

Unemployment, Parental Distress and Youth Emotional Well-being: The moderation roles of parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation

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Abstract

We investigated, in a sample of 112 unemployed parents of adolescents aged 10-19 years, the links between parental distress and change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment, and the moderation roles of parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlations. Further, simple moderation, additive moderation, and moderated moderation models of regression were performed to analyze the effects of parental distress, parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation in predicting change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment.

Results show that parental distress moderated by parent-youth relationship predicted levels of change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment. This study provides evidence that during job loss, parental distress is linked to youth emotional well-being and that parent-youth relationships play an important moderation role. This raises the importance of further researching parental distress impacts on youth well-being, especially during periods of high unemployment rates.

Keywords: adolescence, mental health, parental unemployment, parent-child relations.

Introduction

The recent economic recession has led to an increase in unemployment levels and socioeconomic complications in several countries. Negative consequences for families and adolescents' well-being in the medium and long term are expected in countries badly affected by the economic recession (1-3). In most of these countries, levels of poverty are high and increasing among children and adolescents, and have been attributable to the growing rates of parental unemployment and lowering of family incomes (4-6). A recent cross-national study using representative data on adolescents from 31 countries support this argument. Surveyed before and after the recession, young people in Ireland and Portugal reported a significant rise in youth psychological health complaints associated with the increasing of unemployment rates (7). The family context is an important determinant of well-being of adolescents (8). In that sense, adolescents are likely to become especially vulnerable to poorer well-being and more likely to develop mental health problems when their families are facing stress and socioeconomic deprivation (9-11). A recent study in Slovenia showed that adolescents who report living in socioeconomic deprivation exhibit lower life satisfaction and a poorer quality of life than those living in better socioeconomic conditions (12). Therefore, such adverse living situations constitute a serious threat that can undermine adolescents' development, well-being and future health outcomes in adult life (8).

There is strong evidence for the association between unemployment and mental health problems in adults (13-16). However, the costs of unemployment might go beyond the individual and have repercussions for the family. Well-established research says that a family's negative socioeconomic living circumstances have implications on youth well-being (8-10, 12, 17, 18). Focusing specifically on parental unemployment, research has demonstrated that children of unemployed parents have a higher

prevalence of depression symptoms, higher rates of psychosomatic symptoms and lower perceptions of psychological well-being (19-23).

We addressed how parental distress during an unemployment situation is associated with change in youth emotional problems, with reference to the main theoretical framework in parental unemployment research: The Family Stress Model (24). The Family Stress Model states that adverse financial events, such as unemployment and financial deprivation, together with parental distress and tensions in the family relationship can negatively affect youth emotional well-being (25, 26). Available evidence substantiates the model suggesting that parental distress is associated with increased probability of youth developing mental health problems (18, 27-29). Moreover, according to the Family Stress Model, the negative intergenerational impact on well-being is affected by strain in the parent-child relationship (30, 31). Indeed, evidence states that both parental distress and financial deprivation are associated with a strained parent-adolescent relationship (18, 24, 26, 31-34), and in turn a good parent-adolescent relationship is linked to higher youth well-being when facing events such unemployment in the family (35-37). A lack of parental support is therefore likely to affect adolescents' well-being during parental unemployment (2, 38).

This present study aimed to examine in a sample of unemployed parents, first if higher parental distress during a period of unemployment is associated with negative change in youth emotional problems, and second if strain in the parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation moderate such a link. Higher parental distress is expected to negatively affect change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment, and parent-youth relationship is expected to moderate this association together with financial deprivation. If such a negative intergenerational impact exists,

the true costs of unemployment might go beyond the individual affected by the job loss, with implications for social and public health policies.

Method

Procedure and Participants

We used a convenience sample of unemployed adults (N=748) from Lisbon who were receiving unemployment benefits and registered at the Job Centre. The survey was conducted from April to May 2013. In Portugal, benefit claimants must go to their local civil parishes every two weeks to certify that they are actively seeking work as part of the requirements to continue receiving state unemployment benefit. Thus, self-administered questionnaires were handed to all unemployed people who voluntarily agreed to respond in 5 civil parishes of Lisbon. These civil parishes were recommended to the research team by the City Council because they contained specialized offices for Professional Integration of unemployed people and therefore gave the possibility of getting a larger sample of unemployed participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study, and confidentiality was assured. 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 from the Lisbon civil parishes.

For the purpose of this specific study only parents living with adolescent children aged between 10-19 years old were included in the analysis. In addition to the general questionnaire, these respondents also answered questions regarding perception of the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment. Thus, a final subsample under analysis was composed of 112 parents (54 male and 57 female with a mean age of 45 years \pm 6.6) living with adolescents (53 male and 58 female adolescents with a mean age of 15 years \pm 2.9). More than half of the parents had attained up to higher education (54.5%).

