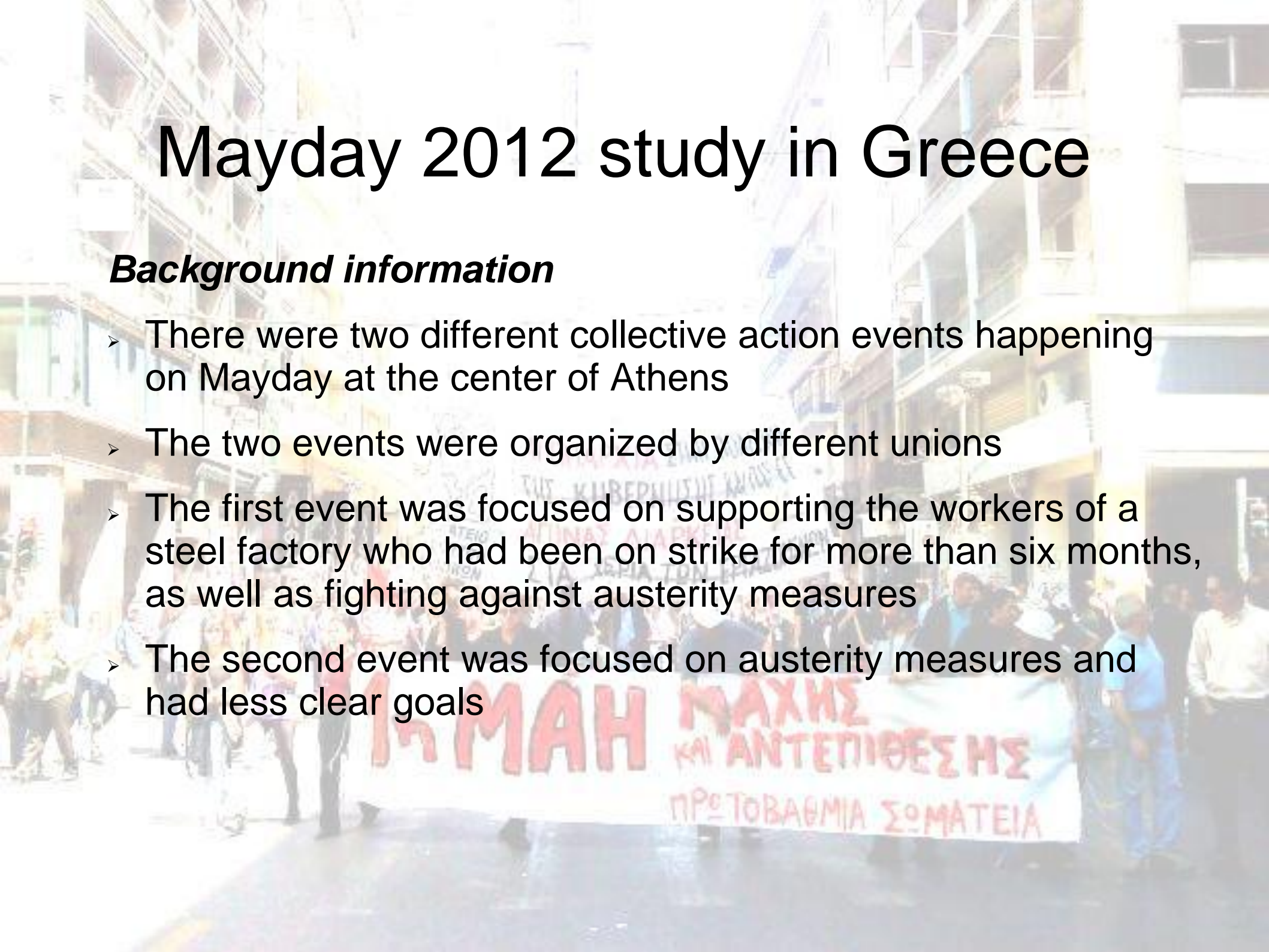
- 15 interviews
- 9 interviews before the event, 6 interviews after the event
- Before (7 men/2 women), After (3 men/3 women)
- Ages 18-53
- Various backgrounds: students, employed, unemployed.
- Both leftists and non-leftists



