Unemployment, life satisfaction and deprivation: Gender and partnership differences in the context of economic recession

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: The economic recession produced a rapid rise of unemployment rates that was more visible in Southern European countries. There is evidence that unemployment correlates highly with individuals' poor life satisfaction.

OBJECTIVE: To analyse the relationship between life satisfaction, household composition and socioeconomic deprivation in people facing unemployment during the economic recession.

METHODS: A sample of 748 unemployed people from Lisbon (Portugal) completed a socio-demographic questionnaire, the Cantril's ladder of life scale, and the latent and manifest benefits of work scale (LAMB). Multiple regression analyses were used to test the associations between life satisfaction and all other variables.

RESULTS: Partnered people report higher life satisfaction compared to singles. Financial deprivation and lack of structured time were the strongest factors negatively related to life satisfaction in both partnered and single people. Having children had a particular negative effect on the life satisfaction of partnered men; and living with an unemployed partner together with lack of social contact and high enforced activity had a negative effect on life satisfaction in partnered women.

CONCLUSION: The heterogeneity of socioeconomic needs found by household composition bring practical policy implications for support actions targeting unemployed individuals in the unique context of economic recession.

Keywords: Marital status, parenthood status, socioeconomic factors, jobless, well-being

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1. Introduction

Life satisfaction, a global evaluation of one's life, is a common key indicator of individuals' subjective well-being [1]. There are reports that life satisfaction, well-being and quality of life have declined in many European countries since the start of the economic recession [2, 3].

Several researchers were already expecting such declines. There is evidence that this economic recession and the changes to welfare systems, labour markets, public policies it produces are likely to generate detrimental effects to population's mental health and well-being that are not equally distributed [4, 5]. Many studies have demonstrated that during recession times the lowest levels of life satisfaction and well-being are reported by the unemployed people [2, 3].

For policy makers it is important to know which subpopulations are most negatively affected by unemployment, and for researchers it is important to extend knowledge about the life satisfaction of the unemployed in countries where the economic recession was particularly severe, such as the Southern European countries – Greece, Spain and Portugal. In the first quarter of 2013, the rates of unemployment in these countries rose to record levels (Greece 27%; Spain 26%; and Portugal 17.4%) [6]. The present study is focused on the Portuguese context.

Unemployment is a known major stressful life event that can lead to an accentuated drop in life satisfaction and well-being [7, 8]. Because in the context of economic recession individuals face higher odds of experiencing unemployment at some stage during their lives and for longer periods due to lack of available jobs, it is crucial for policy makers to get information about the factors that are associated with improved well-being during unemployment.

Literature has established several key factors that can affect how life satisfaction declines during unemployment. In general, people living with a partner report experiencing higher life satisfaction than single people [3, 7, 10]. Despite being limited, research on partner's employment status and satisfaction say that unemployed people experience higher satisfaction when the partner is also unemployed. This process is called adherence to a "social norm" [11].

Empirical research on the effect of parenthood on well-being have stressed that being a parent entails rewards and costs. On one hand, having children may help adults satisfy some psychological needs and increase their social identity [12]. On the other hand, however, there is much more evidence that childless people are better off than parents on well-being measures [13, 14]. Unemployment is expected to exert a negative pressure in parenthood and consequently life satisfaction. This association should differ with partnership status, as single parents were found in literature to be less satisfied with their lives than parents living in partnership [9, 15].

In regards to socioeconomic factors, there are theories formulated that describe the determinants through which well-being is affected during unemployment. The Agency Restriction Model [16] and the Latent Deprivation Model [17], theorise that together with financial strain, there are five other major factors influencing well-being during job loss: time structure, social contact, status, enforced activity and collective purpose.

Financial deprivation has high negative effects on the unemployed individuals' well-being as it brings constraints to make ends meet and to access coping resources to deal with the job loss situation [16, 18]. Partnered individuals may have higher access to financial resources than single people, while being a parent may entail higher financial strain that may lower life satisfaction [13, 19]. Nevertheless, it is known that in countries with strong welfare systems the association betweeen being a parent and financial deprivation is much lower or even absent [13].

