

The Mediating Role of Cumulative Job Characteristics in SES-Health Relationships

We are currently investigating the ways in which job characteristics mediate associations between SES and a variety of physical and mental health outcomes using data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS). Associations between SES and health are well-documented, but the mechanisms linking SES and health are poorly understood. Our work is premised on the hypothesis that the physical and psychosocial characteristics of paid work are stratified by SES (e.g., education, earnings, and occupational standing), and that these conditions of paid employment in turn have direct consequences for health. The WLS --- a long-term longitudinal study which has followed 10,317 high school graduates from their senior years of high school in 1957 through the brink of retirement in 2003/04 --- is a uniquely valuable resource for this investigation because we have access to high quality measures of education, detailed information about occupational careers from ages 35 through 64, measures of other key intervening variables (e.g., access to health insurance, smoking and drinking behaviors, frequency of exercise, body mass index), and measures of a wide variety of health outcomes at ages 53 and 64.

In the piece of this work that we will present at PAA we are investigating the ways in which the CUMULATIVE physical and psychosocial characteristics of jobs across the working career mediate the associations between SES and a variety of health outcomes as measured in late adulthood (including self-reported overall health, depression, and cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, and stress-related health problems and medical conditions). Questions about the impact of job characteristics on health have typically been addressed using cross sectional data. Our ability to consider the cumulative attributes of jobs across the working career and health outcomes at two points in later adulthood puts me in a much stronger position to understand how job characteristics

affect health and consequently how job characteristics mediate associations between education and health outcomes.

In this part of our work we are concerned with both the DURATION and TRAJECTORY of exposure to particular job conditions on health. That is, we are interested in both the total amount of time in which a respondent had a job that was (to choose an example) very physically demanding AND in the trend within that person's life in how physically demanding their jobs have been. Two people with the same duration of exposure to physically demanding jobs may have quite different trajectories of exposure. To estimate the effects of both duration and trajectory of exposure to job conditions on health we will need to use some form of latent growth curve or latent class analysis.