The demographic and social structures of most industrialized and developing countries are changing rapidly as infant mortality is reduced and population life span has increased in dramatic ways. In particular, the oldest-old (85 years and older) population has grown and will continue to grow. This segment of the population tends to suffer physical and cognitive decline, and little information is available to describe how their positive and negative distal experiences, habits, and intervening proximal environmental influences affect their well-being and how social and health policies can help meet the unique challenges they face. Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old is the outcome of a four-day workshop attended by U.S. and Israeli scientists and funded by the U.S.-Israel Binational Science Foundation to examine both novel and traditional paradigms that could extend our knowledge and understanding of the well-being of the oldest old. This book engages social scientists in sharing methods of understanding and, thereby, possibly improving the quality of life of older populations, especially among the oldest old.

Leonard W. Poon is University of Georgia Distinguished Research Professor and Professor of Public Health and Psychology. He is also Director of the Institute of Gerontology and the Georgia Geriatric Education Center, Chair of the Faculty of Gerontology, and Executive Director of the International Centenarian Consortium. He was Director of the Georgia Centenarian Study, funded by the National Institutes of Health, from 1988 to 2009. Dr. Poon’s primary research interests are longevity and survival of the oldest old by using a multidisciplinary approach to examine the contributors and predictors of functional capacities, life satisfaction, quality of life, personality, and ability to cope, as well as genetics, environment, and neuropathological contributions to longevity. His other research interests are normal and pathological changes in memory and learning, the impact of exercise on cognition, and clinical diagnosis of early dementia. He has received more than 33 research grants and has published more than 160 articles and books.

Jiska Cohen-Mansfield is Professor in the Department of Health Promotion at Tel Aviv University and Professor at the George Washington University Medical Center. She is also Chair of the Department of Health Promotion and Director of the Herczeg Institute on Aging at Tel Aviv University and was previously Director of the Research Institute at the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington. Her awards include the Recognition Award for Outstanding Contributions in Gerontological Research from the Maryland Gerontological Association (1994), the Barry Reisberg Award for Alzheimer’s Research for advances in nonpharmacological research and clinical treatment from Hearthstone Alzheimer’s Family Foundation (2003), the award in appreciation of outstanding contribution from Psychologists in Long Term Care (2007), and the M. Powell Lawton Distinguished Contribution Award in Applied Gerontology from Adult Development and Aging, American Psychological Association (2010). She has published around 300 articles and books and is the coeditor of Satisfaction Surveys in Long-Term Care (with F. K. Ejaz and P. Werner). She is a highly cited researcher as listed by the Institute for Scientific Information.
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Edited by

Leonard W. Poon
University of Georgia

Jiska Cohen-Mansfield
Tel Aviv University and George Washington University
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CONTRIBUTORS

ALEX J. BISHOP, PH.D. Assistant Professor, Human Development and Family Science Department, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma

SARA CARMEL, PH.D. Professor of Medical Sociology and Gerontology, Center for Multidisciplinary Research in Aging, and Department of Sociology of Health, Faculty of Health Science, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

JINMYOUNG CHO, M.S. Gerontology Program, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

JISKA COHEN-MANSFIELD, PH.D. Director of the Herczeg Institute on Aging, Professor and Chair of the Department of Health Promotion at the School of Public Health, Herczeg Institute on Aging, and the Department of Health Promotion, Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

ADAM DAVEY, PH.D. Associate Professor, Department of Public Health, College of Health Professions and Social Work, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

NEHA DESHPANDE-KAMAT, Gerontology Program, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

CHRISTINE L. FRY, PH.D. Professor Emeritus, Loyola University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

DOROTHIHAUSMAN, PH.D. Associate Research Scientist, Department of Foods and Nutrition, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

HAIM HAZAN, PH.D. Professor of Social Anthropology and Sociology, Department of Sociology and Anthropology and Herczeg Institute on Aging, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel
Contributors

Lee Hyer, Ph.D. Professor of Psychiatry, Georgia Neurosurgical Institute and Mercer University School of Medicine, Macon, Georgia

Charlotte Ikels, Ph.D. Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio

Maria C. Isales, M.P.H. Institute of Gerontology, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

