

Productive Social Activities and Well-Being in Mid-Old Age

Abstract

Research shows that productive social engagement is associated with better health in later life. The purpose of this study is to test whether paid job and unpaid volunteer work reduce the rate of health decline in middle and later life. Using four waves of the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) collected from a sample of 5,906 individuals aged 55 and over, we estimated a series of individual growth curve models to assess the effects of productive activities on health trajectories. The central finding is that both paid work and volunteering have an independent promoting effect on self-rated health and psychological well-being. Specifically, both duration and diversity of engagement are associated with a slower rate of health deterioration across waves. However, in terms of intensity, only a modest amount of productive activities is sufficient for a health benefit. These findings suggest the optimal activity pattern for older adults based on activity and adaptation theory. The results are net effects after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and predictors for poor health at baseline.