About 44% of the parents lived with an employed partner, 34% were single and 21% reported that their partner is also unemployed. For the most part this was the first time participants had been unemployed (67.6%) and the period of unemployment was generally short-term (less than a year) at the time of data collection (56.8%).

Measures

Parental distress

The adapted and validated Portuguese version of the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12) was used to measure distress among unemployed parents (39, 40). This measure assesses the severity of common mental health problems and is widely used as a distress screening instrument in unemployment research (13).

Responses were scored on a four-point scale ranging from 0 to 3 (better than usual - much less than usual) with higher scores indicating higher distress. The maximum possible score is 36, and the best distress threshold suggested by the scale authors is 12. The coefficient of internal consistency of the GHQ-12 for the current study tested by the Cronbach's alpha was 0.92.

Change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment

The change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment was measured using a single item based on the self-reported health scale which is a widely recognized measure of morbidity and mortality in health psychology (41). Respondents answered the question 'In your opinion, how much has your unemployment negatively affected your adolescent's emotional well-being?' using a 4 point rating scale (not at all-very much).

Perception of parent-youth relationship

The unemployed parents were asked to indicate, in a single-item self-reported measure, ‘In your opinion, how much the unemployment negatively affected the relationship with your adolescent’ in a scale from 1 to 4 (not at all-very much).

Financial deprivation

This measure was an 8-item subscale of the Latent and Manifest Benefits of Work-LAMB-Scale (42), adapted and validated for the Portuguese population (43). The respondents identified the degree of deprivation in scales from 1 to 7 for six phrased statements such as e.g., ‘my level of income usually/rarely allows me to make future plans’. Higher scores indicated a higher level of deprivation, and the maximum possible score was 42. For this study the internal reliability coefficient of the subscale tested by the Cronbach’s alpha was 0.88.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed firstly using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) and correlations. Secondly, to analyze the effects of parental distress, parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation in predicting change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment, simple moderation, additive moderation, and moderated moderation models of regression were performed using Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS (44). Each analysis utilized a bootstrapping approach, and significance was determined at 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. All variables were continuous and centered prior to analysis, and the estimated effects reported were unstandardized regression coefficients (44). To address potentially confounding effects of family structure (single versus dual-parent households, unemployed couples), parent

and youth gender, parent and youth age, and parent level of education, all models were tested including these factors as covariates. Family structure was coded into one variable with 1 representing single-parent families, 2 dual-parent families with one employed parent, and 3 dual-parent families both parents unemployed. Youth and parent gender were both coded into two separate variables, with 0 representing males and 1 representing females. Parent level of education was coded into one variable with 1 indicative of up to secondary level education and 2 of higher education.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations for the survey measures. Change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment was positively correlated with parental distress and parent-youth relationship. Parental distress correlated positively with both change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment and financial deprivation. The mean of parental distress should be considered high in relation to the threshold of 12 suggested by the scale authors (45)

***** Table 1 *****

Moderation analysis

A simple moderation analysis using the PROCESS macro was performed to test the hypothesis that the relationship between parental distress and change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment would be moderated by parent-youth relationship. To avoid multicollinearity issues, parental distress and parent-youth relationship were mean centered prior to analysis and an interaction term between parent-youth relationship and parental distress was produced. Figure 1 shows the simple

moderation model tested. Results revealed that the interaction between parental distress and parent-youth relationship accounted for a significant proportion of the variance on change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment [$\Delta R^2 = .06$, $b = .03$, $t(96) = 3.15$, $p < .001$]. Therefore, support for a moderation effect was found. Examination of the conditional effect values showed an enhancing effect; worse parent-youth relationship together with higher parental distress enhances negative change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment.

***** Figure 1 *****

An additive moderation analysis was conducted to test whether the effect of parental distress on change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment was moderated by both parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation (fig. 2). After adding the financial deprivation x parental distress interaction to the moderation model, the interaction between parent-youth relationship and parental distress remained significant [$b = .03$, $t(94) = 3.38$, $p < .01$], but the interaction between financial deprivation and parental distress was not [$b = .00$, $t(94) = .52$, $p = .60$]. Thus, the effect of parental distress on change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment was not found to be additively dependent on both parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation.

