



**Full Length Research Article**

**DO ADOLESCENTS' FUTURE EXPECTATIONS DIFFER BY PARENTAL EMPLOYMENT SITUATION?  
HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PORTUGUESE HBSC/WHO SURVEY**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Objectives:** This study explores the associations between parental employment status and the future and educational expectations and life satisfaction of a national representative sample of adolescents.

**Methods and analysis:** Data were obtained from 5050 adolescents, attending school and with a mean age of 13.98 years old ( $SD=1.85$ ). After a descriptive analysis of the sample, Chi-square tests were used by parental employment status (both parents employed or non-employed) for adolescents future expectations variables: setting up goals and plans for the future; think about completing high school /professional education; aspire to go on to university/ further education upon leaving high school. Moreover, ANOVA was used with life-satisfaction.

**Results:** Employment of both parents is positively associated with higher future planning and higher educational expectations compared to parental non-employment. In addition, adolescents reporting higher future and educational expectations show greater life-satisfaction scores.

**Conclusions:** This study provides evidence on how adolescents' future and educational expectations differs by parental employment status and, in turn, life-satisfaction. The evidence is relevant given the actual socioeconomic context and can be useful to acknowledge the need to support research on adolescents' with non-employed parents.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Education is a strong determinant for adolescents' well-being and socioeconomic inclusion (Viner *et al.*, 2012). Portugal has been one of the countries hardest hit by the European economic crisis, amid the harsh austerity measures that have affected people's economic and socio-emotional resources. Macroeconomic environmental stress poses significant costs to individuals through reduced employment opportunities, decline in incomes and levels of life-satisfaction (Frank *et al.*, 2013; WHO, 2011). Available evidence shows that people report more health and well-being problems during recession periods (Katikireddi *et al.*, 2012; Zavras *et al.*, 2013). The specific economic crisis that began in 2008 deteriorated labour markets and raised job loss rates.

People face a considerable stressful burden from job loss, as they must to adapt to economic, social and psychological changes (Creed & Klisch, 2005). It is also a well-known risk factor for mental health morbidity (Warr, 1987). In Europe, recent data from the recession describes a significant higher risk of depression among unemployed people (Gili *et al.*, 2013), which is consistent with previous evidence of a positive correlation between unemployment and common mental disorders (Ford *et al.*, 2010; Jefferis *et al.*, 2011; Pinto-Meza *et al.*, 2013). The adverse effects of recession and unemployment can disproportionately affect families (Edwards *et al.*, 2013). In Portugal, cuts in child care benefits and restrictions to social welfare benefits during the recession were particularly severe despite the high unemployment rates, which significantly reduced incomes and increased the risk of poverty for some families (EAPN, 2013). Perceiving a low sense of efficacy in dealing with the growing hardship and job loss is likely to increase pressure on parents. Distressed parents become less nurturing and short-tempered

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(Christoffersen, 2000) and although young people's resilience and strengths push them towards healthy development, they may be especially vulnerable to changes in family relationships as they are still biologically and psychosocially maturing. In fact, prior evidence has stated that children from parents facing economic stress are more likely to face emotional and behavioural problems (Hagquist, 2009; Leinonen *et al.*, 2003; Solantaus *et al.*, 2004). This is consistent with the Family Stress Model (Conger *et al.*, 2000), which describes a process whereby economic hardship undermines parents' mental health, the quality of the family relationships and therefore adolescent's emotional and behavioural adjustment. These outcomes raise serious concerns about the potential impacts of family unemployment to adolescents' well-being. It is known that education is one of the strongest determinants for young peoples' well-being and health (Viner *et al.*, 2012). Higher educated people are at a greater advantage of obtaining employment (Statistics, 2010) and better earnings (Hecker, 1998), achieving higher rates of health status and lower scores of social assistance needs (OECD, 2012).

