



OLDER AND HAPPIER

COLLEGE OF MEDICINE RESEARCHERS DISCOVER REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

BY DOUG CARLSON

Gina Sutin and Antonio Terracciano named their daughter, Baia, after a small town near his home in Italy.

For most, the idea of living a long life is a pleasant one. Growing old? Not so much.

College of Medicine assistant professors, spouses and research partners Angelina Sutin and Antonio Terracciano recently created a buzz when they took a closer look at factors related to that paradox.

They didn't set out to help people feel better about getting old, they just had lots of unanswered questions about the correlation between aging and happiness.

They wondered why so many studies say people get less happy as the years go by, when there are so many individual stories that seem to say the opposite. Many people, after all, learn to appreciate life more as they age, not less.

Sutin and Terracciano thought maybe looking at available data from a different angle could offer some insight.

"We were particularly interested in exploring the cohort effect – what impact a person's year of birth has on their overall level of well-being as they get older," Sutin said.

Some previous studies have found that older adults have lower well-being compared to younger adults, but well-being has generally been assessed at just one point in time. By following individuals over the years with a longitudinal design that accounted for cohort differences, Sutin and Terracciano found something altogether different.

“When we looked at it that way it turns out that people, on average, maintain or increase their sense of well-being as they get older,” Sutin said. “But the overall level of well-being depends on when a person was born.”

The research utilized two large-scale longitudinal studies, examining data collected from several thousand people spanning a period of 30 years. Included were more than 10,000 reports about individual feelings of well-being and health.

One, the National Institutes of Health Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging, included nearly 2,300 highly educated people with an average age of 69 living mainly in the Baltimore area between 1979 and 2010.

The other, from the Centers for Disease Control, included a representative sample of the U.S. population involving more than 3,000 adults in their late 40s and 50s.

At first, Sutin and Terracciano looked at the data across the entire pool of participants and found that the older adults reported lower levels of well-being than the middle-aged and younger adults.

Then they looked again.

“When we took into account the year they were born, we saw reports of satisfaction with life increasing over the participants’



lifetime,” Sutin said. The trend remained even when taking into account factors such as individual health, ethnicity and level of education.

What the results suggest is that previous studies may have misattributed a general decline in feelings of well-being to aging. In fact, previous studies may have drawn some flawed conclusions based on the way older people were being compared to younger people.

Such comparisons didn’t take into account initial differences in levels of happiness.

Sutin and Terracciano found that certain generations may have started from an overall lower level of satisfaction due to non-biological factors, such as being born during the Great Depression.

Their study, published in *Psychological Science* and subsequently reported by media outlets worldwide, offers hope even to those born in difficult times. The last decade, for instance, has been a sobering one for many. The specters of terrorism, wars, high levels of unemployment and economic uncertainty have had a profound impact.

Although the research suggests that people born during a troubling period may not catch up in overall level of happiness with those born during times of greater prosperity, there is nevertheless a measurable improvement over time.

“Relative to their starting point, all of the cohorts increased rather than decreased in well-being with age,” Sutin and her colleagues wrote.

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-- Angelina Sutin, Ph.D., assistant professor of medical humanities and social sciences