

Psychological distress in Ghana: Are unemployed people more afflicted?

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Abstract

The detrimental consequences of unemployment to the psychological well-being of people have been well documented. However, much of this research has been conducted for developed countries. This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on this topic from a Ghanaian perspective. Our results revealed no significant association between unemployment and psychological distress. Rather, we found that part-time and full-time employees who were looking for a job were significantly more likely to suffer psychological distress. When we analysed the association between unemployment and psychological distress for males and females separately, we did not find a statistically significant relationship for either gender group.

Keywords

gender differences, Ghana, psychological distress, psychological well-being, unemployment

Introduction

Psychological well-being encompasses cognitive, behavioural and emotional well-being (World Health Organization, 2013). The presence of psychological distress is one of the criteria for determining common mental health disorders (e.g. depression, anxiety, etc.). These disorders are usually latent although their consequences go beyond the individual to the entire society (e.g. Maj, 2011). Globally, about 284 million people were estimated to have experienced psychological distress in 2017, making the condition a leading cause of mental health and global incapacitation (Ritchie and Roser, 2018). Psychological distress can therefore be regarded as a silent epidemic. Because gainful employment provides substantial material and psychological resources

(e.g. Muschalla et al., 2010), unemployment evokes stressful life events (e.g. Bordea et al., 2017; Tefft, 2011) leading to increased psychological distress (e.g. Carson et al., 2011; Howe et al., 2012; Yassin et al., 2017).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, most countries are still grappling with communicable diseases and poverty (Lancet Global Mental Health, 2007). Psychological disorders account for about 5 per cent of the region's total disease burden and 19 per cent of all disabilities

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(Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, 2013). High unemployment has also bedevilled many parts of the region. It is estimated that the number of unemployed people could increase by a million in 2019 due to the region's high level of labour force growth (International Labour Organization, 2018). A consequent of the region's high unemployment situation is an expected rise in psychological distress among the unemployed. In Ghana, burgeoning unemployment has culminated into the formation of the 'Unemployed Graduates Association'. More than 1.2 million Ghanaians above the age of 15 are estimated to be unemployed (Ghana Statistical Service, 2015). Out of this number, about 535,997 are male (representing 42.8%) while 714,916 are female (representing 57.2%).

Aside from being a means to meeting basic survival needs, employment provides affection and self-actualization (Linn et al., 1985). Therefore, its absence (especially over a long period) leads to increased psychological distress, depression and lower self-esteem in people (Guindon and Smith, 2002; Linn et al., 1985). Unemployment may also lead to mental impairment (Vinokur et al., 1996; Warr, 1987) and adverse effects on physical health (e.g. Linn et al., 1985). Most of the effects of unemployment on health outcomes are self-reported symptoms related to psychological distress (e.g. Dooley et al., 1996; Fielden and Davidson, 1999) or increased unhealthy behaviours such as substance abuse that may be a precursor for diseases and suicide (e.g. Dooley et al., 1992; Hammarstrom and Janlert, 1994; Lee et al., 1991). Psychological distress is found to be correlated with increases in unemployment (Ensminger and Celantano, 1990; Liem and Liem, 1988).

In the empirical literature, many scholars have previously held the view that unemployment leads to increased psychological distress (e.g. Broomhall and Winefield, 1990; Dew et al., 1992; Eisengberg and Lazarsfeld, 1938; Ensminger and Celantano, 1990; Leeflang et al., 1992; Leinonem et al., 2002; Westman et al., 2004). However, recent studies have

shown that this causal arrow could run from psychological distress to unemployment (e.g. Rutter and Rutter, 1993; Schaufeli and Van Yperen, 1992). In addition, studies on the association between unemployment and psychological distress have traditionally focused on men (e.g. Broomhall and Winefield, 1990; Leeflang et al., 1992) due to the higher number of males than females in formal employment. However, a relatively small strand of the literature has focused on women (e.g. Dew et al., 1992; Ensminger and Celantano, 1990) or both men and women (e.g. Leinonem et al., 2002; Westman et al., 2004) and have corroborated the findings that the unemployed have increased psychological distress than their employed counterparts. Furthermore, a limited number of studies have examined gender differences in the relationship between unemployment and psychological distress and found no significant differences among men and women (e.g. Leana and Feldman, 1992; Reine et al., 2004; Stokes and Cochrane, 1984).

