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Explanations of Unemployment: An Eight-Country Comparison

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Abstract

Explanations of unemployment as non-expert beliefs or lay theories, were originally described by Furnham (1982) to follow three axes: individualistic, societal, and fatalistic. Through a revised 19-item version (EoU-R), comprising original and new items with its structure closely resembling the original one we studied 1,689 participants from eight countries (Brazil, United Kingdom, Greece, Poland, USA, Romania, Turkey, and Spain). Internal consistency for a derived three-factor structure (Individualistic, Fatalistic, Societal-Educational) was reached and cross-cultural factor equivalence was supported across countries through covariance structure analysis. The composite EoU-R dimension scores were compared across countries, genders, and employment status groups with the largest differences across countries found for the Individualistic factor. Females were found to explain unemployment in terms of Societal-Educational explanations more than males and some interesting interactions also emerged. The Revised Explanations of Unemployment scale can be used cross-culturally and for within cultures comparisons and can prove useful for counseling.

Introduction

This paper deals with the explanations of unemployment as held by the non-experts, employed and unemployed, in lay-theory terms (Furnham, 1988). In its fiscal sense of course, many economists view unemployment as an economic, not a psychological problem (Winefield, 2002). Facts and figures studied are education and the labour market along with unemployment rates in terms of their prevalence across socio-demographic groups (Petrakis, 2012). Still, a fact that cannot be overlooked is that the unemployed possess structural characteristics which affect their power, motivation, mobility, and objectives, regardless of diversity or non-homogeneity of these characteristics (Petrakis, 2012).

Unemployment has been a very important economic and societal parameter, forming attitudes and political ideologies (Furnham & Lewis, 1986) and has become a major financial determinant for each country's fiscal policies and a grave burden for its people (Petrakis, 2012). This, in turn, has significant impact on a country's economy affecting decisions other countries have to make in terms of their financial relations with this country. As economy deteriorates and unemployment rises, especially under recession times, the impact these may have on individual psychological health can be devastating.

Early research focused on the physical deprivation and hardship due to unemployment but later, research addressed psychological aspects (Furnham & Lewis, 1986). Two important psychological effects of unemployment that have been identified by many researchers have been "the sense of social stigma attached to being unemployed and the suffering from the lack of structure that people experience" (Furnham & Lewis, 1986, p. 120). Unemployment has been associated with poor mental health not only due to the financial strain the unemployed suffer but also due to the lack of the non-financial benefits of employment including self esteem, activities, structured time, shared experiences, personal status, and identity (Artazcoz, Benach, Borrell, & Cortès, 2004; Furnham & Lewis, 1986).

Unemployment can be considered a (socio)economic issue and a social concern as a possible source of psychological and physical ailments or illnesses. It can be defined in many ways (Kapuvári, 2013), as the situational determinants may vary. Several theories have been proposed to address the effects that unemployment has on the individual such as "deprivation" theory, as supported by Jahoda (1982) following the Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel seminal 1932 *Marienthal* study, and "stages" theories (e.g., Arnetz et al., 1987). The latter stress the fatalistic period during unemployment leading to lack of self appreciation, behavioral problems, social isolation and generally to mental health deterioration. Research on the psychological effects of unemployment is voluminous (e.g., Feather, 1990; Goldman-Mellor, Saxton, & Catalano, 2010; Lewis, Webley, & Furnham, 1995). Through these and other studies, psychological and social adjustment following unemployment has been studied along with effects on family life, education about unemployment, etc. Changes in personal values have also been studied, as in the case of Hungary after the onset of the 2008 recession (Kapuvári, 2013) with values shifting from collectivistic to individualistic.

