UNDERSTANDING WELL-BEING IN THE OLDEST OLD

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.

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Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old

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Understanding well-being in the oldest old

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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.

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