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BY JOHN W. ROWE

BOOK REVIEWS

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As we strive to understand aging or the antecedents and the natural history of disease, longitudinal studies play an essential role. They eliminate the confounding cohort effect of factors such as environmental exposure, economics, and nutritional differences that weaken the effectiveness and value of one-time cross-sectional studies of different age groups. Yet, despite their obvious value, there is a downside to longitudinal studies. They take a long time, and answers are slow in coming. It is difficult to keep subjects in the study. Perhaps most important, longitudinal studies are expensive and difficult to keep funded. In this regard, George Vaillant and colleagues deserve special credit for maintaining the support pipeline over numerous decades.

Vaillant, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard, explores both these strengths and weaknesses in Triumphs of Experience, his must-read discussion of the granddaddy of all longitudinal studies: the Harvard Study of Adult Development. He offers a compelling history and analysis for anyone interested in adult development, aging, and disease prevention as well as specific topics such as alcoholism and the impact of religion and spirituality on well-being. In addition to assembling reams of data, the study’s investigators also conducted face-to-face interviews with participants. Vaillant builds on the richness of both data collected and interviews by weaving them together as engaging life summaries of many of the study’s subjects.

For example, the impact of the study findings regarding the influence of a warm or cold childhood on life-course development is especially well drawn with two contrasting life summaries—one of a famous person (Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes), who had one of the warmest childhoods in the study, and Sam Lovelace (pseudonym), whose childhood was loveless.

Vaillant is well positioned to write this account because he has been involved with the study since 1966 and served as its director for many years. As he describes in the book, the Harvard Study of Adult Development is actually two studies. The first, known as the Grant Study, recruited 268 white Harvard men from classes graduating between 1939 and 1944. The first men were recruited as sophomores seventy-five years ago, and the remaining survivors from that group are ninety-one years old today. Over time, the Grant Study’s organizers became increasingly interested in the impact of socioeconomic status on adult development, and therefore they wanted to broaden their sample beyond the privileged group enrolled at Harvard. So in 1970 they merged their work with Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck’s study of 456 white urban men from underprivileged Boston neighborhoods. This study had begun in 1940.

The Grant Study thus has become important not only for its length but also for its unusual samples. It is tempting to criticize the Grant Study for what began as a highly selective sample of Harvard men, but that was the point. It initially followed those people best positioned for optimal physical, mental, and social aging, so that researchers could identify which specific factors actually enhanced and mitigated that outcome. The study has measured adult development by looking at factors such as income; success in work, love, and play; participants’ relationships with their children; the quality of their marriages; and even being listed in Who’s Who.

Early predictors of successful development that emerged in the study included “attachment,” such as a warm childhood and adult relationships; mature defense mechanisms and coping strategies; and overall physical and psychological well-being during college. In contrast, participants’ social class and physical and psychosomatic features have turned out not to be predictive of successful development. The study has also delved into areas such as psychoanalysis. Specific questions have explored participants’ defense mechanisms, coping strategies, and relationships with their parents.

Taking advantage of the study’s extraordinary length, Vaillant and his colleagues also analyzed data according to different phases of their subjects’ lives. Thus, we see the factors that predicted physical health at age fifty-five (mainly mental health) and those factors that predicted how well the same people would function at age eighty (mainly physical health). When it came to predicting longevity, additional factors emerged, including education and personality, whereas the quality of the participants’ childhood and their religious and political beliefs had no effect.

Some of the study’s findings are novel—for example, that the age of one’s maternal grandfather at death predicts one’s own life expectancy. Some findings have conflicted with the general literature; exercise and social supports don’t seem to make a big difference in
long-term outcomes. Others are very consistent with the literature, underscoring that smoking and drinking too much alcohol are bad for health and longevity, whereas warm relationships are good.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the study is the sheer number and variety of its findings. We learn that confirmed alcoholics rarely return to social drinking stably—one of many findings that became clear only after prolonged follow-up. We also learn that childhood trauma, such as loss of a parent, divorce, acute illness, or injury, is less important over time. It is the positive experiences that endure—proving that “what goes right is more important than what goes wrong.”

These lessons run like a common thread through the landmark study over many decades: Adult development continues well beyond adolescence. If you study people long enough, they change. For example, the aforementioned Lovelace, who suffered a cold and loveless childhood, went through early and midlife unsuccessful in work and love. At age thirty-nine he described himself as “lonely, rootless, and sort of disoriented.” But decades later he was gradually transformed. He became socially active and successful. He was elected to chair the board of a large social agency and was physically and emotionally robust. Vaillant states that when he interviewed Lovelace just before his eightieth birthday, “he looked younger than he had twenty-five years before.”

Although many of the specific findings are of interest, for me a striking lesson lies in the durable evidence that individuals continue to change in many ways into late life. This certainly underlines the great value of a long-term longitudinal approach to the study of adult development.

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