

# Unemployment harms couples' relationship happiness

49

POLICY BRIEFING

APRIL 2020

Many people become unemployed during economic crises, resulting in significant financial costs. The social costs, however, are often overlooked. Unemployment can severely affect couples' relationships, potentially leading to separation and poor outcomes for their children. In this briefing, we show the impact of losing one's job, or a partner losing their job, on relationship happiness over the short- and long-term in the UK.

Our findings suggest that women, in particular, become unhappy with their relationships if their partner loses their job. We recommend that policy-makers acknowledge the role of unemployment, for both the unemployed and their partners, when designing relationship intervention programmes.

## Key Points:

- *People are less happy with their relationships when they are unemployed.*
- *Women are less happy when their partners become unemployed, but men are not as concerned with their partners' job loss.*
- *The longer individuals or their partners are unemployed, the less happy they become with their relationship.*
- *When men are re-employed after a spell of unemployment, women continue to feel unhappy with the relationship.*
- *Alongside targeting the unemployed, policy interventions should also take into account their partners throughout unemployment and afterwards.*

## Introduction

Previous evidence shows that unemployment is harmful to the economic and psychological well-being of individuals. However, few studies have examined how unemployment affects the well-being of couples. Having a good relationship is associated with better mental and physical health, and is important for any children a couple may have. It also means that divorce or separation is less likely.

In our research, we have explored different dimensions of unemployment: current unemployment, changes in employment, past experiences of unemployment, and the accumulation of long-term disadvantage. Each dimension provides unique insights into how economic uncertainty can strain relationships over time.

## The study

We used the nationally representative longitudinal survey 'Understanding Society' to study how relationship happiness is associated with unemployment. We focussed on people aged 20 to 60 living with a partner of the opposite sex. Our sample analyses interviews with 20,751 people, using waves 1, 3, 5, and 7 (2009–2017).

Respondents were asked to rate their relationship happiness on a scale from 'Extremely unhappy' to 'Perfect'. The graph below shows that most people say they are happy, very happy, or extremely happy with their relationship. Few people say they are unhappy. Employment status was defined as employed, unemployed, or other non-employed (not shown here).

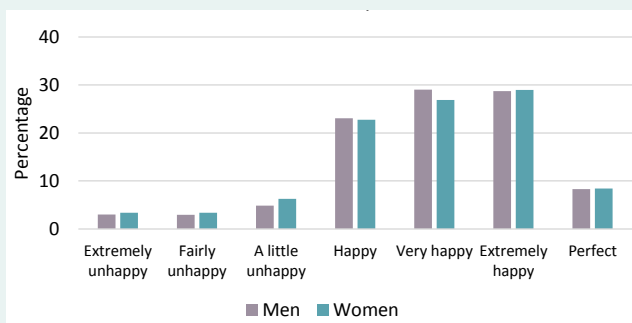


Figure 1: Most people are happy with their relationship

Below we have presented basic associations for simplicity, but other analyses (not shown) use random and fixed-effects models. They include both partners' employment status, as well as controls for health, education, age, ethnicity, prior relationship, marital status, relationship duration, region, and the interview wave.

These analyses lead to broadly the same conclusions; differences are mentioned in the text. We have only shown statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) differences with the exception of figure 5 on unemployment duration where associations at  $p < .1$  are shown because of small sample sizes.

## Main findings

### Unemployed people are less happy with their relationships

When we compared unemployed people in our sample with employed people, we found that the unemployed are, on average, significantly less happy with their relationships than employed individuals, as can be seen in Figure 2. For women, when we control for socio-economic factors, differences in relationship happiness between the unemployed and employed becomes less significant ( $p < .1$ ).

