

Research Report

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College for Human Development professor Jonathan Sandberg is engaged in a long-term research project involving 600 retired couples. The study is designed to help researchers understand the retirement process.

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Following couples through retirement

One hundred years ago, being bored in later life was a luxury of which most people only dreamed. “Things like retirement and Social Security were created in the thirties, forties, and fifties,” says College for Human Development professor Jonathan Sandberg. “So our great-grandparents didn’t have to worry about what they were going to do later in their lives. They were going to work until they died.”

Today, Sandberg says, there is a growing need to understand the retirement process, as aging Baby Boomers become the largest percentage of our retired population. Project Couple Retire, a study Sandberg joined in 1995 as a graduate student at Brigham Young University, follows the lives of 600 U.S. couples between the ages of 55 and 70. Every two years, the couples fill out questionnaires detailing such things as health, marital intimacy, relationships with children, and other aspects of retirement. Project researchers follow up with phone interviews about specific areas.

“It’s important to realize that the idea of older adults withdrawing from society—being lonely, angry, and bitter—is a stereotype and not true for many mature adults,” says Sandberg, who is in his first year with the Marriage and Family Therapy Program of the Department of Child and Family Studies. “Today’s older adult has more opportunities to be engaged in society than in the past. One person I interviewed was a chapter president of the Billy Ray Cyrus fan club and had been to his house in Nashville several times. Her husband was chair of a nationwide junior golf tournament.”

The study does, however, address some problems encountered in retirement. Sandberg spoke with couples in which at least one member was depressed, and compared their responses to those of couples not dealing with depression. “We’re trying to see the differences in communication patterns, the way they solve problems, and differences in the way they relate to each other,” he says. “Most theories about depression have to do with biology or psychology. We believe there is a relational component—how people relate to each other influences the course of a depressive episode.”

Sandberg’s long-term goal is to demonstrate the effectiveness of family therapies in treating later-life illnesses. “Right now, older adults are given medication, and may see a psychologist,” he says. “I’d like us to recognize that changes in relationships—having to withdraw from relationships at work, health limitations, death of friends and family—have a major impact.”

A perk of Project Couple Retire, Sandberg says, is conducting interviews with remarkable people. One couple maintained positive attitudes, even though both had suffered debilitating strokes—the wife on her left side and the husband on his right side. “They said that together, they make up a whole person,” Sandberg recalls. “There are a lot of impressive stories and people like that. It’s always

a treat to hear the wisdom of these people and learn about their past accomplishments and what they still accomplish."

Sandberg traces his interest in aging to his childhood, when he watched his grandmother suffer and eventually die from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. "I witnessed firsthand the problems that occur in later life, the stress these issues place on families, and the joys that come from caregiving," he says.

As an undergraduate taking introductory courses in psychology, sociology, and family studies, Sandberg discovered a link to family therapy, which focuses on working with relationships and healing them. For Sandberg, who grew up in a Colorado family with seven children, the ideas rang true. "As part of a big family, I learned a lot about the way a family interacts in terms of physical and emotional health, growth, and healing," he says. "I've always been interested in trying to make sense out of my experiences."

Sandberg says what happened to his grandmother left him fearful of disease in later life, so he began to study the aging process to overcome that fear. His teaching style reflects that experience. "We really challenge family therapy students to look at themselves and their issues," he says. "The more in touch they are with themselves, the better therapists they'll be."

—MELISSA SPERL AND GARY PALLASSINO

Evaluating global business partnerships

Firms considering joint ventures with foreign companies have a new tool to gauge their chances for success or failure, thanks to research by School of Management professor Shilpa Lele-Pingle.

With Purdue University management professor Douglas Bowman, Lele-Pingle has examined alliances between U.S. and foreign companies in 43 countries. "Firms can't do everything themselves," she says, "so they look for partnerships with other firms, especially in the global arena." The pair found that partnerships formed with marketing in mind—gaining access to a partner's experienced sales force or a new channel of distribution—are far more likely to survive than those created to gain access to manufacturing technologies or cost-effective materials and labor.

Lele-Pingle, who came to SU in July 1998 after earning a Ph.D. at Purdue University, became interested in the international aspects of doing business about 10 years ago, when she observed the influx of foreign firms as the economy grew in her native India. "Global partnerships, marketing relationships, how firms build and maintain relationships—these topics fascinate me," she says.

Her study with Bowman focused on two industries: chemical and allied products, and electric and electronic equipment. Firms in both industries tend to form partnerships, Lele-Pingle says, and comprehensive data were available on each. Lele-Pingle and Bowman looked at 11 years of data from such sources as the F&S Index of Corporate Change and Lexis-Nexis, which contain articles from several hundred foreign and domestic journals, magazines, and newspapers. "It was a laborious job," Lele-Pingle says. "There are no prepared databases for this. We had to wade through thousands of articles and analyze the contents."

One discovery: The risk of terminating a partnership is directly related to the age of the venture. "Initially there's a honeymoon period in which there's a lower risk the venture will break up," Lele-Pingle says. "Then comes a time when there's a high chance the venture will break up." As time passes, however, the chances of breakup are lower because the partners have developed trust and made substantial investments of time and money.



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School of Management marketing professor Shilpa Lele-Pingle examined alliances between U.S. and foreign companies and developed a model to gauge such ventures' chances for success.

Such factors as cultural distance and political instability influence marketing and manufacturing partnerships, Lele-Pingle says. "We found that the more distant a country is from your culture, or the more unstable the political condition, the more likely it is that you're going to hold on to the partnership," she says. "You're not as confident that you have the knowledge to go it alone out there, so you will definitely try to retain a partner who does have that knowledge."

Firms with a marketing motivation rely heavily on their partners' local expertise and access to distribution networks. "If you get out of the venture, you don't have that access," Lele-Pingle says. "Essentially you haven't achieved your objective. The very nature of what you're seeking makes a difference in your role in the relationship."

On the other hand, a company that enters a partnership for its partner's manufacturing techniques could eventually learn what it wishes and no longer be tied to the relationship. In such cases, Lele-Pingle says, the firm sells out to its partner or the venture is terminated altogether.

From their research, Bowman and Lele-Pingle developed a model to calculate the probability of success or failure, given the motivation behind the partnership, the country's political risk, cultural distance, and the structure of the partnership. "These are things a manager can evaluate before committing to a partnership," Lele-Pingle says.

She finds the research aids her teaching, even in the core marketing course she offers. "I try to bring in the idea that you have to have a global perspective," Lele-Pingle says, "even if it's only basic marketing decisions."

—GARY PALLASSINO