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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNEMPLOYMENT, COPING STYLES, PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AND LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

ABSTRACT: The main aim of this research was to explore the relationship between perceived social support, coping styles and life satisfaction, as well as to test whether there are differences in levels of life satisfaction when comparing unemployed and employed university graduates. The sample consisted of 236 university graduates, 59.3% female and 40.7% male (age range 23-30; $M = 26.86$, $SD = 2.24$), from which 109 were employed, while 127 were unemployed. Results indicate that average scores of the unemployed participants are lower on Perceived Social Support and Life Satisfaction, and that Perceived Social Support and Emotion-Focused Coping are significant predictors of Life Satisfaction. The results are discussed with respect to possible intervention.

KEYWORDS: unemployment, university graduates, life satisfaction, perceived social support, coping styles

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1. Introduction

Past research has shown that unemployment has a negative effect on mental health and life satisfaction that goes well beyond the financial difficulties (Winkelmann, 2008). It is strongly associated with an increased risk of morbidity, mortality, mental health problems, and lower life satisfaction levels (Richter et al, 2020). Lower levels of life satisfaction in individuals who are unemployed are not a universal experience, which leads to the question why does it occur for some people, i.e. what factors might explain individual variations.

Some authors believe that duration of unemployment leads to learning how to live with unemployment and downward adjusting of one's expectations (Clark, 2003; Winkelmann, 2008). Their reported life satisfaction may even rise for reasons such as better budgeting (Clark, 2006). However, some existing evidence points to non-existent or only very moderate adaptation to unemployment (Clark, 2006; Winkelmann & Winkelmann 1998). Some research has even linked longer unemployment duration to lower life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan et al, 2005).

Research has proven that unemployment negatively affects men more than women (van der Meer, 2014; Winkelman, 2008). The authors assume that this is due to domestic role of women, which may compensate for some of the negative effects of unemployment (Ervasti & Venetoklis, 2010).

Unemployed workers who were married report more satisfaction with their lives (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Being married may also lead to responsibilities and commitments that provide the opportunity to engage in activities that contribute to one's well-being (Ervasti & Venetoklis, 2010).

Age was negatively related to life satisfaction in unemployed individuals, even after a number of socio-demographic variables had been controlled for (Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2012). Some authors suggest that unemployment is likely to exert relatively less psychological damage on younger age groups than upon older (Ervasti & Venetoklis, 2010).

The results of previous studies demonstrated the change in reported levels of social support after job loss, which indicates that unemployment and social support are mutually related (Kong et al., 1993). Being employed was associated with greater perceptions of social su-

port (Flewelling et al., 2019; Cimarolli & Wang, 2006). Unemployed people who reported higher levels of social support felt better psychologically than those without such support (Pinquart and Sorensen, 2000; Mckee-Ryan et al., 2005; Milner et al., 2016). There is also evidence of an impact of all three forms of perceived social support on the well-being of long-term unemployed youth (Lorenzini, & Giugni, 2010).

More problem-focused coping strategies are associated with a better social adjustment under the experience of unemployment, as well as reemployment (Sojo & Guarino, 2011; Solove et al., 2015). Studies have shown that life satisfaction is in a positive correlation with coping focused on problem and in a negative correlation with coping focused on emotions (Soykan et al., 2019). One study that investigated the correlations of life satisfaction with coping strategies found varying but generally positive associations with problem-directed action and cognitive reappraisal (Korpela et al. 2018).

Many researchers have linked life satisfaction with coping strategies (Fischer et al., 2021), as well as perceived social support (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Oishi, 2005). Considering that unemployment is strongly associated with an increased risk of morbidity, mortality, mental health problems, and lower life satisfaction levels (Richter et al, 2020), it is important to explore whether unemployed people report lower levels of life satisfaction, as well as what factors might contribute to life satisfaction in unemployed individuals.