Another way to study unemployment's psychological consequences, is to conduct research on the beliefs or lay theories people -especially the unemployed- hold on what causes unemployment. For example, long term unemployment can modify the way the unemployed explain its causes, producing more fatalistic explanations (Hayes & Nutman, 1981). Locus of control mechanisms also apply; internal locus of control explanations of unemployment may mobilize better coping strategies and depression avoidance (Cvetanovski & Jex, 1994). The psychological stance the unemployed and employed take towards unemployment is closely related to the explanations of unemployment they hold, as either in terms of attribution theory or in terms of social representation theory these explanations trigger psychological reactions (for example, fatalistic explanations may trigger apathy, withdrawal and depression). In a more general sense, explanations of unemployment are considered attributions related to psychological processes and expectations which then, in turn, affect beliefs about the causes of success and failure (Furnham & Lewis, 1986). These might accentuate unemployment's psychological consequences the same way financial strain has been shown to mediate negative effects of unemployment on mental health (for a review, see Artazcoz et al., 2004) and the same way the association between unemployment and mental health is modified when social status, family roles, and gender are taken into account. A note should be taken with respect to family roles, as different roles are typically assigned within the family to males and females and the effects of unemployment or even a sense of its imminence depend on the investment of the family members on family responsibilities (Hall, 1992) placing a heavier load on males whose role is traditionally that of the provider (Artazcoz et al., 2004; Georgas, Berry, van de Vijver, Kagitcibasi, & Poortinga, 2006).

There are three main explanations of unemployment axes (Furnham & Lewis, 1986): a) individualistic reasons attributing unemployment to personal disposition; b) societal reasons,

attributing unemployment to governmental policies mainly, and c) fatalistic reasons attributing unemployment to uncontrollable parameters and chance. The original Explanations for Unemployment scale was constructed along these axes (Furnham, 1982) and comprised 20 items assessing the respective latent constructs. The factor structure was not clearly replicated in subsequent cross-cultural studies (e.g., Feather, 1985; Lewis, Webley, & Furnham, 1995; Ward, 1991) but according to Furnham (1988), "although different studies have empirically derived rather different factors, it seems quite possible to categorize these into one or other theoretical framework: i.e., individualistic (internal, voluntary, effort, ability), societal (external structural, task difficulty) and fatalistic (cyclical, luck, chance, uncontrollable)." (p.133). In addition to this, Furnham and Hesketh (1988) provided further evidence and introduced a cross-cultural issue as explanations for unemployment may vary across national groups as a function of each country's prevailing economic conditions.

Pilot study - Revised scale version

Based on the original theory, we first revised the original scale adding 24 new interview-driven items; along with the 20 original EoU scale items, we attempted to replicate the original 1982 structure as closely as possible despite the different culture (Greece) and the different time setting (more than two decades later). We aimed at updating the scale without affecting its original latent constructs and at the same time set the stage for the description of its current structure -hopefully a culturally fair one. Through covariance structure analysis (Muthén, 2000) as extended to exploratory factor analysis by van de Vijver and Poortinga (2002), for a Greek pilot-sample, and following an iterative item-elimination procedure (Mylonas et al., 2013), an EoU-Revised 19-item scale emerged, closely resembling the three original dimensions. Under this new set of 19 items (EoU-R), the Individualistic factor was assessed with six of the eight original EoU items and one new item, the Societal factor (emphasis on State provision) with six new items and one original EoU item, and the Fatalistic factor (emphasis on socioeconomic and technological changes) with five new items and one original EoU item.

Main study and Main aims

The EoU-R Scale was further tested during the main study across eight countries for its susceptibility to bias-in-terms-of-culture (van de Vijver & Poortinga, 2002) so as to achieve factor invariance allowing for the overall factor structure to be modeled for the overall sample and for the composite scores to be used in group and country comparisons. Thus, among other research questions in this present study, the dimension composite scores themselves would be of interest, as the fatalistic and societal dimensions had been suggested as unemployment explanations more by the unemployed (Furnham, 1982) and the individualistic dimension had been 'favored' more by the employed.

The first aim was to test for cross-cultural factor equivalence at least with respect to the constructs; this would allow us to calculate dimension composite scores. The second aim was to describe the latent constructs derived (if feasible through an overall solution) to explore their internal consistency and to examine how and to what extent they matched the original EoU theory and dimensions. The final aim was to compare across countries, genders and employment status, exploring for differences and similarities across countries and subgroups in the data. For the latter, interactions were also tested, such as a possible interaction between gender and employment status, as suggested by the literature review.