***** Figure 2 *****

Moderated moderation

To test whether the interaction found between parental distress and parent-youth relationship was moderated by financial deprivation, a moderated moderation analysis (also known as *three-way interaction*) was performed (Fig 3). Altogether the model accounted for a significant amount of variance on change in youth emotional problems

related to parental unemployment [$F(12, 92) = 8.45, p < .001, R^2 = .43$]. However, the interaction between parental distress, parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation was not statically significant [$b=.00, t(92) = .57, p = .570$]. Only the interaction between parental distress and parent-youth relationship accounted for a significant moderation effect on change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment [$b = .03, t(92) = 3.03, p < .01$]. Thus, support for the moderated moderation hypothesis was not found.

***** Figure 3 *****

Discussion

In this study we examined the effect of parental distress on change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment and the moderating roles of parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation. The results confirmed the hypothesis that during unemployment the parents' distress levels are associated with change in youth emotional problems, and that parent-youth relationship moderates such link. This means that the link between parental distress and negative change in youth emotional problems due to parental unemployment is stronger when the parent-youth relationship is worse. This corroborates the idea that good parent-youth interaction may act as a protector of the effects of parental stress on youth well-being during parental unemployment (8, 35-37). Further, additive and multiplicative moderation analysis revealed that the effect of parental distress on change in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment was not moderated by combining parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation together.

Altogether, the findings are somewhat consistent with the arguments of the Family Stress Model. This model acknowledges that together with parental well-being,

parent-youth relationship and financial deprivation affects adolescents' well-being (2, 24, 30, 31, 34, 46). Our results, however, showed that financial deprivation did not moderate the effect of parental distress on youth emotional problems. This is in line with prior research showing that highly distressed parents report lower levels of their youths' well-being independently of socioeconomic deprivation (20, 29, 47, 48). These results point to the complexity of understanding the association between parental distress and youth emotional well-being in an unemployment situation, which should go beyond financial deprivation to consider additional social variables (e.g. coping skills for handling the emotional consequences of job loss, such as capacity to schedule meaningful routines and take care of their mental health).

The parental distress results of this study reveal that this sample is highly distressed, which is in line with most of the literature that links unemployment to higher distress levels (14). Moreover, our results indicated that this sample of unemployed parents was facing extensive financial deprivation when compared to the results found in other Portuguese studies, which supports the argument that unemployed families are likely to face higher financial hardship (49).

This study has some limitations. First, it has a cross-sectional design so causal inference and generalization are limited. Second, the sample size was relatively small (less than 200), limiting statistical power, and precluding the use of structural equation modeling or other statistical approaches to test the current model (50). Third, the results might have been influenced by reporter bias, because parents reported on their own psychological distress level, relationship quality with their adolescents and their adolescent's change in emotional problems. In this study it can be expected that parents and adolescents differ in the view of their relationship and that mainly adolescents, but not parental, reports are associated with diverse outcomes (51). Nonetheless, there is

evidence showing that children and their parents tend to perceive health-related quality of life consistently (52). In the future, it would be useful to design a multi-informant study that may also include self-reports of adolescents with unemployed parents.

Fourth, it is important to consider that the pathways of the impact of parental unemployment distress are many and operate at different levels, and that elements of adolescent life other than family are also important to emotional well-being. Fifth, the findings are obtained with a sample of unemployed parents that are receiving state unemployment benefits. Because only 44% of the Portuguese unemployed individuals are receiving financial benefits (people are only entitled to unemployment benefit if they have completed a period of at least 365 days' paid work with recorded earnings in the 12 months preceding the date unemployment began) (53), the results should not be generalized for the whole Portuguese unemployed parent population.

Despite these limitations, our study is the first - to our knowledge - to contribute to the understanding of the effect of parental distress on changes in youth emotional problems in a population facing unemployment. The moderating role of parent-adolescent relationship on the effect of parental distress on changes in youth emotional problems highlights the importance of the quality of family relations during unemployment. The findings might help plan longitudinal studies that can provide evidence for causality, directionality, and temporal order of the effects. Additionally, the findings might help improve policy-making by bringing awareness to the associations between parental distress and changes in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment, which is especially relevant during periods of economic recession. In particular, the results point to the social importance of parental unemployment – rather than solely the financial consequences – on adolescent well-

being, suggesting a need for add social resources to help families during periods of unemployment.

Summary

This study examined whether parental distress is associated with changes in youth emotional problems related to parental unemployment, and whether this association is moderated parent-youth relationship and by financial deprivation. Results showed that during parental unemployment, elevated parental distress was associated with to greater adolescent emotional problems, and that parent-youth relationship moderated this association. These findings suggest a possible transmission of unemployed parents' distress to adolescents and that the quality of parent-youth relationship exerts important effects on this association. Such information adds to existing literature about the impact of parental distress upon adolescents, and expands the research to explore the effects of parental unemployment. This is useful to raise awareness for research on the effects of unemployment in the family context, which is especially relevant given the rise of unemployment rates caused by the economic recession.

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