Parents are usually their children's primary role models in terms of learning experiences, and consequently can protect or increase school engagement through their behaviour and attitudes towards education (Eccles *et al.*, 2006). Having unemployed parents has been associated with a risk of educational disengagement and low achievement (Coles *et al.*, 2002) and this may be due to modifications in terms of supportive relationships within the family that are known to promote motivation and well-being (Moreno *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, it is known that lower functioning across school related domains is associated with adolescents' lower life-satisfaction that in turn may put them in higher risk for health and behaviour problems (Eid & Larsen, 2008). The *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC/WHO) is a collaborative study undertaken by the World Health Organization, which surveys school-aged children's health status, health behaviours and risk behaviours and gives information about parental employment status. Overall, the crossing of different variables can provide useful data to improve the insight of researchers, stakeholders and citizens with respect to health inequalities among children and adolescents (WHO, 2012). The availability of national data covering the relevant period (2010), albeit for a limited set of variables, allows a rough analysis of the short-run associations of parental non-employment during economic recession and Portuguese adolescents' future and educational expectations that is estimated to be related to life-satisfaction.

## METHODS

### Participants

The sample used in this study was obtained from the 2010 HBSC Study – Portuguese Survey (Matos & Aventura Social, 2010) ([www.hbsc.org/](http://www.hbsc.org/)). A clustered sampling design was used to meet the required number of students for each school grade from 139 national public schools selected according to an international research protocol (Roberts *et al.*, 2007). The sampling unit was either the school or the class so that the sample was representative by age and gender. The total sample consisted of 5050 Portuguese adolescents (47.7% boys and 52.3% girls) attending 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> school grades and with a

mean age of 13.98 years old ( $SD=1.85$ ). For the purpose of this particular study, only respondents living with both parents and having both employed or both parents non-employed were included in the analysis to avoid a confounding effect of family composition.

### Research Design and Instrument

The data analysed and presented here were obtained from the cross-sectional survey conducted in 2010 in Portugal, according to the methodology of World Health Organization collaborative HBSC study. HBSC/WHO is a cross-sectional descriptive correlational study that uses a school-based, self-report questionnaire to assess school-children and adolescents mental and physical health (Roberts *et al.*, 2007). Questionnaires and data collection were developed cooperatively between international researchers according to a standardized research protocol, and used in collaboration with the World Health Organization (Currie *et al.*, 2001).

### Measures

The total sample was stratified by parental employment status. Two groups of parental employment status were considered: "Yes" having both parents employed and "No" both parents not-employed and either (mother or father) not-employed. In the present study, the outcome measure was adolescents' future and educational aspirations. The adolescents' were asked to report how frequently (never/rarely/sometimes and often/always) they: Set up goals and plans for the future; think about completing high school or professional education and; aspire to go on to university or further education upon leaving high school. Additionally, the adolescents were asked to rate their life-satisfaction using a visual analogue scale "Cantril ladder", indicating the step of the ladder at which they would place their lives at present (from "0" to "10") (WHO, 2012).

### Statistical Analyses

Questionnaire' data were scanned, translated and interpreted by the programme-Eyes & Hands-Forms, version 5. The data was then entered into the database of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 19.0 for Windows, in order to carry out the data analysis. After descriptive analysis of the sample, Chi-square tests were used to estimate the associations between parental employment status and respondents' future and educational aspirations. Moreover, one-way ANOVA was used to test possible differences in the means of life-satisfaction among groups of frequency by aspirations.

### Ethical Considerations

The HBSC/WHO Portuguese study follows the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, and was approved by the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Regional Offices of Education, by the scientific committee, by the national ethics committee and by national data protection. Moreover, all participating schools made available informed parental consent, required by the committee of parents from each school. The questionnaires were sent to schools, administered in the classroom by teachers and with voluntary student participation, according to the international protocol. Further, confidentiality was ensured with anonymous response to the questionnaire and restricted access to HBSC research team members, regarding the work on computing and data analysis.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of chi-square tests and descriptive statistics for adolescents' future expectations by parental employment status. There is a statistically significant association between parental employment status and setting up goals and plans for the future [ $\chi^2 (1) = 7.519, p < .01$ ]. Adolescents with both parents employed often/always set goals and plans for the future (75.8%) and those whose parents are not employed "never to sometimes" do this. Furthermore, parental employment status shows a statistically significant association with frequency of thinking about completing high school or professional education [ $\chi^2 (1) = 4.787, p < .05$ ]. Having both parents employed is linked to often/always thinking about completing high school or professional education (71.9%), whereas not having parents employed is linked to never to sometimes think about this (32.2%). The aspirations to go on to university or further education upon leaving school are also statistically associated with parental employment status [ $\chi^2 (1) = 29.198, p < .001$ ]. There is a strong association on the one hand, between having both parents employed and often/always expecting to go to university or further education (76.3%) and, on the other hand, not having parents employed is more frequent when never to only sometimes expecting it (33.5%).

