Depression, Work and Family Roles, and the Gendered Life Course

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RESEARCH PROBLEM & DATA

Do the mental health benefits of employment change as men and women age through their prime employment and child-rearing years?

Women experience more depression than men, and this disparity worsens during adulthood. Although employment promotes mental health, gender inequalities in paid work suggest employment’s health-promoting effects may vary by gender, age, and child-rearing stage. Job resources, such as earnings and authority, tend to accrue with age. Yet women have flatter career trajectories than men, in part due to child-rearing demands as well as discrimination against mothers and women more generally. These gendered employment experiences suggest men accrue greater mental health rewards from employment than women, a difference that could contribute to the worsening of women’s mental health relative to men’s with age.

This study followed 8,931 individuals from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 Cohort, from 1992 to 2012. The author examined men’s and women’s depression scores on the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) as they aged from 27 to 56. Random-effects models assessed the association of mental health with employment status by age and child-rearing stage, controlling for sociodemographic covariates. Fixed-effects models examined changes in individuals’ depression levels over time and controlled for all time-stable characteristics of individuals. The fixed-effects models tested whether depression changes were linked to employment as individuals’ age and child-rearing stage changed.

KEY FINDINGS

- Employment improves both men’s and women’s mental health, but the magnitude of the mental health benefit of full-time employment becomes increasingly unequal as men and women age through their prime child-rearing years. Though the associations of full-time employment and depression are similarly sized for men and women at age 27, by age 43, the benefit of full-time employment is over twice as large for men as for women.
- The protective effect of full-time employment against depression roughly triples as men age from their late 20s to early 40s. In contrast, growth in the benefit of full-time employment as women age is not statistically significant.
- Young children reduce the mental health benefit of full- and part-time employment for mothers but not fathers. Mothers’ full-time employment becomes more beneficial for their mental health as their children age.

Logged CES-D Scores by Employment, Age, and Gender.

Women’s Logged CES-D Scores by Employment and Child-rearing Stage.

Note: Point estimates marked with 95% confidence intervals. CES-D = Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale. Higher CES-D scores indicate more symptoms of depression. Estimates control for child-rearing stage, marital status, family income, education, being black or Latino, and having a health condition that limits employment. Though the difference in predicted CES-D scores for women employed full-time versus those without jobs widens as women age, this widening is not statistically significant.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To increase the mental health benefits of employment for mothers, workplace policies should improve the compatibility of employment with the care of young children. Examples include flexible and predictable scheduling, schedule control, and paid parental leave. The results generally provided greater evidence of mental health benefits from full- versus part-time employment, even for mothers of children under six. Thus, part-time employment policies must guard against the possibility that reducing employment hours lowers job quality.

The results suggested that the protective effect of employment against depression remained relatively stable as women themselves aged, even after accounting for children’s age. Thus, initiatives that facilitate occupational advancement throughout adulthood for all women, including women without children, may bolster women’s mental health and reduce the gender gap in depression as men and women age.

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