



CONSORTIUM of SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATIONS

Setting the Record Straight on “Wasteful Research”

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Federal “Match.com” for Seniors? A Conversation with Dr. Lisa Neff

Support for fundamental, basic research has been an essential function of the federal government for decades. The National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, and other federal agencies invest in scientific research that has led to some of our country’s most important innovations. Support for basic research has the potential to change the way we live, create new knowledge, solve societal challenges, and help us to better understand our world.

Still, some policy makers routinely dismiss projects as “wasteful” without attempting to fully understand their potential benefits to society or the progress of science. Through this series, COSSA is providing an opportunity for researchers to set the record straight about the value and potential of their work, and confronting misconceptions about social science research funded by the federal government.

THE PROJECT:
Understanding Age-related Changes in Relationship Maintenance Strategies¹ (2015)

FUNDING AGENCY:
National Science Foundation

AWARD AMOUNT: \$511,623

FIELD(S) OF STUDY:
Social Psychology, Human Development and Family Sciences

SOURCE OF ATTACK:
Sen. James Lankford’s (R-OK) *Federal Fumbles: 100 Ways the Government Dropped the Ball* (2015)

COSSA: Describe your research project in your own words.

LISA NEFF: Our project compares the relationship coping strategies of older and younger couples, both married and dating, to examine potential age-related changes in how we approach relationship conflicts, as well as the implications of different coping strategies for emotional and physical well-being. We are particularly interested in the relationship experiences of older (age 60+) dating couples. Recent decades have seen a dramatic rise in the prevalence of dating in later life. Despite these societal trends, our understanding of how older adults maintain satisfying dating relationships is limited. Although research on marriage and dating has much to say regarding the coping behaviors that create happier, healthier relationships, this research has focused overwhelmingly on the relationships of young adults. Thus, we don't know how well these findings generalize to an older population. Our project hopes to fill this gap and provide a better understanding of the factors that promote healthy relationships in later life.

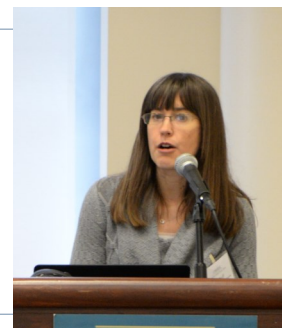
COSSA: How did you first learn that your project had been singled out?

NEFF: My program officer at the National Science Foundation informed me that our project was featured in a teaser video Senator Lankford had published in anticipation of the official release of his wastebook. Thankfully, she was incredibly supportive and made it clear that NSF was prepared to defend the work. She also offered advice on how to work with our university public relations team, should we get calls from the media. I truly appreciated her support as it helped to alleviate my stress quite a bit. Representatives from the American Psychological Association and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology also reached out and offered assistance.

“Given the importance of relationship quality for health and well-being, it is imperative to understand the relationship experiences of older adults.”

- Dr. Lisa Neff

Lisa Neff, University of Texas at Austin, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences. She has conducted extensive research on marriage and family relationships, with a focus on understanding how marriages change and develop over time. Dr. Neff has served as an expert consultant for the Strengthening Healthy Marriage project, sponsored by the Administration on Children and Families, and has been the recipient of numerous awards for her contributions to relationship science, including the Caryl E. Rusbult Early Career Award from the Society of Personality and Social Psychology.



COSSA: What are some of the potential benefits, impacts, and/or applications of the project (keeping in mind, Reader, that this is basic research)?

NEFF: Recent census data has identified two trends which will create a new set of public health challenges for our nation: the aging of the American population and the fact that older adults today are less likely to be married than older adults of previous generations. Together, these trends are concerning, as a wealth of research indicates that high quality romantic relationships allow individuals to thrive both emotionally and physically. Healthy relationships have been linked to improved cardiovascular health and immune functioning, lower levels of depression, and reduced mortality risk. In fact, the effect of relationship quality on mortality risk is actually larger than the effects of a variety of other negative health behaviors, such as smoking, excessive drinking, and obesity. Given the importance of relationship quality for health and well-being, it is imperative to understand the relationship experiences of older adults. For instance, we currently know very little about whether a satisfying dating relationship may offer the same health benefits to older adults as marriage. Even more troubling, we also know very little about the factors that may help individuals form and maintain a satisfying, healthy relationship in later life. Given the new era we are in, in which older adults are more likely than ever to be unmarried and dating, research on these issues is timely and essential.

COSSA: How could your project contribute to further progress of science?

NEFF: Unfortunately, most research on marriage and dating has focused almost exclusively on the relationships of young adults. This means that interventions designed to help people have happier, healthier relationships are being informed by studies conducted on a limited segment of the population. By examining the relationships of older adults, our project brings a much needed lifespan perspective to the field. Our work has the potential to fine-tune current theories of both aging and relationship development. Thus, we hope to improve our understanding of how relationships change across the lifespan, as well as the effects of these changes on health and well-being.

Through this project, we are also able to mentor the next generation of scientists, as there are a number of graduate and undergraduate researchers who are helping to conduct the study.

COSSA: What did the critics get wrong/right about your research?

NEFF: The summary in the wastebok correctly identified the title of the project, the source of funding, and the expected duration of the project. It also correctly noted that one of the goals of the project is to examine how the manner in which individuals' approach conflict may change as we age. However, the wastebok summary goes on to suggest that we are "playing date-doctor" and using taxpayer money to run a "federal Match.com for seniors" (pg. 77). This criticism is unfounded, as

we certainly are not setting people up on dates as part of the study.

COSSA: Was any effort made to contact you to gain clarity about the project prior to publicly singling it out?

NEFF: Neither Senator Lankford nor anyone in his office contacted us prior to publishing the wastebok. The attack came as a surprise to us.

COSSA: What impact, if any, has this attack had on you, your research, your collaborators or this project?

NEFF: Fortunately, the attack has not hampered our ability to move forward with the study. In fact, it has proven to be an important learning experience for the students working in my lab. Before we were targeted, I always made it a point to talk to my lab about the history of these types of attacks and the need for social scientists to advocate for the value of our work to the community. In the 1970s, a study of love and attraction was the first recipient of Senator Proxmire's Golden Fleece awards. In the early 2000s, a study of the early years of marriage came under fire by Rep. Neugebauer. Thus, when we were targeted in Senator Lankford's wastebok, my students appreciated the importance of advocacy on a deeper, more personal level. Unfortunately, despite the fact that so many politicians argue for the value of marriage and family in American society, there seems to be an unwillingness to support the science that will allow us to help people form better, more lasting relationships.

COSSA: Is there anything else about this experience you wish to share?

NEFF: Although this experience has been stressful and disheartening in many ways, in other ways it has inspired me to be more proactive in raising awareness for the value of this type of research. Over the past several months, I have given numerous lectures throughout my local community on the nature of the project and what we hope to accomplish. The feedback we have received has been incredibly encouraging and supportive. The project resonates with older adults, who often comment on the potential value of the work for their lives. Through these lectures, I have been reminded of why I embarked on this research in the first place.

¹ http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1451492



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