The use of structured time (e.g. purposeful daily routines), social contact, collective purpose, and activity are highly associated with well-being among the unemployed population [20]. Parents' involvement in their children's activities and coupled individuals may have increased access to social contact (e.g. social support from other parents) and to other needs such as time structure, collective purpose and social status than single people [19].

Despite that the detrimental effects of unemployment on individuals' well-being have been somewhat established in international literature, to date, there is limited information on the association between unemployed individual factors and life satisfaction among Portuguese adults in the country's unique recessionary context. Thus, the present study contributes to improve knowledge about the factors associated with better life satisfaction in Portuguese unemployed individuals and to examine which variables predict life satisfaction better in groups defined by partnership and gender.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure and participants

This cross sectional study was conducted in Lisbon (Portugal) from April to May 2013. At the time of data collection 9% of people in Lisbon were registered as unemployed from a total population of 26,0405 economically active people [21]. The study was conducted in five civil parishes of Lisbon that were recommended to the researchers by the City Council because they contained specialized offices for professional integration of unemployed people and also because these parishes can certify that the unemployed individual is actively seeking work or not as part of the requirements to continue receiving state benefit. This gave the possibility of getting a larger sample of unemployed participants. Thus, self-administered questionnaires were handed to all unemployed people visiting the civil parishes and who voluntarily agreed to respond. A final convenience sample of 748 unemployed adults (386 males and 362 females), with a mean age of 42.7 years old (SD = 11.4) was obtained.

Ethics approval to carry out the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Nova Medical School of Lisbon, from the Lisbon City Council and civil parishes. Consents were obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was assured throughout the study as questionnaire responses were anonymous.

2.2. Measures

Life satisfaction was measured by the Cantril's Ladder of Life Satisfaction [22], which is an extensively used measure of well-being [23]. Individuals were asked to indicate on a picture of a ladder where they felt they life stood at the moment (the top of the ladder 10 was the best possible life and the bottom 0 was the worst possible life). Although this is a single item measure and Cronbach's alpha is not possible to calculate several studies have shown its reliability, validity and usefulness to measure subjective well-being [1]. Socioeconomic deprivation was assessed using a validated Portuguese version of the Latent and Manifest Benefits of Work-LAMB-Scale [24]. This scale has been widely used in unemployment research [20]. The LAMB-Scale addresses six main dimensions which can be identified with the latent benefits of work (collective purpose, social contact, status, time structure, enforced activity) stated in the Latent Deprivation Model [17], and with the manifest benefit of work (financial income) stated in the Agency Restriction Model [16]. The deprivation of benefits of work is evaluated using 7-point bipolar scales: 1) financial strain (possible scores: 0–42) (e.g., my level of income usually/rarely allows me to make future plans); 2) time structure (possible scores: 0–49) (e.g., there is usually/rarely too much spare time in my day); 3) social contact (possible scores: 0–49) (e.g., regularly/rarely engage in social activities with others); 4) status (possible scores: 0–28) (e.g., I am usually/rarely important to my friends); 5) enforced activity (possible scores: 0–28) (e.g., I usually/rarely do the things I have to do) and; 6) collective purpose (possible scores: 0–35) (e.g., I often/seldom feel as a valuable part of society). The higher scores represent greater perceived deprivation. For this study the internal reliability coefficient of the subscales tested by the Cronbach's alpha were: financial strain 0.88; time structure 0.85; social contact 0.84; status 0.87; enforced activity 0.81 and collective purpose 0.81.

Socio-demographic data were also obtained. Study participants were asked to indicate whether they were living with a partner at present and to indicate their partner's employment status. Moreover, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had dependent children, their age, gender, education level (secondary level and higher education), number of periods of unemployment (first unemployment experience or a repeated experience) and unemployment duration (short-term unemployment was defined as being unemployed for less than a year and long-term unemployment for longer than one year).

