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# Youth Coping with Unemployment: The Role of Social Support<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

There is little doubt that unemployment has a number of negative consequences for those who are in such a situation of exclusion from the labor market. Being deprived of a paid job entails a risk of social exclusion and isolation, Paugam (2009) uses the concept of “social disqualification” to label this phenomenon, but potentially also has a number of negative consequences on the personal life and well-being of unemployed people. This is especially true when unemployment is sustained over time. The classical study by Jahoda et al. (1933) for example, showed how long-term unemployment upset the whole life of the people who remain outside of the labor market for a long period of time. Among the difficulties they face is the lack of a daily routine or time structure.

This paper deals with the negative consequences of long-term unemployment on youth. More specifically, we examine how different forms of social support may help youth cope, in their everyday life, with the absence of employment. In particular, we deal with two aspects of their psychological well-being: the degree of anxiety they face and their level of happiness. Moreover, we do not only include different forms of social support: sociability, practical help, and financial help, but also three providers of support: the partner, the family, and friends. We propose to study the effects of different forms and providers of social support for the youngsters who are coping with long-term unemployment.

We maintain that the potential negative consequences of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being can be compensated or at least reduced if young people have access to external resources that may be provided by social support. For instance, the financial help of the family might prove essential. Similarly, being in a relationship with a partner and having friends with whom one can talk might help overcome the psychological distress caused by unemployment. More generally, we expect to find a positive role of the different forms and providers of social support

on youngsters coping with long-term unemployment. The partner, family members and friends may provide material, psychological, and moral resources that could compensate for the distress caused by long-term unemployment.

Previous studies have shown the impact of different forms of support, but have not addressed the question of who provides such support (Herman et al. 2007). We aim to advance knowledge on how the partner, family members, and friends help the youngsters cope with long-term unemployment and to understand whether multiple support providers play similar or complementary roles. To do so, we rely both on in-depth interviews and survey data. We start with the analysis of the in-depth interviews in order to sort out some of the mechanisms of social support. In addition, we examine whether the unemployed rely on different persons within their networks for each form of social support. Then we advance a number of hypotheses about the influence of different forms and providers of social support on anxiety and unhappiness, as well as about the impact of financial difficulties on both forms of psychological well-being, and test them through regression analysis.

### **Unemployment and psychological well-being**

Jahoda et al. (1933) were perhaps the first to study the negative consequences of unemployment on individuals and community life. In their well-known study conducted in Marienthal, they compared the unemployment impact in the 1930s and in the 1970s. They found that, while economic deprivation is reduced by unemployment benefits, other negative consequences of unemployment remain (Jahoda 1979). In particular, psychological deprivation is produced by the experience of unemployment and, more specifically, by a decrease in social contacts, a lack of participation in collective aims, the absence of an acceptable status, and the absence of regular activities. Thus, unemployment affects many dimensions of the individuals' life through psychological distress. This approach has given rise to deprivation theories, which, according to Ervasti and Venetoklis (2010), are the mainstream sociological and psychological tradition in this field.

More recently, the issue of psychological well-being has been related to what Winkelmann and Winkelmann (1998) call the "non-pecuniary cost of unemployment," which they found to be more important than the pecuniary cost. Other researchers have also shown the importance of such individual non-financial costs (Clark and Oswald 1994; Fergusson et al. 2001; Hammer 2000; see Goldsmith et al. 1996 for a literature review).

These non-pecuniary costs are related to health, mental well-being, and sometimes happiness. Although unemployed people's hampered mental health can be linked to financial difficulties, according to Ervasti and Venetoklis (2010), these are not the only source of moral distress, and the issue of the definition of the financial and psychosocial consequences of unemployment remains open (see also Nordenmark 1999b; Nordenmark and Strandh 1999).

Turning to the effects of unemployment on mental health, Nordenmark (1999a) notes that unemployed people face risks of depression, stress, and harassment as employment is a source of personal and social satisfaction. Therefore the lack of a paid job can alter not only one's ability to build an identity and a social status, but also one's psychological well-being.

