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Triumphs Of Experience: The Men Of The Harvard Grant Study



Synopsis

At a time when many people around the world are living into their tenth decade, the longest longitudinal study of human development ever undertaken offers some welcome news for the new old age: our lives continue to evolve in our later years, and often become more fulfilling than before. Begun in 1938, the Grant Study of Adult Development charted the physical and emotional health of over 200 men, starting with their undergraduate days. The now-classic *Adaptation to Life* reported on the men's lives up to age 55 and helped us understand adult maturation. Now George Vaillant follows the men into their nineties, documenting for the first time what it is like to flourish far beyond conventional retirement. Reporting on all aspects of male life, including relationships, politics and religion, coping strategies, and alcohol use (its abuse being by far the greatest disruptor of health and happiness for the study's subjects), *Triumphs of Experience* shares a number of surprising findings. For example, the people who do well in old age did not necessarily do so well in midlife, and vice versa. While the study confirms that recovery from a lousy childhood is possible, memories of a happy childhood are a lifelong source of strength. Marriages bring much more contentment after age 70, and physical aging after 80 is determined less by heredity than by habits formed prior to age 50. The credit for growing old with grace and vitality, it seems, goes more to ourselves than to our stellar genetic makeup.

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Customer Reviews

George Vaillant tells the story of the Grant Study men through age 91. This is, arguably, the most

important study of the life course ever done. But it is, inarguably, the one most brimming with wisdom. If you are preparing for the last quarter of your life, this is a MUST read. (Martin Seligman, author of *Authentic Happiness*)

Vaillant's fascination with the human condition and his deep insights about development make him a great storyteller, adept at elegantly conveying the essence of humanity. (Laura L. Carstensen, Director, Stanford Center on Longevity)

A fascinating account of the 268 individuals selected for the Harvard Study of Adult Development | Vaillant has done a wonderful job summarizing the study, discussing its major findings, and communicating his enthusiasm for every aspect of the project, which became his life's work starting in 1966. The study has been investigating what makes a successful and healthy life. Initially, this meant looking for potential officer material for the military. Vaillant established what he called 'the Decathlon of Flourishing'—a set of ten accomplishments in late life that covered many different facets of success.

With humor and intriguing insights, the author shows how progress in health studies and the passage of time contributed to the constant 'back and forth between nature and nurture.' During Vaillant's tenure, human maturation and resilience became the focus, and now biology is reasserting itself in the form of DNA studies and fMRI imaging, the seeds for future research. The author considers the study's greatest contributions to be a demonstration that human growth continues long after adolescence, the world's longest and most thorough study of alcoholism, and its identification and charting of involuntary coping mechanisms. Inspiring when reporting these successes, his personal approach to discovery repeatedly draws readers in as he leads up to the account of his realization that the true value of a human life can only be fully understood in terms of the cumulative record of the entire life span. Joyful reading about a groundbreaking study and its participants. (Kirkus Reviews (starred review) 2012-09-01)

Of the 31 men in the study incapable of establishing intimate bonds, only four are still alive. Of those who were better at forming relationships, more than a third are living. It's not that the men who flourished had perfect childhoods. Rather, as Vaillant puts it, 'What goes right is more important than what goes wrong.'

The positive effect of one loving relative, mentor or friend can overwhelm the negative effects of the bad things that happen. In case after case, the magic formula is capacity for intimacy combined with persistence, discipline, order and dependability. The men who could be affectionate about people and organized about things had very enjoyable lives. But a childhood does not totally determine a life. The beauty of the Grant Study is that, as Vaillant emphasizes, it has followed its subjects for nine decades. The big finding is that you can teach an old dog new tricks. The men kept changing all the way through, even in their 80s and 90s. (David Brooks New York Times 2012-11-05)

Vaillant concludes that personal development need never stop, no matter how old you are. At an advanced

age, though, growth consists more in finding new hues and shades in one's past than in conceiving plans for the future. As the Harvard Study shows with such poignancy, older men treat what lies behind them much as younger men treat what lies ahead. The future is what young men dream about; they ponder the extent to which it is predetermined or open; and they try to shape it. For old men, it is the past they dream about; it is the past whose inevitability or indeterminateness they attempt to measure; and it is the past they try to reshape. For the most regret-free men in the Harvard study, the past is the work of their future. (Andrew Stark Wall Street Journal 2012-11-02)

