Self-Esteem and Subjective Responses to Work Among Mature Workers: Similarities and Differences by Gender

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This study addressed three questions that underlie the experiences of middle-aged working individuals: (1) What factors influence workers’ quality of time spent at work, their feelings of competence as a worker, and their satisfaction with work? (2) What is the impact of subjective responses to work on self-esteem? and (3) What effect does gender have on subjective responses and self-esteem? These data are derived from an ongoing study of full-time working men and women (N = 770). Subjective responses to work are affected by poor health. Quality of time at work (meaningful, not boring), job satisfaction, and an identity as a competent worker are associated with self-esteem. Self-esteem was higher among women in highly autonomous jobs, and nonmarried women had higher self-esteem than others. The strongest effect on self-esteem was that of feeling competent as a worker. Positive perceptions of work increased self-esteem, facilitating the transition into retirement.

The transition from full-time work to retirement is not identical for all workers, but one that has many derivations. The particular stops and starts that one worker follows in contrast to another is a matter of many factors such as opportunity structure, their mental outlook, and physical resources. Workers enter this transitional period with a sense of self produced in part by their identity as workers, their subjective responses to work, and the nature of their jobs. The purpose of this research was to examine the strength of these factors on one aspect of workers’ mental health and self-esteem in the years proximal to what is commonly thought of as the time to retire.

Today’s demographic trends make this an interesting period in which to address these research questions. First, while labor force participation for men 55 to 64 years old has declined from 83 percent in 1970 to 68 percent in 1990, the rates for women of a similar age have risen from 43 percent in 1970 to 45 percent in 1990. It is estimated that men’s participation in the labor force will remain about 68 percent through the year 2005, whereas for women it will increase to 54 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Thus, it appears that most middle-aged men and an increasing number of middle-aged women are employed full-time, spending substantial time and energy in their work roles. At the same time, there are increased pressures and/or opportunities to retire. The situation is also in flux because of changes in the divorce rate which prompt some to enter the labor force, while for others divorce affects the timing of retirement (Pienta, Burr, and Muchler, 1994; Smith and Moen, 1988).

All of these social structural changes contribute to the diverse patterns of work and retirement and are expected to relate to the mental health of those in this age group.

Second, retirement is a temporal process that begins in preretirement and continues into postretirement (Atchley, 1982; Ekerdt and DeViney, 1993). Not only does middle age serve as a preparatory stage for retirement, but Atchley (1993) argues that there is an important continuity between pre- and postretirement self-conceptions as individuals continue to use ongoing family and friendship roles as sources of self-esteem. Indeed, Reitzes, Mutran, and Fernandez (1994) found in an earlier analysis that preretirement self-esteem continues to be a powerful predictor of postretirement self-esteem. Thus, the self-esteem of middle-aged workers has important implications for self-esteem in retirement.

Third, it has often been assumed, but not always demonstrated, that the role of worker and work experiences influence self-esteem and other indicators of well-being. Kohn and Schooler (1983) found that the occupational experiences of adult men had stronger effects on their psychological functioning than did the reciprocal effect of psychological functioning on occupation. They argue that jobs provide important opportunities to elicit favorable evaluations of self, an open and flexible orientation to others, and effective intellectual functioning (p. 81). Nevertheless, the effect of work on self-esteem is variable and needs to be placed in a broader context.

In this study, we use data derived from in-depth telephone interviews of full-time working men and women aged 58 to 64 who live in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill metropolitan area to explore three issues. First, what are the factors that influence the way in which workers respond to their jobs toward the end of careers, such as their assessment of the quality of time spent at work, their satisfaction with work, and their identity as competent workers? Second, what is the impact of these subjective responses to work together with social background and work conditions on workers’ overall evaluation of self? Third, past studies suggest that women generally have lower status jobs, are paid less, and have
fewer opportunities for promotions than men (Hodson, 1989; Mottaz, 1986); thus, there needs to be consideration of the possible differences in subjective responses to work of men and women. The sampling frame for this study was specifically designed to allow the separate analysis by gender of factors that influence the quality of work and self-esteem.