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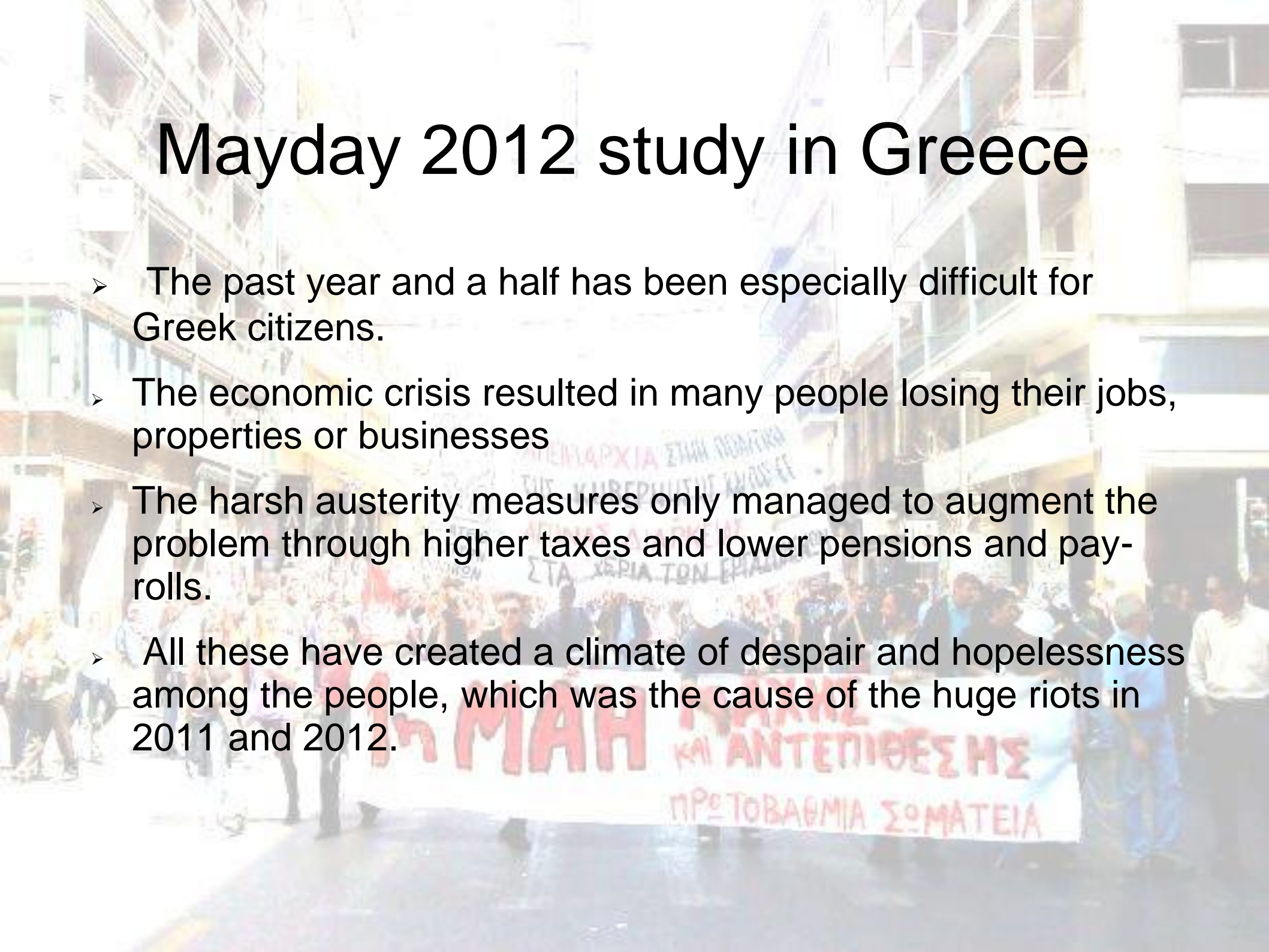
Background information

- There were two different collective action events happening on Mayday at the center of Athens
- The two events were organized by different unions
- The first event was focused on supporting the workers of a steel factory who had been on strike for more than six months, as well as fighting against austerity measures
- The second event was focused on austerity measures and had less clear goals



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- The past year and a half has been especially difficult for Greek citizens.
- The economic crisis resulted in many people losing their jobs, properties or businesses
- The harsh austerity measures only managed to augment the problem through higher taxes and lower pensions and pay-rolls.
- All these have created a climate of despair and hopelessness among the people, which was the cause of the huge riots in 2011 and 2012.