Nevertheless, some scholars have observed better health outcomes among unemployed people than among their employed counterparts. Their argument is that the resilience of the unemployed to overcome life's adversities makes them adopt health-promoting activities such as walking and reduced alcohol intake (e.g. Charles and DeCicca, 2008; Ruhm, 2003; Tefft, 2011). Conversely, Dzator (2013) found that economically better-off respondents were less predisposed to psychological distress than those who experienced 'hard times'. More recently, Amissah and Nyarko (2017) showed that unemployed youth manifested poorer psychological health than their employed counterparts. Their study further revealed that the longer one remained unemployed the more their psychological distress deteriorated. Thus, the debate on the nature of the relationship between unemployment and psychological well-being remains inconclusive for Ghana. While we contribute to this debate by focusing on Ghana, we note that our results may be reflective of the nature of this relationship in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Methods

Participants

We used data from the Rounds 2 and 3 of the Afrobarometer Surveys in Ghana. The Afrobarometer project is a series of surveys conducted in many countries in Africa to explore the economic, social and political attitudes of Africans about their respective countries (Mattes, 2008; Mattes et al., 2016). Six rounds are currently publicly available for free while Round 7 interviews are ongoing. For our purposes, we focused on Rounds 2 and 3 because these were the only rounds for which respondents were asked about their state of psychological distress. In Ghana, the Rounds 2 and 3 surveys were conducted in 2002/2003 and 2005/2006, respectively. For each round, a nationally representative sample of 1200 respondents was randomly drawn and interviewed face-to-face in English and five Ghanaian languages including Twi, Dagbani, Ewe, Ga and Hausa. Each round was conducted in each of the 10 regions of Ghana.¹

Dependent variable

We operationalized the dependent variable (psychological distress) by exploiting the survey question that asked respondents about their state of stress or psychological distress. In both Rounds 2 and 3, it was presented as follows: 'In the last month, how much of the time: Have you been so worried or anxious that you have felt tired, worn out, or exhausted?' The responses included 0=never, 1=just once or twice, 2=many times and 3=always. The merit of this measure is that it gives respondents the opportunity to attribute their physical tiredness to stress (Gillanders, 2016).

Explanatory variable

Our explanatory variable is whether or not the respondent was unemployed at the time of the survey. It was worded as follows: 'Do you have a job that pays a cash income? Is it full-time or

part-time? And are you presently looking for a job (even if you are presently working)?' (0=no (not looking), 1=no (looking), 2=yes, part time (not looking), 3=yes, part time (looking), 4=yes, full time (not looking) and 5=yes, full time (looking)). We constructed 'unemployed' equal to 1 if the respondent indicated 1=no (looking), and 0 = otherwise.

Control variables

We controlled for socio-demographic characteristics including age, gender and education (see, for example, Canavan et al., 2013; Dzator, 2013; Gillanders, 2016; Sipsma et al., 2013) and other covariates of psychological distress in the literature such as bribery (Gillanders, 2016; Van Deurzen, 2017), crime victimization (Gillanders, 2016; Moore, 2006; Sulemana, 2015), religion (Canavan et al., 2013; Sipsma et al., 2013), ethnicity (e.g. Klineberg et al., 2006; Samaan, 2000; Takeuchi and Williams, 2003) and rural-urban differences (Paykel et al., 2000; Sipsma et al., 2013).

Statistical analyses

Because our measure of psychological distress is ordinal in nature, the study adopts an ordered logit model following the approach of previous studies (Kramer, 1996; McKelvey and Zavoina, 1975; Sawkins et al., 1997, p. 127). We ran ordered logit regression models separately for each of male, female and the pooled samples for both rounds resulting in 12 models. In Models 1–6, we tested for the association between unemployment and psychological distress while controlling for other covariates. In Models 7–12, in addition to unemployment, we tested for other employment status categories while controlling for other covariates. Specifically, the employment status categories examined included those out of labour force, unemployed and part-time and full-time workers who were either looking or not looking for another job. We used those in the 'out of labour force' category as the reference group.

Results

From Supplemental Table 1, the average respondent reported having experienced psychological distress just once or twice. The majority of respondents had less than a secondary school education. Corruption experiences were relatively low, confirming the assertion that bribery experiences in Ghana or Africa are relatively modest than perceived (see, for example, Bratton et al., 2005; Justesen and Bjørnskov, 2014; Sulemana et al., 2017). Crime victimization was also low among respondents in both rounds. As shown in Supplemental Figure 1, almost 40 per cent of men reported that they had 'never' experienced psychological distress within the reference period compared to 33.68 per cent of women in Round 2. The corresponding figures for Round 3 were 38.75 per cent relative to 38.13 per cent.