Method

Samples

In all, 1,689 respondents from eight countries, aged 19 to 67 participated in this study. Some (*n* = 19) were students or pensioners and were excluded from the last comparison across groups stage. With respect to participants by country: Brazil (*N*=206, 12%), U.K. (*N*=199, 12%), Greece (*N*=250, 15%), Poland (*N*=156, 9%), U.S.A. (*N*=236, 14%), Romania (*N*=204, 12%), Turkey (*N*=200, 12%), and Spain (*N*=238, 14%). With respect to employment status, 43% of the respondents were unemployed at the time of data collection and 57% were employed (mean working hours per week: 39.98, *s* = 13.30). The percent of employed and unemployed in each country was evenly distributed but minor irregularities existed (UK, 20% unemployed, and Poland, 35% unemployed). According to Artazcoz et al. (2004) "many studies focusing on unemployment have included only men." (p. 82); the present study includes both men (49%) and women (51%), employed and unemployed in approximately equal proportions (21% employed males, 27% unemployed males, 22% employed females, 30% unemployed females).

EoU-R Scale and data collection procedures

The Revised Explanations of Unemployment Scale (EoU-R) consists of 19 items scored on a 7-point Likert type scale (1="very important reason", 7="unimportant reason"), and its theoretical structure is three-fold. One of the two studies which led to this revised scale (Mylonas & Furnham, 2014) supported internal consistency for each of the three dimensions; however, that study did not aim at reaching a common overall factor structure or describing it, but instead it addressed a different question, namely *reducing bias-in-terms-of-culture* on methodological and statistical grounds. Thus, for the present study, the dimensions-constructs were to be re-addressed and recalculated for this eight-country database along with their internal consistency levels. The actual items of the EoU-R are presented in Table 1 along with the eight-country overall factor structure as computed through procedures described later. The EoU-R was first translated in each country's language and was then back-translated by the country coordinators to achieve minimum language interference. Minor irregularities were resolved at this stage and scoring details were clarified.

Statistical analysis

Covariance Structure Analysis and through it, Intra Class Correlation Coefficients on the respective between-groups and pooled within-groups correlation matrices led to Principal Axis Factoring solutions with orthogonal rotation and Internal Consistency Reliability coefficients for the dimensions produced. The factor composite scores were compared through multivariate analysis of variance and through separate analysis of variance by country, gender, and employment status to test for similarities and differences along with interactions of the independent variables. Finally, cluster analysis techniques were employed in conjunction with post-hoc Scheffé comparisons across countries in an attempt to describe the across-country similarity levels.

Results

For the eight countries overall sample (N = 1,689), the between-groups correlation matrix and the pooled within-groups correlation matrix as estimated through Covariance Structure Analysis produced estimates for 19 Intra Class Correlation Coefficients. The average of these 19 coefficients was .05 only, which is below even the ideal limit for this average (.06) verifying that no multilevel modeling of the factor structures across countries was necessary. Consequently, an overall factor structure could be computed as if the eight countries were a single unit, as at least factor equivalence across these countries was now given. Exploratory Factor Analysis identified three factors through Principal Axis Factoring with orthogonal rotation and 36% of the variance was explained (16.3%, 11.2% and 8.5% for factors 1 to 3, respectively). An oblique rotation was also applied but the solution was not as clear as the orthogonal one, although the correlations among the factors were not negligible. The main problem with the oblique rotation, which was not further pursued, was a third factor which could not be identified (only two items were loading on this factor) and that this factor was the one exhibiting the largest correlations with the other two (.38 and .52), whereas factors one and two were less correlated (.32). The solution revealed an overall factor with seven items, a second overall factor with six items and a third overall factor with three items plus a fourth item which cross-loaded on the first factor (Table 1). One item did not load satisfactorily on any of the three factors and two more were not accepted as a part of the second factor.

