



# Kellogg Health Scholars

*Connecting Academe, Community, and Policy*

M E E T   T H E   K E L L O G G   H E A L T H   S C H O L A R S

## Besangie Sellars, Ph.D.

Besangie Sellars is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Kellogg Health Scholars Program at the Center for Minority Health, University of Pittsburgh. She received her bachelor's degree in psychology from Hampton University, and her master's and doctorate in developmental psychology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. "My research focuses on the role of social support in the lives of older African Americans," she explains, "and how it affects psychological and physical well-being."

As a young African American woman, Sellars became interested in this topic when thinking about the health and well being of the older adults in her family. Armed with the knowledge that African Americans had higher incidence of co-morbidities likely to prove fatal, as well as higher incidence of mortality throughout the lifespan, she homed in on the psychosocial factors that were associated with optimal lifespan development and aging. "The ultimate goal of my research is to increase the number of healthy, high-functioning older African Americans by identifying healthy developmental factors over the lifespan," Sellars says. "The historical context of the individual can help us understand outcomes later in life."

### Research and Results

Social relations have always been of interest to Sellars. "Virtually no one exists in a silo. Individuals interact with each other, and influence each other -- both positively and negatively," she explains. Her dissertation research was the springboard to her current interest in healthy development. She investigated demographic variations in self-reported masculine and feminine traits (e.g. aggressive, gentle) over a period of 12 years, and the role that social relations played in owning those traits. Examining the development of self-perception over time led her to further involvement with how such perceptions among older adults have adjusted across the whole lifespan, and might result in optimal aging.

Sellars has worked on several projects investigating how social support fosters resilience and contributes to positive health outcomes among older adults. For

example, her work with resilience and aging demonstrated that among individuals who had high levels of adverse events, quantity and quality of social support was associated with lower depressive symptoms.

As a Kellogg Scholar, Sellars is working on one project that investigates factors associated with use of medical services and participation in medical research, and another that looks at variations and similarities in profiles of older African American and Caucasian men. Both studies will employ data collected via random digit dial methodology in Allegheny County, PA.

Finally, she is beginning a study reflecting her original interest in older African American men and the social supports they identify as integral to healthy development.

## Policy Implications

While policies often address how government can create structures to better serve those in need, Sellars' research is focused on the community level, where resources can be provided to individuals and their support networks. Similar to the aging in place programs, she advocates strengthening the human and community resources surrounding older adults to improve their health and well being, as well as strengthening networks available through churches and community organizations. Her work also leads her to support home and community-based waivers, where individuals can receive services while remaining in their familiar environments with continuing access to their own networks.

To learn more about Besangie Sellars, Ph.D., and her work, contact her at [besangie.sellars@gmail.com](mailto:besangie.sellars@gmail.com) and/or consult the following selected publications:

Jackson, J.S., Antonucci, T.C., Brown, E.E., Daatland, S.O., **Sellars, B.** (2008) Race and ethnic influences on normative beliefs and attitudes: Toward provision of family care. In (Eds.) A. Booth, A.C. Coulter, S. Bianchi, & J.A. Seltzer. *Intergenerational Caregiving*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.

Fuller-Iglesias, H., **Sellars, B.**, Antonucci, T.C. (2008) Resilience in old age: Social relations as a protective factor. *Research in Human Development*, 5(3), 181 – 193.

To learn more about the Kellogg Health Scholars Program, contact Barbara Krimgold of the Center for Advancing Health at [bkrimgold@cfah.org](mailto:bkrimgold@cfah.org) or visit [www.kellogghealthscholars.org](http://www.kellogghealthscholars.org).