Work and Family Experiences Across the Life Course:
Implications for Well-Being at Older Ages

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Question(s)

- Do work and family experiences across the life course shape well-being at older ages?
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• If so, how?
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  • What is it about life experiences that matters?
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  • If so, how?
  • What is it about life experiences that matters?
  • Do these relationships differ for men and women?
Economic well-being & health at older ages: Relationships with life histories

Individual characteristics at older ages

Economic well-being/health at older ages
Economic well-being & health at older ages: Relationships with life histories

Individual characteristics at older ages

Work and family trajectories

Economic well-being/health at older ages
Economic well-being & health at older ages: Relationships with life histories

- Work and family trajectories
- Individual characteristics at older ages
- Economic well-being/health at older ages

?
Stated differently

Does it matter how you got to where you are at age 65?
Mortality: Early academic performance and life histories

High school rank → Mortality
Mortality: Early academic performance and life histories

High school rank → Stable and/or successful work & family lives → Mortality

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Stated differently

Does adolescent academic performance promote longevity by helping to put people on more stable (or successful) life paths?
Background – Why do we care?

• Aging of baby boomers
• Importance of health & well-being at older ages
• Massive restructuring of the life course
  • Family instability
  • Changing employment circumstances
  • Changing roles for women
• What is coming?
Practical/scientific reasons to care

• What kinds of data should we be collecting?
• Major differences in cost and time
Wisconsin Longitudinal Study

- WI HS class of 1957
- Interviewed at ages 18, 35, 54, 65, and 72
- Full employment histories from age 35
- Full marriage histories from age 18
- Multiple measures of economic well-being
- Multiple measures of health
- Information on mortality
Trajectories of life experience

• How to summarize large amounts of life history data?
• “Common sense”?
• Statistical methods?
Trajectories of Women’s Employment Status through Age 54

52% Probability of being employed

“Consistently Employed”
Trajectories of Women’s Employment Status through Age 54

- 52% probability of being employed
- 13% "Late Entry; Often Higher SES"
Trajectories of Women’s Employment Status through Age 54

- Probability of being employed

- Age

- "Never Employed; Also Often Higher SES"
Trajectories of Women’s Employment Status through Age 54

- Probability of being employed
- Age

- 52% at age 45
- 13% at age 42
- 12% at age 48
- 11% at age 51

“Persistent Instability; Late Entry”
Trajectories of Women’s Employment Status through Age 54

- Probability of being employed: 52%
- "Persistent Instability; Early Exit"
Trajectories of Women’s Employment Status through Age 54

Probability of being employed

Age
General finding

Trajectories matter!
Specific findings 1 (EWB)

Longer exposure to low-paying jobs, jobs that don’t offer private pension plans, multiple marriages, never marrying

Lower levels of economic well-being at age 65

Unstable attachment to the labor force (for men, but not for women)

Lower levels of economic well-being at age 65

Remember: This is net of work, family, health, etc. characteristics at age 65
Specific findings 2 (Health)

Longer exposure to low-paying jobs, jobs that do not provide health insurance

↓
Worse health at age 65

Never marrying (for women, but not for men)

↓
Worse health at age 65

Little evidence that statistically sophisticated trajectory measures are more informative than simple measures
Specific findings 3 (Mortality)

High school rank → Mortality
Specific findings 3 (Mortality)

- High school rank
- Stable and/or successful work & family lives
- Mortality

+ (+)
- (-)
Specific findings 3 (Mortality)

Stable and/or successful work & family lives + education

High school rank

Mortality
Summary

• Life trajectories matter
  • Stable employment and marriage associated with better health, economic well-being, survival
  • The path taken to acquire later-life predictors of well-being matters
  • Early-life characteristics help to set us on paths that are related to well-being

• Rich life history data are (sometimes) more informative than simple measures
  • It is not sufficient to just ask people to recollect their lives

• Patterns are largely similar for men and women
Looking forward

• Life histories as mechanisms of later-life stratification
  • “Successful” lives → Successful aging?
• Implications of changes in women’s lives
• Racial/ethnic differences?