Review of the Literature and Research Expectations

We are interested in exploring the impact of three sets of factors on self-esteem. A role, such as the work role, reflects both past structural opportunities and cultural expectations and current efforts of active individuals to infuse roles with self-meaning and affect. Thus, variations in social background and work conditions influence self-esteem. In addition, variations in identification with the role of worker, as well as subjective assessment of the quality of time spent at work and job satisfaction, may affect a person’s sense of self-worth. We are also interested in whether the pattern of factors that influence self-esteem varies by gender. As stated earlier, changes in the divorce rate may influence whether persons work in middle age. This seems to be particularly true of the women in our study, 21 percent of whom are divorced.

Social background. — Social background factors such as the total family income and education suggest financial and cultural resources that heighten a person’s quality of life and directly affect both his/her response to work and self-esteem. In addition, men and women who are better educated have higher family income and may have experienced fewer barriers to occupational mobility; therefore, they are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and overall self-evaluations. Lee and Shehan (1989) found that education and income exerted significant positive effects on the self-esteem of older employed men. Larson (1978) reviewed 30 years of research on correlates of well-being and concluded that income, education, and occupational status are modestly correlated with well-being among older Americans. A similar set of findings was reported by Okun (1987). On the other hand, poor health is expected to restrict a person’s ability to perform work-related as well as other activities and therefore negatively affect subjective responses to work and self-esteem. Larson (1978) found that poor health consistently had a negative effect on diverse measures of well-being, and Okun (1987) also concluded that health is the most potent predictor of subjective well-being.

Past research has been inconclusive on the consequences of marital status on self-esteem and well-being. Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan’s (1989) review of the literature found that being married was associated with higher well-being for both men and women. Lee and Shehan (1989) report that the dummy variables of single, divorced, and widowed did not influence self-esteem for men 55 years and older, but that for women in that age group being single lowered self-esteem scores. Further, the impact of being married, which requires the combining or reconciling the time expectations of the worker and spouse roles, may be more difficult for younger workers. More so than younger workers, middle-aged men and women have had either a longer period to accommodate potentially conflicting role demands or have already dissolved their marriages.

Work conditions and subjective responses to the work role. — Another line of inquiry focuses on the impact of work conditions, or the nature of the job on the way in which individuals subjectively respond to their work. DeVaus and McAllister (1991) surveyed workers from nine European countries and found that job autonomy increased and non-manual worker status decreased job satisfaction; and Loscocco’s (1990) study of blue-collar work found that men and women respond more positively to jobs and companies which provide challenge, variety, and autonomy. Further, Kohn and Schooler (1983) found that indicators of organizational locus, occupational self-direction, job pressures, and job uncertainties influenced self-esteem. In this study, we are interested in the effects of two work conditions: the nonrepetitive character of the job and the extent of occupational self-direction on the mature worker.

Individuals do not passively internalize roles but actively negotiate role boundaries and outcomes (Stone, 1962; Stryker, 1980). Thus, role learning entails not only "identification of," the process of learning the shared meanings of a role, but also "identification with," the process of infusing a role with subjective meanings. Indeed, individuals use these subjective responses as standards and reference points in assessing roles and in constructing self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979).

Three outcomes of "identification with" will be considered in this study. First, identity refers to self-meanings in a role. Reitzes, Mutran, and Fernandez (1994) argue that identity meanings associated with the role of worker include the dimensions of being competent, sociable, and confident; and that individuals vary in the way that they view themselves as workers. Second, the extent to which individuals invest themselves in a role and perceive it as a meaningful use of time also reflects the identification process (LaRossa and LaRossa, 1981; Marks, 1977). Workers may differ dramatically in their assessment of the quality of time spent at work. Finally, job satisfaction captures a person’s affective response to the role of worker (Hodson, 1989). In this study we are interested in exploring whether a worker’s identity, assessments of the quality of time spent at work, and job satisfaction influence self-esteem. In other words, do increases in identification with the role of worker increase a sense of worth independent of the effects of social background and other sets of variables?

