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BOOKSHELF

'The Origins of You' Review: From Bud to Blossom

Examining the data to determine the degree to which our childhood personalities and behaviors predict our adult selves.

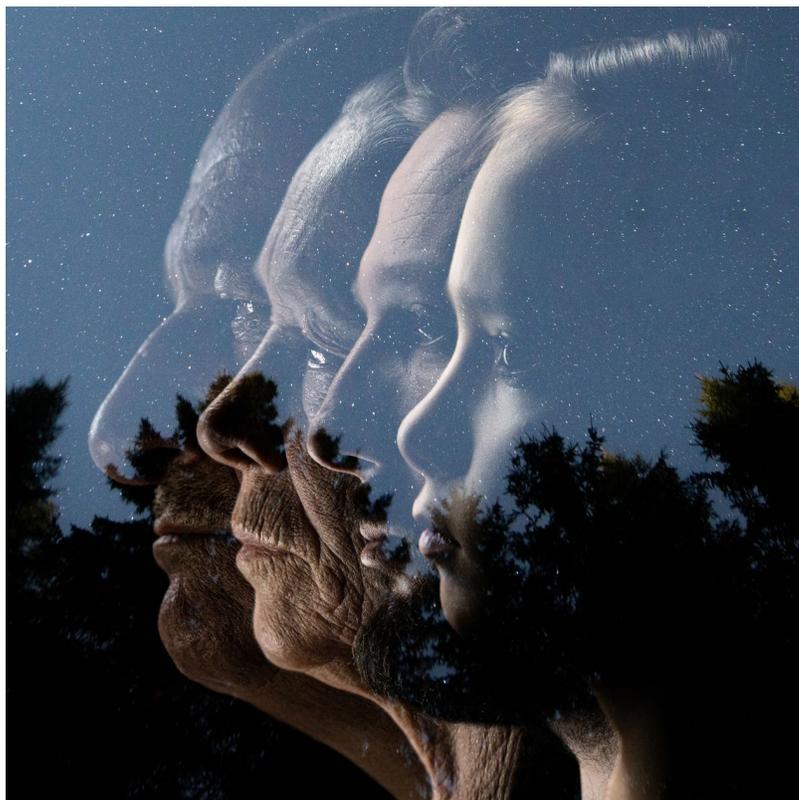


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By John Donovan

Aug. 25, 2020 6:15 pm ET

Beginning on April 1, 1972, and over the next full year, slightly more than 1,100 babies were born at a single hospital in Dunedin, New Zealand, a city comparable in size to New Haven, Conn. Today, deep into middle age, these same individuals have lived varied lives, and, in many cases, landed far from Dunedin. A sizable number, 166, were living in Australia as of 2019, while 26 were in the U.K., 10 in the U.S., 4 in Canada and another 20 or so scattered across Africa, continental Europe, the Middle East and South America.

That such information exists on a set of people connected only by the circumstances of their birth suggests someone has been keeping track of them all their lives. Someone has. “The Origins of You: How Childhood Shapes Later Life” is a book-length discourse on “how we become who we end up being” that relies heavily on cooperation from that cohort of New Zealanders enrolled as infants in the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study.

A remarkably high percentage of the original “study members” continued showing up at two- to three-year intervals to be prodded and probed, measured and scanned, tested and scored. The most recent assessment concluded in 2019, with a 94% participation rate. As the members passed through adolescence and became adults, seemingly every aspect of their lives continued to be recorded: pregnancies conceived, crimes committed, dreams fulfilled. So were accounts of their moods, incomes, dental health, DNA and faith in God—and that only scratches the surface of what they shared with researchers.

More than 800 academic papers have resulted over the last four decades, and now this book, co-authored by four psychologists specializing in human development. Three of the four, Avshalom Caspi, Terrie Moffitt and Richie Poulton, have played leadership roles in the project. The fourth, Jay Belsky of the University of California Davis, also brings in his work on a 15-year longitudinal study in the U.S., as well as a separate British study focused on twins.

Mr. Belsky, who conceived of this book and did the actual writing, is one of psychology’s superstar researchers. He is controversial for his work in the U.S., which found that longer hours spent in day care during the first 4.5 years of life predicts higher levels of aggression and disobedience in children, and then, during adolescence, risky and impulsive behavior. Unwelcome in many quarters, that finding nevertheless relied on the unique advantages of the longitudinal model for studying development, which the New Zealand project epitomizes. As the authors argue persuasively, the longitudinal approach has distinct benefits compared with “retrospective research,” in which “the potential causes of later social, emotional, and cognitive functioning, or even of physical health, are not measured when they occur.”