For each of the psychological distress categories and for both sexes, the proportion of respondents who indicated 'never' exceeded those who indicated 'just once or twice' which in turn exceeded those who indicated 'many times' and so on for Round 2. This observation also applies to the pooled sample for both rounds. In Round 3, however, relatively more women reported experiencing psychological distress 'many times' than 'just once or twice'. Finally, while relatively more men (5.35%) reported having experienced psychological distress 'always' than women (3.99%) in Round 2, more women (9.21%) experienced psychological distress 'always' compared to men (7.44%). This category of psychological distress averaged 4.60 per cent in Round 2 and 8.40 per cent in Round 3, suggesting an increase in psychological distress in Ghana between the two rounds of the surveys. Altogether, the fraction of the respondents who had *ever* experienced some psychological distress was about 60 per cent for both sexes and across both rounds confirming Sipsma et al.'s (2013) observation that psychological distress is prevalent among men and women in Ghana.

We also explored the nature of psychological distress over various employment status categories.² As reported on Supplemental Figure 2, we

observed that, for both rounds, full-time employees who were looking for a job reported relatively higher psychological distress than unemployed individuals. For instance, about 23.70 per cent, 24.48 per cent and 18.52 per cent of full-time employees who were looking for a job reported having experienced psychological distress just once or twice, many times and always, respectively, for Round 2. These are relatively higher than the corresponding figures of 16.15 per cent, 14.3 per cent and 7.41 per cent for the unemployed respondents. An identical pattern was observed for Round 3 where as much as 26.13 per cent and 27 per cent of full-time employees seeking another job reported having experienced psychological distress many times and always, respectively.

Supplemental Table 2 reports our regression results. For all the regression models, we did not find any statistically significant association between unemployment and psychological distress.³ However, we found that full-time employees who were also looking for another job were significantly more likely to report high psychological distress in all six models (Models 7–12). In addition, part-time workers who were also looking for a job were significantly more likely than those out of labour force to report high psychological distress (Models 8–12).

Discussion

These findings corroborate results of a limited number of studies that observed that unemployment does not influence psychological distress (e.g. Dzator, 2013; Feather and O'Brien, 1986; Gillanders, 2016; Schaufeli and Van Yperen, 1992). For instance, Gillanders (2016) did not find a significant effect of unemployment on psychological distress. However, when the author operationalized psychological distress as equal to 1 if the respondent indicated having experienced psychological distress 'many times' or 'always', a negative and significant effect was established, suggesting that the unemployed were significantly less likely to experience high psychological distress. Our results contradict prior evidence on the relationship between unemployment and psychological

distress in developed countries. It may be that people who were employed (full time and part time) but who were looking for another job may have suffered work-related stress or job insecurity and dissatisfaction, and this translated into higher psychological distress for them (e.g. Dooley et al., 2000; Furda and Meijman, 1992; Hilton et al., 2008; Witte, 1999). Moreover, the effect of job insecurity or dissatisfaction is as traumatic (if not more) than the effect of unemployment because ‘the anticipation of harm can have effects as potent as experiencing the harm itself’ (Roskies et al., 1993: 619; Witte, 1999).

Another plausible explanation may be that, in the developed world, unemployment hurts psychological well-being because it leads to depression, psychological distress, low esteem and so on (Kessler et al., 1989; King and Emmons, 1990; Schaufeli and Van Yperen, 1992). This is especially true because unemployment causes lost income, increased indebtedness and lost social resources (Bartley, 1994; Klasen and Woolard, 2009; Witte, 1999) in spite of social programmes that may cater for the needs of the unemployed. Arguably, although Ghana does not have formal social intervention policies or programmes that provide benefits for or insurance to unemployed people, due to the extended family system, the unemployed may enjoy some social support that would lessen the negative burden of joblessness (e.g. Klasen and Woolard, 2009). Unemployment is also relatively more pervasive in developing countries such as Ghana than in developed countries. Therefore, being unemployed may not necessarily cause high psychological distress in Ghana because the unemployed may feel that ‘they are not alone’. Consistent with this view, Dzator (2013) found that during ‘hard times’, unemployment does not lead to sadness, worthlessness or nervousness in Ghana but that rather the unemployed are significantly less likely to feel hopeless. Because they may have more time and fewer financial resources, unemployed people may be involved in health-improving activities (e.g. physical exercise, less alcohol consumption, etc.) that could improve their psychological state (Dzator, 2013; Ruhm, 2003, 2005). Indeed, Ruhm (2003, 2005) argued

that good times can make people sick while bad times can promote healthy lifestyles.

