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Author(s): Liana C. Sayer and Janet C. Gornick

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Older Adults: International Differences in Housework and Leisure

Liana C. Sayer · Janet C. Gornick

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Population aging, longer life expectancy, and earlier retirement ages have heightened interest in patterns and determinants of active aging. Ample research documents both the declining labor force participation of older adults across Western industrialized countries and cross-national variation in levels and hours of employment, legal retirement ages, and pension policies. Yet, little is known about national differences in other types of time use between employed and nonemployed adults beyond midlife. Understanding the association of employment with socially productive and caring labor is important because of the benefits these activities have for psychological and cognitive well-being. The issue is vital for societies, as well, because assumptions about how employment affects non-work time are embedded in broad policy efforts to reverse patterns of early retirement.

Among prime-age adults, employment is negatively associated with time spent on housework, leisure time and (in many cases) child care. Among older adults, employment is also consequential because it widens social networks and improves financial standing. Hence, employed older adults may spend more time in productive social and consumption activities compared with nonemployed adults. It is also likely that macro factors may condition the association between employment and age profiles of time use. Specifically, the regulation of working time, laws establishing legal retirement age, and public pension rules all vary cross-nationally and affect the environment in which older individuals make decisions about time allocations.

This analysis uses nationally representative time diary data collected in the late 1990s and early 2000s from eight Western industrialized countries to examine how housework, active pursuits and passive leisure vary by age among employed and nonemployed women and men ages 45 and older. Included countries are the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Norway, Sweden and Slovenia. Our countries have diverse time-related outcomes and varied policy environments, as well as available archived time diary data from the Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS).

L. C. Sayer (✉)
Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA
e-mail: sayer.12@sociology.osu.edu

J. C. Gornick
The Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, NY, USA

Our measures of age, employment, and time use are guided by MTUS harmonization procedures and analyses of age-differentiated time use with 1980's data by Gauthier and Smeeding (2003). We classify age into five categories: 45–54, 55–59, 60–64, 65–69 and 70 and older. We classify respondents as employed if they report that they had a paying job in the previous week (not on reporting employment activities in the diary). By age 70, women across countries have very low employment rates, being highest at 7% in the US. The age at which women leave employment varies across countries, with three clusters evident. In the US, Norway, and Sweden, about 50% of women are employed at age 60. In contrast, Canada, the UK, Australia and France show women's employment rates declining sharply between ages 55 and 60, with relatively smaller declines thereafter. Lastly, Slovenia is distinct, in that women's employment rates plummet from 64% at ages 45–49 to 15% by age 55–59, but then remain relatively flat.

Among men, employment rates decline sharply between ages 55 and 64 in the US, the UK, Norway and Sweden, from about 90% to only 60%. In contrast, withdrawal from employment occurs earlier in Canada, Australia, France and Slovenia, between ages 45 and 59, with steeper declines for French men. By age 60–64, fewer than 40% of Canadian and Australian men, 20% of Slovenian men, and 10% of French men are employed. Among men in all countries, few remain employed at ages 70 and older; similar to women, among the oldest men, the highest employment rate is in the USA at 14%, and the lowest in France at 1%.

1 Methods and Procedures

Diary activities are grouped into three clusters: housework, active pursuits and passive leisure. This classification differentiates activities by their presumed extent of social engagement and impact on mental and physical health.

- (1) Housework consists of routine household chores (such as cleaning, laundry and meal preparation, as well as yard work, repairs and household shopping).
- (2) Active pursuits consists of six clusters of activities (child care; volunteering, religion and education; sport and fitness; social activities; hobbies and reading and other active leisure (such as attending cultural or entertainment events).
- (3) Passive leisure is primarily time watching television, but it also includes time listening to music and relaxing. Passive leisure presumably does not yield positive gains in social engagement or health, whereas more engaged time is positively associated with well-being.

Figure 1 shows fitted values of women's housework by employment status, age group and country. The fitted values were estimated from Ordinary Least Squares regressions for each country, with controls for education, family income, marital status, presence of children less than 18 in the household (may be own children, grandchildren, or unrelated children) and whether the diary was reported on a weekend day.

Results indicate a nonlinear pattern of housework time by age, contrary to earlier research that showed negative associations of age. This is most evident for Slovenia, with sharp increases in women's housework between ages 45–54 and 55–59. Not surprisingly, nonemployed women spend more time in housework compared with employed women, across age groups and in all countries. However, the gaps vary considerably across countries, with nonemployed women in Sweden spending less time in housework compared with employed women in France, the UK and Slovenia. There is also a slight