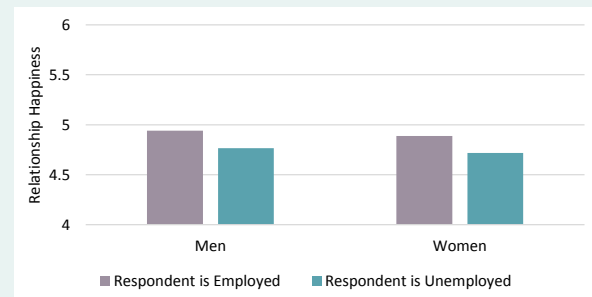


Figure 2: The unemployed are less happy with the relationship

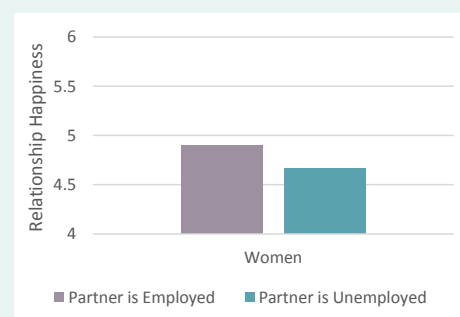


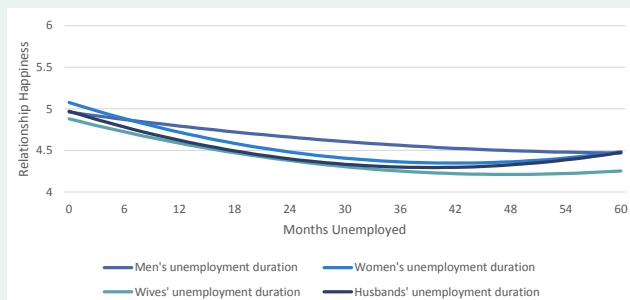
Figure 3: Women whose partner is unemployed are less happy with the relationship

Women are less content in a relationship when their male partner is unemployed, as figure 3 shows. The reverse is not the case; women's unemployment does not seem to affect men's relationship happiness.

When we investigated the moment people went from being employed to unemployed, we found that changes in one's own unemployment did not lead to immediate changes in relationship happiness. Women, however, did become less happy in their relationships when their male partners became unemployed. These results suggest that unemployed people face general disadvantage, which leads to unhappy relationships.

### People are less happy with their relationships the longer they or their partner are unemployed

Figure 4 shows that men and women become less happy with their relationships the longer they are unemployed. Additionally, people were less happy in a relationship the longer their partner was unemployed<sup>1</sup>. After some years, happiness seems to improve again, regardless of continuing unemployment. However, this rise is not statistically robust.



**Figure 4: The longer people are unemployed the less happy they and their partners are with the relationship**

### Men's past unemployment 'scars' women's relationship happiness

We also studied whether unemployment affects relationship happiness even when people return to work. We wanted to investigate whether currently employed people who were unemployed in the past two years are less happy with their relationship than those who were working during this period. Our findings indicate that employed people who were recently out of work were just as happy with the relationship as those who had not experienced unemployment.

However, this is different for women whose male partner was unemployed at some point during the last two years. Our findings show that they were less happy with their relationships than women whose partners were continuously in work.

<sup>1</sup> Note that men's unemployment duration was no longer significantly related to his relationship happiness once we added controls.

This indicates that when a man is unemployed, it can 'scar' the female partner's relationship happiness, even when he goes back to work.



**Figure 5: Women whose partner was unemployed are less happy with the relationship**

### Income doesn't fully explain the role of unemployment

The unemployed usually have less income than the employed. We tested to find out if it is simply the lack of financial resources that puts a strain on relationships. We found that unemployment is still significantly associated with relationship happiness even when we controlled for income, confirming working lives matter more than just being a source of income. They can potentially affect identity, well-being, and self-esteem, the results of which spill over into relationships.

### Policy implications

This study indicates that unemployment is associated with lower relationship happiness. However, it is not necessarily the individual's job loss that matters. Instead, it is the general disadvantage faced by unemployed people, which is especially true the longer people are out of work.

Our work shows that what matters is long-term economic and psychological hardship rather than the shock of losing a job. The consequences of unemployment for relationship happiness seem to become worse the longer people are unemployed. This mainly affects women when their partners are unemployed.

Men's unemployment has more influence on relationship happiness than women's unemployment. This is evidence that the male breadwinner model persists in the UK. Even after re-employment, women remained less happy if their partner had been out of work in the recent past. Happiness in a relationship seems to be scarred by men's past unemployment even after they go back to work.

This study highlights the gendered nature of relationships and employment among British couples. Although attitudes have changed in recent decades, many people continue to think that it is a man's responsibility to be the main provider. At the same time, women are often expected to stay at home or only work part-time.

This traditional pattern may explain why men's unemployment affects how happy women are in relationships but not vice versa.

In its effort to improve child outcomes, the Department for Work and Pensions has prioritised separating families and parental relationships. Our findings tie-in directly with this goal.

The British Troubled Families Programme, which aims to reduce the strain faced by vulnerable families, should recognise the impact of unemployment on couples' relationships.

Counselling programmes should not only offer relationship support to the unemployed but also their partners, for example at Jobcentres and benefits offices. This assistance could help to alleviate some of the negative consequences of unemployment in the UK.

### Authors

**Niels Blom**

(University of Southampton, CPC)

**Brienna Perelli-Harris**

(University of Southampton, CPC)

**Edited by Becki Dey & Teresa McGowan**

(University of Southampton, CPC)

### ESRC Centre for Population Change

Building 58

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Southampton

SO17 1BJ

Tel: +44 (0)23 8059 2579

Email: [cpc@southampton.ac.uk](mailto:cpc@southampton.ac.uk)

 @CPCpopulation

 /CPCpopulation

 Centre-for-population-change

 Centre-for-population-change