

# SLS NEWSLETTER

## NEWS FROM THE SEATTLE LONGITUDINAL STUDY

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

WINTER 2003

### FAMILY SIMILARITY STUDY FOLLOW-UP

In 2003 we will begin the second follow-up of the Family Similarity Study. Participants include adults whose relatives are or have been members of the Seattle Longitudinal Study (SLS). A major objective of the Family Similarity Study is to study the similarity in mental abilities and other psychological characteristics between siblings and among different generations in the same family.

#### Who are the participants in the Family Similarity Study?

##### *Adult Children*

A total of 1181 persons who were adult children or sisters/brothers of SLS participants took part in the first wave of the study (1989/90). They included 780 adult children. The mean age of the adult children was 40 years (Range: 21 - 78 years). Adult sons and daughters were very similar in average age. Over 60% (472) of these adult children are members of the Baby Boomer generation who have birth years between 1946-1962 and are now in middle age themselves.

These adult children live all over the world! Seventy-seven percent lived in Washington state and 23 percent lived outside WA. Many adult children lived in the West, including California (6%), Oregon (3%), Idaho (0.5%), and Alaska (1.5%). A number lived in the Midwest (Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan) and in the East (from Maine to Florida). Among those living outside the U.S., there were adult children living in England, Indonesia, Samoa, and Taiwan.

The adult children are busy people. Of the 63% (492) who are parents, most have 2 children, but over 74 families have 4 or more children. At least one of the participants has 12 children. The adult children also have on average 4 grandchildren, with the range of grandchildren being 1 to 16. Given that

the majority of the adult children were in middle age in 1990, only 3% had retired while the rest are involved in a variety of occupations: Labor and Operators (6%), Service (6%), Craft, Clerical and Sales (20%), Proprietor/Manager (15%), Semi-professional (22%), Professional (14%), Student (3%), and Homemaker (11%).

##### *Siblings*

In addition to the adult children, 401 siblings of SLS participants have been involved in the Family Similarity Study (249 Sisters and 152 Brothers). The mean age of the siblings was 58 years (Range 21 - 88 years). Sisters (57 years) were on average slightly younger than brothers (59 years).

These siblings also lived all over the world! Fifty-six percent lived in Washington state and 44 percent lived outside WA. Many siblings lived in the West, including California (11%), Oregon (7%), Idaho (2%), and Alaska (1.5%). A number lived in the Midwest (Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota) and in the East (from Massachusetts to Florida). All siblings residing outside of the U.S. lived in British Columbia.

(Continued on Page 3)



SLS STAFF. Standing: Walter Eden, Elaine Hardin, Warner Schaie, Sherry Willis, Cherill Perera, Charles Fick. Sitting: Holly Overman, Sara Rosen, Robin Dunlap, Cheryl Guyer.

## Age and Gender Differences in Personality

Participants in both the Seattle Longitudinal Study and those in the Family Similarity Study were sent a Personality Questionnaire. The Personality Questionnaire contained a large number of statements regarding different personality traits (e.g., cooperative, anxious, energetic, etc.). Participants indicated the extent to which they thought each statement represented themselves.

We have examined whether the strength of various personality traits differed by age or by gender. For example, are older adults more likely to perceive themselves as being cooperative than younger adults? Or, are women more likely to think of themselves as anxious than men? Since the Personality Questionnaire has only been given once to SLS participants, it was not possible to study change in personality with age. The findings only indicate how folks at various ages differ in the strength of personality characteristics or how men and women differ.

### *Age differences*

Young adults reported themselves to be more concerned, self-conscious and prone to worry than did middle age or older adults. In addition, young adults reported that they had a greater appreciation for aesthetics, novelty and new ideas and views compared to the reports of middle age and older adults. In contrast, older adults perceived themselves to be more philanthropic, trusting and cooperative, while younger adults perceived themselves to be lower on these characteristics. Likewise, older adults reported being more comfortable with traditional and familiar contexts. Finally, young adults tended to see themselves as more confident, energetic and cheerful, preferring exciting and stimulating experiences - while older adults tended to see themselves as more reserved and independent, needing little excitement for contentment.

### *Gender differences*

In addition to differences between young and old adults, men and women also reported differences in how much various personality traits were perceived to represent themselves. True to stereotypes, women reported feeling a greater appreciation for aesthetics, novelty and new ideas and views, compared to reports of men. Women also perceived themselves as more philanthropic, trusting and cooperative than men perceived themselves. Men, however, perceived themselves

to be more calm, relaxed and less prone to excessive worry, compared to the reports of women. Men believed that they were more likely to make decisions based on facts, rather than emotions, and believed that they were more quick to defend their own interests and beliefs, compared to women's reports.

### *Influence of childhood environment*

In the SLS we have also obtained information on participants' perceptions of their childhood family environment. For example, to what extent did participants think that their childhood family involved a lot of conflict, intellectual stimulation, or fostered achievement motivation? We have examined whether participants' perceptions of their childhood family environment were related to their personality traits

Overall, there were stronger associations between perceptions of childhood family environment and personality traits for young and middle age participants than for older adult participants. These age differences in associations may reflect generational differences in family environment and personality traits. Alternatively, it may reflect age differences in recollections of one's childhood family environment.

Individuals who reported that their childhood family fostered achievement motivation also perceived themselves to be high on personality traits such as being reliable, strong-willed, meticulous, and goal oriented. Adults who recalled their family environment to be one represented by cohesion, conflict or expressivity were more likely to report themselves to be calm, relaxed and even-tempered. Finally, individuals that recalled their childhood family as emphasizing intellectual and cultural issues perceived themselves to be higher on traits such as preference for novelty, appreciation for aesthetics, and eagerness to consider and debate new ideas.