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether there are any significant differences in terms of life-satisfaction scores for frequency of future aspiration and educational expectation. The group comparisons (Table 2) show statistically significant differences in life-satisfaction between "never to sometimes" and "often and always" setting up goals and plans for the future [ $F (1, 160.845) = 53.270, p = .000$ ].

This significance indicated that life-satisfaction is significantly greater when adolescents "often and always" set goals and plans for the future. Statistically significant differences in life-satisfaction were found between "never to sometimes" and "often and always" thinking about completing high school or professional education [ $F (1, 57.331) = 18.707, p = .000$ ]. Often and always aspiring to complete high school or professional education is associated with higher levels of life-satisfaction. Likewise, life-satisfaction varies with frequency of aspiring to go on to university or further education [ $F (1, 72.226) = 23.507, p = .000$ ]. That is, often or always aspiring to continue to university or further education when leaving high school is associated with higher levels of life-satisfaction.

## DISCUSSION

Data showed that higher future planning and aspirations to continuing studies are associated with having parents employed compared to having parents in a non-employment situation. Prior studies gather evidence that confirms these results (Barnes, 2012; Coelli, 2011; Stevens & Schaller, 2011). Possible pathways for these outcomes might be that families without work are most likely to have more difficulties in making ends meet and paying for school related expenses (Barnes, 2012; Coelli, 2011) and parents perceiving a low sense of efficacy dealing with these financial constraints may become stressed and less nurturing (Christoffersen, 2000) causing changes in family connectedness and adolescents' developmental outcomes (Conger *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, it is known that adolescents' family satisfaction and subsequent feelings of self-worth are fundamental determinant of adolescents' intentions to continue education (WHO, 2012). In addition, it is likely to be true that family economic constraints in the case of job loss may push the adolescent to feel

**Table 1. Results of Chi-square Test and Descriptive Statistics for Adolescents Future Expectations by Parental Employment Status**

Future Expectations		Both Parents Employed		$\chi^2$	df
		YES	NO		
Setting up goals and plans for the future N=2894	Never/rarely/ sometimes	503	239	7.519**	1
		24.2%	29.2%		
	(-2.7)	(2.7)			
	Often/always	1572	580		
		75.8%	70.8%	(2.7)	(-2.7)
Think about completing high school/professional education N=2913	Never/rarely/ sometimes	586	267	4.787*	1
		28.1%	32.2%		
	(-2.2)	(2.2)			
	Often/always	1498	562		
		71.9%	67.8%	(2.2)	(-2.2)
Aspire to go on to university/further education upon leaving high school N=2926	Never/rarely/ sometimes	498	278	29.198***	1
		23.7%	33.5%		
	(-5.4)	(5.4)			
	Often/always	1599	551		
		76.3%	66.5%	(5.4)	(-5.4)

Note. \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

**Table 2. ANOVA results for Life Satisfaction by groups of future aspiration and educational expectations**

		Life Satisfaction			
		M	SD	F	p
Setting up goals and plans for the future	Never/rarely/ sometimes	6.85	1.83	53.270	.000
	Often/always	7.36	1.71		
Think about completing high school /professional education	Never/rarely/ sometimes	7.01	1.82	18.707	.000
	Often/always	7.31	1.72		
Aspire to go on to university/ further education upon leaving high school	Never/rarely/ sometimes	6.97	1.82	23.507	.000
	Often/always	7.31	1.73		

compelled to work and leave school in order to contribute to family revenue (McCoy & Smyth, 2005). During this particular economic recession period, young people failing to pursue education are exceptionally vulnerable to unemployment because overall jobs are less due to weakening labour market conditions and also because young people have low skills and poor work experience. Youth unemployment has been demonstrated to be far more sensitive to economic shocks than adult unemployment (ILO, 2008). In Europe, youth unemployment reached record highs (28.2%), increasing twice the pre-recession level in countries facing substantial economic instability (Croatia, Greece, Portugal and Spain) (European Commission, 2013). In 2012, the unemployment rate for youth below 25 years old in Portugal reached 18.8% (INE, 2014).