Our findings are also consistent with results of prior studies that have shown that older people tend to report or suffer higher psychological distress (e.g. Dzator, 2013; Paul et al., 2006; Sipsma et al., 2013). It may be that loneliness in old age and inability to familiarize and interact with neighbours lead to increased depression and psychological distress among older people (Paul et al., 2006). Our results corroborate the findings of Sipsma et al. (2013) who observed that women suffer higher psychological distress than men in Ghana. In addition to work-related stress, women in Ghana may suffer role-related stress because they perform more domestic responsibilities than their male counterparts and may even bear disproportionately higher household and child maintenance costs especially in polygamous marriages (e.g. Lloyd and Gage-Brandon, 1993, 1994; Simon, 1992). Our results also partly confirm the finding of De Menil et al. (2012) that psychological distress was lower among Ewes, and that ‘Depression is the commonest mental illness of Akan rural women’ (Field, 1960: 149; Read and Doku, 2012).

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, the data used here are from 2002 to 2003 and 2005 to 2006, which are relatively dated. However, VanOver and Lusk (2016) have argued that historic data on any measure of a given age can have long-term value if that measure is static. Because human behaviour is generally static (Kenschaft and Clark, 2016) and because psychological distress tends to be a relatively static measure of human behaviour (Pietri-Taleb et al., 1994), it could be argued that the data used in this study are relevant today. Moreover, the rounds used here were the only rounds for which survey participants were asked about their psychological distress. Thus, future research could examine the topic using new data.

Second, our data are secondary data from the Afrobarometer project and do not include some of the predictors of psychological distress as

shown in the empirical literature (e.g. marital status (e.g. Bratter and Eschbach, 2006; Hope et al., 1999), financial situation of the household (e.g. Brown et al., 2005; Dakin and Wampler, 2008), etc.). Accordingly, this study did not control for these covariates. Third, we have relied on two cross-sectional datasets for our analyses. A more ideal approach would be to conduct a longitudinal study involving the same participants over time. Moreover, a superior approach would be to conduct a randomized control trial in order to address the potential endogeneity, selection bias and other problems (see e.g. Deaton, 2010). Finally, we have focused on Ghana. Future research could examine the nature of the association between unemployment and psychological distress at a larger scale by covering other African countries. In spite of these, we believe that our results provide some useful preliminary insights into the nature of the relationship between unemployment and psychological distress in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa generally.

Summary and conclusion

In this study, we studied two main issues. First, we examined the relationship between unemployment and psychological distress in Ghana using data from the Rounds 2 and 3 of the Afrobarometer Surveys. Our results from ordered logistic regressions do not support the established claim in developed countries that unemployment leads to higher psychological distress. Instead, we found some evidence that people who were employed either part time or full time but who were also looking for a job were significantly more likely to suffer psychological distress. Second, when we analysed the association between unemployment and psychological distress for males and females separately, we did not find a statistically significant relationship for either gender group. Because our results revealed that employed people who were also seeking another job were more likely to report high psychological distress, a policy implication may be that public policy could focus on improving working conditions to improve job security and satisfaction.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In 2018, the Government of Ghana created 6 additional regions making a total of 16 regions. However, our study is based on the 10 regions at the time of the surveys. They were Ashanti, Brong Ahafo, Central, Eastern, Greater-Accra, Northern, Upper East, Upper West, Volta and Western Regions.
2. Those who did not have a job and were not looking were considered out of the labour force and included retirees and discouraged workers. Those who did not have a job but were looking were the unemployed (the focus of this study). The rest of the respondents in the other employment categories were employed (whether part time or full time, looking or not).
3. Canavan et al. (2013) found a strong effect of psychological distress on unemployment in Ghana. In other words, their study modelled employment status as a function of psychological distress. We have done the reverse here. This suggests an

endogeneity problem. To address this problem, we used 'Northern Ghana' (coded 1 if respondent's region was either of Northern, Upper East and Upper West Regions) as an instrument for unemployment (see e.g. Gaspar, 2009). The reason is that, these regions have relatively higher unemployment rates than their southern Ghana counterparts. Thus, being in Northern Ghana is positively correlated with being unemployed. Yet, there is no clear association between being in Northern Ghana and the individual's state of psychological distress. We then ran ivprobit models. The results were identical to those reported in Models 1–6. Hence, for economy of space, we neither report nor discuss them here.

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