

## **Don't worry, (s)he's an adult! Adult children's unemployment and parental depressive symptoms.**

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### **Introduction**

Parents invest a lot of time and resources in raising children (Haider & McGarry, 2018; Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013), which to a large degree reflects how concerned parents are about offering their children the best possible start in working life (Gauthier & de Jong, 2021). However, little is known about the impact of labor market experiences of adult children on parental mental health (Fingerman et al., 2020), and the few existing studies on related topics provide mixed results. Albertini and Piccitto (2022) found that children's unemployment had a small, albeit statistically significant, negative effect on mothers' mental wellbeing, whereas the effects on fathers' distress was negligible. Torres et al. (2021) did not find any significant effect of adult children's unemployment on their parents' cognitive decline. Among studies on intermittent factors mediating the effects of adult children's unemployment on parental wellbeing, some have shown that unemployment makes adult-child-parent relations worse (Hammersmith, 2018), whereas others do not confirm such effects (Pillemer & Sutor, 2002).

Taking the "linked lives" principle (Elder et al., 2003) as a point of departure, adult children's unemployment is conceptualized as adverse experiences that may be detrimental not only to young adults who are directly exposed to these negative life course events but also to their parents. We explore the potential dimensions of heterogeneity in how parental depressive symptoms are related to adult children's unemployment. Building on previous research on gender differences in how adverse life course events of significant others affect mental health (Simon, 2014), we consider parents' and children's gender as a potential moderator. Drawing on theories linking family size and birth order with parental investments (Steelman et al., 2002), we also pay special attention to potentially diverging influences of adult children's unemployment according to both birth order and the number of siblings.

This paper adds to the small but growing literature on adverse life course events in adult children's lives and parental mental health. It offers new insights on the crossover effects of unemployment on mental health from younger generation to the older one. Furthermore, in this study we show how the strength of the association between adult children's unemployment and mental health of mothers and fathers depends on the number of children and the position of a child within a sibling group. This question is particularly relevant in light of shrinking family sizes making older adults dependent on support from a reduced number of close relatives. Finally, whereas previous research linking adult children's unemployment and parental mental health has been restricted to specific national contexts, the results from this study are generalizable for Europe.

### **Data and Methods**

The analysis used cross-sectional data from the sixth wave of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). The fieldwork of the sixth wave of SHARE was conducted in 2015 across 17 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland). From the original sample of the sixth wave ( $N = 67,196$ ), a subsample was selected, uniquely composed of respondents aged 50 and over who declared to have at least one child within the age range between 18 and 65 years ( $N = 56,456$ ; 84% of the total sample). Finally, we restricted our analysis to parents with up to three children because the subsamples of respondents with 4 or

more children were too small (leaving us with 87% of all parents). Our final analytical sample was 46,687 respondents with complete information for all variables included in the analysis.

### *Variables*

The mental health condition of parents in our analysis was measured using the EURO-D Scale. SHARE survey includes a final 12-item questionnaire in its section about mental health. The addition of all the answers to these 12 items declared by each respondent resulted in a final scale ranging from 0 (not depressed) to 12 (very depressed), which is our final dependent variable.

The labor market status of children was categorized into three groups: employed (full and part-time, self-employed, and working for own family); unemployed; and inactive (in vocational training or education, in retirement, permanently sick or disabled, looking after a home or family, and other situations). The gender of each child is interacted with the employment status of the child in order to account for possible gender differences in the influence on parents' mental health. The gender of parents and the birth order of children are also key moderating variables in our analysis.

All the models are controlled for characteristics of both parents and all children. When estimating the key effects of interest, we only adjusted for variables that were assumed to affect the adult child's risks of becoming unemployed as well as parental depressive symptoms in order to avoid any overcontrol bias (Elwert & Winship 2014). Hence, variables that may lie on the theoretically implied causal path from children's unemployment to depressive symptoms such as the number of grandchildren or own labour market status were intentionally not controlled for. In the case of parents, the control variables are educational attainment, age, marital status, international migration background, and country of residence. In the case of children, we included their educational attainment, marital status, gender, and age. As parental characteristics which could condition the employment status of children, marital status and international migration background were included.

