

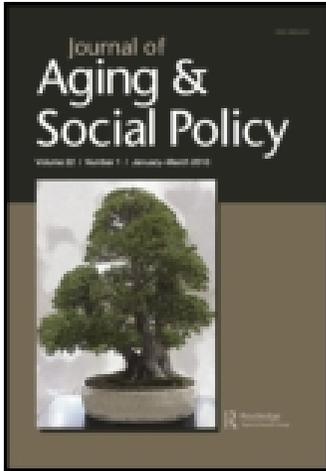
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Productive Engagement Among Older Americans: Prevalence, Patterns, and Implications for Public Policy

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GENERAL ARTICLES

Productive Engagement Among Older Americans: Prevalence, Patterns, and Implications for Public Policy

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ABSTRACT. This study estimates the prevalence of productive engagement among adults aged 60 and over residing in the United States over a nine-year period. We analyze three waves of data from the Americans' Changing Lives Study, which allows the findings to describe the non-institutionalized older American population. Focusing upon five activities—formal paid employment, irregular paid work, unpaid volunteerism, caregiving, and informal assistance to others—we identify changes in the engagement

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rates, examine the extent to which engagement occurs through single or multiple concurrent activities, and document intra-individual patterns of engagement within and across forms of productive activity, including the continuity, initiation, and cessation of involvement. The findings reveal that late-life productive engagement is widespread, with the majority of older individuals involved in multiple forms of activity concurrently. Non-market-based activities such as caregiving, informal assistance, and volunteering are most prevalent. Initiation and cessation of activities are common and yield more complex patterns and lower rates of non-participation than are revealed in cross-sectional analyses. Time spent in productive engagement is highly variable and exhibits an overall decline across time. We conclude by highlighting policy strategies to increase the availability and quality of opportunities for productive engagement and promote planning for engagement in late life.

KEYWORDS. Productive engagement, longitudinal analyses, employment, caregiving, voluntarism, civic engagement, public policy

INTRODUCTION

Policy discussions generally highlight the projected costs to care for our graying American population. This is an appropriate concern and should stimulate proactive public and private action. But aging does not universally and inevitably impel individuals to become net consumers rather than contributors of valued social and economic resources. This study, motivated by the productive aging perspective, offers an empirical counterpoint to the stereotype of the older adult as a “net resource sink” by documenting the prevalence and patterns of engagement in paid and unpaid productive activities among older Americans. These activities are important to public policy decisions for three reasons: They generate important, although commonly overlooked, returns to the commonwealth; they positively impact late-life health and functioning; and they can be influenced by policy mechanisms.

Social and technological advances have created new expectations for healthy longevity. The compression of morbidity allows individuals to anticipate an extended, vital, and active old age. As the adage suggests, this “new aging” raises a challenge: How might we add life and meaning to these added years? While there is no single, compelling vision for how to fulfill this promise, many adults approaching late life express the desire

to remain involved in socially valued activities such as paid employment and volunteerism (Peter D. Hart & Associates, 1999, 2002). However, there is a lag between these changing preferences and the availability of appropriate, attractive opportunities for engagement (Riley, 1998). Tension will likely grow between available opportunities and the wishes of an increasingly active, engaged, and vital older population as the baby boom generation negotiates the transition away from full-time labor force participation.

Why does this mismatch matter? Advocates such as Robert Butler (1975) and Betty Friedan (1993) argue that age is associated incorrectly with diminished capabilities and dwindling contributions, and that these inaccurate perceptions are detrimental to both older adults and the broader society. Unfortunately, early gerontological scholarship embraced and reinforced these assumptions. Disengagement Theory asserted that withdrawal from important social roles and relationships was a mutually undertaken, mutually beneficial process for the aging individual and society (Cummings & Henry, 1961). This theory fell out of favor as contrary evidence and methodological critiques surfaced (Achenbaum & Bengtson, 1994). Activity Theory emerged as a countervailing view (Whaples & Longino, 1996); however, its limited attention to the meaningfulness of the activity performed led to criticism that being busy—while normatively valued—may not be enough (Ekerdt, 1986). Continuity Theory addresses this concern by emphasizing that not all activity is equally important to well-being, and focuses attention on sustained involvement of activity patterns established by mid-life (Atchley, 1989). More recently, new gerontological perspectives such as Successful and Productive Aging have emerged to stress further the value of engagement in both the individual and broader society. The Productive Aging perspective, in particular, informs policy-relevant research by calling attention to larger social structures that influence behavior in late life (e.g., Bass, Caro, & Chen, 1993; Butler, Oberlink, & Schechter, 1990; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001).