The first factor is the *Individualistic* dimension and consists of six original (1982) items and one new item. The second factor is the *Fatalistic* dimension; this appeared as the third factor in the original EoU Scale (1982) but in this revised version the dimension appears second and stronger. It consists of one original EoU item and five new items constructed for the revised version. The emphasis is placed on the changes time brings with people unable to intervene (item "q10_n" regards a more societal situation, with wages/salaries defined by the state or the employers). Finally, the third factor is the *Societal* dimension with its emphasis on lack of education and qualifications as provided by the state. For the factor composite scores, item "q5_n" was considered a part of both the first and third factors.

Table 1. Exploratory Factor Analysis outcomes: overall factor solution across eight countries

Principal Axis Factoring, *KMO* = .86, $\|D\|$ = .006, Bartlett's sphericity test χ^2, p < .001 Orthogonal rotation solution; variance explained: 36.0% (16.3%, 11.2%, 8.5%)	Factors			
	1	**2**	**3**	h^2
q13 Lack of effort and laziness among unemployed people	**.827**	.094	.045	.70
q12 Unemployed people do not try hard enough to get jobs	**.798**	.097	.027	.65
q15 Unemployed people are too fussy and proud to accept some jobs	**.650**	.137	.017	.44
q19 Lack of intelligence and ability among unemployed people	**.592**	.068	.216	.40
q3 Inability of unemployed people to adapt to new conditions	**.526**	.122	.216	.34
q5_n Unemployed people lack self knowledge and pursue jobs not corresponding to their qualifications	**.492**	.136	**.441**	.46
q2 Unwillingness of unemployed to move to places of work	**.463**	.146	.190	.27
q17_n Enterprises have embraced technology evolution	.136	**.634**	.097	.43
q9_n Job positions' overlap and company merging	-.001	**.501**	.095	.26
q11_n Production facilities and enterprises have been displaced at other areas or even at other countries	.023	**.498**	.129	.27
q16_n Demographic and population changes	.197	**.498**	.119	.30
q7 The introduction of widespread automation	.090	**.495**	.163	.27
q10_n High levels of wages/salaries result into less people employed	.143	**.434**	.163	.24
q8_n Lack of vocational guidance and counseling	.148	.373	.357	.29
q14_n Employers will easier hire someone without family obligations	.092	.373	.143	.17
q4_n The educational system does not correspond to the current job market	.091	.189	**.664**	.49
q18_n Poor educational system	.099	.244	**.553**	.38
q6_n Unemployed people do not qualify for contemporary market needs	.340	.193	**.421**	.33
q1 Incompetent industrial management with poor planning	.083	.171	.239	.09

Note: "X_n" in the item label denotes items which were constructed for the Revised (EoU-R) scale.

Internal consistency estimates were calculated and Cronbach's α indices were .84, .70, and .69 for factors one to three, respectively. For two of the factors, the internal consistency estimates were just acceptable. To explore this further, we computed the internal consistency estimates for the three dimensions for each country separately. For the Fatalistic factor Cronbach *alphas* were clearly acceptable for all countries but the UK, with internal consistency just acceptable (.65). For the third Societal-Educational factor though, internal consistency was threatened for half of the countries (*alphas*: Greece, .63; UK, .61; Turkey, .58; Brazil, .61); for the remaining four countries *alphas* exceeded .70. Therefore, the third factor should be treated with caution, although for the overall sample the statistical and metric errors within the factor's scores were clearly much less than for each country separately, obviously due to the power achieved because of data aggregation.

For the composite scores, a multivariate analysis of variance design was employed across countries. The multivariate tests showed a moderate statistically significant differentiation of the three factors across countries (*Wilks*' Λ = .77, F 21, 4821.32 = 21.71, p < .001, η^2 = .08). From the univariate F ratios it become evident that the largest differences were observed for the Individualistic factor (F 7, 1681 = 26.36, p < .001, η^2 = .10). In contrast, the smaller differences were observed for the Fatalistic factor (F 7, 1681 = 12.73, p < .001, η^2 = .05); for the Societal-Educational factor differences were less strong than the individualistic dimension ones but stronger than the fatalistic dimension ones (F 7, 1681 = 26.00, p < .001, η^2 = .08).

