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Psychology has important role in helping older Americans as they age

Special issue of APA journal reviews psychology's role in promoting health cognition, confronting ageism, ensuring retirement security

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

WASHINGTON -- With more than 13 percent of Americans currently over age 65, and that proportion expected to grow in the coming decades, psychology has played and will continue to play an important part in helping seniors maintain their health, adjust to retirement and prevent cognitive decline, according to the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association.

In a special issue of *American Psychologist*® entitled "Aging in America: Perspectives from Psychological Science," researchers review the current and potential contributions of psychological science to the well-being of older Americans, including promoting healthy cognition, preventing dementia, confronting ageism, recognizing the role of family members in long-term care and ensuring retirement security, both financial and emotional.

"Aging is often viewed in negative terms, with a focus on inevitable physical and cognitive decline, dependence, vulnerability and older adults being a drain on society," noted Deborah A. DiGilio, MPH, director of APA's Office on Aging and one of the scholarly leads on the issue.

"The articles in this issue highlight actions that older adults, professionals and systems can take to promote aging well and to engage older adults as valuable members and contributors to society." said Karen Roberto, PhD, of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, the issue's other scholarly lead.

The idea for the special issue originated from the 2015 White House Conference on Aging, during which APA presented a series of white papers outlining how psychology could help improve the lives of older Americans in the four areas identified as themes by the White House. After the conference, authors of the white papers were invited to expand those papers into full journal articles that comprise the special issue.

"Psychological research on the processes of aging informs how we address critical aging issues that have far-reaching societal impact for years beyond the 2015 White House Conference on Aging," Roberto said. "To further our understanding of the varied and competing issues facing an aging society, the articles in this special issue address individual, societal and technological shifts that influence aging well, including mind, body, wealth and relationships."

Among the nine articles in the special issue:

"Psychology's Contribution to the Well-Being of Older Americans," by Margaret Gatz, PhD, University of Southern California; Michael Smyer, PhD, Bucknell University; and Deborah DiGilio, MPH, American Psychological Association.

In an overview of the special issue, the authors outline some of the areas where psychological research can

contribute to the well-being of older Americans, including promoting healthy cognitive aging, planning for retirement security (both financially and emotionally), reducing vulnerability to financial exploitation and abuse, enhancing good health behaviors, incorporating families into the long-term health paradigm, and reducing the incidence and impact of age discrimination.

Contact: Margaret Gatz

"Financial Exploitation, Financial Capacity, and Alzheimer's Disease," by Peter Lichtenberg, PhD, Institute of Gerontology, Detroit, and Wayne State University.

Financial exploitation of older adults is increasing. Psychologists are skilled in assessing financial decision-making as part of cognitive capacities but have just begun to address this form of elder abuse. This article outlines a new model for evaluating the factors involved in financial exploitation that may lead to more comprehensive assessment and research on these interrelated vulnerabilities. It also calls for financial professionals to be given the tools and training to identify and curb financial exploitation in older Americans.

Contact: Peter Lichtenberg

"Retirement Security: It's Not Just About the Money," by Jacquelyn Boone James, PhD, and Christina Matz-Costa, PhD, Boston College; and Michael Smyer, PhD, Bucknell University.

While there are many guidelines for financial security, there are few for crafting a rewarding life after retirement. Retirement security is often equated with financial status, but security also extends to psychological concerns, such as the need to belong and continue to contribute to society. Ageist attitudes and outdated social structures can impede older adults' engagement in work and volunteer activities. This article summarizes what is known about the current context of retirement, identifies barriers to psychological security later in life and suggests how psychologists can help remove these barriers and support retirees' meaningful engagement.

Contact: Jacquelyn Boone James

"Caregiving Families within the Long-Term Services and Support System for Older Adults," by Sara Honn Qualls, PhD, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

Families provide most of the long-term care of. Because family caregiving emerges from a historical relationship and is so common, the needs of families are often unnoticed. Serious illness brings major role shifts, and psychologists can assess family needs and provide key support services when needed. This article outlines the role of family members as caregivers for older adults while identifying policy and practice barriers to integrating them into care structures and systems.

Contact: Sara Honn Qualls

Other authors contributing to the special issue are Kevin E. Cahill, PhD, Boston College; Sara Jane Czaja PhD, University of Miami; Todd D. Nelson, California State University - Stanislaus; Joseph F. Quinn, PhD, Boston College; Karen A. Roberto, PhD, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; and Glenn E. Smith, PhD, University of Florida.

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