Youth unemployment rise is accompanied by significant increases in the NEETs rate - 'not in employment, education or training'. The most recent data shows that Portuguese NEET rate below 25 years old ranges from 10%-14% (Mascherini, Salvatore, Meierkord, & Jungblut, 2012). Longitudinal data has revealed that falling into NEET status is significantly associated with growing up with parental unemployment (Barnes, 2012). This brings rough but alarming evidence of possible intergenerational transmission of inactivity. Missed work opportunities and inactivity in early life has long lasting consequences (Helgesson *et al.*, 2013; OECD, 2010) and can limit potential human capital (World Bank, 2006). Some outcomes for the NEET group have been described in literature, although we must consider its heterogeneity: disengagement from life and society; mental health problems; drug and substance abuse; are more likely to commit crimes; less life expectancy (Arnold & Baker, 2012). Moreover risking having a "lost generation" can pose great societal and economic demands for countries. This study results indicated statistically significant differences in life-satisfaction between groups of frequency by future and educational aspirations.

Setting up goals and future plans and strongly aspiring to continue studying were linked to higher life-satisfaction compared to others. Already available evidence indicated that adolescents' low life-satisfaction is related to their low engagement at school (e.g. cognitive engagement) and further lifelong learning experiences (Lewis *et al.*, 2011). In addition to this possible risk, it should not be forgotten that the majority of Portuguese adolescents already do not perceive their school performance to be very good, placing Portugal at the bottom for positive self-perception of school performance compared to 52 countries (WHO, 2012). A major limitation is that the design of this study is cross-sectional using one point of time only. Therefore, despite the possible hypothesis the pathway through which parental non-employment may reduce the adolescents' future and educational aspirations and how this is related to low life-satisfaction is yet to be completely elucidated. Moreover, this study did not have the opportunity to test the causal relationship between parental unemployment and adolescents' expectations. Future research which includes national data and covers the socioeconomic status of the sample and the level of education of the parents is recommended. Other important determinants to further study are the effects of duration of parental non-employment and the quality of relationship between family members impacting on

adolescents' well-being. Regardless of these limitations the fact that it is a national representative study in which social-economic situations were not yet analysed in relation to future and educational expectations, in association with the present socio-historical period of recession, makes this an important study to highlight the need to research possible intergenerational effects of family unemployment.

## Conclusion

The current study gives a rough estimation that parental employment status is associated with future expectations and educational aspirations of adolescents. The evidence is relevant given the actual socioeconomic context of Portugal (with an unemployment rate of 16%) and can be useful to acknowledge the need to support adolescents' with non-employed parents to better cope with the situation, and to prevent early school drop-outs that are known to negatively impact health, social and economical outcomes of individuals and society. In Portugal educational attainment remains a challenge and children with low socioeconomic status are unlikely to attain high levels of education. The recession may increase the extent of inequality in access to education which in addition to students' low future and educational expectations may represent a lost opportunity for them to prosper and escape from exclusion and deprivation.

In a conference report, UNICEF (2009) appealed that countries must "make sure that children, the most vulnerable members of society, are not asked to bear the burden of a crisis they did not create." p.2. School-age is when adult life potential is set. Taking action at this age may improve the attainment of sustained results, potentially lasting to adult life, in health and economic growth. This is likely to reduce health and social demands by future excluded and ill-adults. Thus, enhanced efforts to encourage dropout prevention programmes and the implementation of strategies to promote students' ambition, attainment and achievement especially for those at greater risk – from families affected by unemployment and economic deprivation – are strongly recommended.

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