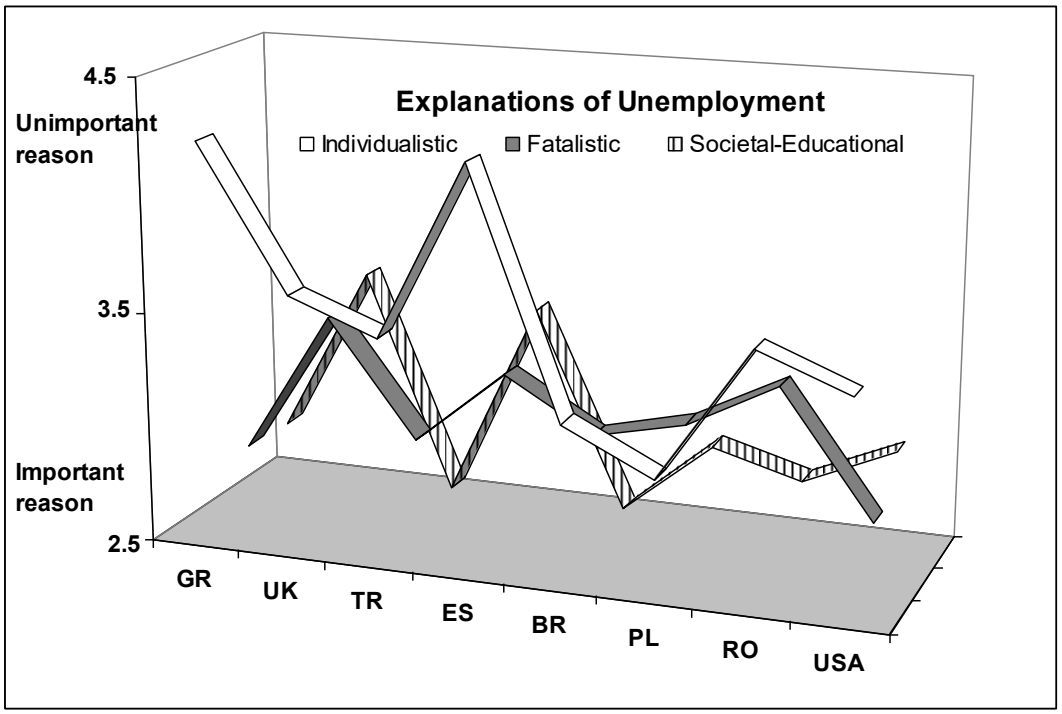

Figure 1. Mean composite scores for the three factors across the eight countries.

Table 2. Post-hoc comparisons summary: factor means' differences across pairs of countries

	GR	UK	TR	ES	BR	PL	RO	USA
GR								
UK	1, 2, 3							
TR	1, 3	2, 3						
ES	2	1	1, 3					
BR	1, 3	2, 3	No diff.	1, 3				
PL	1, 3	1, 3	No diff.	1, 3	No diff.			
RO	1, 2, 3	3	2	1, 3	No diff.	1		
USA	1, 3	2, 3	No diff.	1, 2, 3	No diff.	No diff.	2	

Note: Each number denotes the factor for which statistically significant post-hoc differences were observed between the respective pair of countries. For example, Spain and Poland differ in their mean scores with respect to factor 1 and 3.

Greece, Turkey and Brazil emphasized the societal-educational explanations of unemployment, Greece, Turkey and USA emphasized the fatalistic explanations and Brazil and Poland emphasized the individualistic explanations of unemployment. To gain more insight, we computed post-hoc Scheffé tests and we also cluster-analyzed the means for the factor composite scores (country level) through hierarchical cluster analysis (median linkage methods). From both analyses, it was evident that considering all three factors, Turkey, Brazil, USA and Poland formed a single cluster (based on score similarity for the multivariate system of all three factors); Romania was close to this cluster as well. No more clusters of countries were observed as UK, Spain and Greece were unique in respect to their scores in all three factors, with UK and Greece being on the opposite ends of a continuum and with Spain standing opposite to the four-country cluster. The Scheffé outcomes have been summarized in Table 2 and the Cluster analysis outcomes are presented in Figure 2.