Prior Research

Research on productivity in later life has advanced unevenly. This is, in part, due to the lack of consensus about which activities are productive and the absence of a solid theoretical foundation to unite this knowledge development (Sherraden, Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Rozario, 2001). More scholarship has accumulated on older adults' labor force participation than their efforts as volunteers or caregivers, and some forms of productivity have received even less attention (i.e., informal, unpaid

assistance to others). Furthermore, empirical research generally focuses upon single activities. The current study examines how individuals coordinate their time and energy across multiple activities to assess more accurately overall engagement.

Some research has examined engagement in this way. For example, Bass and colleagues (1993) determined that nearly three quarters of all individuals over the age of 55 were involved in at least one form of productive activity, and almost 40% were involved in two or more. Glass and colleagues (1999) analyzed 13 years of EPESE data to find a positive connection between mortality and engagement in productive activities among 2,817 adults aged 65 and older. Zedlewski and Schaner (2005) used the 2002 wave of the Health and Retirement Study to determine that 52.4% of adults aged 55 and over performed a combination of two or more activities, including paid work, caregiving, volunteering, and informal volunteering, while committing an average of 1,266 hours annually to such efforts. Another quarter reported only a single activity and approximately one fifth indicated no involvement.

Given the prevalence of concurrent involvement in multiple productive activities, it is surprising that little research has tracked patterns of engagement over time. Glass et al. (1995) analyzed data from the MacArthur Successful Aging study to explain changes in productive engagement among 1,192 adults aged 70–79 over a 3-year period. They included housework, yard work, child care, paid work, and volunteering, and compared respondents with high versus moderate-low functional status. Domestic activities (house and yard work) were most prevalent in both groups, followed by volunteerism, childcare, and paid work. High functioning individuals were significantly more likely to report involvement in paid work and volunteerism. They also found that only a small proportion of respondents either significantly increased (12.7%) or decreased (15.1%) their overall hours of activity as measured by a shift in quartile rank between waves. Paid work, child care, and volunteering showed the most stable rates of involvement with approximately 25–30% raising or lowering their hours in house and yard work.

Burr and his colleagues (2005) highlighted late-life patterns of productive role patterns using the 1986 and 1989 waves of the Americans' Changing Lives Study. They show that formal volunteer activity is more prevalent among older caregivers than non-caregivers, and that these individuals also contribute more hours of volunteering on average. Their additional and as-yet unpublished work extends these analyses to include a greater number of productive activities (Burr, Caro, & Mutchler, 2003).

They find significant rates of activity initiation and cessation between these two waves. Age-graded differences in transitions yield a net increase in activity number for the youngest-old (50–54) and a decrease for those aged 70 and over. Level of activity, as measured by annual hours, reveals similar age-related change; however, intra-individual patterns of engagement account largely for these differences. Using latent class analysis, they identify the most prevalent patterns for three age groups: under 50, 50–64, and 65 and older. A quarter of the oldest group performed “many activities (4+), high volume (above the mean level in two or more activities).” The second most common pattern was “many activities, specialized type” in which the individual reported annual hours above the mean in only one activity type.

Study Aims

Several aims are pursued in this study. First, we define productive activity as that producing goods or services, whether paid or not, and seek to document the prevalence of various forms of productive activity among older Americans through cross-sectional analyses of panel data. This analysis highlights trends in the engagement rates for discrete activities over time. Second, we examine the extent to which productive engagement occurs through involvement in single or multiple concurrent activities and determine which combinations are most prevalent. Third, we identify intra-individual patterns of engagement over time, within and across activities, to determine whether continuity of engagement is more common than initiation and cessation. We conclude with implications for public policy.

