

New study links aging with increased trust and well-being

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Getting older doesn't imply becoming cynical and misanthropic, according to research by UB associate psychology professor Michael Poulin and colleagues.

Hollywood has given movie-goers many classic portrayals of grumpy old men—American Movie Classics even maintains a list of the top fifteen film curmudgeons.

But new research suggests that getting older doesn't imply becoming cynical and misanthropic. Instead, aging tends to lead people to become more trusting, says University at Buffalo psychologist Michael Poulin, co-

author of two new studies exploring the relationship between age and trust.

Though trust can have negative consequences, especially among [older adults](#) at risk for exploitation from scams and fraud, the UB research shows that it can also be a resource for well-being. The studies find no evidence that those [negative consequences](#) erode the benefits of trust for older adults' well-being, said Poulin, associate professor of psychology at UB.

"Both studies found a positive association between trust and well-being, which was consistent across the life span, suggesting that trust is not a liability in old age," he said.

"The kindly old man or old woman next door is really not especially likely to yell at the kids to 'Get off the lawn,'" he added.

The studies, conducted with Claudia Haase, assistant professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University, are published in one research paper published online ahead of print in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

In the first study, they looked at the association between age and trust at multiple points in history in a sample of 197,888 individuals from 83 countries.

"The results suggest a positive association between the two. It has been present for at least the past 30 years and the magnitude of the association between age and trust has been about the same," said Poulin. "This suggests that it's not simply about people being born at certain times."

Study two was a representative study of 1,230 individuals in the U.S. that followed the same people over time. This study found they became more

trusting as they aged.

"The study shows that for Millennials, Generation X, and the Baby Boomers alike, levels of trust increase as people get older," said Haase. "People really seem to be 'growing to trust' as they travel through their adult years."

Previous research on the relationship between age and trust has been mixed. The biggest study that had found higher trust with age used a sample from the World Values Survey, which has collected data from around the world since 1981.

"That study used data from one point in that survey," said Poulin. "We wanted to improve on that and get more data, from more countries and more people."

Poulin said there are two completely different possible explanations for any association between age and some phenomenon, such as trust.

One possibility is that the process of getting older leads people to become more trusting. The other possibility is that people born at different times have different levels of trust, a result from having lived in the "good old days" or when times were tough.

"Imagine people born during the Great Depression who had to rely on one another for resources being more trusting than people born in the aftermath of Watergate when we become generally more mistrusting of institutions and each other," said Poulin.

There are two broad explanations for why trust increases across adulthood, Poulin said.

"On the structural side, we know that as people age, they prune their

social networks such that as we get older we interact less with people we find less emotionally rewarding," he said.

The smaller network may leave older adults with a group of people they find trustworthy. So when asked if they trust people more in old age than when they were younger, the response could be due to a social circle comprised exclusively of people they [trust](#).

"The other possible explanation is that older adults are increasingly motivated to give back to others," said Poulin. "One thing that helps motivate giving behavior is the belief that others are good and worthwhile. And so this could be a kind of motivated belief. Older adults want to contribute to people so they believe them to be good and trustworthy."

"We know that [older people](#) are more likely to look at the bright side of things," Haase added. "As we [age](#), we may be more likely to see the best in other people and ignore the little letdowns that got us so wary when we were younger."

Poulin said right now the researchers do not know which of those explanations is true.

"Maybe the next step would be to find out."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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