To avid consumers of modern happiness literature, some of Vaillant's conclusions will seem shopworn ('Happiness is love. Full stop.'), while other results of the Grant Study appear to confirm what social science has long posited--that a warm and stable childhood environment is a crucial ingredient of success; or that alcoholism is a strong predictor of divorce. But what's unique about the Grant Study is the freedom it gives Vaillant to look past quick diagnosis, to focus on how patterns of growth can determine patterns of wellbeing. Life is long, Vaillant seems to be saying, and lots of shit happens. What is true in one stage of a man's life is not true in another. Previously divorced men are capable of long and loving marriages. There is a time to monitor cholesterol (before age 50) and a time to ignore it. Self-starting, as a character trait, is relatively unimportant to flourishing early in life but very important at the end of it. Socially anxious men struggle for decades in emotional isolation and then mature past it--relatively speaking. Triumphs of Experience is not only a history of how the Grant men adapted (or not) to life over 70-plus years, but of how author and science grew up alongside them. Yet what unifies Triumphs is the same question posed originally by Bock, the study's founder: What factors meaningfully and reliably predict the good life? Vaillant's mission is to uncover the 'antecedents of flourishing.' (Dan Slater Daily Beast 2012-11-07)

George Vaillant's book on the development and well-being of a longitudinal sample of men, now in their nineties and studied regularly since they were undergraduates at Harvard University, reads like a riveting detective tale... He has a thought-provoking story to tell about the lifelong significance of loving care... Brief life-story vignettes illustrate movingly how adult development and maturation is a lifelong process that strongly relates to the transformative power of receiving and giving love... [The book's] well-evidenced wisdoms on the significance of nurturing relationships offer new multidisciplinary perspectives on the complex issue of nature versus nurture (much needed at a time when medical science and genetics once more dominate studies of human development) and on the lifelong costs of childhood emotional neglect. (E. Stina Lyon Times Higher Education 2012-12-13)

Triumphs of Experience elegantly summarizes the findings of this vast longitudinal study, unique in the annals of research...[The] book analyzes how the men fared over their late adulthood, and indeed their entire

lives. In it, Vaillant masterfully chronicles how their life successes, or lack thereof, correlate with the nature of their childhoods, marriages, mental health, physical health, substance abuse, and attitudes. Extensive quantitative findings are interspersed with the detailed stories of individual study participants...Here Vaillant proves that his skills are literary as well as scientific. The case histories are engaging novelistic capsules that artfully bring the quantitative material to life...Many of its findings seem universal. If they could be boiled down to a single revelation, it would be that the secret to a happy life is relationships, relationships, relationships...The other overarching message of this book is that resilience counts...Vaillant is that rare thing: a psychiatrist more interested in mental flourishing than in mental illness. With *Triumphs of Experience*, he has turned the Harvard men's disparate stories into a single narrative and created a field guide, both practical and profound, to how to lead a good life. (Charles Barber Wilson Quarterly 2013-01-01) In *Triumphs of Experience*, Vaillant elegantly and persuasively brings us an answer to the question that launched a thousand snake-oil salesmen: what makes for a successful and happy life? ...[An] engaging work. There are regrettably few studies of this magnitude and even fewer accounts that so ably synthesize the broader insights with the moving parts. (Christopher Croke The Australian 2013-02-09) Reading like a storybook, the case histories of the individuals provide fascinating insights about how the subjects tackled challenges or succumbed to setbacks. Vaillant superbly explains how these lifelong experiences sculpted these men's final years. Readers can learn more about themselves and what they may expect from life by reading this revelatory and absorbing book. (Aron Row San Francisco Book Review 2013-02-18) Offers broadly applicable evidence about how everything from early maturity to grandparents' longevity is likely to affect flourishing throughout life...It is hard to overstate the wealth of the data provided in *Triumphs of Experience* or the ambition of the project, composed of survey responses, health records, and interviews. This archive of human life is poised to answer questions shorter studies can barely hint at...Vaillant offers striking conclusions about a range of factors affecting human flourishing. (Adam Plunkett New Republic online 2013-03-22) This fascinating book of 'numbers' and 'pictures' is the final summary volume of a longitudinal psychosocial study focused on the optimum health of 268 males from Harvard College classes...This book is well worth reading for the discoveries contained in its pages; it has the potential to advance knowledge about adult development. (J. Clawson Choice 2013-04-01) The factor Vaillant returns to most insistently is the powerful correlation between the warmth of your relationships and your health and happiness in old age. (Scott Stossel The Atlantic 2013-05-01)

George E. Vaillant is Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

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. The Harvard Grant Study draws its conclusions from rigorous multivariate analysis, but Vaillant presents the findings with a distinctive and rare combination of statistical rigour and empathy for his subjects - in addition to tables containing the statistical results, there are profiles (disguised, of course) of different respondents of the study, and these give the reader a sense of being part of the study team. The original design and subsequent evolution of the study show how much our models of adult development have changed over time. At the time the study started, physical constitution and mental health indicators were expected to be important predictors of subsequent progress of the study. Parental/family relationships and childhood upbringing were thought to be unimportant. Yet, the latest Harvard Grant Study findings show that loving relationships during childhood are important for longevity and success in life.