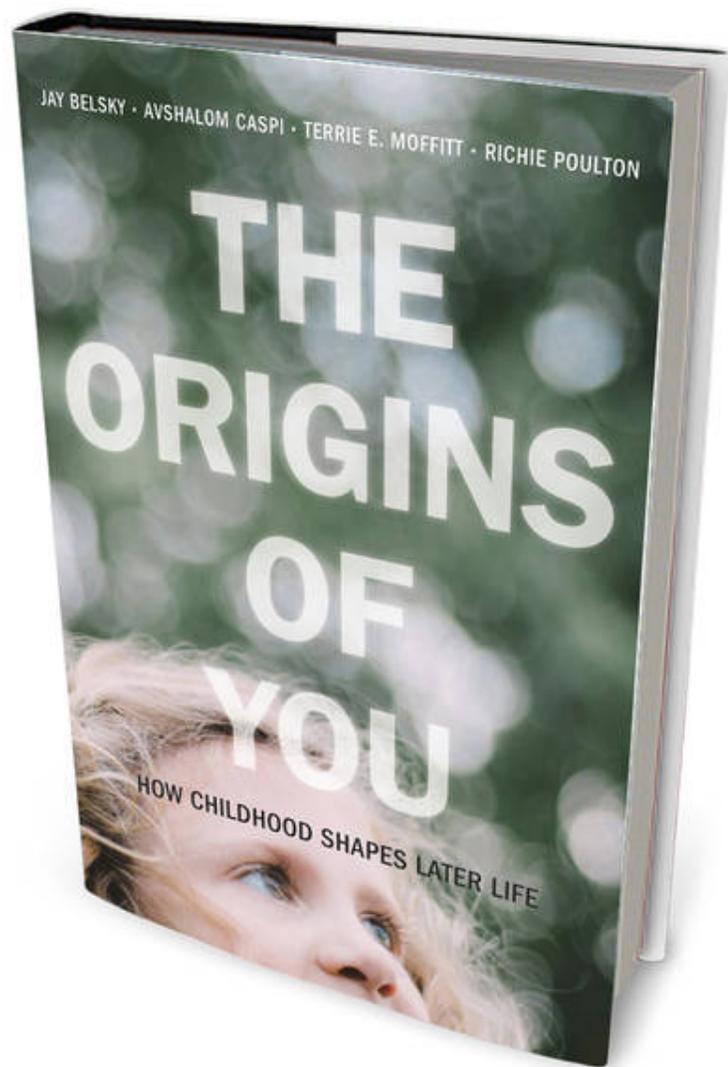


PHOTO: WSJ

THE ORIGINS OF YOU

By Jay Belsky, Avshalom Caspi, Terrie E. Moffitt & Richie Poulton
Harvard, 410 pages, \$35

By contrast, researchers engaged in longitudinal work are right there with their subjects when key “experiences, exposures, and early-life functioning” are happening, taking measurements and filling notebooks. Researchers can’t know what information will turn out to be important and are thus, perhaps, less influenced by confirmation bias.

This book’s authors, having plumbed their data in depth, deliver a flood of insights around the book’s central question: To what degree do our childhood personalities and behaviors

predict our adult selves? They discovered, for example, that those who exhibited more self-control as young children were more likely than those at the other end of the spectrum to achieve financial success as adults, and also less likely to get in trouble with the law. That children with more limited self-control showed earlier signs of aging as adults. That persistent marijuana use across decades predicts a diminishment in IQ scores in adulthood. And that 15-year-olds using marijuana faced a higher risk of later “schizophrenia-related outcomes” than those who waited another two years to start. In many cases, the authors can only guess at what exact mechanisms drive these connections, leaving tantalizing pointers for further theorizing and research.

But the guessing itself gets interesting at times, as when Mr. Belsky analyzes the finding that girls in the Dunedin group reached puberty at younger ages in homes where the father was absent—a circumstance he labels an “adverse condition.” Knowing that evolutionary biologists view “the *purpose* of life is to pass on genes to the next generation and future descendants,” Mr. Belsky theorizes that these girls, owing to adversity, “were rushing to maturity—for reproductive reasons.” That is a debatable take, but invites comment and investigation by anyone else who might have something to say about it: geneticists, endocrinologists, gynecologists, social workers and actual evolutionary biologists, among others. This head-turning quality is one of the book’s virtues. It presents lots to interest many kinds of researchers.

Mr. Belsky, however, says he set out to hook a lay audience, “to share the insight, even excitement, that comes from investigating how humans develop.” On that score, the book misses. It never tells its most relatable story—that of the people studied in Dunedin, as people. They are barely met as individuals, either at home or in the exam room. Only a handful are given names, and then only passingly, for the purpose of noting some finding they embody. The book never describes the full life course or environment of any single subject, and none is ever heard from on one of the most interesting questions: how or why they trusted these researchers and remained committed to a project they were enlisted into as infants, when volunteering was out of the question.

No doubt, the ironclad anonymity promised to the study members was a barrier to that sort of narrative. But the resulting book reads like a reference work. Even Mr. Belsky, while repeatedly promising an “adventure,” acknowledges that the book’s parts don’t require reading in order, and that there is “little intellectual cost to jumping around from chapter to chapter.” That the researchers experienced an intellectual adventure is entirely believable. But as “The Origins of You” lays things out, it seems you had to be there.

Mr. Donovan is the co-author, with Caren Zucker, of “In a Different Key: The Story of Autism.”

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