METHODS

Sample

The Americans’ Changing Lives Study (ACL) is a multistage stratified national probability sample of 3,617 non-institutionalized adults aged 25 and over in the United States. Study participants were interviewed face-to-face initially in 1986, with follow-up interviews conducted in 1989 and 1994. The sample is restricted to African American and White individuals at least 60 years of age at first interview ($n = 1,644$). All analyses are weighted to correct for oversampling of African Americans and adults over age 60. Sample characteristics are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Sample sociodemographic characteristics

	Wave		
	1	2	3
<i>n</i>	1,644	1,511	1,195
Age (<i>M</i>)	70.4 (7.4)	72.3 (7.2)	76.2 (6.6)
White (%)	70	70	72
Female (%)	67	68	72
Married (%)	51	52	58
Education (<i>M</i> years)	10.3 (3.7)	10.4 (2.5)	10.7 (3.5)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

Cumulative attrition due to death was 10.1% ($n=133$) in 1989 and 33.2% ($n=449$) in 1994, reducing the number of respondents for whom data were or should have been collected to 1,511 and 1,195 (waves 2 and 3, respectively). Non-response among living participants resulted in item and case-level (monotonic) missing data. Overall, the amount of missing data was approximately 10%. To reduce the likelihood of type I and II errors and preserve the representativeness of the sample, we imputed these missing values in SAS 8.1 using multiple random imputation (Proc MI). Multiple random imputation is a preferred method for addressing missing data under most circumstances and has been shown to yield valid point estimates and standard errors estimates with longitudinal data (e.g., Twisk & de Vente, 2002). We generated five independent implicates of completed data under an inclusive imputation strategy that used information from approximately 100 auxiliary variables to improve the efficiency of our analyses (Collins, Schafer, & Kam, 2001). Multiply imputed data were analyzed appropriately with complete-data methods, including point estimation as done here (Allison, 2001; Shafer, 2000). We repeated all analyses on each implicate and pooled the results as prescribed by Rubin (1996).

Engagement Variables

The ACL includes five activities at all waves that fit our conceptual definition of “productive”: formal paid employment, irregular paid work, volunteerism, caregiving, and informal social assistance. *Paid employment* indicates the respondent spent time in a formal, paid position in the previous year. *Irregular work* status reflects whether the respondent

received pay “to do work or chores” for someone else that was not part of his/her regular job during the previous 12 months. *Volunteers* performed unpaid work for a church, educational organization, political group or labor union, senior citizen group or related organization, or “any other national or local organization, including the United Fund, hospitals and the like.” *Caregivers* provided “care to a friend or relative who has trouble taking care of themselves because of physical or mental illness, disability, or for some other reason.” The respondent may have provided care directly, arranged for care provision, or both. *Informal social assistance* refers to efforts to “provide transportation to, shop for, or run errands for others; help with housework, or with the upkeep of others’ homes, cars or ‘other things’; provide childcare without pay, or do any other things to help.” Table 2 shows the engagement rate for each activity type.

We created several composite measures. *Engagement* is a dichotomous measure of activity at each wave. Respondents reporting at least one productive activity during the past 12 months were coded (1); those who did not were coded (0). *Total number of activities* is a count of activities reported at each wave. *Hours of engagement* over the previous year were also collected for each activity. With the exception of paid employment, which was recorded as a continuous measure, respondents indicated their level of engagement categorically: (1) less than 20 hours, (2) 20 to 39 hours, (3) 40 to 79 hours, (4) 80 to 159 hours, and (5) 160 hours or more. We used midpoint values for the categorical measures with the highest category recoded to 200 hours. Univariate distributions for these measures are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 2. Percentage of respondents engaged in each productive activity, by wave

	Wave		
	1	2	3
Formal employment	22.6	16.8	11.8
Irregular employment	3.5	5.9	5.8
Volunteering	34.6	37.1	38.9
Caregiving	16.4	18.3	22.3
Informal assistance	61.1	65.9	61.3

TABLE 3. Mean hours of engagement per activity during the previous 12 months, by wave

	Wave		
	1	2	3
Formal employment	1,523.9 (961.2)	1,360.5 (1,064.7)	996.9 (1,341.0)
Irregular employment	53.7 (58.4)	55.4 (54.8)	48.9 (61.2)
Volunteering	71.1 (70.0)	78.9 (72.4)	67.7 (72.2)
Caregiving	124.4 (79.9)	112.5 (80.5)	97.0 (84.0)
Informal assistance	68.0 (67.6)	71.1 (69.9)	49.6 (55.7)
Total hours, engaged only	644.3 (907.6)	429.4 (755.4)	256.5 (632.7)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

RESULTS

Engagement Rates by Wave

Engagement status, that is, involvement in at least one activity during the prior year, is consistent across the three waves. At the initial wave, 73.6% reported engagement in at least one productive activity, while 44.7% performed multiple activities (see Table 4). The mean number of activities was 1.46 ($SD = .83$). These figures remained stable in subsequent years. At wave 2, 73.5% were engaged in 1.47 activities ($SD = .84$);

TABLE 4. Number of productive activities reported, by wave

Number of Roles	Wave		
	1	2	3
0	26.4	26.5	26.0
1	29.0	29.0	30.5
2	27.9	28.6	27.9
3	13.8	12.1	12.7
4	2.8	3.4	2.7
5	0.2	0.3	0.3
Mean role number	1.46 (.83)	1.47 (.84)	1.44 (.82)
Mean number, engaged only	1.94 (.88)	1.88 (.88)	1.85 (.86)

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses.

