

# Associations Between Time Spent on Paid, Unpaid Work, and Well-being

Jonathan Morris, Stacey M. Schaefer  
 Institute on Aging, University of Wisconsin-Madison



## Project Aims:

Exploratory analyses examined whether time spent on work (both paid and unpaid) was associated with physical and emotional well-being using data from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study.

## Background

- Are physical health, emotional well-being, and time spent on work (both paid and unpaid) related?
- Well-being may enable people to spend time working:
  - Poor physical health makes physically demanding work challenging.<sup>1</sup>
  - Better emotional health is associated with greater work involvement and performance.<sup>1</sup>
  - Greater sense of purpose may support meaning derived from paid and unpaid work.<sup>2</sup>
- More time working may support well-being: 1, 2, 3
  - Social interaction.
  - Cognitive stimulation.
  - Physical activity.

## Methods

**Participants:** N ~ 900 | 42% Male | 20% BIPOC  
 Ages: 34-84 years (avg: 54 ± 11.5 years).  
 Age groupings: (a) 49 and under, (b) 50-65, (c) 66 and over

**Paid and Unpaid Work:** Over 8 days, participants reported time spent on:  
 1. Paid Employment.  
 2. Volunteering.  
 3. Chores

**Inflammation:** Blood levels of inflammatory marker interleukin-6 (IL-6). High IL-6 can indicate infection, chronic conditions, chronic stress, and immune dysregulation.<sup>4</sup> Chronic inflammation can lead to diminished physical or cognitive health.<sup>4</sup>

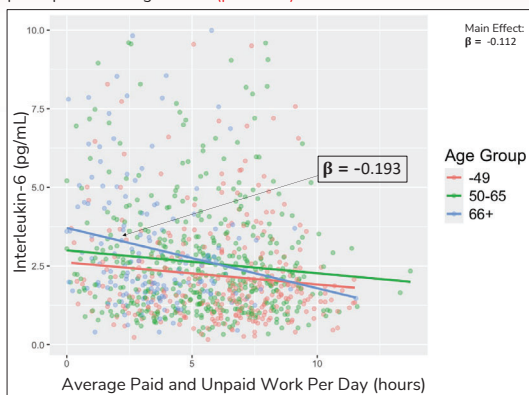
**Purpose in Life:** Self-reported sense of purpose and meaning in life.<sup>5</sup> Subscale of Ryff's Psychological Well-being scale.

**Positive Affect and Life Satisfaction:** Amount of positive emotion experienced over the past week.<sup>6</sup> Life satisfaction is a persons' self-evaluated contentedness with their life.

**Negative Affect:** Amount of negative emotion experienced over the previous week.<sup>5</sup>

## Results (all analyses controlled for race, sex, and educational status)

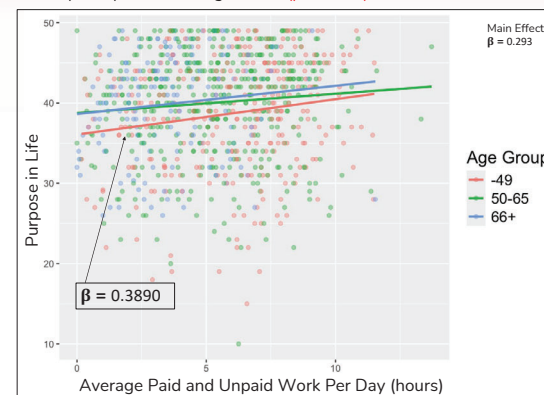
**Fig. 1:** More time spent working associated with lower inflammation in participants over age 65. \*\* (p < 0.004)



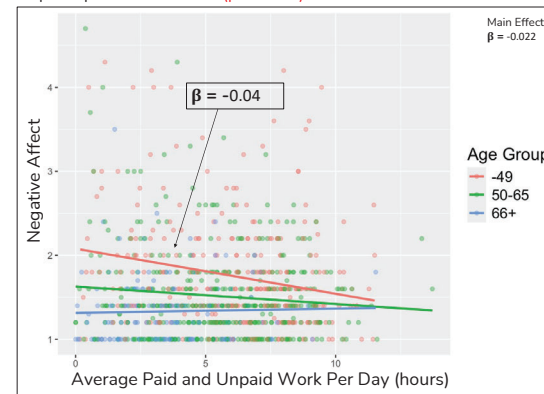
**Fig. 3:** More time spent working associated with greater positive affect and life satisfaction in participants under age 50. \*\* (p < 0.001)



**Fig. 2:** More time spent working associated with greater purpose in life in participants under age 50. \*\* (p < 0.009)



**Fig. 4:** Greater time spent working associated with lower negative affect in participants under age 50. \*\* (p = 0.003)



## Discussion

- Higher well-being associated with more time working overall.
- Under age 50: More time spent on paid and unpaid work associated with greater positive affect, life satisfaction, purpose in life and lower negative affect.
- Suggests that better well-being is most strongly associated with greater time spent on work in individuals under age 50.
- Future research needed to understand drivers (e.g., job satisfaction, employment status).
- Over age 65: Lower inflammation associated with greater time spent on paid and unpaid work. Future research will address bi-directionality.
- Lower inflammation may support better physical health and enable individuals to spend more time on work.
- Activity and social interaction through work may lead to lower chronic inflammation.
- Implications for public health and policy as populations age and retirement patterns evolve.
- Future research will examine whether negative emotion regulation enables individuals to maintain work engagement later in life.

## References

1. Calvo, Esteban. Does Working Longer Make People Healthier and Happier? (February 2006). Issue Brief WOB #2. Center for Retirement Research at Boston College.
2. Matz-Costa, C., Besen, E., Boone James, J., & Pitt-Catsopeous, M. (2014). Impact of Multiple Levels of Productive Activity on PWB. *The Gerontologist*, 54(2), 277.
3. Lee, Y. (2019). The Impact of Productive & Leisure Activities on Cognitive Health in Later Life (Order No. 13864213). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
4. Fuster, J. J., & Walsh, K. (2014). The good, the bad, and the ugly of interleukin-6 signaling. *The EMBO journal*, 33(13), 1425-1427. <https://doi.org/10.15252/emboj.201498855>
5. Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. (1996). PWB: meaning, measurement, and implications for psychotherapy research. *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*, 65(1), 14-23.
6. Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: the PANAS scales. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 54(6).

This project was funded by the Sophomore Research Fellowship from UW-Madison and the MIDUS study.