In this paper we use the term psychological well-being to refer to mental health. Jahoda (1988) stresses the fact that mental health is not opposed to mental illness or psychiatric disorders and that it can be defined as the "experience [of] a lowered degree of positive mental health" (Jahoda 1988: 20). Headey et al. (1993) add that psychological (subjective) well-being includes four dimensions: life satisfaction, positive affect, anxiety, and depression. In this paper we deal with two dimensions of the psychological well-being: anxiety as "a state of psychological discomfort characterized by feeling tense, worried, anxious, and restless" (Drentea 2000: 440) and happiness as "a complete and lasting sense of satisfaction with life as a whole" (Kamman et al. 1984: 111).

### **The role of social support**

According to stress theories (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Pearlin et al. 1981; Thoits 1995, 2010), when facing a stressful event individuals use multiple coping resources. Coping resources are available both at the individual and at the social level; they serve as stress buffers and reduce the negative impact of stressors, understood as stressful events that affect negatively the life of the individual (Thoits 2010). Among the personal coping resources we find self-esteem and the feeling of mastery over one's life, while at the social level there is social support.

In this research we are mainly interested in social support, defined as "the functions performed for the individuals by significant others, such as family, friends, and co-workers" (Thoits 1995: 64). These significant others provide instrumental, informational, or emotional assistance and they can also offer opportunities for social activities (Herman et al. 2007). Previous studies have shown that social support is beneficial to physical and



mental health while facing stressful events, although they cannot prevent all damaging effects (Gore 1978; Pearlin et al. 1981; Thoits 1995).

In her study of youth unemployment in the Scandinavian countries Hammer (2000) found a link between social isolation, economic deprivation, unemployment, and mental health: "Social integration may increase the individual's ability to cope in a way that reduces mental health symptoms and prevents social exclusion" (Hammer 2000: 55). In her study social integration is understood as having a network of family and friends, but also as having contacts with them. In addition, one should look at the quality of these contacts and the different forms of support received by family members and friends, although these aspects may be more difficult to grasp in quantitative analyses.

Clark and Oswald (1994) have studied the effects of unemployment on well-being (measured through the General Health Questionnaire) and they found that married unemployed people display lower levels of mental distress. However, Atkinson et al. (1986) maintain that unemployment can also affect social support through its negative impact on significant others, especially partners who are directly and indirectly affected by the stressor. Thus, those providers of support who live with the unemployed or who are closely related to him or her would also be affected by unemployment. In addition, to make the picture even more complex, sometimes social support can be negatively perceived by unemployed themselves due in particular to their interpreting the support or help received as a debt that they are not able to repay (Herman et al. 2007). This can lead them to refuse being helped or to negative unintended consequences of the help received, such as diminished self-esteem and perceived social value.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) found two effects of social support: firstly, it helps maintaining self value and a positive outlook and, secondly, it buffers stress and reduces the negative moral consequences of unemployment. In addition, Thoits (1995) highlights the mechanisms behind coping assistance, which consist in helping to reinterpret a given situation, giving self reassurance and sustaining self-esteem, providing a valued identity as well as a sense of mastery over one's life, and competency to deal with problems and difficulties faced in everyday life.

## **Data and methods**

Our analysis is based both on qualitative and quantitative data. Firstly, we analyze in-depth interviews in order to understand how the different providers of social support contribute to the youngsters' ability to cope with

long-term unemployment. Then we test our findings through regression analysis based on data derived from a telephone survey carried between February and August 2010 on a representative sample of young long-term unemployed and a control group of regularly employed youth. Both groups include people aged between 18 and 34 residing in the canton of Geneva, which displays consistently the highest unemployment rates in Switzerland. Long-term unemployment is defined as having been without a job for at least one year.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 20 long-term unemployed who also took part to the survey. They include 10 men and 10 women with different educational levels ranging from mandatory school to a university degree. We included in the sample both Swiss citizens and foreigners (from Europe and from outside Europe), thus reflecting the population of young long-term unemployed in Geneva. Some of the foreigners we interviewed were born in Switzerland, while others arrived as children, teenagers, or young adults.<sup>2</sup> The interviews lasted between 40 and 100 minutes, were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. These data allow us to discover the meanings that youngsters give to their situation of unemployment as well as the role played by the providers of social support. Thus, they single out some of the mechanisms linking social support to coping with unemployment-related difficulties.

Respondents to the survey were recruited through a two-stage process. In a first stage, we retrieved 95 respondents from a random sample of the population of Geneva aged 18 to 34. In a second stage, 206 respondents were recruited through the cantonal unemployment office. We sent letters inviting them to participate to the survey and to send us back a prepaid postcard with their name and phone number. Additional respondents were recruited by contacting them during two weeks in front of the unemployment office. In this second stage we created a database of young long-term unemployed who were then contacted for the telephone interview.