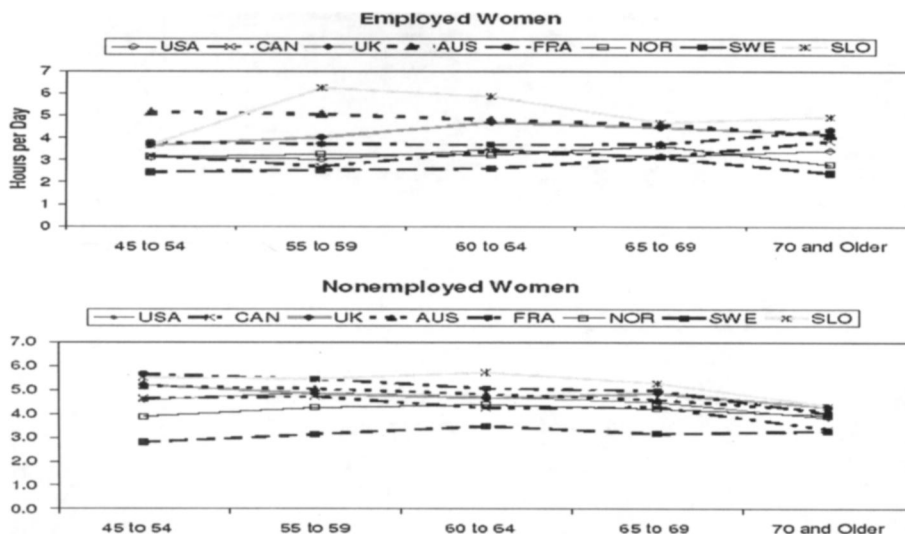


Fig. 1 Regression adjusted housework hours by employment, age, country

indication that declines in housework with age may be concentrated among nonemployed women in English speaking countries and France, but not in Slovenia or the Nordic countries. Additionally, within all countries, the magnitude of employment associations with housework is much larger than age effects. Among men (results not shown), there is no consistent pattern by age but nonemployed men do more housework across the life course compared with employed men.

Figure 2 shows fitted values of women's active pursuits by employment status, age and country. Across all countries, nonemployed women under age 69 spend more time in active pursuits compared with employed women. After age 69, however, in all countries but the US, Norway and France, the association reverses, with employed women spending more time in active pursuits. Why employed women in the US spend less time in active pursuits at older ages is not clear. (Results not shown indicate that employed women aged 70 and older in the USA work long hours that may preclude time necessary for engagement in other activities. Similar long hours are observed for both France and Norway, but with small sample sizes). Among employed women in Canada, Norway and Slovenia, time in active pursuits is relatively flat through age 64, but levels climb fairly steeply after age 65. In the latter countries, then, employed women may have either more opportunities for engaging in active pursuits, perhaps because of employment related social networks, or may have better health, and thus more ability to remain active. Among men (estimates not shown), the age profile is relatively flat, with employed men spending less time in active pursuits relative to nonemployed across each age group. At age 70, however, levels of time in active pursuits are relatively comparable for employed and nonemployed men. Men appear to be reallocating time across different types of active pursuits, away from sports, exercise and socializing to reading, to be sure a valuable activity, but one that is more isolated and may have fewer health benefits.

Variations by employment status and age for women's and men's passive leisure (not shown) indicate that passive leisure increases with age and among women. Rises are generally not significant. Among men of all ages, nonemployed men spend more time in

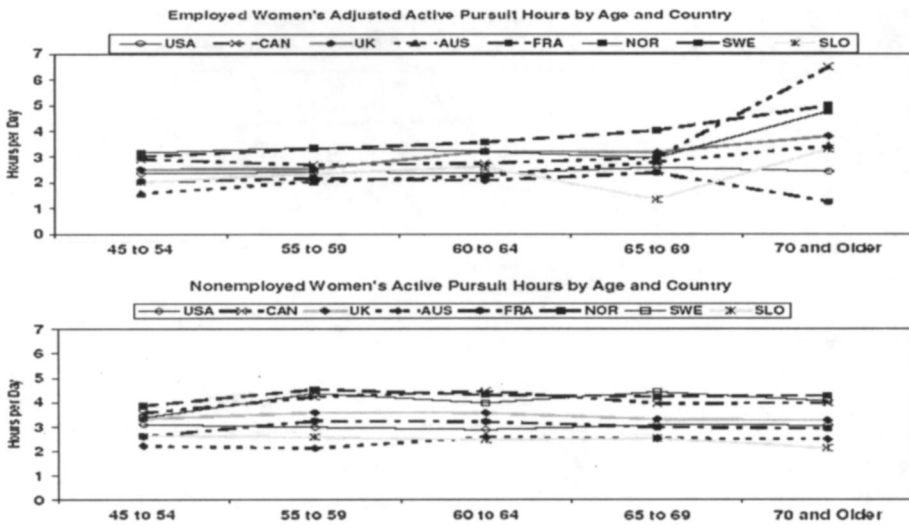


Fig. 2 Regression adjusted active pursuit hours by employment, age, country

passive leisure than employed men, but no significant associations between age and passive leisure are observed.

2 Conclusion

In sum, our results offer limited evidence that employment status differentiates age profiles of time use across countries. Housework and leisure levels vary by age and country, but consistent age patterns emerge only for passive leisure, and the association is not significant in 4 of the 8 countries. Further, associations between employment status and time patterns are more consistent and of greater magnitude across countries than variation by age. This suggests that employment among older adults may provide opportunities for more socially engaged or healthful time use patterns, whereas nonemployed adults may have more constraints on the activities they engage in due to limited social networks or poorer health.

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