We recognize that the pure relationship between subjective responses to the work role and self-esteem is probably reciprocal, but our cross-sectional data prevent us from clearly distinguishing causal order. For theoretical reasons, we believe that it is more likely, at any given point in time, for subjective responses to the work role to influence self-esteem. Burke (1980) argues that situated and role-specific identities serve as frequent "reality checks" that individuals use to confirm their more global self-conceptions, such as self-esteem. Thus, we propose that individuals frequently use their worker identity, assessments of time in the work role, and job satisfaction to confirm their general sense of well-being, and this is true among a group of preretirees.
Self-esteem is also influenced by other identities (such as family identities) and past experiences and behaviors, but typically self-conceptions change only slowly and after mounting pressure for self-consistency. When self-conceptions do change they can profoundly influence the way that individuals view themselves in their roles. While over time there is expected to be a reciprocal relationship between identities and self-conception, at any one moment it is more likely that subjective responses to the work role will be used to confirm and support self-esteem. As more of this study population leaves the labor force, we will be able to examine how self-esteem contributes to reentry.

**Gender.** — A pair of puzzling findings is that despite systematic gender differences in work conditions, men and women have similar subjective responses to work (Boke-mieer and Lacy, 1986; Losocco, 1990; Mottaz, 1986; Weaver, 1978) and comparable self-esteem (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1987; Larson, 1978). One explanation is that due to differences in gender socialization, women have lower work expectations than men (D'Arcy, Syrotuik, and Sidi-digue, 1984). Another explanation is that women do not use men as a comparison group for assessing their jobs but use other women, so gender differences in work conditions would not affect the subjective responses to work (Crosby, 1982; Hodson, 1989). It is difficult to speculate what these relationships might be in a group of mature women workers. These women would have been in the forefront of career women in their cohort, while some are in the work force for economic necessity. In establishing and maintaining their self-esteem, middle-aged working women may perceive themselves advantaged in comparison to women who do not work for pay outside the home (Mackie, 1983; Westwood, 1984).

**Model and Hypotheses**

One of the problems with past investigations of self-esteem and subjective responses to work is the neglect of the underlying causal structures. Research tends to focus exclusively on total or net effects with little attempts to investigate the indirect paths that lead from work conditions and subjective responses to work to self-esteem (for an exception see Ross and Reskin, 1992). This study seeks to redress this omission. Figure 1 presents a model relating demographic and social characteristics, work conditions, work values, and work attitudes to self-esteem.

Beginning with the social background variables, we expect that more highly educated individuals will be less satisfied with their work. It is reasonable to expect that higher education would lead to elevated (but potentially unfulfilled) expectations; thus, education should contribute to positive, but moderate, subjective responses to work. On the other hand, individuals with more prestigious and higher paying jobs will be more positive in their subjective responses to work. Finally, we expect poor health to negatively affect subjective responses to work and to self-esteem.

Turning to work conditions and subjective responses to work, we expect workers in more repetitive jobs and those with less autonomy in their jobs to negatively assess their time spent at work, to be less satisfied with their jobs, and to be less confident in their worker identities than other workers. We expect that self-esteem is an outcome positively related to subjective responses to the quality of one's work time, to a worker identity as competent, and to the satisfaction derived from work. Job satisfaction and worker identity as competent will, in turn, be influenced by work conditions. We argue that work conditions influence job satisfaction and worker confidence directly and also indirectly through an assessment of the quality of time spent at work. The quality of time spent at work should help shape the identity as competent and raise job satisfaction. In reference to gender differences, we expect no direct effects of gender on worker identity as competent or job satisfaction, although we do plan to test for these effects. We do expect gender to be significantly correlated with work conditions. The literature suggests that women are less likely to be in autonomous and nonrepetitive jobs than males, and these job conditions may negatively affect assessment of the quality of time spent at work, worker identity as competent, and job satisfaction (Fierman, 1990).