The regression analysis bears on two dependent variables: anxiety and unhappiness. Given our focus on psychological well-being, we used the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) to create a scale measuring anxiety (Banks et al. 1980; Nordenmark 1999a). We selected the items to be included in the scale after performing a factor analysis, which yielded one dimension tapping anxiety and including the following indicators: "I have lost much sleep over worries;" "I feel that I cannot overcome my difficulties;" "I have lost confidence in myself". We computed the anxiety variable by adding the three items on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. This

dimension refers not only to self-esteem, but also to the fact of being worried about one's situation and unable to solve it.<sup>3</sup> Discouragement and perceived inability to lead an autonomous life is a central problem stressed by young long-term unemployed during the in-depth interviews. Concerning unhappiness, we used a question asking respondents to state their overall level of unhappiness on a scale from 0 to 10, whereby 0 indicates being extremely happy and 10 extremely unhappy.

The main independent variables refer to the different forms and providers of social support. Partner support is measured by three variables. The first one measures the impact of living with the partner. The other two are related to help: receiving help in dealing with everyday issues and receiving financial help. Family support is measured by four variables. The first two refer to the housing situation (living either with the mother, the father, or both) and to contacts with family members who do not live with the respondent (gathering with family outside the household during the month prior to the interview). In addition, we include two indicators of help constructed in the same way as the ones for partner support (help in everyday issues and financial help). Finally, friend support is measured in a similar way through four variables referring, respectively, to living with friends, gathering with friends who do not live with the respondent, receiving help in everyday issues, and receiving financial help.

We include in the regression analysis a number of additional variables that are likely to have an impact on the psychological well-being of the young unemployed. The first group of variables are linked to the respondents' perception of their situation in relation to unemployment: a subjective indicator of the material situation (their perception of the capacity to live on the present income); an indicator of the financial situation, receiving or not unemployment benefits as a means of reducing some of the financial difficulties related to unemployment;<sup>4</sup> a measure of the importance of having a paid job; and a measure of the perceived chances of finding a job.

We also include variables referring to various dimensions of the personal situation of the young unemployed: a measure of their overall health based on their self-evaluation; a measure of their level of social activity;<sup>5</sup> partnership status (being in a relationship or not); and having children.

Finally, we include the following sociodemographic control variables: gender, age, nationality, and education. These aspects may not only influence the experience of unemployment and the chances of re-entering the labor market, but also the coping strategies adopted.<sup>6</sup>

## Coping mechanisms

Starting with the analysis of the in-depth interviews, we analyze in details the impact of joblessness on young long-term unemployed psychological well-being. In particular we address the following questions: How does long-term unemployment affect the psychological state of youngsters? How do different providers and forms of social support help cope with the consequences of long-term unemployment? The goal of this first empirical part is to understand the linkages between financial and psychological distress related to unemployment, their relation to the loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, and difficulties in perceiving one's own competencies, as well as the role played by different providers of social support.

The in-depth interviews conducted with young long-term unemployed show the interconnection of the various problems they face. Various forms of distress are intertwined and unemployment can become an overarching problem affecting fundamental aspects of one's life. In particular, financial difficulties can lead to financial distress, understood as the psychological counterpart of financial difficulties. They contribute to the loss of sleep and to worries producing anxiety.

Unemployment constantly remains in one's thoughts, and it is seen as very difficult to take out of one's mind. The interviewees mentioned thinking about it all the time, in a circular way that does not help solve the problem and makes them nervous. Thus, long-term unemployment produces anxiety; it can even lead to moral distress and depressive mood. Many interviewees mentioned a state of depression at some point during their unemployment; they mention their inability to do things, to get going and starting the day, sleeping in late, and not being able to or not knowing how to get out of that state. Some talk about depression indirectly, stressing this aspect as an obvious consequence of long-term unemployment, but not as something they experienced personally.

What is the role of social support – in particular, family and friend support – in countering these problems? Our in-depth interviews point to the importance of support from the family and friends with regard to both financial difficulties and moral distress. Family members are available to discuss about unemployment, they offer opportunities to talk to someone, and receive support or guidance. Sometimes they provide practical help, in particular the youngsters mention the importance of job proposals or contacts that they received from family members. Furthermore family members can also help prepare application forms, curricula or administrative documents. These cases are related to what have been called *strat-*



*egies focused on the problem*, that is, finding ways of solving the problem (Herman et al. 2007).

