

This Week's Citation Classic™

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Vaillant G E. *Adaptation to life*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977. 396 p.
[Harvard University, Cambridge, MA]

The lives of college men, selected for health and prospectively followed for three decades, are examined. The powerful associations between ego mechanisms of defense, mental health, and maturity are analyzed. Defense mechanisms are validated by behavioral and psychobiographical methods rather than by metapsychological inference. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this book has been cited in over 255 publications since 1977.]

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"During my psychiatric residency, I became interested in the natural healing processes that could be observed in mentally ill adults who were followed for decades. Because of this interest, I welcomed the chance to study the extensive dossiers of 268 'normal' college sophomores, selected for mental health, who had been prospectively followed for three decades. These life records had been assembled by the staff of the Harvard Study of Adult Development (HSAD) under the successive directorships of Clark Heath and Charles McArthur. Although I had had no experience in the initiation of longitudinal studies, I had devised certain methods for harvesting them. These methods included keeping the data analysis as simple as possible, paying attention to global outcome variables, and setting greater store by how people behaved than by what they said or how they performed on pencil and paper tests.

"As a way of organizing the HSAD data, I studied the ego mechanisms of defense used by the men in their efforts to master difficulties in their lives. Although selected for mental health and favored by social privilege, these

men had all met severe difficulties. By taking a longitudinal approach—by focusing on life course—I made their invisible defenses apparent by 'triangulation' of biography, autobiography, and creative (pathologic) product. In other words, by contrasting the objective biographical facts of their lives both with subjective autobiographical statements and with odd or unusual behaviors, it was possible to obtain better consensual validation of defense choice than had been previously achieved by others. I then correlated individual defense choice with age, with psychopathology, and with adult success at working and loving. This produced an empirically derived hierarchy of defenses. By studying the men's lives over time, it was possible to see one defense evolve into another; it was even possible to see personality disorder evolve into creative adaptation.

"I suspect that the book's frequent citation in part reflects increased popular interest in adult development. However, because the book is limited to one sex, one social class, and one birth cohort, its value in this area is limited. Since then, I have replicated the findings in a cohort of inner city men.^{1,2} I hope that the book is also cited because it elucidates the importance and clinical validity of defenses and because it helps to rescue the Freudian baby from being discarded with its bathwater. In 1978, a reviewer for *Contemporary Psychology* (vol. 23, p. 538) wrote, 'Psychologists scientifically or professionally concerned with human development will find little in the way of evidence or insight in Vaillant's offering.' I am glad that the book's frequent citation suggests that this judgment was too harsh. I am also glad that the scientific community appears to value a work that insists that the brain is affected by the heart."

1. Vaillant G E & Milofsky E. Natural history of male psychological health: IX. Empirical evidence for Erickson's model of the life cycle. *Amer. J. Psychiat.* 137:1348-59, 1980.
2. Vaillant G E. *The natural history of alcoholism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983. 359 p.