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The purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenology of empowerment and more precisely:

- a) how do people talk about changing of subjective power?
- b) how do people deal with a situation of defeat?

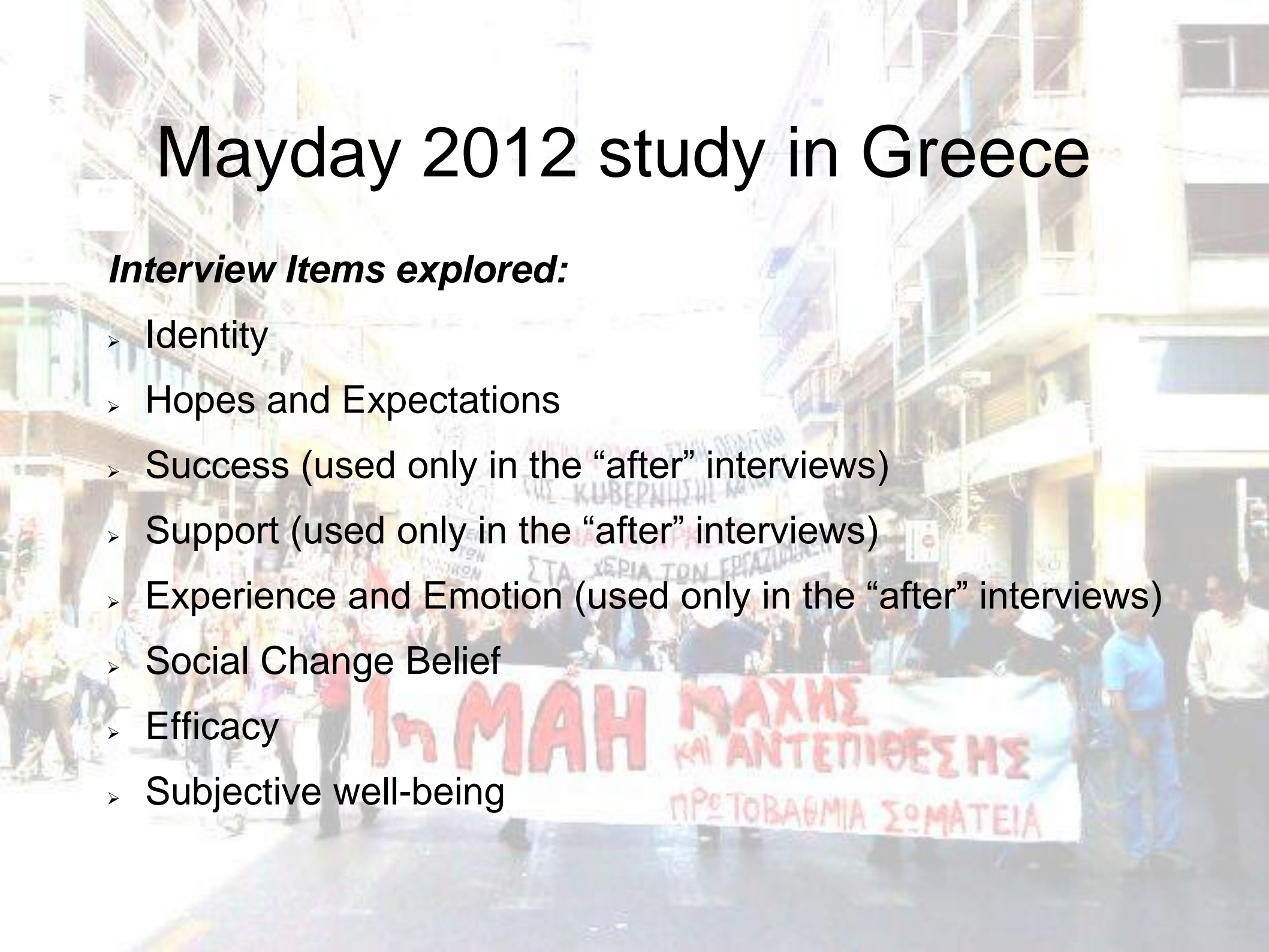


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Interview Items explored:

- Identity
- Hopes and Expectations
- Success (used only in the “after” interviews)
- Support (used only in the “after” interviews)
- Experience and Emotion (used only in the “after” interviews)
- Social Change Belief
- Efficacy
- Subjective well-being



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Analysis

- We conducted a thematic analysis of the data and organized them into four empowerment-related themes.
- Those four themes were:
 - a) building power
 - b) emotion
 - c) unity
 - d) (dis)organization



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Building power

Participants identified the building of power as an important long-term goal of the movement. They presented the awakening of people's consciousness as the first step towards that goal.

“I wish to see people awaken, become more involved and less fatalistic. I was like that but I'm trying to change this now, so I hope that for me, personally, it will be a step towards that change. I think the people of this country have been passive long enough.” (Christophoros, before)

“I mean, you have an immediate goal, right? And that might be satisfied or not, depends, but other than that...and perhaps more important....is the awakening of consciousness. Making people realize that they are abused by the government and they have the right to defend themselves”. (Maria, after).

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Building power

However, awakening consciousness would not suffice, as our participants hinted. A number of awakened consciousnesses would be necessary in order to build this collective agency.

“ I believe most of the times it's small things such as this that can bring a huge difference...maybe showing the people that not all those who protest against the government are thugs and vandals...maybe we can achieve a greater participation to the movement. I'm not saying it will happen, but I'm saying it could and we might not see it right away, but it would be huge if it did”.(Nikos before)

“But even if we don't achieve it right now, it matters...it's important to let people know that they can fight. Maybe then more will participate and we'll finally get somewhere”. (Vasilis, before)

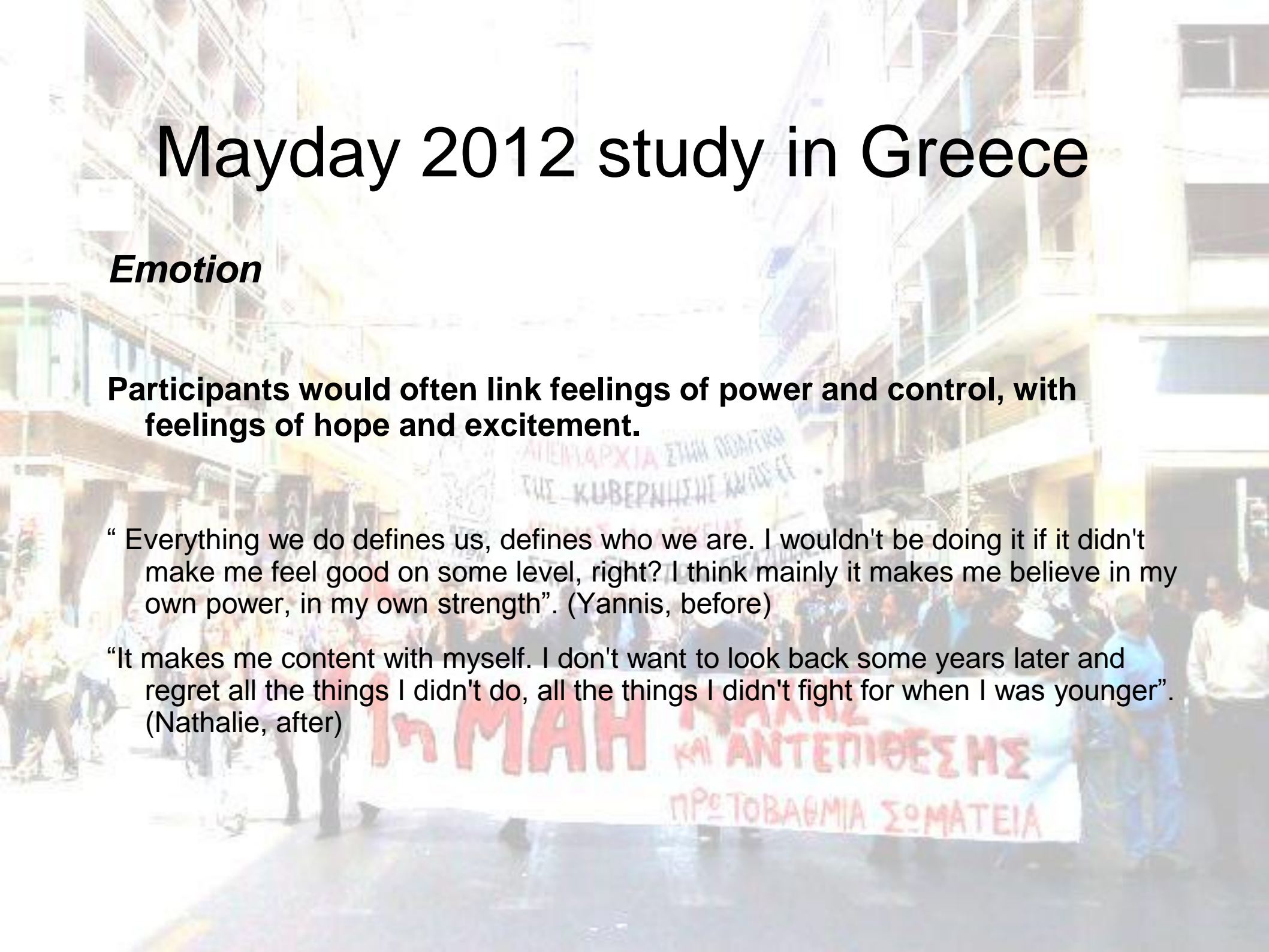
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Emotion

