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Unemployment and the health of Slovak adolescents

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Introduction

The time of adolescence and young adulthood is a critical period with long-term implications for the health and well-being of each individual. It is the time when young people establish health habits (such as sporting, risky behaviour, eating habits), life styles and value systems, which have important effects on their health. Related to this, adolescence may be the most important period to intervene and invest in establishing healthy patterns (Call et al., 2002).

Unemployment is one of many factors which are important for adolescents' health and well-being. Relationships between the health of young people and unemployment can be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, their own unemployment can have negative health consequence for them. Secondly, for those living with their parents also unemployment of one or both parents could cause serious health problems.

In this chapter we provide information about unemployment and its consequences in general, and about youth and parental unemployment with special focus on health consequences for adolescents. We then briefly introduce the research on unemployment in Slovakia. The aims of the study, research questions and structure of this thesis are also set out in this chapter.

1.1 Unemployment

Unemployment is a worldwide problem, which has serious consequences on individual as well as societal level. It has attracted the attention of researchers since the 1930s when the first study about unemployment during the Great Depression was carried out by Jahoda et al. (1933). Since that time a considerable number of studies on job loss and its consequences have been published, but unemployment still ranks among the topics which deserve the attention of researchers.

1.1.1 Unemployment and society

Unemployment is a life event in which paid employment is involuntarily taken away from an individual (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). People are usually considered as unemployed when they are not active in paid work, but are looking for jobs, and available for work. Those who are jobless but have no intention to work or are not able to work because of serious physical or mental illness are not considered as unemployed (Fuchs, 2002; Anonymous, 2006).

In Slovakia the problem of unemployment is relatively new. During the Communist regime, being without an officially-paid job was illegal, so the unemployment rate at that time was nearly zero per cent. Because of considerable political and societal changes in the 1990's, unemployment re-occurred after a long period of forty years. Unemployment in society increased rapidly and in the year 2002 Slovakia was one of the European countries with the highest unemployment rates. For the whole population it was 18.7% compared to the European Union average of 7.8%, and for youth (aged 15 to 24) it jumped to 37.7% (Eurostat, 2003). For Slovakia also the distribution of unemployment within the country is specific. The difference between the unemployment rate in the region around the capital city Bratislava and the eastern part of Slovakia was 8.7% versus 22.2% for adults and as much as 18.4% versus 44.4% for youth (Eurostat, 2003). During recent years the unemployment rate in Slovakia has become stable and is decreasing slowly.

1.1.2 Unemployment and the individual

Many studies concerning unemployment have been carried out in recent years. Although some of these studies found that job loss has no significant negative effect on some of the studied variables (e.g. de Goede & Spruijt, 1996; Schaufeli, 1997), the generally accepted opinion is that unemployment has various undesirable consequences for unemployed individuals as well as for their social environment. The effect of unemployment on the individual is moderated by a large number of individual and situational variables which influence the person's capacity to cope with it (Creed, 1999). Results from recent studies show that unemployment seems to have less severe negative consequences for women in comparison with men (Artazcoz et al., 2004), for youth compared to adults (Breslin & Mustard, 2003), for those unemployed for a shorter time when compared to the long-term unemployed (Fergusson et al., 2001), for those from higher occupational classes (Hannan et al., 1997) and for the better educated (Voss et al., 2004). Furthermore, the negative effect of unemployment on the individual was found to be lower when the financial loss of the unemployed individual was not significant (Sadava et al., 2000; Weden et al., 2006), when the state provision of unemployment benefits was higher (Amato & Keith, 1991), when the perceived social support from family and friends was good (Axelsson & Ejlertsson, 2002), when the outlook for the future was good (Creed & Klish, 2005) and when the unemployment rate in the region was high (Whitehead et al., 2005).

1.2 Unemployment and health of adolescents

As already mentioned, the relationship between unemployment and health of adolescents should be treated from two perspectives: their own unemployment and unemployment of their parents.

