WORK AND UNEMPLOYMENT: Evidence of the impact on the wellbeing of men and women

Given a generally stronger social norm for men to be working in paid employment than for women, unemployment is typically worse for the wellbeing of men than women. That is the consensus finding of a survey of leading researchers on wellbeing from around the world.

But the experts are divided on whether unemployment is better for an individual’s happiness than being employed in a bad job.

Unemployment, gender and happiness

In the seventh round of the World Wellbeing Panel monthly survey, 21 wellbeing experts from economics, sociology and psychology who responded to the survey were first asked whether they agree with the following statement:

The consensus of our happiness experts is that men on average suffer more from unemployment; there is a stronger social norm to work in paid employment for men than for women. Jan-Emmanuel De Neve (Oxford University) reminds us that ‘the data on wellbeing and unemployment split by gender is clear: men seem even more impacted than women’.
Nick Powdthavee (Warwick Business School) elaborates: ‘for those people with joblessness and looking for one, it has been shown very clearly across time and countries that unemployment is much more detrimental for men than for women’.

Looking at the detailed July 2017 survey responses, we see that many on the World Wellbeing Panel offer explanations as to why women cope better with unemployment. Bruno Frey (CREMA) is of the opinion that ‘women still have more options in life than work and are consequently less vulnerable when one option fails’.

Controlling for family status and income, Heinz Welsch (University of Oldenburg) thinks ‘that women are on average less psychologically dependent on a job as a source of meaning and social inclusion’.

Martin Binder (Bard College, Berlin) suggests that ‘social norms and traditional gender roles could make it easier for women to adapt to the role of being unemployed’. Perhaps in the work-family nexus, men are more oriented to work while women still have more options in life than work and are consequently less vulnerable when one option fails.

**Is some work better for happiness than no work?**

The experts are split down the middle on the question of whether the type of job doesn’t matter: is some work better than no work?

Ruut Veenhoven (Erasmus University) refers us to his World Database of Happiness, which shows a few cases in particular countries of slightly lower happiness in some jobs (for example, sales worker) than among the unemployed. Yet these are exceptions: as a rule, happiness is lowest among the (involuntary) unemployed.
Richard Layard (London School of Economics) provides empirical evidence: ‘unemployment reduces life-satisfaction (measured 0-10) by at least 0.7 points. By contrast a job that is 1 standard deviation (in terms of job quality) reduces life-satisfaction by only 0.4 points’.

But Daniel Benjamin (Cornell University) raises an important point: ‘in some countries, parents force children into jobs even though the child would have higher wellbeing (both in terms of happiness and lifetime utility) by being in school’.

Perhaps this is why Esteban Calvo (Universidad Diego Portales) is of the opinion that, ‘Voluntary unemployment is preferable than a terribly bad job’. Of course it all depends on what we mean by a ‘bad job’: is a bad job one where the worker is exposed to occupational health and safety hazards? Or is a bad job one where workers are underpaid: for example, there is some initial evidence of systemic exploitation of migrant workers in Australia.

Wenceslao Unanue (Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez) recalls a recent article in The Independent by Peter Kinderman (President, British Psychological Society), Martin Pollecoff (Chair, UK Council for Psychotherapy) and Andrew Reeves (Chair, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy). They call on governments ‘to rethink the Jobcentre’s role from not only increasing employment, but also ensuring the quality of that employment, given that bad jobs can be more damaging to mental health than unemployment’.

ENDS

Notes for editors:

The World Wellbeing Panel on wellbeing and organisational structures is available here: http://cep.lse.ac.uk/wwp/latest.asp

The experts, their affiliations and their responses to the survey are here: http://cep.lse.ac.uk/wwp/panel.asp

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