

Life-Cycle Effects of Unemployment Insurance on Health at Later-Life

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Background: Despite repeated calls for cross-national comparative research on aging that integrates insights from population health and policy analysis (Crimmins, Preston and Cohen 2011, Woolf and Aron 2013), work in this area is still hampered by two problems:

1. Inaccurate and imprecise measurement of exposure to policy arrangements across the life course restricts the range of questions that can be answered and weakens the inferences that can be drawn about the relationships between aging and policy.
2. Current scholarship relies on partial measures of policy that do not represent cutting-edge theoretical and methodological developments in comparative political economy, further undermining the nascent science of aging in comparative political economic context.

We propose an exploratory project that could allow such scholarship to take a large leap forward, by developing life-course measures of social citizenship that integrate individual-level life history data from the international Survey of Health Aging and Retirement (SHARE) with macro-level detailed policy data from the Social Citizenship Indicator Program (SCIP). Crucial to our project is the fact that the SCIP data are both the best (theoretically-grounded, accurate, and precise) measures available for comparative social policy analysis, and the only data that extend back into history to 1930. Both characteristics of the SCIP data are essential to our project, because, to date, research on social policy and the life course excludes:

1. Detailed policy analysis of program generosity and eligibility requirements (the latter depend on employment history, family status, benefit consumption, and age, and vary by country and year).
2. Multiple and overlapping policy domains, including intertwined policy arrangements in the areas of unemployment, sickness, and pensions.
3. Historical information on the long-term evolution of social policy during the period of welfare-state institutionalization (roughly 1945-1975 in most OECD nations). SHARE was first fielded in 2004, meaning that the oldest respondents in the first wave of the SHARE would have lived social policy as it existed in the 1930s.

Aims: Using a linkage of life-history information for 11 European countries included in SHARE with detailed information on unemployment insurance generosity (including maximum and minimum benefits, waiting days and length of coverage) we will systematically assess how exposure to more/less generous unemployment insurance experienced at sensitive life-course periods (e.g. e.g. unemployment, transition into the labour market or family formation) affects various health outcomes at later-life.

Significance: This project addresses a critical barrier to scientific progress in research on aging. We do not know how and when aging populations are exposed to different policy environments; nor do we know how policy effects may cumulate and generate feedbacks over time. That is, current research on policy, aging, and health assumes that the relevant policy environment for a 70-year-old Dutch woman included in the SHARE in 2004 is the policy environment in the Netherlands in 2004, or, if lagged measures are used, most probably 2003. A hypothesis is that her integration into the paid labor force in 1954 was a critical period when unemployment policy as it existed at the time may have formed a decisive part of her lived social citizenship. This brief example illustrates how our exploratory work carries the potential to open up new questions to drive new inquiry in this quickly developing area, as well as shed new and better light on existing questions.

Innovation: Our project challenges the current paradigm in comparative political economy by integrating insights from life-course scholarship. Specifically, our project is motivated by the idea that policy environments change over time, and are lived differently by different people, depending on when and at what stage of the life course they live policy.