**METHODS**

**Data.** — The data for this investigation were collected in 1992 as the first stage of a five-year longitudinal study of the retirement process. The sampling procedures were designed to identify men and women aged 58 to 64 years who are working at least 35 hours a week and residing in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, North Carolina, metropolitan area. In order to gather a diverse sample of older working men and women we began by obtaining the driver history files maintained by the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles. The file is estimated to include over 80 percent of the entire population in the age group and a higher percentage of full-time workers. Following Dillman (1978), two introductory letters and screening postcards (3 weeks apart) were mailed and follow-up telephone calls made (up to 9 tries) in order to verify telephone numbers and identify full-time working subjects living in the area. We reached our desired sample size of approximately 800 respondents after successfully screening 72.2 percent (4,689) from our original list of 6,497 persons whose ages fell between 58 and 64 (Council of American Survey Research Organizations, Task Force on Completion Rates, 1982). We excluded 3,358 for the following reasons: 1,104 worked less than 35 hours a week; 1,016 had retired; 602 had moved out of the sample area; 348 were either younger than 58 or older than 64; 131 had disabilities and were not working; 114 had died; and 43 were ineligible for other reasons. Of the 1,331 men and women identified by the screening procedures as eligible, 62 percent consented to participate in our two 30-minute telephone interviews (60% of the men, 64% of the women). Interviews were conducted with 826 people. Data analyses were performed using pairwise deletion of missing cases; minimum pair of cases equaled 770.

Our sample corresponds to the population of fully employed men and women between the ages of 58 and 64 years in the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area on age, racial, and marital status distributions. The educational distribution of our sample approximates the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan...
area background for high school graduates and those with some college education, but it underrepresents lower levels (11th grade and below) and overrepresents higher levels (college graduates and beyond). We also find higher proportions in managerial and professional occupations and in upper income brackets.

Variables. — "Self-esteem," derived from Rosenberg (1965), has proven to be a durable and popular measure of a person's summary or global assessment of self. The scale includes 10 items such as "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others," "I am able to do things as well as most other people," and "I wish I could have more respect for myself" (recoded) with four response categories (alpha = .87).

We developed three subjective responses to work. Assessment of the quality of time at work is a scale that begins with the statement, "My time at work is" and is followed by four adjective pairs, "empty–full," "wasted–not wasted," "boring–exciting," "meaningful–meaningless" organized into a 5-space semantic differential format (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, 1957) (alpha = .70, Cronbach, 1951). Job satisfaction is based on a question that asks about how satisfied the respondent is with his/her work and is coded with four categories ranging from "very satisfied" (4) to "very dissatisfied" (1). Worker identity refers to the set of attributes or cognitions that a person uses to describe him/herself in the work role (Reitzes and Burke, 1983). Mortimer, Finch, and Kumka (1982) suggest a multidimensional identity measure. We used the competent dimension and adapted it to the worker role. After the leading phrase, "As a worker, I am ..." the adjective pairs of "active–inactive," "successful–unsuccessful," and "competent–not competent" were organized in a semantic differential 5-point format (alpha = .59). As expected, the three subjective responses to work measures are moderately correlated. Assessment of the quality of time at work is correlated .36 and .47 with job satisfaction and worker identity, respectively, and job satisfaction is correlated .24 with worker identity. The three variables are also related to self-esteem with correlations of .27, .27, and .31 for assessment of quality of time at work, job satisfaction, and worker identity, respectively.

Work conditions were measured by four sets of measures. First, following Kohn and Schooler (1983), we measured nonrepetitive job by asking which of the following best described the respondent’s work: "doing a number of different kinds of things” (3); "doing the same kind of thing in a number of different ways” (2); and "doing the same thing in the same way” (1); occupational autonomy is based on four items with high scores derived from being self-employed or when dealing with a supervisor with whom one is free to disagree, being able to be independent from supervision, and being able to do a job well without being told what to do by a supervisor (alpha = .82). The two measures, autonomy and nonrepetitive job, are only weakly related, with a correlation of .09.

