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Research study finds Americans are more optimistic about the future than Canadians

Middle-aged citizens of the United States have faith in the American dream and believe that it will continue into the future, despite greater adversity in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession.

That sense of optimism was among the key findings of a research paper soon to be published in the *Journal of Aging Studies*. A trio of researchers, led by Dr. Susan McDaniel, Canada Research Chair and director of the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy at the University of Lethbridge, asked middle-aged Canadians and Americans what they anticipate in their future lives and in the future lives of their children when they reach middle age.

American respondents worried about their own future financial security and retirement but they expressed optimism about their children's futures. While Canadian respondents also subscribed to the belief that hard work and sacrifice will lead to a better future for their children, many of those interviewed expressed doubt about their children's prospects, and more Canadians thought their children's lives would be a real struggle.

"Now they're saying 'Maybe my kids won't be better off than me,'" says McDaniel. "If you're still working hard and sacrificing but your kids are not gaining, what does that mean in the long run? This could be a long-term shift and we're beginning to dig into these questions in this study."

The researchers also found that the intergenerational contract, which implies that the young will support the old, that adult children will leave the family home and become independent, and that older people will retire to make room for younger workers, is shifting and changing.

"The old assumptions that younger or working people will support older people are not working out that way at all," says McDaniel. "The support is going the other way."

In this prospective life course study, McDaniel and Dr. Amber Gazso, York University, and Dr. Karen Duncan, University of Manitoba, interviewed people ranging in age from 45 to 64 in 2013, a few years after the 2008 economic recession. The respondents came from two socio-economic classes in comparable cities in the U.S. and Canada.

McDaniel can't say whether Canadians are more pessimistic or just more realistic than Americans. The after-effects of the Great Recession are still being felt in the U.S., especially with regard to housing foreclosures, defunct pension plans and massive numbers of discouraged workers who have given up job searching.

"The unemployment rate is lower than it has been but many people argue that's because so many people have given up finding work. Whether we understand the longer-term implications of all that, we don't know," she says.

While the researchers can only speculate about the future, McDaniel says social policy-makers may find they need to do some major rethinking of social programs. If young people experience an incomplete launch into adulthood or their career paths are bumpy and they don't accumulate a pension, their prospects in middle age or older could be dim indeed.

"So many things are shifting here that it may be true that we're going to see a whole different ball game in terms of opportunities for those young people today when they're old," says McDaniel. "In that case, we might have to re-examine a whole lot of things in terms of policy, planning and thinking."

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