2.3. Data analysis

After descriptive analysis for all variables (mean, standard deviation, and percentage), ANOVA was carried out to determine the associations between life satisfaction and partnership status. Analyses were then stratified by partnership status, after the ANOVA results showed that life satisfaction differs significantly between single and partnered individuals. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted firstly to test whether there is an effect of parental status and/or partner's job status on life satisfaction, independently of the influences of financial and latent deprivation; and secondly to test whether parental status and/or partner's job status together with financial and latent deprivation were

still associated with life satisfaction first in the sample of single unemployed people and then in the sample of partnered unemployed people. All models were adjusted for age and gender because well-being variables in unemployed populations have been found to vary between age and gender [7]. The analyses were further stratified by gender to test for possible heterogeneity of explanatory factors. All data analysis was completed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22.0 and the level of significance for all tests was 0.05.

3. Results

3.1. Sample description

Socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants are shown in Table 1. The current study included 748 adults (52% males), with a mean age of 42.7 years (SD = 11.4). At the time, most of the respondents were living with a partner (58%), that was employed (64%) and were parents of dependent children (51%). More than half had attained secondary education (55%), were unemployed for the first time (64%), and unemployed for less than a year (57.4%). Respondents rated their overall life satisfaction as low (mean of 3) and financial deprivation and deprivation of time structure, social contact, status, activity and collective purpose as high.

3.2. Association between life satisfaction and partnership status

There was a statistically significant difference in life satisfaction between partnered (3.3 ± 2.2) and single (2.7 ± 2.1) people (see Table 2) as determined by one-way ANOVA, $F(1,726) = 12.134$, $p = 0.001$.

3.3. Association between life satisfaction, parental status and deprivation variables in single people

Results for the regressions of variables linked to life satisfaction in single unemployed people are presented in Table 3.

All of the 10 variables together accounted for a significant 18% (adj. R^2) of the variance in life satisfaction of the total sample of single people. Parental status was not associated with life satisfaction in single people; neither in first model (parental status alone), nor in the second model (parental status plus

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of main sample

Variables	N (%)
Gender	
male	386 (51.6)
female	362 (48.4)
Partnership status	
partnered	432 (57.8)
single	315 (42.2)
Partner employment status	
employed	255 (64.1)
unemployed	143 (35.9)
Parental status	
parents	383 (51.3)
non-parents	364 (48.7)
Household type	
single	213 (28.5)
single parents	102 (13.7)
partnered	151 (20.2)
partnered parents	281 (37.6)
Level of education	
secondary level	405 (54.7)
higher education	336 (45.3)
Unemployment periods	
1st time	476 (64.0)
repeated	268 (36.0)
Unemployment duration	
<1 year	425 (57.4)
≥1 year	315 (42.6)
	Mean±SD
Age	42.7 ± 11.4
Life satisfaction	3.1 ± 2.2
Financial Deprivation	31.5 ± 8.9
Time Structure	30.6 ± 10.4
Social Contact	26.0 ± 9.3
Status	10.1 ± 5.4
Activity	11.5 ± 5.2
Collective Purpose	18.9 ± 7.0

Table 2
Analysis of variance of life satisfaction between partnered and single individuals

	Total			
	Partnered	Single	F	p
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		
Life satisfaction	3.3 (2.2)	2.7 (2.1)	12.134	0.001

latent and manifest deprivation variables). The latent and manifest deprivation variables at step 2 did add significantly to the prediction of life satisfaction, ΔF (6, 291) = 8.727, $p < 0.001$, which suggests that these variables, specifically financial deprivation and lack of time structure, were the most important factors to be considered in single unemployed people's life satisfaction. This was found to be true in both men and women.

