UC SANTA BARBARA
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The Work of a Lifetime

Every day, stigmatized people — the overweight, gay, minorities — face assaults on their self-esteem. And yet they display a striking resiliency. Brenda Major wants to know how they do that — and she's spent 40 years studying it.

"I'm really interested in how people cope and adapt to adversity," said Major, a distinguished professor in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences.

In honor of her decades of work, the International Society for Self and Identity (ISSI) has honored Major with its Distinguished Lifetime Career Award. The award "recognizes a scientist who has made outstanding contributions to our understanding of self and identity throughout their career," according to the organization.

Major, who describes herself as an experimental social psychologist, will be honored at the ISSI's Society for Personality and Social Psychology preconference in New Orleans in February 2020.

"I'm proud, humbled and deeply honored to have received this award for the work that I've been doing on identity and how people protect and maintain positive identity in the face of adversity and social stigma," Major said.

Most well-known for her work on stigma and stigmatized populations, she studies what she calls the "psychological immune system, these things that we do to protect ourselves psychologically in the face of various threats to our identity."

Major’s current research involves a large survey of resilience in low-income minority students. The study follows them through college, paying attention to markers of inflammation, stress and more.

“We’re basically looking at who’s doing well,” Major said, “who’s doing poorly and can we predict that from the first week of school, and over time, what happens to them at college. There’s going to be a lot of really interesting data coming out of there.”

Michael Miller, professor and chair of the Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences, called the award a fitting tribute to her work and contributions to psychology.

“Everyone within the department was delighted to hear about this prestigious award to Brenda,” he said. “She is one of the world’s leading scholars on social stigma and how people maintain their self-esteem in the face of discrimination and other negative life events, and her impact on the field of social psychology cannot be overstated. Brenda continues to be a great source of pride and inspiration to all of her students and colleagues.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.