Mary Ann Johnson, Ph.D. Bill and June Flatt Professor of Foods and Nutrition, Department of Foods and Nutrition, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

Howard Litwin, D.S.W. Professor, Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, Israel Gerontological Data Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel

Maurice Macdonald, Ph.D. Professor and Director, Family Studies and Human Services, College of Human Ecology, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas

Jennifer A. Margrett, Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Human Development and Family Studies and the Gerontology Program, College of Human Sciences, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

Peter Martin, Ph.D. Professor and Director, Gerontology Program, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

Benjamin T. Mast, Ph.D. Associate Professor, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky

Galit Nimrod, Ph.D. Lecturer, The Guilford Glazer School of Business and Management, Department of Hotel and Tourism Management, and the Center for Multidisciplinary Research in Aging, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

Yuval Palgi, Ph.D. Department of Psychology and Hertzeg Institute on Aging, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

Leonard W. Poon, Ph.D. Distinguished Research Professor and Director of the Institute of Gerontology and the Georgia Geriatric Education Center, Institute of Gerontology, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

Grace da Rosa, M.S. Gerontology Program, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa
Contributors

Elisabeth Lilian Pia Sattler, B.S. Pharm. Department of Foods and Nutrition, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia

Ciera V. Scott, B.A. Research Coordinator, Georgia Neurosurgical Institute, Macon, Georgia

Dov Shmotkin, Ph.D. Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, and Senior Researcher, Herczeg Institute on Aging, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

Amit Shrira, Ph.D. Department of Psychology and Herczeg Institute on Aging, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

Catherine A. Yeager, Ph.D. Georgia Neurosurgical Institute and Mercer University School of Medicine, Macon, Georgia
To grapple with the meaning of well-being is to seek understanding of the human condition when the glass is nearly full. Not surprisingly, this rich and challenging issue has engaged philosophers for more than 2,000 years. In our contemporary era, well-being has become a prominent focus of research that spans the scientific disciplines – it has become empirically tractable. Well-being is now studied with the same fervor once restricted to obviously objective facts, such as rates of death and disease. The field of aging was surprisingly prescient in recognizing the importance of well-being from the outset. Classic studies in social gerontology dating back to the middle of the past century were fundamentally concerned with understanding old age not simply as a process of decline and deterioration but as an experience of meaningful inner evaluations and satisfactions. These initial ideas have been extensively elaborated in subsequent decades, and entire literatures of aging and well-being have now been assembled.

This book carries the study of well-being into important new territory. By focusing on the oldest old, that historically unprecedented stretch of living, the authors address some of the most fascinating questions imaginable: Is well-being possible at the very end? For whom? What is the shape and form of positive experience when life is nearly over and the future has been swallowed by the past? Multiple chapters, crafted by notably thoughtful scholars, probe theoretical meanings of well-being and how it is possible in the face of adversity and consider the adaptation processes by which very old people draw on their distant past and their immediate resources to make lives go well. Of particular interest are excellent contributions dealing with the effects of past life trauma on the oldest old, including how such experience is integrated into one’s life narrative. Variability is a persistent theme, from those whose survival is robust and vital to those who are embattled and demented.
Contemporary science affords opportunities to explore critical influences on well-being among the oldest old, and these are richly arrayed in the book. Such factors are wide ranging, from the basics of nutrition and dietary intake to the importance of cognitive vitality, social relationships, spiritual and religious connections, and leisure activities. Clearly, the pathways to well-being in the very late decades of aging are many, as are the routes away from it toward despair and suffering.

 Appropriately, the book begins and ends with the central challenge – namely, how to define and measure well-being. That is the ultimate question, and as illustrated by the outstanding work in this book, there is no single right answer. There are many ways to know well-being, some of which are likely to be experienced only at the end of a long life, when much has been lost and yet there remains a powerful will to continue living. The authors and the editors of this fine collection have elevated the discourse and the science. Well-being, in their hands, with their late life focus, has never been a more penetrating subject.

Carol D. Ryff, Ph.D.
Director, Institute on Aging
Professor of Psychology
University of Wisconsin-Madison