The social background variables were measured with six items. Income taken from a question which asks for the total 1991 household income with 10 response categories ranging from "$7,500 or less" (1) to ‘$200,001 and over” (10). Education is based on the highest grade completed in school and coded in years. Less than 1 percent of the sample self-identified as Asian or as neither White nor African American, so White is a dummy variable (White = 1 and non-White = 0). Female is a dummy variable (female = 1, male = 0). Poor health is a measure of functional limitations based on a 7-item scale of difficulties in activities such as walking, using stairs, standing or sitting for long periods of time, bending, lifting weights up to 10 pounds, and reaching above your head, with three response categories (alpha = .79). Finally, married is a dummy variable where being married is contrasted to other marital states.

Results

Descriptive overview. — Table 1 reports the outcome of our investigation of gender differences in work attitudes and self-esteem, social background, work conditions, and identification variables in the work and spouse roles. Here we use the t-test to compare the means of men and women on our study variables. Beginning with outcome variables, consistent with earlier studies, we find that there are no overall differences in the way that middle-aged working men and women perceive their jobs. Similarly, there are not statistically significant differences between men and women in their self-esteem. However, while there are no overall gender differences in these variables, men and women may still differ in the set of factors that influence their attitudes toward work and sense of self-worth.

Middle-aged working men clearly are advantaged in comparison to women in their socioeconomic resources. They have higher family incomes and a higher percent are married, 92 percent to 57 percent. Men in this sample are also better educated than the women. In addition, men are less hampered by poor health in these middle years than women. Yet, as noted above, these social background advantages do not translate into higher mean self-esteem scores for men.

Turning to work conditions, we find that consistent with their social background advantages, men are more likely than women to hold upper-level occupations, to have nonrepetitive jobs, and to exert more self-direction in their work than women.

Yet means do not tell the full story; different variables in different ways may influence work attitudes and self-esteem. To investigate how background variables, work attitudes, and self-esteem interrelate, we tested the model described in Figure 1 for both men and women. Using Linear Structural Equations (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1988), we determined that the magnitude of effects was similar for both men and women but with two exceptions. These exceptions were the relationship of marital status and job autonomy with self-esteem. The strength of these relationships varied by gender. For ease of presentations, results using ordinary least squares and multiplicative terms for these two paths are reported here. The correlation matrix is available from the first author upon request. We proceed now to the three questions asked: (1) What are the factors that influence the way workers respond to their jobs toward the end of careers? (2) What is the impact of these subjective responses to work together with social background and work conditions on
workers’ overall evaluation of self? and (3) Are there differences in the way work conditions, attitudes, and identity affect the self-esteem of men and women?

For workers to view themselves as competent, the quality of their time at work must have some meaning and count for something. By examining Table 2, we see that by far the greatest education tends to be less satisfied with their work. Other investigators have reported similar findings about the negative association between education and job satisfaction (Glenn and Weaver, 1982; Hodson, 1989; Kohn and Schooler, 1983; Mottaz, 1986). It may be that education works in the opposite direction. Those with the greatest education tend to be less satisfied with their work.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor health**</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married**</td>
<td>51.69</td>
<td>14.05</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>46.26</td>
<td>11.73</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>48.90</td>
<td>13.18</td>
<td>825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income**</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy**</td>
<td>12.24</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>10.72</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>11.45</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonrepetitive*</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent identity</td>
<td>13.94</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>13.96</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>13.95</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of work</td>
<td>17.64</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>17.89</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>17.77</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>34.00</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>34.12</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>34.06</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>820</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01.

Figure 1. Proposed model relating demographic and social characteristics, work conditions, work values, and work attitudes to self-esteem.

