



Introduction to Special Issue: Productive Aging

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Productive aging scholarship and practice gained new momentum in 2015 with the White House Conference on Aging's focus on retirement security and health among older adults, as well as the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare's (AASWSW) Grand Challenges (Gonzales et al. 2015; Morrow-Howell et al. 2017, 2018). *Increasing productive engagement in later life* was selected by AASWSW as one of the twelve grand challenges identified to focus our professional attention on society's most pressing issues, alongside critical topics like health disparities, homelessness, isolation, and family violence. We were pleased that AASWSW recognized the challenges and opportunities associated with the major changes in the population's age distribution. With fewer young people, longer life expectancies, and shifting racial and ethnic distributions, social workers are called to find ways to ensure economic security and health for the growing older population in this country. From our productive aging perspective, we argued that the older population represents a growing resource of human and social capital that can be optimally engaged to improve well-being for individuals, families, and communities. We suggested that social development efforts can improve policies and programs to facilitate paid and unpaid work longer into the life course, while ensuring inclusion of all segments of the older population and ensuring positive outcomes for the older adults themselves.

We defined productive engagement in later life as any activity *by an older adult* that produces goods and services for society, whether paid or not (Bass et al. 1993) *with employment, civic engagement (formal and informal volunteering) and informal caregiving being the primary foci.*

Ageist attitudes and outdated social structures limit participation of older adults in many of these important social roles. We argue that policy and programs developments in the arenas of employment, education, long term care services and supports, and civic engagement are needed; and our efforts should be guided by principles of health equity, choice, opportunity, and inclusion. Program and policy solutions must ensure ample opportunities for continued engagement for those who *choose* this route; removal of barriers detracting from engagement; support for transitions between caregiving and other forms of productive engagement to prevent care work from being penalized; and restructuring of social arrangements that exclude older adults from economic and social activities.

The scholarship related to productive aging as conceptualized here has focused on programs, policies, organizational arrangements, and age discrimination. Rightfully so. It would be harmful to expect older adults to assume individual responsibility for maximizing productive engagement in the face of our current social structures. Yet this perspective has limited our thinking about our profession's clinical work with individuals and their families. How do we use a productive aging perspective in our direct social work practice? How do we integrate clinical perspectives to bolster engagement in vital social roles? The purpose of this Special Issue is to advance our understanding of the many clinical implications with regard to theories, practices, approaches, and techniques in the area of productive aging. We aim to recognize the significant achievements of clinical scholarship and practice and will help to shape a vision for the next generation of scholars, educators, and practitioners to situate micro level factors within the broader ecological context. The special issue is divided into two parts: theory development and rigorous empirical investigations.

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Theory Development

Social work scholars have been at the forefront of developing and testing concepts and constructs to productive engagement and health since the turn of the Twenty-first Century. Three papers in this special issue refine existing conceptual frameworks. Matz et al. (2020) introduce a model of subjective quality of engagement that focuses on how role environments and other factors could be modified to optimize psychological engagement in roles, and in turn the health benefits of engagement. This model highlights how social work practitioners can engage with older adults in therapeutic settings to find purpose, meaning, and fulfillment in work, volunteering, and informal caregiving. Gordon (2020) critically reflects on years of clinical geriatric care management practice to unpack how ageism operates within the family and undermines health and family dynamics. Her clinical insights are important because there is a dearth of literature on ageism within the family and how it compromises informal care. Gonzales et al. (2019a, b) offer a conceptual framework on intergenerational home sharing to help address issues of affordable housing, health, and social connections. Each of these conceptual paper advances our theoretical understanding of contexts that shape employment, volunteering, and caregiving.

Empirical Investigations

Four additional papers use primary and secondary data to investigate employment and volunteering in later life. Shen et al. (2020) utilize longitudinal population-based data from the Health and Retirement Study to reveal factors associated with why older adults might stop volunteering and how social workers in direct practice settings can modify volunteer responsibilities to encourage retention. Straussner and Senreich (2020) utilize national survey data of professional social workers to reveal occupational differences and similarities between younger and older social work practitioners. Their study reveals that older social work practitioners are potential mentors to help younger clinicians with occupational satisfaction and how to cope with burnout within the field of social work. Gonzales et al. (2019a, b) shift our attention to factors that promote health and employment among low-income older adults in a federally funded employment training program, the Senior Community Service Employment Program. Halvorsen and Yulikova (2019) make a compelling case to re-evaluate the Department of Labor's performance measures of SCSEP and offer clear practice recommendations for social workers who are at the frontlines.

The scholarship on productive aging has come a long way since Robert Butler introduced the concept in 1983 (Butler and Gleason 1985). There have been great strides in theoretical and empirical developments, and social work scholars have played an important role in this knowledge development. The articles in this special edition represent an expansion of the knowledge base in a slightly different direction—toward the micro side of social work practice and clinical gerontology. To date, the focus of productive aging scholarship has been on programs and policies; this new attention to practice is novel and significant. This volume is a testament to the contributions made by our profession.

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