44.5% reported multiple activities. At wave 3, 74% reported some activity ($M = 1.44$, $SD = .82$) with 43.5% performing multiple activities.

Informal social assistance was the most prevalent productive activity at each wave with engagement rates between 63 and 67% (Table 2). Irregular employment was reported least (4–6%). Formal employment rates dropped sharply from 22.6 to 11.1%. Caregiving and volunteerism were more prevalent at later waves. Over 16% of the sample reported caregiving activity at wave 1, increasing to nearly one quarter by wave 3. Volunteering rose from 34.6 to 38.9% over the same period.

Level of Engagement

Time committed to productive activities varied more than activity number (see Table 3). In 1986, older Americans spent an average of 589.1 hours ($SD = 683.9$) in productive activities. These figures dropped to 212.6 ($SD = 465.4$) and 280.2 ($SD = 533.7$) at waves 2 and 3. Mean hours declined while variability grew for all activities from wave 1 to wave 3 except for informal social assistance.

Multiple Productive Activities

Concurrent engagement in multiple activities is common (see Table 4). At each wave, approximately 45% of the sample reported performing two or more activities during the previous year. To better understand these intra-wave patterns, we computed the proportion of respondents indicating involvement in each pair of activities (see Table 5) and their correlations (not shown).

TABLE 5. Concurrent forms of productive engagement, percent of sample reporting both activities by wave

	Wave 1				Wave 2				Wave 3			
	Emp	Irreg	Vol	Care	Emp	Irreg	Vol	Care	Emp	Irreg	Vol	Care
Irreg	1.9				2.2				1.5			
Vol	12.5	2.3			8.4	3.0			5.0	3.3		
Care	5.2	0.7	9.2		3.7	1.4	8.0		2.5	1.5	12.0	
Inform	20.2	3.4	33.3	14.1	13.2	4.5	30.3	14.5	8.0	4.2	30.2	17.1

Note: Emp = Employment, Irreg=Irregular employment, Vol = Volunteering, Care = Caregiving, Inform = Informal assistance.

The strongest association is between informal social assistance and formal volunteerism; nearly one third of the sample reported concurrent involvement in these activities at each wave. Informal assistance also was strongly related to formal paid employment and increasingly so to caregiving. Caregiving was most commonly reported in combination with volunteering with co-occurrence rates of 8 to 12%. Compared with other activities, it exhibited low co-incidence with employment, which is not an unlikely phenomenon given the high demands associated with these activities (Scharlach, 1994).

Continuity of Engagement

We then identified continuity and discontinuity of engagement by noting when individuals sustained or ceased an activity reported at the prior wave. Table 6 presents these results for three groups of respondents: those alive at all waves ($n = 1,195$), two waves ($n = 316$), or only wave 1 ($n = 133$). The column headings use a three-character code to reflect activity patterns. We indicate engagement in a selected measure by displaying the wave number and use O to denote that it was unreported at that wave. We use X to show the individual was deceased prior to that wave.

Among those alive at every wave, eight patterns were possible (OOO, 100 . . . to . . . O23, OO3). Only 8% of this group reported no engagement at any wave (OOO), with 5% engaged only at wave 1 (100), and 6% engaged only at waves 2 and 3 (O23). Columns labeled 12X to OOX include respondents alive only at waves 1 and 2. Thus, pattern 12X indicates that 46% of these respondents were engaged at waves 1 and 2, the only waves at which they were alive. Respondents in the final two columns (1XX, OXX) were alive only at the initial interview ($n = 133$); equal proportions were engaged (49%) and non-engaged (51%).