2. Method

2.1. Aim of this study

To better understand the relationship between perceived social support, coping styles and life satisfaction, this study will test whether perceived social support and coping styles are predictors of life satisfaction and whether there are differences in levels of life satisfaction when comparing groups of unemployed and employed university graduates.

2.2. Sample and Procedure

A convenient sample was used in this research. The sample consisted of 236 participants, 59.3% female and 40.7% male (age range 23-30; $M = 26.86$, $SD = 2.24$), from which 109 were employed, while 127 were unemployed with average unemployment duration being 1.23 years ($SD = 1.04$). The basic conditions for entering the sample were that the participant had finished university and that they were below the age of 30. Data were collected through an online questionnaire. Before moving to questions sections, the participants confirmed that they were familiar with their rights and testing rules.

2.3. Instruments

Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (Brief-COPE; Carver, 1997; for Serbian adaptation see Živanović, & Vučkević-Marković, 2019) is a self-report questionnaire that uses 4-point scale, from 1 = I haven't been doing this at all, to 4 = I have been doing this a lot, to measure the extent to which the participants were coping with stress. The three overarching coping styles are:

- Problem-Focused Coping, characterized by the facets of active coping, use of informational support, planning, and positive reframing.
- Emotion-Focused Coping, characterized by the facets of venting, use of emotional support, humor, acceptance, self-blame, and religion.
- Avoidant Coping, characterized by the facets of self-distraction, denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement.

Multidimensional Scale Of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) consists of 12 items, on which the degree of agreement with the statements is expressed on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 = I completely disagree, to 7 = I completely agree. The three subscales refer to friend support, family support, and partner support.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) is a short 5-item instrument designed to for measuring cognitive dimension of

subjective well-being, life satisfaction, where participants answer on a 7 point Likert scale (1 = I completely disagree to 5 = I completely agree).

2.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were processed using the Independent-Samples T Test, Pearson's correlation to examine the relationship between variables, and regression analysis.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive-statistical data of the variables that were used in this research, as well as results of Independent-Samples T Test conducted to compare average scores of unemployed and employed group. There is a statistically significant difference when it comes to Perceived Social Support and Life Satisfaction, with average scores of the employed being higher on all of these variables compared to average scores of unemployed.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Results of Independent T-Test

	Full Sample		Unemployed		Employed		<i>t</i> (277)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
<i>PFC</i>	6.02	1.33	5.54	1.53	6.58	.76	-.505	-.066
<i>EFC</i>	5.70	1.49	5.03	1.68	6.49	.65	-.092	-.012
<i>AC</i>	5.54	1.51	5.16	1.62	5.98	1.24	-.609	-.079
<i>SO</i>	2.67	.47	2.65	.46	2.68	.49	-6.436**	-.840
<i>Family</i>	2.31	.41	2.31	.41	2.32	.42	-4.866**	-.591
<i>Friends</i>	2.28	.39	2.26	.39	2.31	.41	-4.305**	-.562
<i>SWLS</i>	5.51	1.16	5.18	1.22	5.91	.95	-5.044**	-.659

Note. ***p*<.01; **p*<.05; *PFC* = Problem-Focused Coping; *EFC* = Emotion-Focused Coping; *AC* = Avoidant Coping; *SO* = Significant Other Support; *Family* = Family Support; *Friends* = Friends Support; *SWLS* = Life Satisfaction.

Results of correlation analysis, shown in table 2, suggest that higher scores on Problem-Focused Coping and Perceived Social Support, as well as lower scores on Emotion-Focused Coping, are associated with higher scores on Life Satisfaction.

Table 2

Correlation analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 – PFC	-	.391**	.439**	.126	.139*	-.039	.156*
2 – EFC		-	.339**	-.155*	-.089	-.126	-.163*
3 – AC			-	-.012	-.001	-.073	.077
4 – SO				-	.632**	.520**	.521**
5 – Family					-	.398**	.532**
6 – Friends						-	.421**
7 – SWLS							-

Note. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; PFC = Problem-Focused Coping; EFC = Emotion-Focused Coping; AC = Avoidant Coping; SO = Significant Other Support; Family = Family Support; Friends = Friends Support; SWLS = Life Satisfaction.