Findings of the Harvard Grant Study

Some of the important findings of this study reported in *The Triumphs of Experience*:

- Individuals develop through their adult lives as well, not only up to the stage of adolescence.
- The impact of childhood trauma decreases over time; more importantly, the positive experiences of a loving childhood have enduring impact.
- Being well integrated and self-driving while young helps people live longer.
- Divorce led to happier marriages than the bottom third of sustaining

marriages. Alcoholism had bigger negative impacts than measured by most previous studies. It accounted for more than half of the divorces in the Grant Study. The study shows that it is unlikely that alcoholics can return safely to social drinking, thereby upholding the methodologies followed by organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous. The involuntary coping styles predicted by Freud exist, and they are important for human effectiveness. Important Lessons for Management of Long-term Research Programs

The Harvard Grant Study is interesting from a research management perspective as well. Over its 70+ year lifespan so far, the study has transcended several research directors and team members, but the integrity of the study has not been compromised. George Vaillant estimates that about \$ 20 million has been spent on the study over time, with an average cost of \$10,000 per research paper published. The study has had different sponsors at different times, and while the study had to adapt itself to the priorities of these sponsors (such as a major retailer, cigarette company and a program against alcoholism), it still managed to sustain the collection of data related to its core research questions. With its emphasis on the choice of appropriate control variables and other related issues of study design, this book is a great primer on how to design and adapt longitudinal research studies for maximum research impact.

Rishikesh Krishnan, IIM Bangalore

I'm a father of two boys. I read this book because I wanted to see if there were seeds I could plant now, while they are young, that would bear fruit 40 or 60 years from now. I wondered what could do now to help them live full and meaningful lives. I also wondered if I would be able to avoid making mistakes. For those reasons, I read this book slowly, taking nearly a year to read every word. I can't help wonder if the time thinking about this was more fruitful or the data in and of itself, but of course the answer is both. Taking the time, thinking about these men, and imagining how the lessons learned could be grafted into the lives of my sons has been incredibly helpful. And I am so very grateful that George Valliant wrote this book. It did not chart a map, but it set a course that affirmed over and over again that the things you get right matter more than the things you do wrong and love is enough to bring about great joy.

This book is a fascinating study of 268 men who were followed since 1938. It shows how actions one takes at one point in their lives effects what happens later in life. It also asks interesting questions about correlations between things. For example, do people who exercise regularly healthier or do people who are healthier exercise more? Which is the cause and which is the effect? These are the types of questions that are answered. This book would be interesting to someone who

wants to know about the long term effects of certain things (marriage, exercise, smoking, drinking, education etc.) on men who are starting from a position where they should have some control over their own lives. i.e. white men who graduate from college with good prospects in front of them.

At the age of 56, I find it quite encouraging to learn that there is scientific proof that men continue to grow and change throughout their lives, that positive experiences have more influence on later life than negative ones, and that love can always grow and love begets love. Thank you Dr. Vaillant for this enriching study of lifetimes. Someday I hope such studies will span not just lifetimes but epochs, as Robert Heinlein so beautifully depicted in Time Enough for Love. Thank you again.

Triumphs of Experience is a trove of wonderfully interesting data. It's presented with verve and enthusiasm, though it is at heart a non-fiction affair with a very human, reasonably typical cohort. Mr. Vaillant has an obvious affection for the study and its participants. He's forthright concerning the misapprehensions and foibles that drove his own development over the course of his administration of the study, and generally engaging owing to his depth and the inevitable appeal of this sort of undertaking. The author's approach, both to the work and to his own advancing years, is optimistic regarding the process of aging. If the book suffers from his presentation in any way, it is the effort Mr. Vaillant dedicates to convincing his readers that maturity is less a process of deterioration than one of continued development that is at least as rewarding as the experience of youth. It's a rationalistic approach that is at odds with common expectations; I'm not sure he pulls it off. It's a great read at any rate, well worth the time spent as both an empirical parsing of a mountain of useful and interesting data (for cynics and materialists), and an uplifting counter to the expectation that life is less fulfilling beyond the age of fifty.

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