

Study explores possible causes of well-being in old age

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Investigators from the UK and China are to analyse the most in-depth surveys on aging ever carried out in both countries to explore what key factors affect the well-being of the elderly. They will also compare differences between the two countries on what it means to be old in research that aims to inform policy makers looking to develop programmes to support the elderly.

The project ‘Understanding Inequality in Elderly Well-being in [China](#) and the UK’ is led by Professor Albert Park, Professor of Economics at the University of Oxford, in collaboration with Professor Y Zhao at Peking University. The international collaboration between researchers in the UK and China will use newly available data to answer global issues about aging and caring for the elderly.

The comparative research project will use two high-quality longitudinal datasets: the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA) and the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS). ELSA is modelled on a similar study in the US (the Health and Retirement Study) and aims to study a sample of people over the age of 50 every two years in order to see how people's health, economic and social circumstances change over time, as well as subjective questions about life satisfaction or feelings of loneliness.

The surveys also include a wealth of other data, such as whether the respondents have links with their community or relationships with family members, and socio-economic factors, education, physical and mental health, social interaction, sex, respondents' ages and family characteristics.

An early analysis of the datasets has already presented some intriguing findings: the English dataset has shown that although wealth could be linked to feelings of well-being, it did not lead to a strong correlation over a longer period of time. The preliminary findings also suggest that social interactions are strongly linked to a sense of well-being.

Meanwhile in the CHARLS pilot study, education was found to be a much more robust indicator of health differences than living standards. As in the UK, links with the community appears to be a key to better health. Those with better memory and cognitive skills also reported a higher participation in social activities, such as locally organised dances. The researchers noted that those living in cities were more likely than those in rural areas to be able to participate in organised social activities.

Professor Albert Park, Professor of Economics at Oxford University and co-director of the CHARLS, said: 'Comparisons between countries can be invaluable for identifying clearly what relationships appear to be universal and which depend on cultural or local factors. China's unique

institutional history and rapid pace of modernisation provides us with a rich laboratory for testing possible determinants of well-being in old age. It has institutions that restrict population mobility, with rich variation in the environments faced by persons living in different parts of the country and in rural versus urban areas.

‘We also want to examine the differences between countries. For instance, is being old and poor a condition that has some universal outcomes or are the local factors more important, so your sense of well-being could depend on whether you live in the UK or China? We might find that elderly poor in the UK are more likely to be socially isolated and in poor health than their counterparts in China where a strong sense of community is still evident, particularly in rural areas.’

The year-long project, led by the University of Oxford, is one of 12 new Pathfinder projects jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) in South Africa that cover a wide variety of topics including wellbeing, social mobility and growth.

Provided by Oxford University

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