Regression analysis was conducted to determine whether the research variables significantly predict Life Satisfaction (table 3). We can conclude that the model is significant and that Perceived Social Support and Emotion-Focused Coping emerge as significant predictors of Life Satisfaction. This result indicates that the higher level of Perceived Social Support contribute to a higher level of Life Satisfaction, while higher level of Emotion-Focused Coping contribute to a lower level of Life Satisfaction.

Table 3

Perceived Social Support and Coping Styles as predictors of Life Satisfaction

	β	p	F	p	R	R^2
Significant Other Support	.190	.010	24.796	.001	.628	.110
Family Support	.305	.001				
Friends Support	.192	.002				
Problem-Focused Coping	.117	.058				
Emotion-Focused Coping	-.161	.006				
Avoidant Coping	.096	.101				

Results of Independent-Samples T Test when it comes to gender show no differences in terms of Life Satisfaction ($t(234) = -.926, p = .356$), with man attaining higher scores ($M = 5.60, SD = 1.20$) than women ($M = 5.46, SD = 1.13$). There is also no significant differences in terms of marriage status ($t(234) = 1.360, p = .175$), with married participants attaining higher scores ($M = 5.61, SD = 1.21$) than unmarried ($M = 5.41, SD = 1.09$). There is no significant correlation between Life Satisfaction and age ($r = -.11, p = .12$) or duration of unemployment ($r = -.09, p = .16$).

4. Discussion

To better understand the relationship between perceived social support, coping styles and life satisfaction, this study tested whether perceived social support and coping styles are predictors of life satisfaction and whether there are differences in levels of life satisfaction when comparing groups of unemployed and employed university graduates.

The results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference when it comes to perceived social support and life satisfaction, with average scores of the employed being higher on all of these variables compared to average scores of unemployed. Past research has shown that individual unemployment has a negative effect on life satisfaction (Clark, 2006; Ervasti & Venetoklis, 2010; van der Meer, 2014; Winkelmann, 2008), as well as social support (Flewelling et al., 2019; Kong et al., 1993).

Higher scores on life satisfaction are associated with higher scores on problem-focused coping and perceived social support, as well as lower scores on emotion-focused coping, while significant predictors are perceived social support and emotion-focused coping. Higher level of perceived social support contributes to a higher level of life satisfaction, while higher level of emotion-focused coping contributes to a lower level of life satisfaction. These results are consistent with previous research on life satisfaction which established positive association with problem-focused and negative with emotion-focused coping (Korpela et al. 2018; Soykan et al., 2019). Previous research has also proved that social support plays a necessary role for understanding life satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Oishi, 2005).

When it comes to levels of life satisfaction and socio-demographic variables there are no differences regarding age, gender, marital status or duration of unemployment, even though we expected different results. This study did not collect more demographic information that could be relevant, so future research should give adequate attention to this issue. It should also be explored whether these findings can be verified with a follow-up study, considering that the research has shown that there are differences in life satisfaction with duration of unemployment (Clark, 2003, 2006; Winkelmann, 2008; Winkelmann & Winkelmann 1998).

However, current results give us a reason to conclude that perceived social support and coping styles might be important for addressing in future intervention programs aimed at unemployed individuals. Different programs that offer training in job seeking yielded higher quality reemployment in terms of earnings and job satisfaction, and higher motivation among those who continued to be unemployed (Caplan et al., 1989). Programs targeting factors such as perceived social support and problem-solving strategies could be implemented among unemployed university graduates. Considering that unemployment has a negative effect on mental health and life satisfaction (Winkelmann, 2008), implementation of intervention programs could be extremely beneficial for unemployed individuals, ideally as early as possible.

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