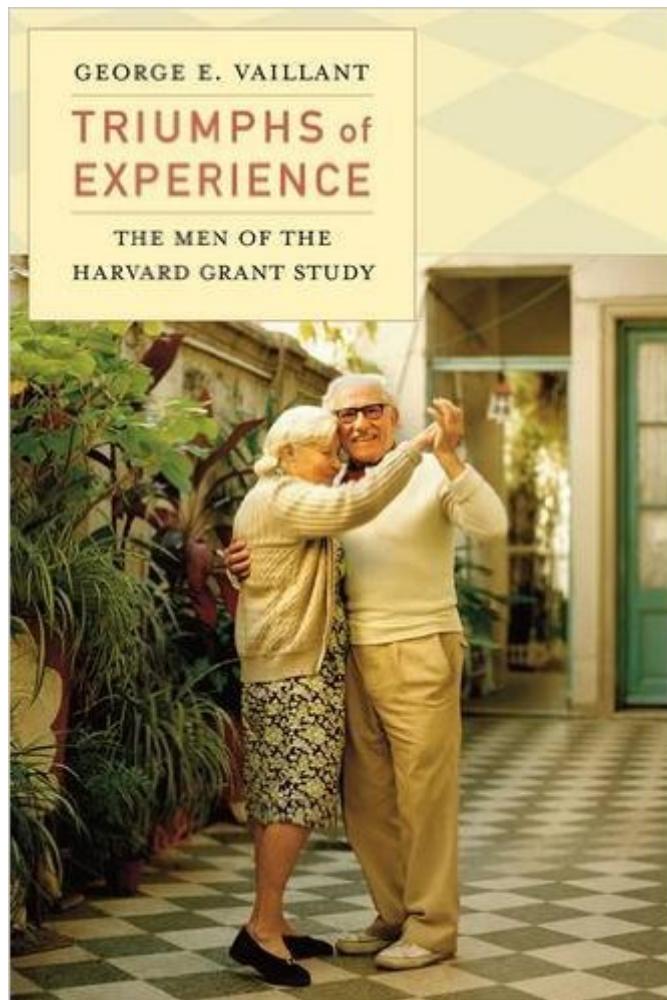


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Triumphs Of Experience: The Men Of The Harvard Grant Study



Synopsis

At a time when people are living into their tenth decade, the longest longitudinal study of human development ever undertaken offers welcome news for old age: our lives evolve in our later years and often become more fulfilling. Among the surprising findings: people who do well in old age did not necessarily do so well in midlife, and vice versa.

Book Information

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: Belknap Press; Reprint edition (May 4, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674503813

ISBN-13: 978-0674503816

Product Dimensions: 8.5 x 5.4 x 1.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 starsÂ ¤ See all reviewsÂ ¤ (97 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #62,988 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #39 inÂ Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Developmental Psychology #39 inÂ Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Research #40 inÂ Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Psychology & Counseling > Research

Customer Reviews

Some of the oldest and most contentious debates on human beings centre around the relative influence of heredity (genetics), environment and individual voluntary action on growth and development. These include whether mental illness has genetic origins, what factors determine "success" in life, and whether adults continue to "develop" as they grow older (or whether all development happens before a certain age). These questions cross disciplinary boundaries as they involve concepts from psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and genetics. Great thinkers like Freud and Erikson made significant contributions to these debates, but many of their contributions were based on intuitive theorizing rather than rigorous empirical evidence. With time and careful research, some of their theories have been upheld, and others disproved! The studies that have made the most impact are longitudinal studies in which a carefully chosen cohort of respondents was tracked periodically over an extended period of time. The Harvard Grant Study One of the most well known of these studies is the Harvard Grant study which commenced in the late 1930s and early 1940s and continues till this day. The survivors of the cohort (who were Harvard sophomores when they were recruited) have now entered their 90s, and the data collected therefore allows several inferences to

be drawn on adult development. George F. Vaillant was the director of the Harvard Grant Study for over two decades. His latest book, *The Triumphs of Experience*, presents the latest findings. I found it a fascinating read as it not only uncovers new insights, but also questions some of the conclusions reached at earlier stages of the study.

Well, start with full disclosure: I'm a Harvard man too, from a much later class than the subjects of this study. But the study consciously sought the *crème de la crème*: the students with the best physical, social, and intellectual profiles. With my notably modest accomplishments in all those areas, I'd never have gotten near the study. So, what does it prove that a very elite group of people mostly did well in life? Not much. The interest attaches to the few who did NOT do so well. Many transcended a rough childhood, but few could manage a lifetime of being locked in self, or a lifetime of drinking too much, or a lifetime of defending oneself too successfully against love and companionship. Some did find love and/or sobriety late, but personality mattered. A simple metric--extraversion minus neuroticism on the standard personality scale--predicted an awful lot. Another reviewer has pinpointed some problems with the statistics here. I would add that scoring big, vague, fuzzy concepts as if they were precise is always problematic. The study did its best--using independent raters, over time--and I think did a very good job, but between this scoring and the problem of using simple bivariate statistics, I sometimes wondered about the conclusions. There is also the problem that the study researchers ran, apparently, hundreds of correlations, so when something shows up as significant at .01, you should be a bit skeptical. Striking, though, are the many that showed up significant at .001, a rather rare thing in psychology. One problem is the list of defenses. Some are "immature," including "autistic fantasy," whatever that is; how is it different from ordinary fantasy?

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