Sometimes coping with the help of the family becomes difficult because it creates other problems, such as depending on someone, or raises questions about one's ability to provide help in return. Unemployed can be wretched by their current situation and find difficulties to explain it or talk about it with family members. They can even have difficulties to accept the help offered by the family. This is consistent with previous findings (Thoits, 1995): receiving support can be costly and some social ties may imply stressful demands. Indeed, the parents' support is quite complex. This holds especially for the younger interviewees (18-22 years old) who still live with their parents, who sometimes face mutual incomprehension. Problems of misunderstandings and getting on each other's nerves may arise. The parents try to provide help and support, but this is not always well perceived by the young unemployed, who want independence.

The parents might also be incapable of providing concrete help. They might not know very well the current employment situation and have trouble understanding the difficulties their children face when trying to find a job as they did not themselves experience unemployment. Sometimes the difficulties encountered by parents who are willing to help their children finding a job are also due to the limits of their own integration, not only concerning the labor market, but more generally their social integration. In the case of young unemployed of migrant origin, the parents cannot help much because they have a limited knowledge of the local language and institutions. In this case difficulties in the process of integration in the labor market combine with broader issues pertaining to integration in the country of residence.

The family appears as a core provider of material help, whereas friends are related to moral support that can take different forms: going out, changing one's mind, and having opportunities to talk to other people, either about the situation of unemployment or about other things. Accordingly, talking with friends about unemployment is a form of debriefing which helps coping with the moral distress that can result from unemployment. Spending time with friends, talking, sharing one's worries appear as important in order to prevent a decrease of their level of positive mental state. These have been defined as *strategies centered on emotion*, that is, strategies allowing to take distance from one's problems, or think about them also in positive terms (Herman et al. 2007).

However, friend support may also take other forms, not related to talking about problems, but rather linked to activities. In this case what is presented as both important and helpful by the young long-term unemployed is to remain socially active, that is, involved in activities outside their home, such as going out for a drink, having a night out, or going to a football game. In our interviews youngsters value the opportunities offered by their friends to go out, the propositions to do a cultural or physical activity together, something that takes them out of their daily routine which often includes too few activities.

As in the case of family members, friends' support can have a downside. Some of the younger unemployed talked about friends being also unemployed and sharing the same situation as not always positive in coping with unemployment. The positive side of this is that friends can help each other writing applications or getting ready for an interview, while the negative side is related to demotivation in searching for employment. In this case the youngsters see a danger that can result in losing the spirit to find a job. Hammer (2000) mentions the existence of group subcultures offering alternatives to the dominant culture which values work and employment as one of the most important sources of social status. Although they propose alternative domains in which youth can find valued identities, such subcultures are not always positive since they can also lead to drug consumption or alcohol abuse. Therefore these groups do not offer a supportive environment able to help solve problems related to moral distress. In this case one may be tempted to reduce contacts with friends in order to focus on his or her own problems.

In other cases friends may be a burden when they are a source of worries rather than help. Some of the young unemployed we interviewed were surrounded by friends who also faced difficulties related to entering the labor market. Therefore they were not helping cope with the situation. Quite on the contrary, sometimes they would tear down one's hopes of improving his or her situation. This has been conceptualized as social undermining by Vinokur and van Ryn (1993). Social undermining consists of criticisms impeding or reducing the individuals' capacity to achieve fixed goals.

How happy or unhappy are overall the young unemployed we interviewed? They are worried and have financial problems, but they are not unhappy. They see other people as being in worst situations than themselves and they did not complain much during the interview. They do not



want pity; they just want to have “a normal life”: a job, money to pay their living expenses, a social status, and an easier social life.

In this discussion about the role of social support we did not mention partner support. In fact, few interviewees talked about their partner. Some mentioned their former partner and one talked about her partner with whom she lives and has children. The main coping mechanism in this latter case is that the partner provides financial support by paying for the everyday-life expenses. But then, after a long period of unemployment, it becomes difficult also for the partner to handle the financial situation on his or her own. Moreover, on the psychological level, it also becomes more difficult for the partner to provide moral support. The partner is also affected by both financial and moral deprivation. Yet the other respondents, some who are in a relationship, did not talk about their partner.