We computed aggregate patterns of engagement allowing for respondent death by combining these pattern frequencies across the three groups. Table 7 shows these results. The first row indicates engagement status; column one reveals the proportion of respondents involved in at least one activity at all waves in which they were alive. To compute this rate, we aggregated the underlying cell frequencies from Table 6 for *engaged* in columns 123 ($n=706$), 12X ($n=145$) and 1XX ($n=65$) and divided by the total sample size ($n=1,644$). This shows that over half (56%) of the respondents were engaged at every wave in which they were alive. Similarly, rates of continuous engagement were 6.6% for formal employment, volunteering 20.9%, caregiving 4.3%, informal social assistance 43.8%,

TABLE 6. Engagement status patterns, proportion of individuals

	Alive All Waves (n=1,195)									Alive Waves 1 and 2 (n=316)			Alive Wave 1 (n=133)	
	000	100	120	020	123	103	023	003	12X	10X	O2X	OOX	1XX	OXX
Engaged	0.08	0.05	0.10	0.03	0.59	0.05	0.06	0.04	0.46	0.15	0.09	0.29	0.49	0.51
Employment	0.68	0.11	0.08	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.08	0.02	0.85	0.07	0.93
Volunteering	0.44	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.23	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.15	0.12	0.08	0.66	0.14	0.86
Caregiving	0.57	0.08	0.04	0.08	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.13	0.04	0.08	0.07	0.81	0.13	0.87
Informal assistance	0.16	0.07	0.13	0.06	0.41	0.06	0.08	0.05	0.32	0.17	0.11	0.40	0.41	0.59
Irregular employment	0.88	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.03	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.97	0.03	0.97

1, 2, 3 = engagement at wave, O = no engagement, X = dead.

TABLE 7. Aggregate engagement patterns, allowing for attrition due to death

	Engaged All Waves	Never Engaged	Initiation Rate	Cessation Rate
Engaged	56%	15%	9%	16%
Employment	7%	73%	2%	17%
Volunteering	21%	51%	10%	15%
Caregiving	4%	64%	14%	16%
Informal social assistance	39%	24%	11%	22%
Irregular employment	1%	91%	3%	5%

and less than 1% for irregular work. Conversely, the second column of Table 7 indicates that 15.4% of the panel reported no productive activity at any point during the study period. In short, productive engagement is normative and reported by 85% of the older adults in the study. This is contrasted with the cross-sectional rates of non-engagement shown in Table 4, which revealed one quarter of the entire sample reported no engagement at each wave.

Less pronounced differences are observed for specific activity types. For example, almost three quarters (73.2%) reported no formal employment as compared with 77.2%, 83.2%, and 88.2% across each wave (see Table 4). Similarly, 51.2% did not volunteer at any time; 64% were uninvolved with caregiving; 23.9% did not give informal assistance to others; and 90.5% indicated no irregular employment.

Initiation and Cessation of Engagement

Table 7 also shows two additional patterns not readily visible with cross-sectional data or analyses: initiation and cessation. Initiation occurs when a respondent first reports an activity in wave 2 or 3. This does not provide information about their engagement prior to inclusion in the study. Initiation yields higher cumulative than cross-sectional rates of engagement. Cessation refers to the discontinuation of a previously reported activity without reinitiating during the study, that is, reporting an activity at wave 1 or 2 but not at subsequent waves for reasons other than death.

Almost 10% of respondents initiated engagement of some form in later waves, yielding an aggregate population engagement rate of 84.6% as

reported earlier. Similarly, three quarters never reported paid work, but only 51% never volunteered, and less than a quarter never provided informal social assistance. Over one third did perform caregiving during some point in the study.

Older individuals do cease involvement in previously reported productive activities. Approximately 16% of individuals terminated any prior involvement at some time while still alive. Informal social assistance was most frequently discontinued (22%), followed by employment (17%), caregiving (16%), and volunteerism (15%). Rates of cessation exceeded initiation for all activities. Taken together, these figures reveal older adults change forms of engagement, which is not visible when only the mean number of activities is examined.

Exploring these patterns further, we find that among individuals not engaged in any of the five activities at wave 1 ($n = 434$), 52% maintained this state at wave 2, and 16% died prior to the second interview. The approximately remaining third ($n = 136$, 31.4%) initiated at least one productive activity, with most undertaking a single activity ($n=97$). Provision of informal assistance was the most common initiated role either with ($n=35$) or without concurrent initiation of additional roles ($n=59$). Caregiving and volunteering were less frequently begun following non-engagement: 7% and 10% of the wave 1 non-engagers, respectively, initiated these activities. The occurrence of formal employment initiation following non-engagement was very rare ($n=6$).