1.2.1 Youth unemployment

Results of recent studies show the importance of differentiating between youth and adults when exploring the consequences of their own unemployment (Hannan et al., 1997; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Breslin & Mustard 2003; Reine et al., 2004). Young people and adults differ in their experience of unemployment in a number of ways. Young people, particularly school leavers, do not experience such financial loss as adults do. In some cases, thanks to unemployment benefits, their financial situation is even better than it was during their studies (Mean Patterson, 1997). Furthermore, young unemployed do not feel such role pressure as do married middle-aged people (Hannan et al., 1997). These two facts make young people less vulnerable than adults to the negative effects of unemployment.

On the other hand, adolescence and young adulthood is the special life period during which young people have to undergo many crucial role transitions. One of them is the transition from school to full-time employment. If a young person does not handle this situation successfully, the process of identity formation may be hindered. Moreover, Hannan et al. (1997) state that unemployment could 'desocialise' young people and create a 'culture of unemployment' which could have serious long-term consequences. De Goede et al. (2000) suggest that unemployment could be expected to have a negative impact on the development and even mental health of the individual because the work environment provides opportunities for learning, showing initiative and developing social contacts and self-reliance.

The relationship between unemployment of young people and their health has been studied in several countries. An interesting picture of this relationship is given by Hammarstrom and Janlert (1997). Based on interviews with 21-year-old unemployed persons, the authors developed four different kinds of relationship between unemployment and mental health. They found that, first, *unemployment can lead to improved health*: in some cases, unemployment was perceived as a paid vacation during which unemployed persons, mainly men, can do what they want. This can lead to an improvement of their mental health. Second, *unemployment may not affect health*: mainly short-term unemployed young people who were able to fill their spare time with meaningful activities or were unemployed only because of waiting for a good job opportunity reported no change in their health during unemployment. Third, *bad health and/or health habits can lead to unemployment*: people with serious health problems or alcohol problems had difficulties finding a job; or, fourth, *unemployment leads to ill-health and deteriorated health habits*: due to stress caused by unemployment, young people reported worsening of their health as well as higher occurrence of unhealthy habits. Within this study we consider youth unemployment as a possible predictor of worse health.

1.2.2 Parental unemployment

Studies concerning the effect of parental unemployment on adolescents' health are not very numerous. However, evidence from some previous studies on the family and family relationships shows the importance of studying the consequences of job loss, not only with regard to the unemployed individual but also considering the effect of unemployment on the whole family, especially children.

Previous results show that financial strain and poverty, which are very often associated with unemployment, have a negative impact on adolescents' health (Takeuchi & Williams, 1991; Abernathy et al., 2002). Furthermore, changes in family life could also influence the health of adolescents. According to Sweeting and West (1995) there are three main dimensions of family life which can be important for health in childhood and adolescence: *family structure* (parental death, divorce, remarriage), *family culture* (family cohesiveness, parental support) and *family conflict* (parental conflicts, parent-child conflicts). Loss of job by one or both parent(s) has negative effects on all three family dimensions. Unemployment of one of the parents usually causes a change in family roles (*family structure*). Especially if the father is unemployed, he becomes dependent on his wife's income and often stays at home and takes care of the family, which results in a swap of the traditional husband-wife roles (Schliebner & Peregoy, 1994). Unemployment among adults is often associated with feelings of personal failure, loss of structure in daily routine, loss of social contacts, and decrease in social status. Unemployed individuals have to cope with these stressors and may be less supportive for the needs of their children and spouse (*family culture*). According to Christoffersen (2000), loss of parental sensitivity could result in personality disorders, psychiatric and medical problems and self-destructive behaviour. Wickrama et al. (1997) reported that changes in parental behaviour had a direct effect on changes in adolescent physical health. *Family conflicts* are also frequent consequences of unemployment. Marital relations can change during unemployment; conflicts between parents can occur, caused by the stress of unemployment, and result in conflicts between parents and children.