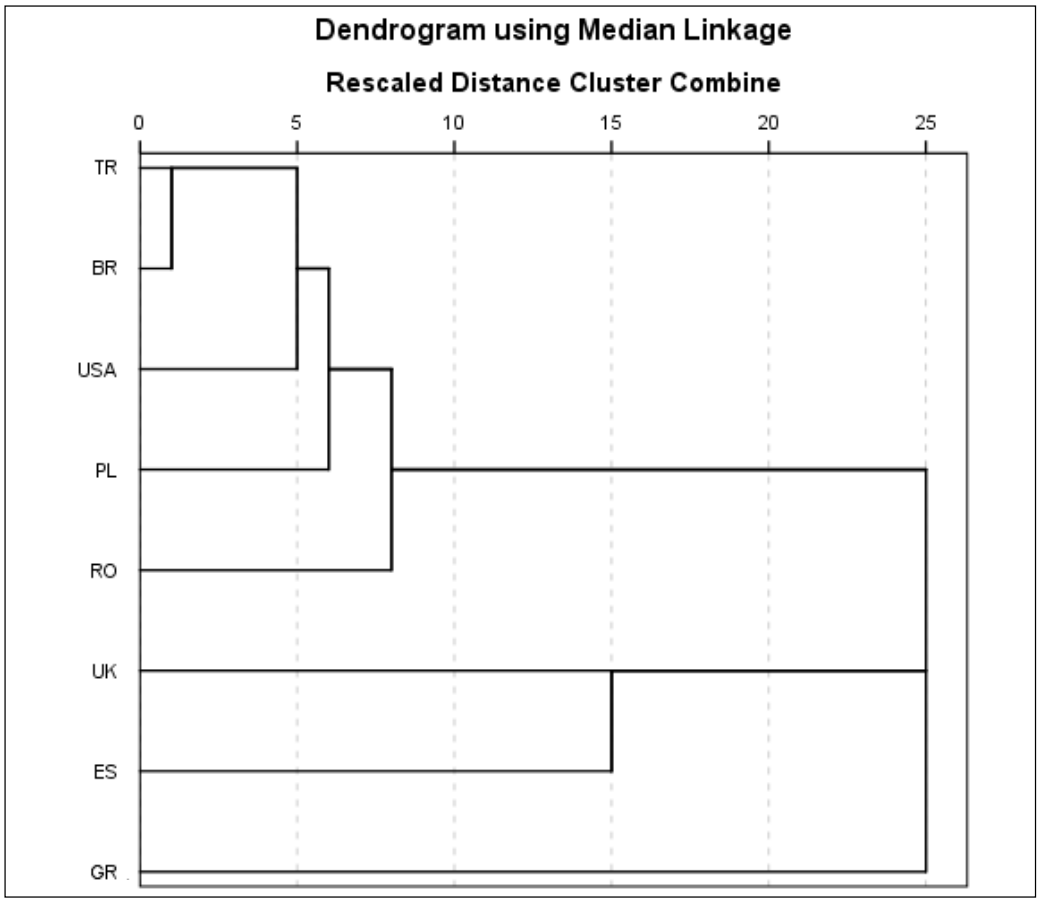

Figure 2. Hierarchical Cluster Analysis of countries (aggregate level).

Controlling for gender and employment status, we conducted three separate (for each factor) analysis of variance designs (*N* = 1,670 due to conjoint missing information for the independent variables). The results are summarized in Table 3.

One important outcome was that country effects remained unchanged, so the existing differences described earlier, also directing towards the country clusters, still hold true with respect to country differences regardless of other measures. The effect sizes for a few statistically significant interactions observed were very small, however, they deserve some attention. For the Individualistic Explanations of Unemployment, a gender by employment status effect reached statistical significance. Employed males explained unemployment using Individualistic Explanations (mean = 3.51) more than the unemployed males do (mean = 3.78); for females no difference exists (means = 3.60 and 3.52, respectively). Another interaction effect regarding Fatalistic Explanations of Unemployment was observed (Figure 3).