By wave 3, 44% of wave 1 non-engagers had died, and almost 30% reported no productive engagement. Fewer were involved in one role than at wave 2 ($n=83$). Caregiving and informal assistance remained the most frequently performed roles. Only 10% of those initiating productive activity after wave 1 sustained their engagement through wave 3 or until death. Conversely, almost 20% ceased engagement without resuming prior to wave 3 or death.

DISCUSSION

Productive Engagement is Prevalent and Variable

The purpose of this study was to estimate the prevalence and identify patterns of productive engagement among Americans aged 60 and older over a nine-year period. We analyzed nationally representative data to establish population-level trends in productive engagement. Data limitations in the

Americans' Changing Lives study, such as the gross measurement of engagement hours, make it likely that we underestimated the prevalence and full extent of productive engagement among older Americans.

The findings reveal that most older adults are actively engaged over time, and nearly half report concurrent involvement in multiple forms of productive activity. Informal assistance to friends and neighbors is most frequently reported, while irregular employment is the least common productive activity examined. Rates of formal employment show the greatest change in prevalence, falling by half over the study period. In general, the number of activities performed changes little with advancing age, but the number of hours spent in these activities declines sharply in part reflecting "blurred" transitions into new patterns of activity (Mutchler, Burr, Pienta, & Massagli, 1997). We found rates of involvement are the product of significant intra-individual change in activity over time.

Identifying patterns of initiation and cessation of activity shows that productive engagement is a complex phenomenon that can be mischaracterized by examining activity-specific engagement rates. Caregiving was initiated by 15% of older adults and eventually was performed by more than one third of older individuals. Volunteerism rates increased over time with nearly 50% of older adults reporting this activity at least once. This new engagement may represent an adaptive response to role loss as individuals seek community involvement to replace declining connections to work (Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003) or following the death of a spouse (Utz, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2002). This high composite engagement rate is important given the association of volunteer activity with mortality and well-being (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Tang, & Rozario, 2003; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999). It is notable also that the rate of irregular employment doubled over the study period, which may reflect a need among some older adults to "patch" their income, derived from pensions and savings, with small amounts of untaxed earnings. Over the three waves, 85% of individuals reported some amount of productive engagement.

Concurrent participation in multiple productive activities occurs as frequently as either non-engagement or involvement in a solitary activity. Most often, informal assistance, volunteering, and caregiving are combined with some individuals also engaged in the formal and informal labor markets. This suggests that older adults contribute generally through productive activities outside the formal market place in which time and effort are captured by measures of national income. Nonetheless, we find older Americans continue to engage most intensely in paid labor;

however, this results from the inclusion of young-old individuals in the study who are below the mean national retirement age, but also from our use of right-censored time measures for activities other than formal employment.

Focusing on Institutional Capacity

This study did not consider the reasons for the observed patterns of engagement, although identifying these factors is important. When combined with other factors such as race, gender, and class, age serves as a powerful determinant of how opportunities for productive engagement are distributed (Riley & Riley, 1994). Engagement is also regulated by social institutions that shape patterns of individual and collective action by regulating access to opportunities and sanctioning certain behaviors (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, Tang, & Thirupathy, 2003).

Institutions are affected by many forces, public policies among them. Our findings indicate that policymakers should first recognize the importance of productive engagement in the lives of older individuals. Older Americans decide where and when to direct their time and energy actively. Collectively, their human and social capital represents a tremendous resource that is squandered by the failure to adequately support, recognize, and reward productive engagement outside the formal labor market. Despite their social and estimable economic values, much less attention is given to promoting and facilitating unpaid forms of engagement. This does not lessen their importance to individuals who undertake or benefit from them. There is a striking disconnect to bridge between the older Americans' aspirations and actions and our public investments.

Policy Innovations to Promote Engagement are Needed

We now discuss broad strategies for building and leveraging institutional capacity to promote and enhance productive engagement. Three important principles should define these efforts. First, we should create opportunities, not additional obligations. Older adults should be encouraged, not required, to be engaged. Second, we should allow older adults to pursue activities they feel are meaningful and enable them to make real contributions to the lives of others. Finally, we should ensure individuals find their engagement limited only by personal willingness not by artificial barriers such as the lack of opportunity.

Reinventing Employment. The 20th Century institution of complete, permanent retirement has weakened significantly. As our findings show,

formal employment remains prevalent in wave 3 (11.8%) when the minimum age of respondents reaches 69 with a mean of 76 years. For reasons as varied as older individuals themselves, paid employment is an important late-life activity. Labor and pension policies that both created and sustained the idea of permanent withdrawal from the labor market have been radically altered over the past 30 years. Actuarial projections continue to propel a contraction of public and private programs that once fostered a normative link between leisure and late life. So tight was this association, Erkerdt (1986) noted that a new ethos had arisen around the notion of “busyness” to justify how individuals spent their time post-retirement.