Based on this discussion of the in-depth interviews, we may advance a number of hypotheses about the impact of different providers and forms of support on anxiety and unhappiness. In addition, we propose one hypothesis on the impact of financial difficulties on both forms of psychological well-being.

Concerning anxiety, we expect the positive impact of social support to be linked to having someone to whom the young unemployed can talk to, who shares their problems, and can possibly reassure them about their social value. However, the role of the family appears more ambivalent than that of friends with regard to anxiety as it is helpful in some cases and a source of further stress and anxiety in others. Therefore we expect to find a positive impact on anxiety of practical and financial help from the family as well as of contacts with friends, their help, and social activities.

We link happiness to having or maintaining the capacity to balance the pros and cons of one's situation and keeping an active social life. In this case we expect to observe an effect of the employment-related variables, such as the hopes of finding a job (that should increase happiness) and the importance of employment related identity and status (that should decrease happiness), as well as an effect of the social life predictor (that should increase happiness). The lack of information about partners in the in-depth interviews makes it difficult to advance hypotheses about the role of this provider of social support. Nevertheless, based on the literature, we expect to find a positive impact on happiness of being in a relationship and living with the partner.

Finally on the variables related to the financial situation, we expect them to increase the anxiety of the young long-term unemployed, but not necessarily to have any impact on their overall level of unhappiness.

### **The impact of social support on anxiety and unhappiness**

In this section we test for the effect of the different forms and providers of social support on anxiety and unhappiness through regression analysis. Due to possible multicollinearity among the independent variables, in particular among the different providers of support, we run separate models for each provider of support. We first discuss anxiety and then unhappiness, starting with the role played by the partner, then addressing that of family members and finally that of friends. Each model includes the indicators of support, unemployment situation, personal situation, and the sociodemographic controls.

Table 1 shows the results of the regression analysis for partner support. Having a partner and living with him or her does not contribute to reducing anxiety. This seems to confirm what is suggested by the qualitative interviews as well as by the literature, namely that the partner is also affected by the unemployment situation and therefore he or she cannot help reduce the anxiety related to long-term unemployment. Nevertheless, the partner can provide social support reducing anxiety through his or her help in dealing with everyday issues.

Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis for family support. Living with the parents (mother, father, or both) does not help reduce anxiety either, and neither do contacts with family members outside the household. Concerning anxiety, the in-depth interviews suggest that family members are also anxious about the youngsters' unemployment situation. As a result they tend to put pressure on them to find a job. Sometimes they even do not understand why the youngster fails to find a job. Therefore it is not surprising that contacts with family members do not help reduce anxiety.

The interviewees stressed that family support is more a material kind of support, which is reflected in the significant effect of the family's provision of help on anxiety. In contrast, quite surprisingly, the family's financial help is not statistically significant. This might be related to the fact that what produces anxiety is the absence of a job and the personal and social value related to it. In fact having a job means having an identity and a social status. We see that the more importance youngsters give to these two aspects, the more anxious they are, whereas the absence of a wage or the

**Table 1** Regression analysis of anxiety and unhappiness on partner support and selected control variables (OLS unstandardized coefficients)

	Anxiety model		Unhappiness model	
	B	Standard error	B	Standard error
Partner support				
Living with partner	-.087	(.248)	-.851**	(.295)
Partner's help in everyday issues	-.675**	(.257)	-.860**	(.306)
Partner's financial help	.469	(.306)	.150	(.362)
Unemployment situation				
Feeling about household income	.367*	(.155)	.502**	(.183)
Unemployment benefits	-.061	(.268)	-.572	(.316)
Hopes of getting a job	-.428***	(.122)	-.157	(.145)
Importance of employment-related identity and status	.332*	(.143)	.342*	(.170)
Personal situation				
Self-evaluation of own health	-.267	(.157)	-.576**	(.186)
Social life	-.081	(.122)	-.394**	(.145)
Children	-.418	(.285)	.646	(.339)
Sociodemographic controls				
Male	-.327	(.217)	.554*	(.258)
Swiss	-.166	(.228)	.270	(.270)
Age	.001	(.027)	.026	(.032)
Education	-.047	(.028)	.003	(.033)
Constant	5.091***		3.802**	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.176		.216	
Increase in R <sup>2</sup> when adding the partner support variables	.026*		.060***	
N	269		272	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ 

financial independence offered by the employment situation is less important. In fact, in the interviews the youngsters mentioned that they wanted a job in order to lead a normal life, to be like everybody else; financial issues were not the first or the most important motivation related to having a job.