Participants would often link feelings of power and control, with feelings of hope and excitement.

“Everything we do defines us, defines who we are. I wouldn't be doing it if it didn't make me feel good on some level, right? I think mainly it makes me believe in my own power, in my own strength”. (Yannis, before)

“It makes me content with myself. I don't want to look back some years later and regret all the things I didn't do, all the things I didn't fight for when I was younger”. (Nathalie, after)



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Emotion

On the other hand, feelings of defeat and powerlessness were linked with feelings of depression, disappointment and bitterness.

“I've been feeling more and more depressed lately, so I think it'll be good for me, to remember that stuff.[...] I think I felt better, before. Like I was just myself, fighting for my values, no matter what. I felt disappointed many times, but I never felt bitter...like a misanthrope...like I feel now. I was sure of my beliefs and I knew I was acting upon them...so...I didn't matter if our demands were met...well, it mattered but I never felt like losing focus or determination. I felt I could do important things”.
(Kostas, before)

“It's really easy to start feeling passive and defeated these days. I think taking part in something like this, taking action helps with that, helps make you feel better.”
(Markos, after)

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Emotion

Furthermore, participants talked about how participation in collective action affects their general quality of life and showed a tendency to link this to subjective well-being.

“Participating makes me feel alive and in control. Like I'm part of something important and I could potentially leave something behind me in this world.”
(Andreas, after)



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Unity

Participants extensively talked about the importance of unity and strength in numbers, however, this was a conditional talk rather than descriptive.

“if we could get enough people to understand that...to understand their own power...then things would change”. (Kostas, before)

“If one man, a scientist, a philosopher, a teacher, a writer, can make a difference in the world, then lots of men working together towards a common purpose can do anything”. (Nathalie, after)

“If enough people joined, of course. Throughout history, society changed because people wished to change it and realized they had the power to do so”. (Markos, after).

