Employment and Self-Rated Health Trajectories in the UK and US: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The paper is a comparison of long-term health and employment in the UK and the US during the 1990s. Using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), it describes latent classes of self-rated health and latent class transitions over an 8-year period, and examines the relationship of employment status with

these cross-sectional and dynamic health. A two-class model, one that distinguished a "healthy" group from a "less healthy" group, best fits the data from both countries. Older individuals, non-whites and those without partners were more likely to be members of the less healthy latent class than others. Although the same was true for those with little schooling, national differences in this likelihood were notable, with education having a stronger effect on latent class membership in the US. In the UK, women were more likely to be in the less healthy group than men, while no gender differences were apparent in the US. Both unemployment and non-employment increased the likelihood of being in the les healthy class in the US in contrast to the UK, where non-employment was a stronger predictor of class membership and unemployment was unrelated to latent health classification. A greater proportion of the UK survey members were in the healthy class than the US respondents. Correspondingly, the transition probability of moving from a health to a less healthy state was higher in the US than the UK and the probability of moving from a less healthy to a healthy state was higher in the UK than the US. The 32 possible transitions between healthy and less healthy states over five occasions of measurement could be summarized into four patterns. These were stable good health, stable poor health, declining health and improving health. Although the first two patterns were, by far, the most likely in both nations, higher proportions of the British population were classified in the stable good health group (65 percent compared with 49 percent of Americans). Very few individuals managed to return to a healthy state after a period of poorer health. Despite their poorer health, Americans were more likely to be economically active than their British counterparts. Notably, economic inactivity was higher among British men and women with stable poor or declining health trajectories than it was among Americans. Nevertheless, a greater proportion of American men with a declining health trajectory leave the labour market than men in the UK. These patterns are discussed in relation to national labour market and welfare policies.