Table 3
Multiple regression of variables linked to life satisfaction in single unemployed people

		Total	Male	Female
		B (95% CI)	B (95% CI)	B (95% CI)
Step1	childless	0.19 (–0.33;0.70)	0.47 (–0.29;1.24)	–0.04 (–0.76;0.68)
Step2	childless	0.07 (–0.42;0.56)	0.54 (–0.23;10.31)	–0.33 (–0.99;0.33)
	financial strain	–0.07 (–0.10;–0.04)***	–0.05 (–0.09;–0.01)**	–0.10 (–0.14;–0.05)***
	low time structure	–0.04 (–0.06;–0.02)***	–0.03 (–0.06;0.00)*	–0.04 (–0.07;–0.02)**
	lack of social contact	–0.02 (–0.05;0.01)	–0.04 (–0.09;0.01)	0.00 (–0.04;0.04)
	status deprivation	–0.05 (–0.10;0.01)	–0.02 (–0.11;0.06)	–0.06 (–0.14;0.01)
	lack of activity	0.04 (–0.01;0.10)	0.03 (–0.05;0.12)	0.05 (–0.02;0.12)
	low collective purpose	0.02 (–0.02;0.06)	0.04 (–0.02;0.10)	0.00 (–0.05;0.05)

Data are given as regression coefficients (B) and 95% confidence intervals. R^2 is 0.182, 0.103 for males, and 0.247 for females. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

3.4. Association between life satisfaction, parental status, partner's employment and deprivation variables in partnered people

Results for the regressions of variables linked to life satisfaction in partnered unemployed people are presented in Table 4.

All variables together accounted for a significant 17% (adj. R^2) of the variance in life satisfaction in the total sample of partnered unemployed people. At Step 1, parental status and partners employment status were significantly associated with life satisfaction, $F_{(4, 374)} = 4.471$, $p < 0.01$, accounting for 4% of the variance. The addition of the latent and manifest deprivation variable at Step 2 increased significantly the prediction of life satisfaction, $\Delta F_{(6, 368)} = 11.048$, $p < 0.001$, which suggests that they are also important factors to be considered. Nonetheless, being childless and living with an employed partner remained as significant key factors of life satisfaction in partnered unemployed people, even after deprivation variables are considered.

For men, not having dependent children was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, whilst financial strain and lacking time structure were negatively associated with life satisfaction and accounted for 15% (adj. R^2) of the variance, $F_{(9,185)} = 4.869$, $p < 0.001$. For women, having an unemployed partner, experiencing financial strain, low social contact and high enforced activity accounted for 19% (adj. R^2) of the variance in life satisfaction $F_{(9,174)} = 5.842$, $p < 0.001$. Because being a parent was significantly associated with lower levels of life satisfaction among partnered individuals, particularly in men, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to test what specific variables can explain this heterogeneity. In unemployed partnered fathers, all variables together accounted for 13% (adj. R^2) of the variance, in life satisfaction $F_{(8, 120)} = 3.351$, $p < 0.01$. For these fathers, the main additional factors linked to life satisfaction were status and activity. Higher status and less enforced activity were associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, in addition to higher time structure.

In unemployed partnered mothers, the variables accounted for 21% (adj. R^2) of the variance, in life satisfaction $F_{(8, 113)} = 4.919$, $p < 0.001$. For these mothers, their partners' unemployment loses statistical significance in the presence of the other variables (financial strain, social contact and enforced activity). Thus, less financial strain, higher social contact and less enforced activity were linked to higher life satisfaction for partnered mothers.

4. Discussion

This study examined the different factors driving the relationship between life satisfaction, household composition and socioeconomic deprivation factors in a sample of unemployed men and women from a country (Portugal) with a high unemployment rate and under the context of economic recession. The descriptive statistics highlighted that this sample of unemployed adults from Lisbon is highly dissatisfied with life, reporting on average a life satisfaction score of 3 out of 10. Many factors may explain this low score, but it can be the case that the support provided to unemployed individuals in Portugal is potentially not mitigating the impact of unemployment [25].

