

Are unemployment and subjective well-being related?

Andreea Iorga

Cognitive Behavioral Therapies Master of Science Program, Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

In time, subjective well-being was studied in relation to a series of other characteristics. It was connected to age, social support, material condition, religiosity, marital status, gender, culture, self-esteem, work place status, and others. In the present paper, we propose a short analysis of the most important studies which approached the relationship between subjective well-being and work status. Here and there, we will refer to other research results which emphasize the relationship between subjective well-being and other characteristics mentioned above.

Keywords: *subjective well-being, life domains, life satisfaction, happiness, depression, gender differences*

Corresponding author: Andreea Iorga

Phone number: -

E-mail address: andreeaiorga14@yahoo.com

I. INTRODUCTION

Subjective well-being was differently defined in time and no unitary opinion can be found to fully describe it. Diener (2000) mentions as distinct elements of subjective well-being the following characteristics: the degree of satisfaction for different life domains, life satisfaction through global apprehensions on life, positive and negative affects (experimenting less unpleasant states).

Can we define happiness through minor positive events emerging with a high frequency in our lives? Or can be define it by presenting positive events of high intensity which emerge rather rarely? Diener, Sadvik, and Pavot (1991) consider that, although we desire strong positive events in our lives, when we experience them, they are less connected with a long term subjective state because of the rare occasions they appear. Thus, what we call happiness seems to be made of frequent positive affects and the absence of negative affects (Diener et al., 1991).

The assessment of subjective well-being implies the subject's self-assessment. Questioned about what happiness means for them, people will describe it as a state of happiness or as a state of satisfaction, actually and alternatively indicating the emotional or the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Argyle, & Martin, 1991). Thus, some assessments of subjective well-being measure emotional aspects, some measure satisfaction and others, a combination between the two.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND LIFE EVENTS

Opinions regarding subjective well-being are various: well-being presents a genetic component (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), social support is a predictor of subjective well-being (Winkelmann, 2009), adjustment influences subjective well-being (Biswas-Diener, Diener, & Tamir, 2004), religiosity influences subjective well-being, whether it helps us in the case of traumatic events (Ellison, 1991) or it helps in the case of material and status issues which affect us (Roemer, 2010).

Latif (2010), based on the idea that unemployment has a negative effect on subjective well-being, conducted a longitudinal study in this matter and results came to support this hypothesis. Considering money costs caused by losing finances, they are much smaller than costs which are not related to financial aspects during unemployment (Latif, 2010).

Warr, Butcher, Robertson and Callinan (2004) were also interested by showing this relationship, so they examined life satisfaction and the affective state comparing employed people, unemployed or retired, aged between 50 and 74 years old. In their study, people who

were not employed were divided into two categories: the ones who desired this status and the one who did not. They started from the idea that the difference between the people who were not employed as a result of volunteer choice (for instance, anticipatory retirement) and unemployed people consists in that the latter are characterized not only by the lack of a workplace, but also by the desire to obtain one. Results supported the hypothesis that the preference for one of the mentioned statuses is associated with two investigated indicators (life satisfaction and well-being). Thus, people who want to be in the position they are in also present a higher level of subjective well-being. Also, it seems that the way a status is obtained is more important than the status itself, as we are more content if we decide ourselves about the status compared to having it imposed on us.

Suh, Diener and Fujita in 1996 have shown as a result of a longitudinal study that life events which interfered in the past three months influenced positive or negative affects and life satisfaction, distal life events being uncorrelated to well-being.

People react to events but, in time, return to their initial level of satisfaction and happiness (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004). Although people strongly react to unemployment and then partially return to basic levels of their satisfaction and happiness, they do not fully return to the initial state of their satisfaction, not even after they obtain another workplace, as life events strongly influence, on a long term, the level of subjective well-being. Contrary to expectancies of adaptation theories, people who have experienced unemployment do not react more negatively to their status compared to those who never had such an experience (Lucas et al., 2004).

Menagan (1989) has given special attention especially to combined expected social roles, for instance from a person who parents, is married and employed. Data has been collected every four years, which allowed the analysis of the way in which interfering changes in the roles repertoire correlates to psychological symptoms. Menagan also conducted a cross-sectional analysis of the combination of owned roles and of psychological symptoms present at the moment of testing, and results supported the hypothesis according to which, no matter the gender, marriage and having a workplace have a positive impact upon the person, while specific responsibilities of the parent status have a neutral to negative impact upon well-being. It seems that the impact of the parent status is stronger for unmarried women and for unemployed spouses (Menagan, 1989).

Regarding the association between marital status and well-being, there are authors who support the idea that marriage improves well-being (Mookherjee, 1997), along with authors who doubt the existence of a causal relation between the two variables (White, 1992).

A study conducted by Delahaye (1996) revealed that under only some aspects of psychological well-being (psychological stress, life satisfaction, depression) are affected for

people unemployed for long periods of time, however, long term unemployment is not the main cause of lower subjective well-being; financial difficulties and personal issues, as secondary effects of the long-term unemployment, are more responsible for decreased well-being.

These results contradict the ones obtained by Lever (2004) who indicated a low correlation between subjective well-being and income. An especially important aspect is that, the higher perception that our needs are not being met, the unhappy we become (Fuentes, & Rojas, 2001).

III. SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN WORKPLACE

From a point of view of De Witte (1993), in the case of unemployed people the process of adaptation assumes adapting to the new long term role along with retrieving from the workplace market by reducing the engagement to occupying the work force, by diminishing behaviors of seeking a workplace, and adapting to the new status reduces the probability of finding a new workplace.

Delaye, Hicks, Muller and Winocur (1996) have shown that activity does not seem to have a positive psychological influence upon well-being, but may mediate the negative effects generated by long term unemployment along with negative secondary effects regarding subjective well-being. In the study they have conducted, it resulted that women would be more predisposed to present issues regarding psychological well-being (considering depression and self-esteem), compared to men. In this study, women had more responsibilities than men, conclusions being harder to generalize under the aspect of gender differences, in the absence of groups tested in similar conditions. Also, it seemed that, as they aged, men obtained lower scores for well-being compared to women (Argyle, 2001).

Results regarding the level of subjective well-being in relation to workplace status differ widely. These differences are due to the fact that each study is based on a different theoretical approach to subjective well-being – which is not associated to a unanimously accepted definition from a scientific point of view. Studies sometimes investigate different components of the concept, which were too wide to approach in just one article. We therefore invite you to further investigate them, based on the mentioned bibliographical references.

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