Table 2. Predictors of Subjective Responses to Work*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Quality of Work Time</th>
<th>Competent Identity</th>
<th>Job Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.136*</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-.190*</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education**</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>-.107*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor health**</td>
<td>-.063*</td>
<td>-.068*</td>
<td>-.058*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married**</td>
<td>.093*</td>
<td>-.044</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige**</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>-.029</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income**</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.066*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy**</td>
<td>.095*</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonrepetitive*</td>
<td>.129*</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of work</td>
<td>.464*</td>
<td>.357*</td>
<td>.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 770

*p < .10; *p < .05.

But as pointed out above, it is the quality of the time at work that matters most. Persons who assess their time at work in a positive way with meaning and purpose are more likely to be women than men, and African Americans more than Whites. Mature workers may be comparing their time at work to other things they might be doing. For those who are seen as less dominant in the labor force, the comparison group may be others like them but not employed. It is not so much the quality of the time at work in this job versus other jobs, potential or in the past, but rather this job or no job. Many White men between the ages of 58 and 64 working full time may compare this time at work to their earlier work years or to their anticipated retirement years. Married persons too have a positive assessment of their time at work in a positive way with meaning and purpose are those who are sickly find their time at work of lower quality.

Turning to the second question, the impact of these subjective responses to work along with social background
and work conditions on self-esteem, we find that subjective responses to work are among the strongest predictors of self-esteem in the years prior to and proximal to retirement (Table 3). The three variables of quality of work time, worker identity as competent, and job satisfaction add substantially to the explained variance in self-esteem as the $R^2$ doubles from .117 to .233. Both job satisfaction and worker identity as competent, help to bolster the self-esteem of persons who are approaching retirement age, but it is the identity measure that is a particularly potent influence with a standardized estimate of approximately .23 compared to a standardized estimate of .16 for job satisfaction. The quality of the time spent at work also has significant effects on self-esteem, but this variable’s direct effect is only half the size of the effect of job satisfaction and a third the size of having a competent identity. We should recall, however, that the quality of the work time contributed heavily to identity and job satisfaction, and therefore, the quality of the work time has a substantial indirect effect on self-esteem.

It is interesting to note that the effects of several other variables are divided between a direct association with self-esteem and an indirect association. Prestige of the job and income are two examples of this. In the first step, model 1 of the hierarchical analysis, prestige is associated with self-esteem with a beta of .148; by model 3, however, the effect is reduced by 20 percent to .119. Income’s direct effect drops from .134 to .086, 64 percent of its original size. First, the effects of prestige and income are reduced by considering work conditions, that is, the degree of autonomy and the nonrepetitive nature of the work. Second, the inclusion of the subjective responses of quality of work time, worker identity, and job satisfaction reduces the effects of prestige, income, and work conditions on self-esteem. In fact, the effect of work conditions no longer significantly affects self-esteem and only indirect effects remain through the association with quality of the time spent at work.

Poor health also has both direct and indirect effects. The relationship of poor health to self-esteem is little changed by work conditions; however, poor health is related to all three of the subjective responses to work. Poor health lowers the assessment of the quality of the work time, weakens an identity as competent, and reduces job satisfaction. Thirty percent of the effect of poor health is indirect; 70 percent is a direct association (.096/.137) in the model that we analyzed.

Finally, the effects of marital status and gender on self-esteem are complex. The effects are primarily direct, with marginal indirect effects due to the association of gender and marital status with quality of time at work. Nonmarried women in this study have higher self-esteem than others. We have further explored the interaction of marital status and gender in separate analyses available from the first author. We found that the self-esteem of married men and married women were equal, while nonmarried men had lower self-esteem than both married and nonmarried women. Married men and nonmarried men also had equal self-esteem.

In response to our third question, Are there differences in the way work conditions, attitudes, and identity affect the self-esteem of men and women?, the answer is only a partial yes. If men and women were equal on all other variables in the model, women who work full time would have higher self-esteem than men. In addition, women in more autonomic jobs have even higher self-esteem.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study we focused on the experiences of middle-aged workers and investigated factors that influenced their assessment and satisfaction with work, their perceptions of themselves as competent workers, and their overall self-esteem. We view these findings as tentative and recognize that there are limitations. Though several of the scales have good measures of reliability, there has been much less research on workers’ identity measures, and the scale developed can be further refined and its alpha improved. The response rate, as well as the fact that the sample represents only a particular region of the country, restricts the generalizability; however, we have found support for much of what is suggested in the literature for younger workers.