Table 3. Analysis of variance results by Country, Gender, and Employment status for Individualistic, Fatalistic, and Societal-Educational Explanations of Unemployment

	F (*df*)	*p*	η^2
Individualistic explanations			
Effect: Gender by Employment status	5.60 (1, 1633)	< .05	.003
Effect: Country	20.95 (7, 1633)	< .001	.08
Fatalistic explanations			
Effect: Country by Gender by Empl. Status	2.90 (7, 1633)	< .01	.012
Effect: Country	10.62 (7, 1633)	< .001	.05
Societal-Educational explanations			
Effect: Gender	7.42 (7, 1633)	< .01	.005
Effect: Country	19.36 (7, 1633)	< .001	.08

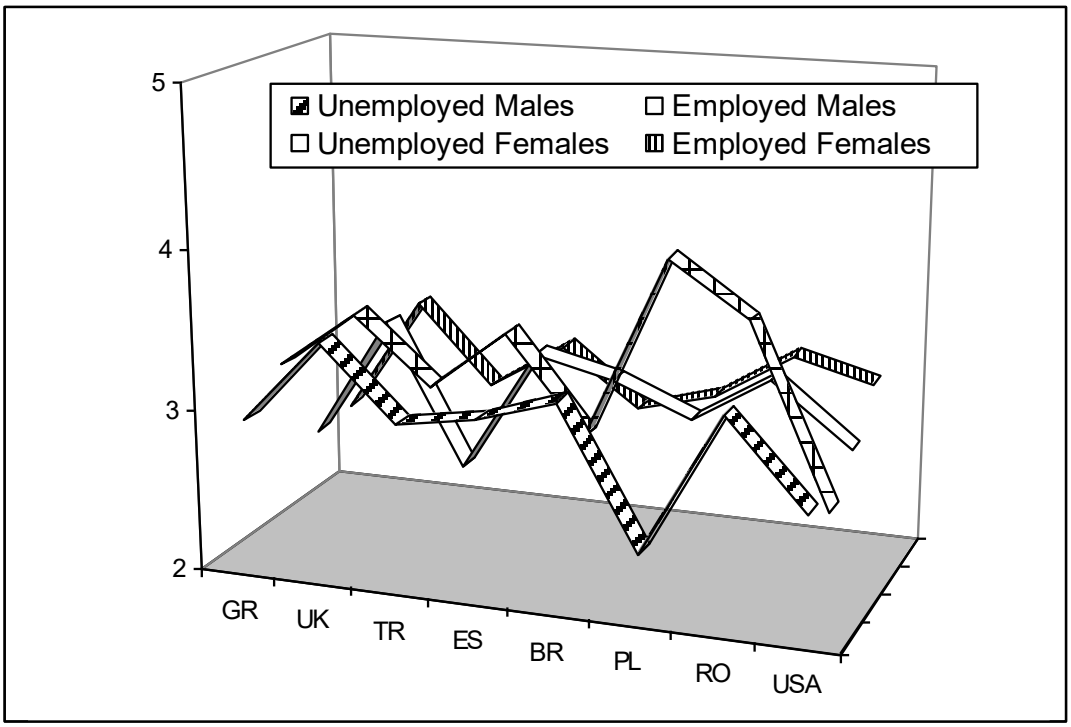

Figure 3. Fatalistic Explanations of Unemployment: Means by gender and employment status.

For this interaction effect, all three independent variables participated, with unemployed males-females and employed males-females by country holding different views for the Fatalistic Explanations. Specifically, there is a very large difference observed between Polish unemployed and employed males, whereas such a difference is diminished for Polish females. Polish unemployed males explain unemployment using Fatalistic Explanations a great deal more (2.38) than Polish employed males do (4.02). Keeping in mind that the scoring scale ranges from 1 to 7, this difference is not vast, but such a difference clearly stands out regarding the remaining seven countries. Differences of the same kind emerged for Spain and Romania but were very small (avg. $\Delta_{means} \cong .30$) and of trivial interpretation value. Finally, a main gender effect was observed for the Societal-Educational Explanations of Unemployment, with females (mean = 2.88) explaining unemployment on these grounds more than males (mean = 3.06).