A growing proportion of individuals anticipate working well into later life. Burkhauser and others (2001, 1997) have argued that more flexible employment options are needed to accommodate changing expectations and needs of our aging population. Recent evidence supports this view and reveals those approaching or attaining traditional retirement age are working longer and increasingly rely on bridge jobs to slow their transition from employment (Cahill, Giandrea, & Quinn, 2006). While expanded labor force participation among those 60 and over may not be necessary to the economic health of the nation (Schulz, 2001), it will be critical to the welfare of many individuals—particularly those in more disadvantaged groups—and desirable to many others. Critics of this perspective argue that advocating for such policies further destabilizes the social welfare supports so arduously sought and achieved during and after the New Deal (Estes, Mahakian, & Weitz, 2001). There is merit to this position; however, the likelihood is low of reinstating an extended period of publicly incentivized and subsidized absence from paid work. Instead, we should discover ways to protect the option of employment for older individuals and, where possible and desired, direct their contributions toward identified community needs.

Encouraging Civic Participation. Formal volunteerism and civic service offer avenues to affect others and communities, and promoting these forms of civic engagement among older adults is seen increasingly as a viable policy goal (Morrow-Howell & Tang, 2003). The market value of unpaid volunteer work by older Americans exceeded \$60 billion in 2002 (Johnson & Schaner, 2005) and was enhanced through non-monetizable effects such as increased socialization, community cohesion, and active engagement in public affairs (Hinterlong & Williamson, 2006–2007). Recent evaluation research shows that involving older adults can be a win-win strategy: good for individuals, good for the

community (Austin, Des Camp, Flux, McClelland, & Sieppert, 2005; Glass et al., 2004; Rebok et al., 2004). Still, current public-sector support for late-life volunteerism is inadequate, while the private sector has taken an active role in creating community-based opportunities. Aging individuals themselves are leading efforts to change the number and quality of volunteer positions available to older adults (Freedman, 2001). This “institutional lead” is nurtured by private philanthropy and could be magnified by public resource commitments. Significant expansions of National Senior Service Corps programs would absorb more talented and motivated individuals into RSVP, Foster Grandparents, and SCORE. Peace Corps and AmeriCorps could be similarly enlarged. The sheer number of aging Baby Boomers will demand the development of new initiatives and will respond to different volunteer recruitment and management strategies than have been effective with younger individuals (Harlow-Rosentraub, Wilson, & Steele, 2006; Morrow-Howell & Tang, 2003).

Recognizing and Supporting Caregiving. Not all productive engagement is voluntary. As with employment to make economic ends meet, caregiving responsibilities can be obligatory. Caregivers offset significant social costs by delaying or preventing the entry of individuals into institutional care settings. Older adults performed over \$100 billion in informal care in 2002 alone (Johnson & Schaner, 2005), yet their contributions pass largely unnoticed and with little formal public support (Herd & Meyer, 2002; Li & Seltzer, 2002). Similarly, although not included in our analyses, custodial and non-custodial grandparenting is growing more prevalent. As many as 4.5 million children now live in grandparent-headed households. Population aging and shifting family structures will dramatically increase the need for informal caregiving. We require policy and program innovations that support individuals in this hidden work. Refundable tax and public pension credits for caregiving are two possible strategies (Favreault, Sammartino, & Steuerle, 2002; Goynea, 1997). States can equalize subsidies and support services for relative caregivers with those provided to non-kin foster care and adoptive parents (Hinterlong & Ryan, 2007). It is also notable that caregivers often have access to volunteering opportunities (Burr et al., 2005), and concurrent involvement in such activities mitigates negative effects associated with caregiving (Rozario, Morrow-Howell, & Hinterlong, 2004; Stoller & Pugliesi, 1989). Programs to assist older care providers in managing their activities, including those beyond the caregiving role, are therefore vital.