## New Edition of Textbook

Our textbook *Adult Development and Aging* by K. Warner Schaie and Sherry L. Willis has recently been revised and a 5th Edition is now available published by Prentice-Hall. The book was recently translated into Serbo-Croat and a Chinese translation is in preparation.

---

*Research Grant R37 AG08055 from the National Institute on Aging. K. Warner Schaie, Principal Investigator; Sherry L. Willis, Co-Investigator.*

## Generational Similarities in Health Behaviors

Parents attempt to socialize or educate their young children about many things. Sometimes parents attempt to directly teach their children certain behaviors or skills. More often, children learn through observing their parents' behaviors and the values and beliefs reflected in parents' behaviors. One important area of behavior in which parents try to influence their children is with respect to health behaviors - such as nutrition, exercise, and safety precautions.

Most studies of the association between behaviors of parents and their offspring have examined only young children - the period in which parents and children are living in the same household, and hence parents have a strong influence on their children. In the Family Similarity Study we have begun to examine whether there are similarities in behaviors between parents and their adult children - when it may have been many years since parents and their offspring lived in the same household. Are there still associations between the behaviors of older parents and their young adult or middle age offspring? Specifically, we have examined whether there were similarities in health behaviors between parents and their adult children. Domains of health behaviors examined included: Nutrition, exercise, dental care, regularity of medical check-ups and risk behaviors, such as alcohol, smoking, and seat belt usage

One of the most consistent associations between parents and adult children was found in terms of nutritional practices - such as frequency of eating meats (e.g., lamb, pork), cholesterol products (e.g., egg yolks, fat), sodium intake, and attention to nutritional labels. Adult children and parents reported similar nutritional practices. We further examined whether these associations were found between same-sex versus different-sex parent and offspring pairs. Some research suggest that parents and adult children of the same sex (e.g., mother-daughters) may be more similar in behaviors. However, similarity in nutritional practices was found for all types of parent-offspring pairs (mother-daughter, father-son, mother-son, and father-daughter).

Other similarities in health behaviors varied by the particular parent-offspring type. Mothers and sons reported similar types of exercise behavior patterns. Fathers and sons reported similar seat belt behaviors. Finally, fathers and daughters

reported similar health behaviors in terms of dental and medical check-up routines.

In future research, we will examine what factors might influence these similarities between parents and adult children in health behaviors. For example, does more frequent contact between parents and adult children impact similarity of health behavior?. Are certain characteristics of the childhood family environment (e.g., cohesion, expressivity) more likely to be associated with similarity in health practices?

### The Second Generation Study (Continued from Page 1)

The siblings of SLS participants also reported on their families and occupations. The siblings have on average 3 children, ranging from 1 to 10 children. They have on average 5 grandchildren, but the number of grandchildren ranges from 1 to 20. About 18% of the siblings did not have children. The siblings are involved in a variety of occupations as well: Labor and Operators (3%), Service (4%), Craft, Clerical and Sales (13%), Proprietor/Manager (14%), Semi-professional (10%), Professional (9%), Student (2%), and Homemaker (14%). Thirty-four percent of the siblings reported being retired.

### Honorary Degree for Dr. Schaie

The project director for the Seattle Longitudinal Study, Dr. K. Warner Schaie, was conferred the honorary Doctor of Science degree by West Virginia University at their convocation on December 6, 2002. The degree was awarded in recognition of Dr. Schaie's long-term research career in the study of cognitive aging with special mention of the Seattle Longitudinal Study.

### Publication from the SLS

A complete list of publications from the SLS as well as downloadable PDF files of most of these publications can be found on our web site <http://geron.psu.edu/sls>.

#### HELP KEEP US UP TO DATE

If you have moved or changed your name please contact our office at 206-281-4050, write us at 180 Nickerson, Suite 206, Seattle, WA 98109, or e-mail us at [slsnick@u.washington.edu](mailto:slsnick@u.washington.edu)

## Maintaining Contact Among Family Members

One of the most dramatic changes in families has been the geographical dispersion of family members. Relatives are increasingly less likely to live in the same neighborhood, city, or state. Thus, families must remain in contact by means other than face-to-face encounters. How frequently do various family members contact each other? In our increasingly technologically complex society, by what means do family members maintain contact - email, phone, letters, etc.? There is the stereotype that women are the kin keepers in families - is this evident among SLS participants? In the Family Similarity Study, we examined frequency of family contact and the means of maintaining contact.

We found that frequency of contact varied by gender and by the relationship among relatives. As expected the women were more likely than to stay in contact with relatives, and the highest frequency of contact occurred between mothers and

daughters. Similarly, sibling relationships involving sister (both sister-sister and sister-brother pairs) reported more contact. Parents reported greater contact with adult children of the same sex (mother-daughter and father-son), although frequency of father-son contact was much lower than frequency of mother-daughter contact. By contrast, the frequency of contact between parents and adult children did not differ significantly by age of the parent or child.

The mechanism for maintaining contact varied by gender and age. Young adults were more likely to maintain contact via email. In contrast, older parents were more likely to maintain contact by phone or letter. Women reported greater use of the phone for contact, while father reported more contact by letter.

The good news from the SLS is that family members are remaining in touch - even though separated geographically. As in the past, women appear to continue to play a kin keeping role among family members.

Seattle Longitudinal Study  
The Pennsylvania State University  
180 Nickerson Street, Suite 206  
Seattle, WA 98109

Address Service Requested