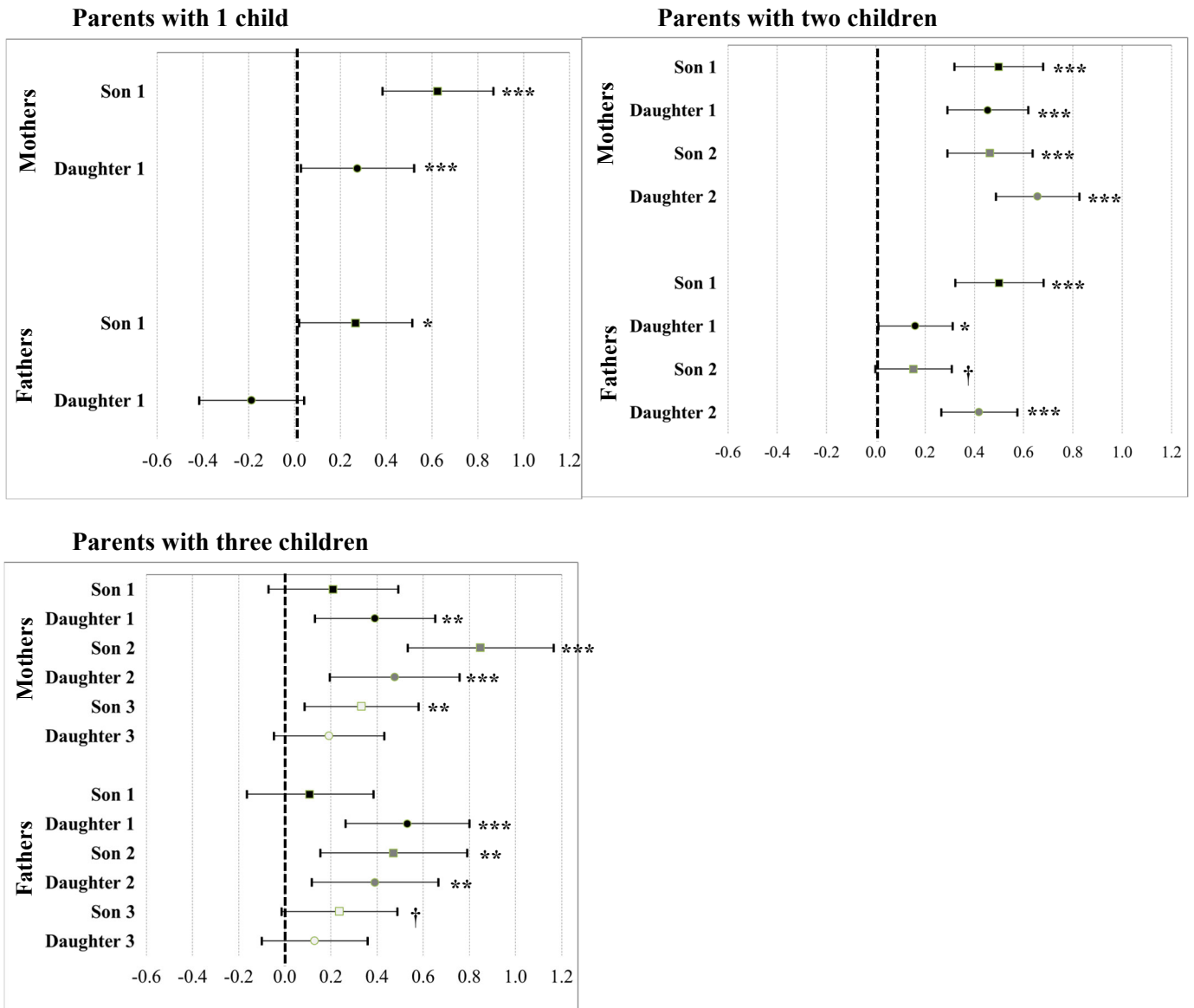
### *Method*

This study applies general structural equation modeling (GSEM). This method permits to model complex paths in the relationship between multiple exposures and outcomes by solving equation systems (Tarka, 2018). Many parents have more than one child, and each child's unemployment may be relevant for parental health. GSEM allows modeling the specific characteristics of all children at the same time by a system of different equations interrelated with each other, so that when we estimate the effect of one child's unemployment, other siblings' labor market experiences are controlled for. Second, the different equations in the system can be modeled using different family probability distributions (Bowen & Guo, 2011). In our case, the equations in the system have two different dependent variables: Mental health of parents (count of symptoms) and labor market status (nominal categorical variable) for each child. Consequently, we combine Poisson and Multinomial regression models in our equation system. Third, GSEM provides an effective way to deal with multicollinearity (Rahman et al., 2015), which is particularly appropriate for parents with more than one child as characteristics between siblings might be similar as they share the same socioeconomic background.

### **Preliminary Results**

We present the results of our multivariate models by plotting the Average Marginal Effects (AME) of unemployment of children on parental mental health (Figure 1). AME represent the difference between predicted mental health of a parent with an employed and an unemployed child according to the gender and birth order of a focal child.

**Figure 1. Effects of unemployment on depressive symptoms among parents according to number of children (Average Marginal Effects).**



Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; †  $p < 0.1$

Our results confirm the negative association between adult children's unemployment and the mental health of their parents. The crossover effects presented in this study are found for both mothers and fathers. Contrary to previous research on the gendered nature of links between parents and children, the mother–daughter dyads show no evidence of stronger detrimental effects of unemployment on mental health compared to other types of parent–child dyads.

We do not find stronger associations between adult children's unemployment and parental mental health among firstborn children. This contradicts arguments about the primacy of firstborn children when it comes to parental investments and expectations (Gauthier & de Jong, 2021). Whereas our results confirm an association between the birth order and the risk of unemployment as implied in previous research (Steelman et al., 2002), the relationship between adult children's unemployment and parental mental health does not seem to be moderated in any systematic way by parity. This would go against the idea that the greater dedication of resources and greater expectations from the first children, regardless of their gender, implies greater disappointment when they are unemployed.

In fact, perhaps it is precisely the fact of having invested more in these first children that could reduce the negative effects on parents as they perceive that their firstborn children are more likely to find a new job relatively quickly.

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