Corroborating prior research [3, 7, 26], the findings from this study showed that unemployed men and women living in partnership were more satisfied with their lives than single individuals. This may suggest that men and women living in partnership seem to have more resources to cope with job loss than single people.

Table 4
Hierarchical multiple regressions of variables linked to life satisfaction of unemployed partnered individuals and partnered parents

		Total B (95% CI)	Male B (95% CI)	Female B (95% CI)	Fathers B (95% CI)	Mothers B (95% CI)
Step1	childless	0.57 (0.11;1.03)*	0.75 (0.10;1.40)*	0.41 (−0.25;1.07)		
	unemployed partner	−0.73 (−1.19;−0.28)***	−0.45 (−1.08;0.17)	−1.06 (1.75;−0.37)**		
Step2	childless	0.54 (0.11;0.98)**	0.69 (0.05;1.32)*	0.40 (−0.21;1.01)	–	–
	unemployed partner	−0.48 (−0.92;−0.05)*	−0.35 (−0.95;0.25)	−0.65 (−1.31;0.00)*	−0.24 (−0.98; 0.50)	−0.43(−1.28;0.43)
	financial strain	−0.05 (−0.08;−0.02)***	−0.06 (−0.09; 0.02)**	−0.04 (−0.08;−0.01)*	−0.04 (−0.08;0.01)	−0.06 (−0.10;−0.01)*
	low time structure	−0.03 (−0.06;−0.01)***	−0.05 (−0.08;−0.02)**	−0.01 (−0.05;0.02)	−0.04 (−0.08;0.00)*	−0.01 (−0.05;0.03)
	lack of social contact	−0.02 (−0.05;0.02)	0.02 (−0.02;0.07)	−0.06 (−0.10;−0.01)**	0.03 (−0.02;0.08)	−0.06 (−0.11;−0.01)*
	status deprivation	−0.05 (−0.10;0.01)	−0.08 (−0.16;0.01)	−0.03 (−0.11;0.04)	−0.13 (−0.24;−0.03)*	−0.01 (−0.10;0.08)
	lack of activity	0.07 (0.02;0.12)**	0.05 (−0.03;0.12)	0.09 (0.02;0.15)**	0.10 (0.01;0.19)*	0.10 (0.01;0.18)*
	low collective purpose	−0.02 (−0.06;0.01)	−0.01 (−0.07;0.05)	−0.03 (0.80;0.02)	−0.03 (−0.11;0.04)	−0.04 (−0.10;0.03)

Data are given as regression coefficients (B) and 95% confidence intervals. R^2 is 0.169, 0.152 for males, and 0.192 for females. In partnered parents R^2 is 0.128 for males, and 0.206 for females.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

4.1. Single and life satisfaction

The findings suggested that the lower life satisfaction among single people may be explained in part by financial strain and lack of time structure, but not by having dependent children, as suggested the findings of other studies [9, 15]. This could be explained by the fact that the subgroup of single parents in our study was very small, but also because financial strain and time structure are, in fact, the key variables that best account for the significant variance in life satisfaction among single people. There were no gender differences in life satisfaction among single people.

4.2. Living in partnership and life satisfaction

Although partnered individuals are less likely to perceive lower life satisfaction, they are also highly dissatisfied. Both financial strain and lack of time structure significantly predicted their satisfaction with life. Furthermore, partnered individuals experience higher life satisfaction if they are childless, living with an employed partner, and experience less enforced activity.

Nevertheless, there were substantial gender differences found. For partnered men, being a father, together with financial strain and lack of time structure, predicted lower levels of life satisfaction. These findings are corroborated by other studies [14], showing that nonparent men are better off than parents on well-being measures. These findings are rather important since fathers' low life satisfaction is likely to affect their children as well [27, 28]. Thus, helping fathers to better cope with unemployment may also help protect their children's well-being during periods of unemployment.