Table 3 shows the results of the regression analysis for friend support. Concerning anxiety, we find that gathering more frequently with friends reduces anxiety. This is in line with the idea stressed by the young unemployed in the in-depth interviews that friends provide opportunities to think about something else than unemployment. Moreover, receiving help from friends further contributes to reducing anxiety. In this case the young unemployed know that they have someone on whom they can rely, as in the case of the partner and family members.

**Table 2** Regression analysis of anxiety and unhappiness on family members' support and selected control variables (OLS unstandardized coefficients)

	Anxiety model		Unhappiness model	
	B	Standard error	B	Standard error
Family support				
Living with parents (mother, father or both)	-.415	(.308)	.016	(.367)
Gathering with family outside the household	-.004	(.109)	-.218	(.131)
Family members' help in everyday issues	-.643*	(.264)	-.749*	(.320)
Family members' financial help	.516	(.281)	.464	(.337)
Unemployment situation				
Feeling about household income	.310*	(.154)	.577**	(.182)
Unemployment benefits	-.061	(.271)	-.494	(.323)
Hopes of getting a job	-.420***	(.120)	-.087	(.144)
Importance of employment-related identity and status	.374**	(.143)	.385*	(.172)
Personal situation				
Self-evaluation of own health	-.388*	(.154)	-.699***	(.186)
Social life	-.088	(.122)	-.454**	(.146)
In a relationship	-.199	(.222)	-.579*	(.266)
Children	-.604*	(.275)	.418	(.331)
Sociodemographic controls				
Male	-.190	(.218)	.630*	(.261)
Swiss	-.122	(.233)	.379	(.278)
Age	-.018	(.030)	.008	(.036)
Education	-.046	(.028)	.007	(.033)
Constant	6.155***		4.690**	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.174		.205	
Increase in R <sup>2</sup> when adding the family support variables	(.027†)		.028*	
N	274		276	

(†  $p < .10$ ); \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ 

Regarding the unemployment-specific variables, we discussed the importance of the financial difficulties and financial distress on the basis of the in-depth interviews. Our analysis shows that finding it difficult to cope with the household's present income increases anxiety, whereas receiving unemployment benefits has no effect, hence confirming our hypothesis about the negative impact of financial difficulties on anxiety. Finally, we should note that none of the sociodemographic controls help us understand the anxiety of young long-term unemployed.

Thus in all three models we find that anxiety is affected by employment-related variables and most importantly by the variable "hopes of finding a job:" the higher these hopes, the lower the anxiety related to unem-

**Table 3** Regression analysis of anxiety and unhappiness on friend support and selected control variables (OLS unstandardized coefficients)

	Anxiety model		Unhappiness model	
	B	Standard error	B	Standard error
Friend support				
Living with friends	.207	(.593)	.108	(.688)
Gathering with friends	-.312*	(.130)	-.111	(.160)
Friends' help in everyday issues	-.636*	(.254)	-.449	(.312)
Friends' financial help	.722*	(.299)	-.201	(.367)
Unemployment situation				
Feeling about household income	.355	(.147)	.654***	(.179)
Unemployment benefits	.059	(.263)	-.512	(.321)
Hopes of getting a job	-.427***	(.118)	-.121	(.145)
Importance of employment-related identity and status	.333*	(.143)	.355*	(.176)
Personal situation				
Self-evaluation of own health	-.263	(.153)	-.669***	(.189)
Social life	-.036	(.121)	-.388**	(.148)
In a relationship	-.126	(.215)	-.660*	(.265)
Children	-.652*	(.270)	.278	(.333)
Sociodemographic controls				
Male	-.241	(.216)	.574*	(.265)
Swiss	-.068	(.226)	.253	(.276)
Age	-.006	(.026)	.017	(.032)
Education	-.036	(.027)	.011	(.034)
Constant	5.904***		4.168**	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.196		.186	
Increase in R <sup>2</sup> when adding the friend support variables	.050**		n.s.	
N	275		277	

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ 

ployment. Employment expectations are able to reduce anxiety more than any form of social support included in our model. The only form of social support by partner, family members, and friends that reduces anxiety is help in everyday issues. This aspect may capture some of the help related to writing applications and preparing for interviews mentioned in the in-depth interviews. However, we do not have specific indications about what the respondents meant specifically when they mentioned receiving help.