1.3 Unemployment research in post-communistic countries

Because of the recent 're-occurrence' of unemployment in post-communistic countries, research on this topic in these countries is also relatively new. Although some researchers pay attention to the effect of unemployment on individuals in these countries, very little has been published in international peer-reviewed journals (see e.g. Piko & Fitzpatrick, 2001). In the next section we briefly introduce the unemployment research in Slovakia as one of the post-communistic countries.

1.3.1 Unemployment research in Slovakia

Several studies focussing on youth as well as adult unemployment have been conducted in Slovakia in recent years. Frankovsky (2004) studied the quality of life of unemployed adults and found that the more negatively individuals perceive their unemployment, the worse their quality of life becomes. Baumgartner (2004) reported no differences in quality of life between short-term and long-term unemployed. Furthermore, among short-term unemployed active coping was connected with better quality of life, whereas this association was not visible among long-term unemployed. According to Schraggeova (2003), those who found a new job had higher self-confidence in comparison to long-term unemployed. Vasilova and Bendzalova (2004) compared the social competences and social networks of employed and unemployed adults. Their findings indicate that objectively there is no difference in the extent of social network between employed and unemployed, but subjectively unemployed people judge that they have fewer acquaintances and their social network does not offer them the satisfaction needed. Some studies have also explored the effect of unemployment on Slovak adolescents. The effect of school-leavers' unemployment on their experience of positive and negative emotions and how they spend their time was studied by Dzuka (2001). He found that negative emotions (sadness, tension, anger) are experienced more frequently by long-term (over 12 months) than short-term (in his study under 7 months) unemployed; doing nothing is significantly more frequent in the long-term unemployed; short-term unemployed spent more time with friends or parents and devoted much more time to entertainment. Kopcova (2004) carried out a qualitative study based on focus groups concerning the experience of unemployment of school-leavers. The main result of her study was the finding that behaviour of the unemployed is fundamentally influenced by the subjective assessment of their situation.

However, many of these studies have one or both of the following limitations: they were carried out without any control group of employed persons and on relatively small samples, or they were oriented qualitatively rather than quantitatively. The aim of this work is to attenuate these limitations and contribute to the knowledge on the relationship between unemployment and health, especially regarding the post-communistic countries.

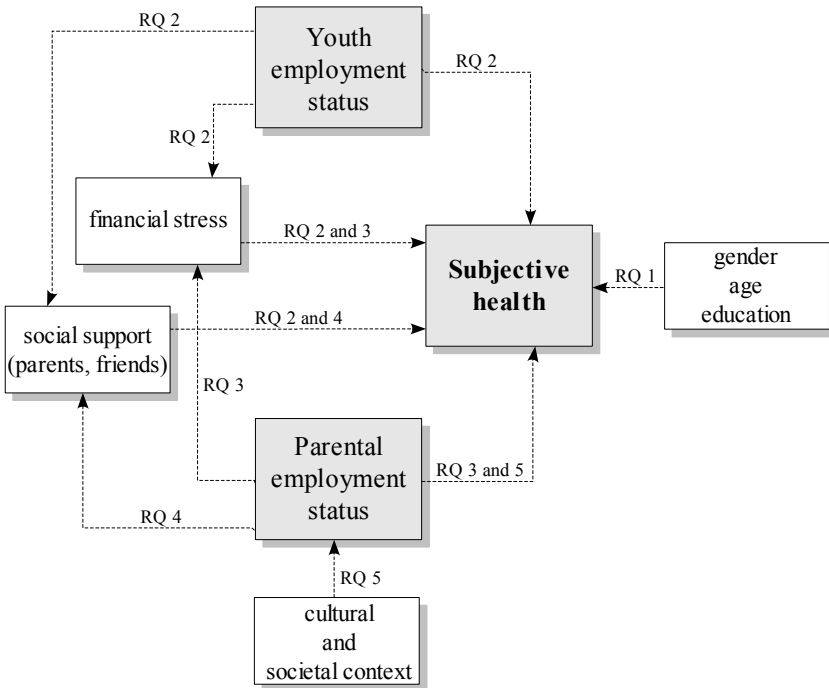
1.4 Aims of the study and research questions