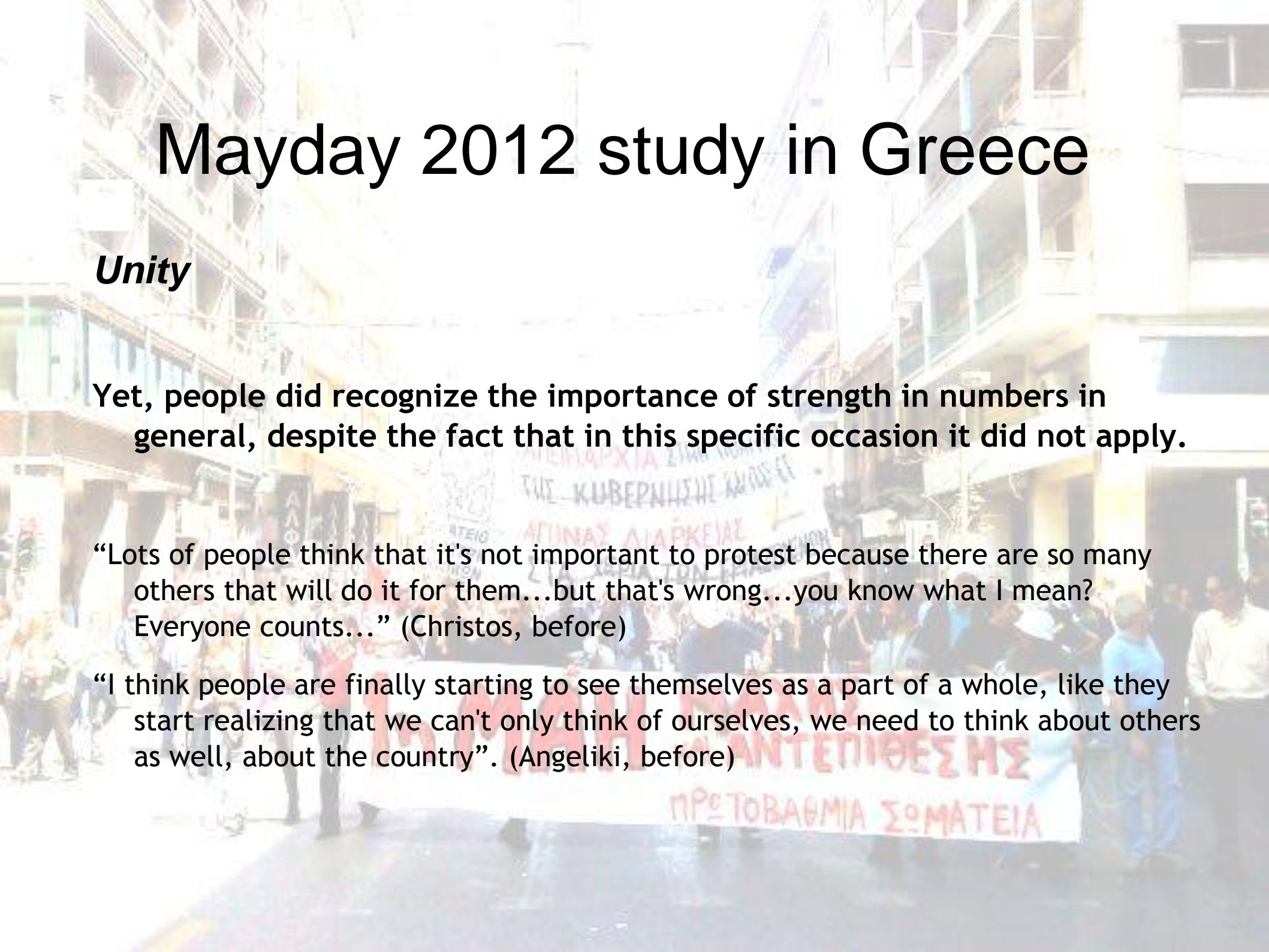
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Unity

Yet, people did recognize the importance of strength in numbers in general, despite the fact that in this specific occasion it did not apply.

“Lots of people think that it's not important to protest because there are so many others that will do it for them...but that's wrong...you know what I mean? Everyone counts...” (Christos, before)

“I think people are finally starting to see themselves as a part of a whole, like they start realizing that we can't only think of ourselves, we need to think about others as well, about the country”. (Angeliki, before)



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(Dis)organization

Most participants seemed to identify the lack of organization as the source of their disappointment with the event as well as feelings of disconnection and confusion. Furthermore, they considered it as an important factor concerning the failure of the event.

