

# Study to examine impact of culture on aging process

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In the United States, "aging gracefully" tends to imply that we maintain our physical beauty, remain self-sufficient and stay as active as ever. The suggestion, in other words, is that we shouldn't age at all.

Yet in other cultures - such as that of Japan - the same pressure to stay forever young doesn't exist, says renowned University of Wisconsin-Madison aging expert Carol Ryff. With a team of U.S. and Japanese researchers, Ryff is now examining the consequences of cultural differences like this for people's emotional and physical health as they get older.

Called Midlife in Japan, or MIDJA, the new investigation builds on MIDUS, Ryff's groundbreaking longitudinal study of midlife and aging in the United States. MIDUS has already demonstrated that a range of psychological and social factors, such as relationships with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance, are linked to biological markers for stress, immune function and cardiovascular risk. But until now, this hasn't been examined across cultures.

"Through MIDUS we've seen that psychosocial factors do influence health and that this changes over time as people transition from midlife to older age. But we also knew from the beginning that this wouldn't be uniform in various cultures," says Ryff, who is a psychology professor and director of the UW-Madison Institute on Aging. "A central objective of MIDJA is to test whether another set of factors have consequences for health and well-being within the dramatically different social context of

Japan."

Ryff explains that while Japanese society emphasizes filial obligation, interdependence and respect for the elderly, the youth-oriented United States values individualism and independence. A telling illustration of the difference comes from a preliminary study that asked Japanese adults to describe experiences that made them feel happy and good.

Some responses, such as "relaxing" or "enjoying natural beauty," were similar to those of Americans. "But there was a whole category of answers that just isn't found in the United States, which was 'how thankful they are to their parents for giving them life,'" says Ryff. "It shows that in many kinds of everyday ways, there's a deeper appreciation for parents."

Results like these raise another intriguing possibility: "Maybe it's easier to get old in the Japan than in the U.S.," Ryff says. One of MIDJA's main hypotheses is that older Japanese adults will score higher than their younger counterparts on many measures of physical and emotional well-being, whereas Americans will tend to do worse as they age.

To test these ideas, the team will collect survey data from 1,000 men and women, aged 30 to 79, living in Tokyo. The 50-page survey covers comprehensive sets of sociodemographic and psychological factors, as well as self-assessments of mental and physical health. In addition, approximately half of the sample will participate in a study of biomarkers for neuroendocrine, immune and cardiovascular function.

The results will then be compared to data from MIDUS, an ongoing study of more than 7,000 U.S. adults between the ages of 25 and 74. Originally launched in 1995 to explore how various behavioral, psychological and social factors affect who does and doesn't age well, MIDUS has since expanded to include assessments of biomarkers,

cognition and neuroscience parameters.

In recognition of MIDUS's unique, integrative approach to understanding aging, Ryff and her longtime collaborator, Burton Singer of Princeton University, will receive the second Matilda White Riley Award in the Behavioral and Social Sciences from the National Institutes of Health in early June.

"MIDUS studies aging as a holistic process," says Ryff. "Other studies may focus on certain psychological or biological or economic factors, but MIDUS is the one that pulls it all together. Now, with MIDJA, we're extending the scientific scope even further."

MIDJA is funded by a highly selective National Institutes of Health MERIT (Method to Extend Research in Time) Award to Ryff, which guarantees 10 years of research support without the need to write a new grant proposal.

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