

**Center for Social Development
George Warren Brown School of Social Work
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An Agenda on Productive Aging: Research, Policy, and Practice

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As a general principle, all older adults should have opportunities to be engaged and productive if they have the ability and desire to do so.

The Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University in St. Louis is advancing an agenda on productive aging, focusing on three primary forms of productive engagement: employment, volunteerism/civic engagement, and caregiving. These are activities that produce goods and services, whether paid for or not, and that have effects beyond individuals to families, communities, and society. Older adults who engage in these activities make important economic and social contributions, though these contributions are often undervalued. This agenda on productive aging builds on the results of a CSD-sponsored symposium where leading gerontologists from many academic disciplines discussed older adults as a resource.¹ The meeting resulted in an edited volume published by Johns Hopkins University Press.²

Growing Capacity

Over 12 percent of the U.S. population is over the age of 65, and this age group will grow to an estimated 20 percent by the year 2030. Already the United States has over 34 million older people. Although the stereotype of the physically and cognitively frail elder still prevails, more than 70 percent of older Americans today are fit and functioning. Retiring at age 65, the typical person can expect another 18 years of life, perhaps 12 of these active years.³ Moreover, it is altogether likely that the average age for the onset of dependency and death will continue to rise. This demographic revolution is a striking success for technology and economic development, a huge blessing and opportunity for individuals, and an enormous resource for society.

Current Understanding of Productivity in Later Life

As we move into a new demographic era, society is not prepared to utilize the enormous resource of older adults. Despite the growing number of available volunteers, workers, and caregivers, we are only beginning to discuss how to develop and employ this capacity for productive engagement.

Survey researchers have documented that many older people remain productively engaged, although their contributions are little noticed, overshadowed by their departure from the formal labor market.⁴ It is also well known that older adults want to continue to assume meaningful roles and contribute to families and communities through work, volunteering, and caregiving.⁵

Yet, it is clear that older adults face significant barriers and disincentives to their continued or renewed participation in productive roles. While they may wish or even need to engage in productive activities, they are able to do so only with great difficulty. Sociologists have pointed out that institutionalized structures of opportunity have failed to keep pace with increases in the

capacity of older adults to fill productive roles.⁶ The number, type and quality of these roles vary greatly, as do the incentives provided to those willing and able to contribute in later life.

Most research on productive aging has focused on the traits, resources, capacity, and preferences of individual older adults. The CSD agenda seeks to expand understanding in this field by investigating the role of social institutions and organizations in the productive engagement of older adults. The central focus will be the joint effects of individuals and institutions on the type, frequency, and outcomes of productive behavior.

Agenda for Research, Policy, and Practice

We recognize the need for new knowledge that guides policy and practice aimed at decreasing the gap between rising individual capacity and the availability of institutionalized productive roles. We aim for scholarship that extends the "biology of successful aging into the social policy of productive aging."⁷ We do this through applied research that examines the influences of individual and institutional capacity on the incidence and outcomes of productive behavior (see Figure 1).

In the past, research has largely focused on individual capacity, skirting the powerful role of institutions in maximizing productive engagement. In our view, productivity in later life is likely to be shaped by social institutions, policies, and programs as much as by individuals. Thus, we will focus our work on the interaction of individuals and social institutions, such as social service agencies, churches, civic organizations, businesses, and government programs. We will examine how these institutions encourage or inhibit older adults from engaging in productive roles through four primary mechanisms: by providing information, offering incentives, securing access to productive roles, and facilitating continued participation. As shown in Figure 1, we will also focus on public policy as it affects institutional capacity. This knowledge-building agenda is based in social science theory and evidence, but at the same time is very applied.

We are also interested in outcomes of productive engagement, recognizing that all activities are not of equal benefit. Some hold greater promise than others. To date, scholarship on productive aging has failed to establish a standard definition of productive behavior, to distinguish among various types of productive activities, or to consider relationships among types of productive behavior and outcomes for the individuals, families, communities, and society. Considerable evidence already demonstrates the positive impacts of productive engagement for individuals. We will pursue an expanded research agenda that examines impacts of productive engagement for families, communities, and society, and seeks to assess these in terms of costs and benefits.

Service

As one particular focus, we will examine *service* as a type of volunteerism/civic engagement that may hold great promise for engagement of older adults in the future. By *service* we mean a formal program of service opportunities. Examples include public programs, like Foster Grandparents, and private programs, like Experience Corps and Person-to-Person Peer Counseling. Service is more formal than most types of volunteerism, with characteristics similar to employment (organizational structure, defined role and tasks, serious commitment), but the emphasis is more on contribution than on compensation. Service opportunities for young people are gradually expanding in the United States (e.g., Peace Corps, AmeriCorps) and in many other countries as well.⁸

With aging populations in most countries, it is possible that large new social institutions for service will emerge with seniors as the primary participants.⁹ Danzig and Szanton foresaw this possibility

and suggested that service by older adults might develop more rapidly than service by youths.¹⁰ Indeed, discussions of productive aging are an opening to promote service across the life course, with greater numbers and quality of service opportunities available at all ages.

Areas of Work: Current and Future

The Center for Social Development is currently engaged in efforts to document existing institutional capacity as it relates to the productive engagement of older adults; review policies (regulations, expenditures, and taxation) that affect institutional capacity and individual productive behavior; develop measurement instruments for the study of institutional capacity for productive engagement and outcomes for individuals and society; and explore the idea of service across the life course.

To date, CSD faculty and staff associates have produced a book and quite a few manuscripts that advance our research agenda on productive aging (publications presented on the next page are available upon request). Current efforts include a national survey of elder service programs funded by the MetLife Foundation and analyses of large secondary data sets to answer questions about productive activity of older adults. In the next few years, CSD plans to host a conference on service as an institution for the productive engagement of older adults.

Capacity of CSD

The Center for Social Development has a research and policy mission to increase capacities of individual, communities, and society to utilize resources and solve problems. CSD is perhaps the best known for its work in studying and promoting asset building for the poor through a matched saving program known as individual development accounts (IDAs). In this work, CSD leads the nation in setting the research agenda and undertaking empirical studies. This research has had major impacts in federal and state policies, and in hundreds community-based initiatives.

Michael Sherraden, Benjamin E. Youngdahl Professor of Social Development and director of CSD, was involved in youth service research and policy development that contributed to the enactment of AmeriCorps. Currently, his focus is on international youth service.¹¹ Nancy Morrow-Howell, Ralph and Muriel Pumphrey Professor of Social work and faculty associate at CSD, has an established research career in community services to older adults and brings expertise on volunteerism and caregiving. She has studied programs utilizing older volunteers in providing services to others. Dr. Jim Hinterlong studied productive engagement of older adults in his doctoral work at Washington University and continues this work as a faculty member at Florida State University. Dr. Philip Rozario, also a doctoral alum of Washington University and currently at Aldephi University, specializes in caregiving as a productive activity. Fengyan Tang is a doctoral fellow with CSD and producing a dissertation on older volunteers.

Overall, CSD has the capacity, keen interest, and proven track record to facilitate emergence of new scholarship and policy innovations in productive aging.

Conclusion

The demographic revolution is upon us, and there is widespread agreement that we need to do something differently regarding older adults. The idea of productive aging offers a positive vision of the potential of this demographic revolution: older adults can be involved in meaningful roles, utilizing their potential, contributing to their families and communities, while, at the same time, preserving their health and well-being. Our goal should be to build the capacity of social institutions to engage this potential through policies and programs that invite and support productive activity. CSD intends to contribute to these new developments through insightful research and innovations in policy and practice.

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Endnotes

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