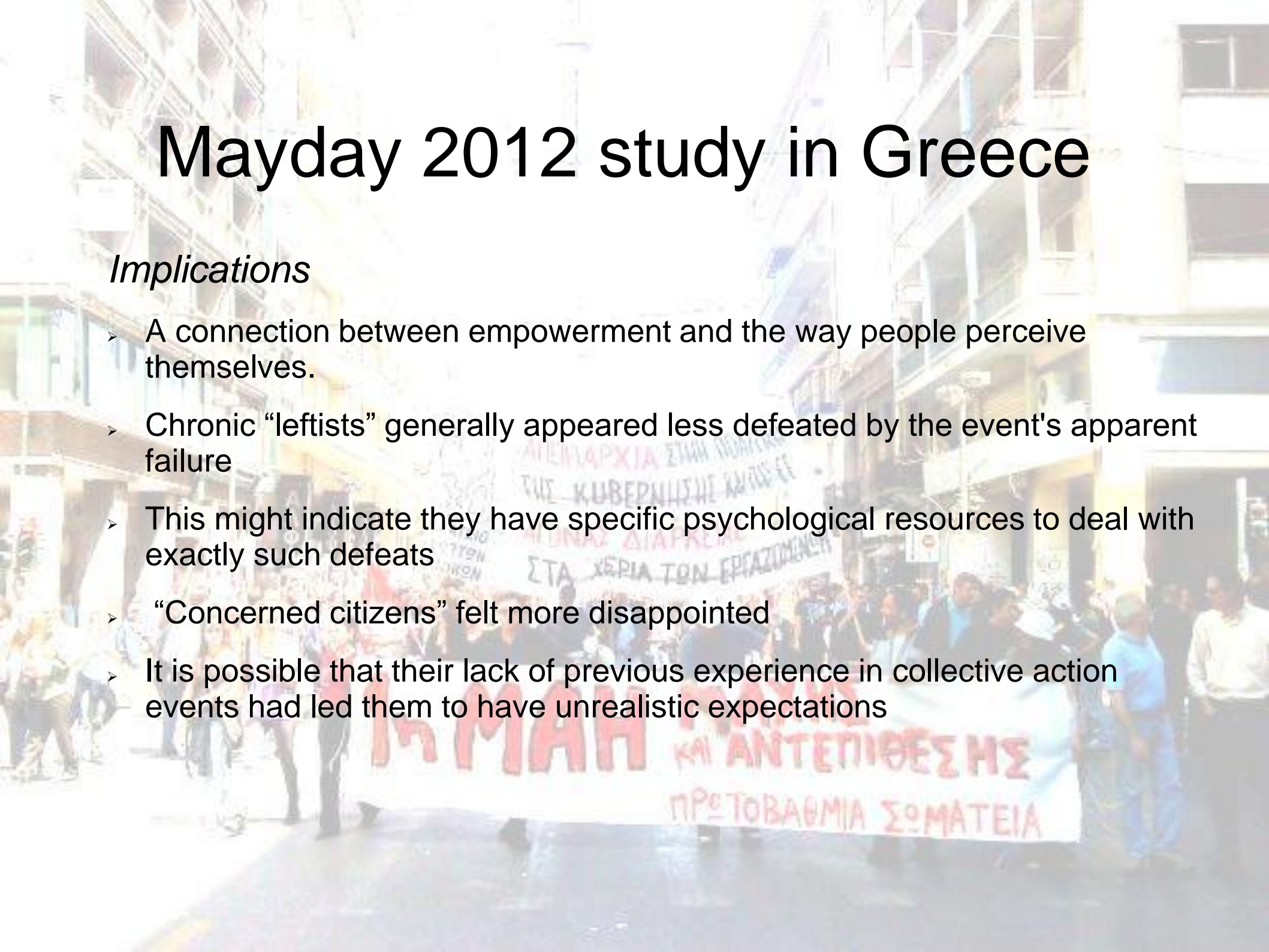
“I went to the event really hopeful, but I ended up feeling sort of, well, disillusioned, I suppose. It felt really weird that there were two different events and there was no connection between the participants”. (Pavlos, after)

“That was to be expected since there were discrepancies in the organization of the event itself. The steel factory event was considered better, I think, probably because it had a tangible goal: supporting the workers and it makes you feel good to support other people, especially these days. But the other one was much less focused and it just managed to cause disappointment and confusion”. (Nathalie, after)