Turning to the analysis of unhappiness, we find that living with a partner has a statistically significant effect and reduces unhappiness. Furthermore, being in a relationship also has a statistically significant effect on reducing unhappiness that appears in the other two models, those on

family and friend support. In contrast, living with parents or being in close contacts with them do not reduce unhappiness. In fact the contacts with family members may not participate to social integration as much as being in a relationship or having friends with whom to gather.

The findings show that social integration – measured through social activities, contacts with friends, and having a relationship – contributes to the overall happiness of the young long-term unemployed. This result should be linked to the fact that happiness does not refer to the same dimension of psychological well-being as anxiety. In the latter we are confronted with a psychological discomfort that includes worries and feelings of both restlessness and incapacity to act, mainly negative affects, whereas the former is linked to overall life satisfaction and the balance between positive and negative affects. Previous studies have shown that happiness is more likely to be correlated with social participation, as opposed to social isolation and a lack of activity (Heady et al. 1993; Kamman et al. 1984).

In sum, the regression analysis provides evidence of a positive role of social support on the psychological well-being of young long-term unemployed. We have shown that the three providers of social support (partner, family members, and friends) contribute to the reduction of anxiety and unhappiness. More specifically, we stressed the role played by certain forms of support. In this regard, help in dealing with everyday issues is important in reducing anxiety, while financial help does not seem to matter much. Furthermore, the partner's presence in the household reduces unhappiness, while gathering with friends reduces anxiety. Thus, we see that different providers of help can offer various forms of support. Finally, the regression analysis shows the importance of certain psychological aspects related to the unemployment situation, such as the hopes of getting a job.

## **Conclusion**

This paper addressed the role played by different types and different providers of social support in coping with long-term unemployment. Our analysis shows an impact of social support on the psychological well-being of young long-term unemployed. All three types of social support reduce anxiety. Furthermore, partner and family are more important in the case of unhappiness; they contribute in some way to increase the level of happiness of young unemployed.



The in-depth interviews allowed us to stress some mechanisms linking social support to the psychological well-being of young long-term unemployed. Concerning these coping mechanisms, let us stress three points. Firstly, friends are very important as they can represent a sort of “security valve” for the young unemployed, allowing them to diminish the negative impact of unemployment on psychological well-being, which can be related to the emotional handling of a stressful situation. Secondly, friends can also provide a diffuse support, sharing everyday-life activities and therefore avoiding or reducing a feeling of isolation by the young unemployed. In this case the coping mechanism is related to maintaining social participation. Thirdly, the family can lend money, but can also give the young unemployed a broader and more symbolic support. The family can help through problem resolution – reducing the financial difficulties or providing assistance in finding a job – as well as through emotional support. In general, what emerges from our in-depth interviews is that the most important forms of support provided by friends and family are related to emotional coping strategies and to some extent to social participation.

We observe in particular the importance of having someone to talk to and to share one’s problems, as well as having persons with whom to go out and think about something else than unemployment and finding a job. The youngsters’ ability to maintain an active and diversified social life contributes to their psychological well-being; we can see that in the higher levels of happiness of those who are socially integrated. This points to the importance of providing financial assistance that does not only permit to cope with everyday expenses, but also includes a share of money for social activities and social integration. Moreover, on a more practical level, we have shown that family members, friends, and the partner can provide help with regard to preparing applications and interviews. The young long-term unemployed value greatly this form of support.

The limited effect of all three forms of social support on anxiety that we find in the regression might be due to the fact that social support, as we can see in the in-depth interviews, is not always positive. Some forms of social support may imply a sense of being in debt with the persons helping and faced with one’s own incapacity to pay back, hence reinforcing one’s devalued self-feelings. On the other hand, social support may be negative when accompanied by social undermining or when drawing people in marginalized networks. When studying the role of social support for youth coping with unemployment, one should also take into account such an impact.