The differences found may be suggestive of the importance of traditional gender roles. For instance, the possible reason why being a parent is negatively associated with life satisfaction among partnered unemployed men may be due to higher pressure to provide for their children. This social burden of being the "breadwinner" might explain, for instance, why status deprivation was negatively associated with life satisfaction among partnered fathers, but not partnered mothers.

For partnered women, life satisfaction was better predicted by their partner's employment, financial deprivation, social contact and enforced activity. It might be the case that these women expect men to carry out their traditional role of the "breadwinner". Thus, when the partner is employed they may feel

it is more socially acceptable to be jobless; probably because the traditional role of the "housewife" is then strengthened. The relationship among partnered mothers shows the same direction; however, partner's employment status is less significant in the presence of other variables.

Furthermore, our study showed that unemployed men's life satisfaction was not dependent on the employment status of their partners; as it was in unemployed women. These results do not offer evidence of an overall adherence to a "social norm" as life satisfaction was not found to be lower when partners are employed [11].

Other remarkable differences between partnered women and men were found in time structure and social contact. Unemployed women living in partnership tend to structure their time better than men and single people. Therefore, men and single people may benefit, in terms of well-being, from support to help them engage in activities that give purpose and time structure to their lives. Nevertheless, partnered women seem to be more protected in terms of time structure. It may be the case that this is also related to the traditional role of the "housewife", in a way that by undertaking household chores and the care of others may assist unemployed women to structure their time in a more purposeful way.

Additionally, social contact was highly associated with life satisfaction in partnered women's life satisfaction; more so in mothers, than single women or unemployed men. Although the evidence in relation to gender differences in latent deprivation is sparse, and more so in relation to partnership and parental status, Hammarström and Janlert [29] support these findings in part by indicating that social support is highly associated with the well-being of unemployed women but not unemployed men. The fact that in our study only partnered women showed a strong association between social contact and life satisfaction may indicate that the commitments made by these women at the family level may withdraw them from social activities. Thus, these women would possibly benefit in terms of life satisfaction if supported to increase contact with others.

4.3. Financial deprivation

The findings of our study suggest that financial deprivation is the most common significant predictor of life satisfaction in all groups, with the exception of partnered women with no children (having an unemployed partner was the best predictor), and partnered fathers (lack of time structure, low status and enforced activity were better predictors). This could mean that a more generous cash benefit system might lessen the experience of financial strain and improve overall life satisfaction of unemployed people. It could also mean that the levels of unemployment protection in Portugal are insufficient to fulfil the needs of this unemployed sample; however, further research is needed to provide evidence for this statement.

These findings are somewhat limited by the methodology of this study that used correlational data, a cross-sectional design, and a convenience sample. Moreover, unemployment is a very complex life event that depends on a large number of individual variables (e.g. personality and motivations) and context variables (e.g. labour market conditions and welfare system), but only a few effects were analysed, and only on one single component of well-being (life satisfaction). These finding contribute a small, but important step forward in the comprehensive understanding of the possible effects of household composition on well-being during an unemployment experience in a unique context of economic recession. Participants were unemployed people from an urban area that were receiving state unemployment benefits, and possible bias can be at least theoretically foreseen when considering the overall population of Portuguese unemployed people (56%) who do not receive any benefits at all [30].

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the understanding of how life satisfaction and socioeconomic deprivation during unemployment is experienced within specific family groups, and is the first study of its kind involving the unemployed population in Portugal. Although results, associations and pathways need to be further explored, these findings surfaced a few concerns to suggest that actions that provide better access to the specific predictors of life satisfaction in single or partnered men and women may provide some protection to the negative effects of unemployment on well-being.

5. Conclusion

In a social, economic and political context of economic recession that poses new challenges to the supports provided to unemployed individuals, this study contributes to the knowledge about the effect of household composition and socioeconomic deprivation on the life satisfaction of single and partnered

unemployed men and women. The findings attempt to stimulate the design of actions to support unemployed people to cope better with unemployment considering the heterogeneity of the needs that were expressed.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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