The main aim of the present study is to examine the relationship between the subjective health status of adolescents and unemployment. Based on the above-mentioned information, this will be analysed from several points of view. Firstly, the health status of young people assessed with subjective health indicators will be described in general and with regard to their gender, age and education. Secondly, the relationship between youth unemployment and their health will be explored, as well as possible confounding factors in this relationship. As already mentioned, the health of young people may also

be affected by the employment status of their parents. To study this point of view, we will investigate the effects of short-term and long-term unemployment of father and mother on adolescents' health. Since studies focusing solely on parental unemployment and its effects on adolescents' health are quite rare, we will pay more attention to this topic within this thesis. The fourth issue of this study therefore is to look at parental support in the context of their employment status. Support from parents is one of the most important factors which can protect the health of young people. However, parental support has been found to deteriorate due to stressful events such as unemployment. We aim therefore to observe the effects of mother's and father's support on their children's health under the circumstances of the mother's or father's unemployment. The final point of view takes into account possible cultural and societal differences, so we will compare the effects of parental unemployment on children's health in Slovakia and the Netherlands.

The model of the relationships examined within this thesis is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Model of the relationships examined within this thesis



Based on previous studies, several main research questions (RQ) have been formulated:

- (1) Does the subjective health of Slovak adolescents differ by age, education and gender? (*Chapter 3*)
- (2) Does youth unemployment affect the subjective health of unemployed individuals? Does perceived financial stress and social support mediate this relationship? (*Chapter 4*)
- (3) Does parental unemployment affect the subjective health of adolescents? Does perceived financial stress mediate this relationship? (*Chapter 5*)
- (4) Does the effect of support from parents on adolescents' health differ with regard to parental employment status? (*Chapter 6*)
- (5) Does the effect of parental unemployment on adolescents' subjective health differ with regard to the cultural and societal context in which unemployment occurs? (*Chapter 7*)

1.5 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters.

Chapter 1 provides general information about unemployment, its consequences for unemployed youth and the effect of parents' unemployment on adolescents. The main aim of the study and several research questions are stated in this chapter.

Chapter 2 presents the data collections and descriptions of several research samples used in this thesis. Further, it gives a brief description of the measures and statistical analyses used.

Chapter 3 describes the health status of young people in Slovakia using self-reported health indicators. Age differences in health in three age cohorts of young people are studied in this chapter. Furthermore, we explore whether the age differences in health status vary between males and females and between different educational levels.

Chapter 4 deals with unemployment of Slovak school-leavers and its possible influences on their subjective perception of health. Furthermore, we were interested whether perceived financial stress and social contacts can mediate the effect of employment status on health.

Chapter 5 explores the effect of parental employment status on their adolescent children's subjective health, because of the evidence that unemployment affects not only the unemployed individual but also the entire family, especially children. We were interested whether father's and mother's short-term and long-term unemployment and unemployment of either one or both parents has a negative effect on adolescents' health. Next, perceived financial strain was added in the analyses as a possible confounder of this effect.

Chapter 6 deals with parental support and adolescents' health in the context of parental employment status. Firstly, levels of support received from mothers and fathers regarding employed, short-term unemployed and long-term unemployed mothers and fathers are compared. Secondly, the effect of high levels of parental support on adolescents' health stratified by

parental employment status is studied.

Chapter 7 deals again with parental unemployment. There is evidence that the consequences of unemployment should be studied with regard to the context in which it occurs. In this chapter, therefore, we study whether there are differences in the relationships between parental unemployment and adolescents' health in Slovakia and the Netherlands, two countries with to some extent differing cultural contexts.

Chapter 8 contains a discussion of the main findings of the previous chapters in a general context. In addition, implications for future research as well as for practice are suggested.

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