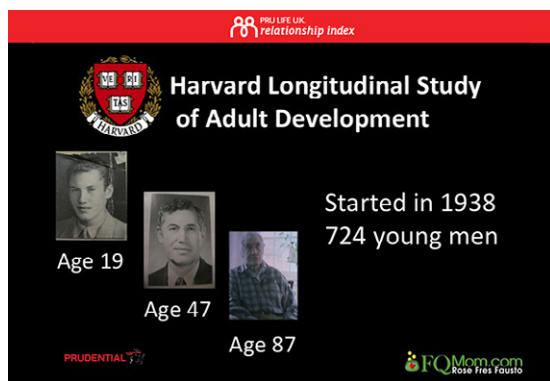


HAPPINESS AND GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

The central topic of my previous newsletter was a comprehensive study of the relationship between income and happiness. This study revealed that income relates positively to happiness, albeit up until a certain point: the satiation point. In my next articles I will address a further question: what factors-other than income-contribute to happiness?

A fascinating study, started in 1939 and still running today⁽¹⁾, provides one answer to this question. The Harvard Study of Adult Development has successfully tracked participants (and their offspring) for the past 81 years, providing considerable insight into the key factors that influence our happiness. To underpin the value of its findings, I will briefly describe the key details and methodology of this study first.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development



A team of researchers at the Harvard Medical School started to track a total of 268 Harvard graduates from the classes of 1939 to 1944, along with 456 young men who had grown up in the impoverished parts of inner city Boston at the same time⁽²⁾. At its start, the study – in the words of its third director, George Valiant – was “an attempt to transcend medicine’s usual preoccupation with pathology and learn something instead about optimum health and potential and the conditions that promote them⁽³⁾.”

Although the intention from the start was to follow its participants for a long time (being a “longitudinal” study), it is still amazing that it is continuing today. Its continued success is due to sufficient

funding; researchers taking project responsibilities over when their colleagues had stepped down or passed away; and last but not least, participants continuing to participate⁽⁴⁾. Under the leadership of the current director, Robert J. Waldinger (the 4th director of the project) a “second generation” study has started, with children and spouses now being subjects as well⁽⁵⁾.

The data the researchers collected from the start were about participants’ physical and mental health. The men had to complete physical examinations, somatotyping and home interviews.

This was followed up by⁽⁷⁾:

- Every 2 years – questionnaires asking about health, marital quality, career or retirement enjoyment and so forth;
- Every 5 years – health information collected from the men and their physicians;
- Every 5-10 years – in-depth interviews with most of the men about their relationships, careers and how they were adjusting to the aging process.



(6)

1), 5) “Good genes are nice, but joy better” by Liz Mineo, Harvard staff writer 11 April 2017

2), 3) “The triumphs of experience” by George E. Valiant

4) TED TALK Robert Waldinger “What makes a good life?” 23/12/2015

6) Image Harvard Medical School

7) Massachusetts, General Hospital, Harvard Medical School, 22 Dec 1977



Adult Development

When the Harvard Adult Development Study started, the idea that adults develop as people was new if not non-existent. However, the researchers learned from the collected data that (young) adulthood (whether reached by 16, 18 or 21) is by no means an “end stage”. To the contrary: growth and development continue, in response to cultural and societal changes as well as the process of aging itself ⁽⁸⁾.

This provides confirmation of e.g. Erik and Joan Erikson’s theory (first formulated in 1950 and then further expanded) that from (young) adulthood onwards, several more stages can be recognized ⁽⁹⁾, each stage with its own challenges, our responses affecting our sense of well-being.

Results

Over the decades, the data show that the men have entered all walks of life. Some became doctors, lawyers, businessmen; one became president of the USA. Some became alcoholics, had disappointing careers or descended into mental illness. Some of the Harvard sophomores would not have a successful career at all; whereas some of the young inner-city participants would proceed to follow very successful career paths ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The current director, Dr. Waldinger, continued his predecessor’s efforts to share the findings of this project with the public. His TED talk garnered more than 13 million views by April 2017 ⁽¹¹⁾.

Waldinger is very clear that the data of this comprehensive study reveal that rather than wealth, fame or a successful career, *the important ingredient for long term health, well-being and happiness is the strength and quality of one’s relationships with family, friends and community.*

In fact, again according to Waldinger, when the study’s participants were in their early fifties, the quality of their relationships was a better predictor of their health, well-being and happiness later in life than their cholesterol level ⁽¹²⁾.

For the record, good relationships (couples were videotaped) by no means meant that the relationships were smooth. As Waldinger says *“some of our octogenarian couples could bicker day in and day out. As long as they felt they could really count on the other when going got tough”*⁽¹³⁾

Furthermore, retirees who made new friends (to replace old colleagues) were happier and healthier than those who left work and placed less emphasis on maintaining strong social networks.

“The clearest message that we get from this 75-year study is this: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.”—Robert Waldinger, director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development

Further confirmation of the Harvard Study of Development results

The conclusions of Dr. Waldinger by no means stand on their own. Numerous psychological studies confirm his findings as reported e.g. by Emma Seppala in her excellent book *“The Happiness Track”* ⁽¹⁴⁾. Her book explores how studies show that lack of social relationships constitute a major risk factor for health; that social isolation accelerates the physiological decline of aging and that loneliness harms our psychological wellbeing. Together, this leads her to say that rather than self-focus it is *“the other focus”*, especially in the form of compassion which leads to tremendous benefits and ultimate happiness ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Conclusion

Both the data of the Harvard Study of Development as well as numerous psychological studies show that good relationships are a major contributor to our happiness.



(16)

8) *“The triumphs of experience”* by George E. Valiant

9) Wikipedia, Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012

10), 11), 12), 13) *“Good genes are nice, but joy is better”* by Liz Mineo, Harvard staff writer 11 April 2017

14), 15) *“Happiness Track”* by Emma Seppala, PH.D., 2017 edition by Piatkus

16) From www.carebook.com

Frank van Lerven CFP®

