

UW–Madison researchers expanding study on human resilience

August 28 2012, by Greg Bump

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute on Aging are studying how adults overcome social and economic challenges and whether it matters for their health, with a special focus on human resilience in the face of adversity.

MIDUS (Midlife in the U.S.), a national longitudinal study conducted by the institute, is documenting how Americans age from [early adulthood](#) through later life. The National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health provides funding for MIDUS.

Carol Ryff, director of the UW-Madison institute and Marie Jahoda Professor of Psychology, says the MIDUS study is unique because it measures the resilience of the subjects, not just the negative effects of psychological and [social stress](#) on health.

"Our study went after the positive side as well as the negative," Ryff says. "Many scientists are now working with our data because we have the tools to show that some people are resilient."

For example, although previous studies have shown that people with lower socioeconomic standing tend to have poorer health than people with higher standing, MIDUS has clarified that some educationally or economically disadvantaged individuals are doing quite well in both mental and [physical health](#), Ryff says. The study has also shown that although aging is accompanied by declines in [cognitive abilities](#), some older individuals do not fit this pattern; they maintain high capabilities.

"This maintenance seems to be facilitated by staying mentally engaged as well as by having good [social relationships](#)," Ryff says.

Other types of resilience pertain to doing well as a [cancer survivor](#), or doing well in the face of perceived discrimination. Finally, African-American members of the MIDUS sample have shown multiple strengths, both psychological and biological, in the face of the challenges of minority life.

Researchers are headed back into the field to expand the study, particularly gathering data on the impact of the current [economic downturn](#). Although MIDUS is national, there is a specific focus on Milwaukee's African-American population, where MIDUS researchers previously conducted surveys in 2005 and 2006.

Milwaukee's African-American population is of particular interest because of the myriad challenges the community faces, such as high unemployment among adult males, high infant mortality rates, and the highly segregated nature of the city, Ryff says.

Researchers are currently going door-to-door in targeted Milwaukee neighborhoods to interview subjects for the study. Some study participants will also be asked to travel to UW-Madison to undergo a physical examination. Other universities across the country are also participating in the study.

An article titled "Varieties of Resilience in MIDUS" will be published soon by the journal [Social and Personality Psychology Compass](#). It summarizes the evidence that many people are doing well in the face of challenge.

MIDUS began in 1995 as a study of the influence of psychological and social factors on the aging process. The initial study had a sample of

more than 7,000 adults between the ages of 25 and 74.

A 2004 and 2005 follow-up study expanded to include cognitive assessments in addition to biological and neuroscience measurements. More than 400 publications have been generated by the data, which can be found [here](#).

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

Citation: UW–Madison researchers expanding study on human resilience (2012, August 28)
retrieved 20 September 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-08-uwmadison-human-resilience.html>

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