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The Social Structuring of Mental Health over the Adult Life Course: Advancing Theory in the Sociology of Aging

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Abstract

The sociology of aging draws on a broad array of theoretical perspectives from several disciplines, but rarely has it developed its own. We build on past work to advance and empirically test a model of mental health framed in terms of structural theorizing and situated within the life course perspective. Whereas most prior research has been based on cross-sectional data, we utilize four waves of data from a nationally representative sample of American adults (Americans' Changing Lives Study) collected prospectively over a 15-year period and find that education, employment and marital status, as well as their consequences for income and health, effectively explain the increase in depressive symptoms after age 65. We also found significant cohort differences in age trajectories of mental health that were partly explained by historical increases in education. We demonstrate that a purely structural theory can take us far in explaining later life mental health.

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