## Appendix

### Main characteristics of the interviewees

Sex	Age	Nationality	Arrival in Switzerland	Education	Household
F	20	Swiss	Adopted	Searching for an apprenticeship	Lives with mother
F	25	Portuguese	Born in Switzerland	Commercial diploma	Lives with partner and children
F	27	Swiss	Born in Switzerland	Trained massage therapist	Lives alone
F	27	Swiss	Born in Switzerland	Mandatory school	Lives with son
F	30	Portuguese	At age 18	Mandatory school	Lives with parents/friends
F	31	Somalia	At age 17	Mandatory school	Lives with children
F	32	Swiss	Born in Switzerland	University degree in arts	Lives alone
F	32	Peruvian	At age 16	Mandatory school	Lives with children
F	33	Swiss	Born in Switzerland	Beautician diploma	Lives with parents
F	35	Spanish	At age 17	Mandatory school	Lives alone
M	18	Thai	At age 9	Searching for an apprenticeship	Lives with mother
M	22	French	At age 14	Apprenticeship	Lives with mother
M	27	Swiss	Indian background	Bachelor degree in pedagogy	Lives with mother
M	27	Swiss	Born abroad, at age 13	Mandatory school	Lives alone
M	30	Swiss	Adopted	Apprenticeship	Lives alone
M	32	Haitian	At age 20	Business school not achieved	Lives alone
M	32	Swiss	Born in Switzerland	Apprenticeship	Lives alone
M	34	Swiss	Born in Switzerland	Mandatory school	Lives alone
M	34	Swiss	Born in Switzerland	University degree in arts	Lives alone
M	35	Swiss	Adopted	Apprenticeship	Lives with partner

**Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables**

Variables	Range	Values	Mean	Standard deviation	N
<b>Dependent variables</b>					
Anxiety	1–10	1 = not anxious at all/ 10 = very anxious	3.88	1.90	295
Unhappiness	0–10	0 = extremely happy/10 = extremely unhappy	3.05	2.26	300
<b>Partner support</b>					
Living with partner	0–1	0 = not living with/1 = lives with...	0.37	0.48	301
Partner's help in everyday issues	0–1	0 = no or little/1 = frequent	0.26	0.48	295
Partner's financial help	0–1	0 = no or little/1 = frequent	0.15	0.36	294
<b>Family support</b>					
Living with parents (mother, father or both)	0–1	0 = not living with/1 = lives with...	0.27	0.45	301
Gathering with family outside the household	1–4	1 = never/4 = almost every day	2.56	1.00	301
Family members' help in everyday issues	0–1	0 = no or little/1 = frequent	0.23	0.42	300
Family members' financial help	0–1	0 = no or little/1 = frequent	0.21	0.41	299
<b>Friend support</b>					
Living with friends	0–1	0 = not living with/1 = lives with...	0.04	0.19	301
Gathering with friends	1–4	1 = never/4 = almost every day	3.06	0.86	301
Friends' help in everyday issues	0–1	0 = no or little/1 = frequent	0.23	0.42	301
Friends' financial help	0–1	0 = no or little/1 = frequent	0.16	0.37	299
<b>Unemployment situation</b>					
Feeling about household income	1–4	1 = living comfortably/4 = finding it very difficult	2.34	0.77	300
<b>Unemployment benefits</b>					
Hopes of getting a job	0–1	0 = no/1 = yes	0.77	0.42	301
Importance of employment-related identity and status	1–4	1 = very low/4 = very high	2.87	0.94	294
<b>Personal situation</b>					
Self-evaluation of own health	1–4	1 = very bad/4 = very good	3.36	0.68	301
Social life	1–5	1 = much more seldom/5 = much more often	2.71	0.90	296
In a relationship	0–1	0 = no/1 = yes	0.56	0.50	299
Children	0–1	0 = no/1 = yes	0.28	0.45	301
<b>Sociodemographic controls</b>					
Male	0–1	0 = no/1 = yes	0.50	0.50	301
Swiss	0–1	0 = no/1 = yes	0.50	0.50	300
Age	18–35		28.39	4.40	301
Education	1–15	1 = not finished compulsory school/ 15 = PhD or higher	6.60	4.11	292

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## Notes

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- 2 See the appendix for a description of the main characteristics of the 20 interviewees.
- 3 Anxiety, as measured through the three items presented above, has a Cronbach alpha of .71.
- 4 We include in our measure of receiving unemployment benefits the intermediary earnings (incomes related to employment periods during the period of unemployment)
- 5 More specifically we asked them to assess their level of involvement in social activities in comparison to other persons of their age.
- 6 See the appendix for an overview of the descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the analyses.