The literature suggested that social background and work conditions are factors that influence subjective responses to work and self-esteem (deVaus and McAllister, 1991; Kohn and Schooler, 1983; Loscocco, 1990). We propose that in addition to these social structural and work environment variables, the ways in which individuals respond to work and establish their self-esteem are influenced by identity processes. Individuals actively infuse their work role with self-meaning and affect that make their time at work more meaningful, increase their job satisfaction, and support an identity as a competent worker. Further, these subjective responses to work increase a sense of self-worth. This sense of self-worth is likely to be important in postretirement activity.

Beginning with the variables suggested in past studies, we found that social background factors had only modest and inconsistent effects on subjective responses to work. Further, in line with past studies we found that despite the fact that men clearly were advantaged in their social background

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**Table 3. Model of the Predictors of the Self-Esteem of Mature Workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.119*</td>
<td>.128*</td>
<td>.102*</td>
<td>.231*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.075*</td>
<td>.075*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor health</td>
<td>-.137*</td>
<td>-.135*</td>
<td>-.096*</td>
<td>-.095*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>-.030</td>
<td>.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
<td>.148*</td>
<td>.133*</td>
<td>.119*</td>
<td>.113*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.134*</td>
<td>.108*</td>
<td>.086*</td>
<td>.092*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonrepetitive</td>
<td>.094*</td>
<td>.061*</td>
<td>.058*</td>
<td>.058*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent identity</td>
<td>.226*</td>
<td>.229*</td>
<td>.229*</td>
<td>.229*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>.155*</td>
<td>.155*</td>
<td>.155*</td>
<td>.155*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of work time</td>
<td>.076*</td>
<td>.074*</td>
<td>.074*</td>
<td>.074*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female X Married</td>
<td>-.183*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female X Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.074*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 =$ .105 .117 .233 .241

$N = 770$

*OLS estimates of standard coefficients. $p = .10$; $p = .05$. 
The relationship of poor health to retirement has been widely studied (e.g., Ekerdt and DeViney, 1993; Hurd, 1990), as well as poor health’s relationship with well-being (e.g., Larson, 1978; and Okun, 1987); however, we see in this analysis how poor health alters the subjective responses to work. As men and women experience functional limitations they begin to see the time at work as less meaningful, in a sense as just not worth it. Unhealthy workers also begin to feel that they are not as competent and active as their coworkers and, overall, workers in poor health find the job less satisfying. It is these processes that help to push the worker into retirement. To the extent a job can be defined so that the tasks will fill the day in a meaningful way, retirement may be postponed or reentry into the workplace may be seen as desirable.

Comparing our results of marital status to that of past research is complicated by the nature of our sample. By restricting the study to full-time workers, we have an atypical distribution on marital status. Ninety-two percent of the women are divorced and another 21 percent of the women are widowed, compared to only 5 percent and 1 percent of the men, respectively. In this group of full-time working women, divorce and widowhood have both necessitated and allowed women to work.

Interestingly, in contrast to past research, we find little evidence that autonomous work conditions contribute to higher self-esteem for men, but among women those with highly autonomous jobs hold the highest self-esteem. We find, similar to Losocco’s (1990) work, that nonrepetitive work contributes to higher levels of self-esteem for both men and women. Work conditions have their most telling influence on the assessment of the quality of work-time. As workers age, repetitive, nonautonomous work weighs heavily in determining the quality of time at work, and we suspect that when the quality is perceived as low, the worker is motivated to retire. If the quality of time in retirement is found wanting to the remembered quality of work-time, the retiree may return to work in some capacity.

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References


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AND
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This is a call for nominations for two of the awards given annually by The Gerontological Society of America for outstanding achievements by its members. These are the Robert W. Kleemeier and Donald P. Kent awards.

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