Promoting Planning

Two key findings from this study are that older individuals generally balance multiple commitments at any given time and they transition in, out, and among various roles over time. Middle-aged and older adults currently report that they lack role models for how to act, given their capacity for continued engagement (O'Neill, 2005). Moreover, despite higher overall levels of health among older Americans compared to previous generations, they report widely varying levels of interest, willingness, and capacity to sustain various combinations of productive activity as they age. Engagement patterns established earlier are likely to persist into late life. Our findings partially confirm this assumption by showing that activity initiation and cessation result in a stable number of roles and a steady decline in total hours over time. While momentum may propel some individuals into sustained patterns of productive activity, however, there is little systematic encouragement to consider how to invest one's time and experience in later years. When directly asked, recent surveys find many people believe productive engagement will be a critical aspect of their later years (AARP, 2005; Peter D. Hart & Associates, 1999, 2002). Given the uneven opportunity structure available to aging individuals, we are leaving too much to chance.

Considerable emphasis is given to financial and legal planning. A comparable broad-based public-private commitment to non-financial preparation is needed. One promising strategy is "life options planning" (Civic Ventures, 2005). Life options programs identify and connect individuals with opportunities for engagement within their communities. Early experiences in several pilot programs are promising, exposing an underappreciated interest among middle-aged and older individuals to consider and chart new pathways for meaningful engagement.

Planning will reveal to some individuals new possibilities for productive involvement. For others, it will emphasize the need for additional preparation. Nevertheless, we are generally ill-prepared as a nation to capture the productive potential of older adults. Our labor policies, educational systems, leisure industry, voluntary sector, and families have developed expectations for engagement based on an average lifecourse a full one-third shorter than is common today. For example, private-sector organizations and firms unevenly consider how older workers and volunteers may assist their operations (Brudney, 2002; Burnes & Gonyea, 2005). Although we can expect current and future cohorts of middle-aged and older individuals to compel these institutions to change, this lag between

changing institutional capacity and individual preferences for late-life productive engagement should be a paramount concern.

A Final Reason for Change

Creating and enhancing opportunities for continued engagement is not simply good public policy due to its returns to communities and society; it also exhibits a strong positive association with the late-life physical health and functioning (Hinterlong, 2006; Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, & Rozario, 2007), life satisfaction (Butrica & Schaner, 2005), subjective well-being (Baker, Cahalin, Gerst, & Burr, 2005), and mortality (Glass, Mendes de Leon, Marottoli, & Berkman, 1999). Such findings concur with common wisdom. Individuals have long recognized that engagement is an avenue to healthy aging, although scholarly perspectives and public policy arrangements have operated under different assumptions. Public perceptions of aging are slowly changing, but still focus heavily on how dementia, depression, disease, and dependency define the quality of later life. These biases affect the range of generally supported health interventions. Psychosocial interventions aimed at improving the health and functioning of older adults could be enhanced by incorporating a focus on engagement in productive activities, such as volunteering. Ory and colleagues (2003) argue that ageist stereotypes influence the design of health promotion and disease prevention initiatives targeting older adults, which in turn make those efforts less effective or even harmful, and assert that such public health measures would be more beneficial were they to include promotion of engagement in productive activities. In short, promoting productive engagement may augment other public health efforts aimed at minimizing the costs of population aging by reducing the need for health care. Given our findings of high rates of activity initiation, cessation, and transition, efforts aimed at facilitating these changes—either through advance planning or support—may have implications for population health.

Implications for Future Research

This study raises numerous questions for future research on productive engagement in later life. To begin, this work should document differences in productive engagement by gender, race and ethnicity, residence, and other sociodemographic characteristics. In addition, more research is needed on productive activity in mid-life when patterns of engagement are solidified and establish trajectories that might persist into old age. We have

not attempted to establish the meaningfulness participants attribute to their activities or their reasons for engagement. Similarly, we have not explored how transitions between activity types or changes in time commitments are determined, or the factors that influence the timing of such discontinuities.

CONCLUSION

Robert Butler (1985) asserted that the new realities in the biology of aging demand a new vision for social policy. Extended, healthy lives allow us to remain engaged in activities that contribute far into the life-course not only to our own development but to the welfare of others and our communities. This is reshaping how we think about our own aging and how we behave as we age. This study adds to the considerable empirical evidence refuting the “myth of unproductivity,” which has long affected our view of late life (Hendricks, 1996) and reveals patterns in the collective behavior of the “new aging” pioneers. Current and future cohorts of older Americans will call increasingly upon private- and public-sector leaders at all levels to realign policies and the capacity of organizations to provide greater access and support for paid and unpaid productive activity. Current and future policy work should pursue two aims: the creation of sector-specific strategies to promote and support engagement, and the development of well-designed, publicized, and managed opportunities for older Americans to be actively involved in community life.

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