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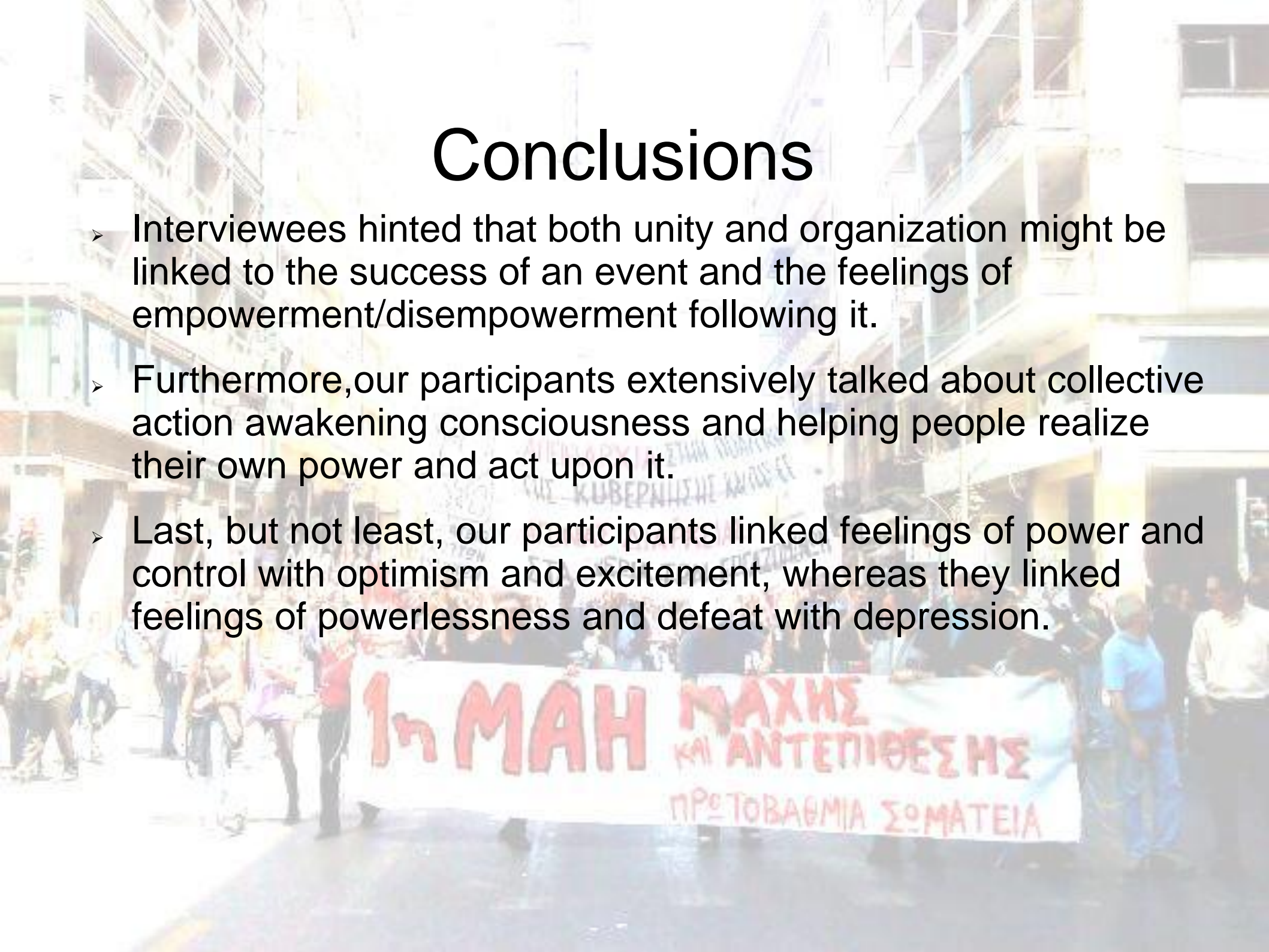
Implications

- A connection between empowerment and the way people perceive themselves.
- Chronic “leftists” generally appeared less defeated by the event's apparent failure
- This might indicate they have specific psychological resources to deal with exactly such defeats
- “Concerned citizens” felt more disappointed
- It is possible that their lack of previous experience in collective action events had led them to have unrealistic expectations



Conclusions

- Interviewees hinted that both unity and organization might be linked to the success of an event and the feelings of empowerment/disempowerment following it.
- Furthermore, our participants extensively talked about collective action awakening consciousness and helping people realize their own power and act upon it.
- Last, but not least, our participants linked feelings of power and control with optimism and excitement, whereas they linked feelings of powerlessness and defeat with depression.



Thank you!