Discussion

A first psychometric point regarding our outcomes is that the Revised Explanations of Unemployment Scale seems to be stable in its dimensions both in a cross-cultural sense and in a sense of latent constructs assessed (i.e., within each country). This has important implications for the use of the Scale both in cross-cultural settings and in settings within a culture, as we can assume that dimensions are stable enough within *any* culture; we can thus test for group differences or for invariance across such groups even within cultures (Byrne & Watkins, 2003). The dimensions are approximately the same with the ones initially supported by Furnham, as there is a perfect match with the first one (individualistic explanations in their cross-cultural sense), a very close resemblance of the second dimension with the fatalistic explanations and a near identity of the third societal-educational factor with the initial societal explanations supported by Furnham (emphasis is given on the lack of education and qualifications as provided by the State in the Revised form of the scale). So Furnham's suggestion (1988) that despite the initial evidence on cross-cultural differences in the dimensions found we could still categorize these dimensions into the three original axes, seems to be fully supported.

Other ways to approach the data seem plausible of course. For example, one important implication is that explanations of unemployment may themselves moderate or mediate the impact of unemployment on psychological well-being and self-esteem. This might also be linked to the individual's general belief system acting as the cognitive vehicle (Ramos, Correia, & Alves, 2014) as EoU-R dimensions are indeed beliefs (not values, but also not unstable attitudes as well) and they adhere to the properties of the general belief system (Gawęda, & Kokoszka 2014). Taking "ageism" and its projective identification as a paradigm in terms of reciprocal projective mechanisms between the young and the old (Terry, 2008) we might expect that EoU would act as a projective means for the inner fears (rationalization) amongst the employed and as passive acceptance (fatalistic submission) of unemployment's reality amongst the unemployed. Thus, it can be supported that explanations of unemployment should be studied in terms of their possible causal or indirect relation to psychological health regarding self-esteem or self-concept and self-consciousness, aggression, social skills, psychological well-being and many other personality and behavioral facets.

Specifically for the unemployed, the information collected through the EoU-R may prove useful in several other ways. However, the main gain is that the factor or factors the unemployed person considers most important as explanations of unemployment, may help provide tailored interventions. The explanations reported may be regarded as "internal barriers" (Nathan & Hill, 2006) in the job-searching process. If the individual attributes unemployment to factors outside himself (i.e., external locus of control), as for example in the cases of Societal-Educational or Fatalistic explanations, he/she may not try hard enough to find a job. The role of the counsellor is to address these beliefs of the unemployed person; knowing about the explanations of unemployment which are important to a group of persons can aid the counsellor in this process.

Limitations

Being employed does not necessarily mean being fully employed. Tenured jobs have suffered strong blows and those classified as employed in our data may actually be under-employed, though not unemployed. The existence of these levels may have confounded the data as we have not assessed its effect (covariance analysis with working hours as a covariate would answer these questions but data for working hours per week were available for seven countries only). Correlating the scores for each factor with all available measures on working

hours revealed no relations though. Also, an indicative analysis of covariance for each factor composite score revealed very small covariate effects ($\eta^2 < .01$). Length of unemployment may also have been another confounding variable. A covariance analysis would be indicative as well, but was not possible as for one country the data on unemployment length differed from the rest of the countries.

Other assessment approaches to explanations of unemployment (Feather & Davenport, 1981; Schaufeli, 1988) have not been considered at this stage. Future research should examine the respective theoretical frameworks and assessment procedures, at least under a concurrent validity rationale. Invariance should have also been tested within the current study across genders and across the employed and unemployed subsamples; the gender invariance question has not been considered at all at this stage; however, the employment status invariance question has been addressed during the adaptation-revision of the original EoU Scale and equivalence of structures was supported, so this question has been only partly answered. More studies are needed within cultures to ascertain -mainly through SEM- invariance at least across gender and employment status, age-bands and socio-economic status levels.

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