Is there a golden secret to a long, healthy, and productive life? Can we ever unveil the key characteristics that help people make the best use of their potential and maintain health and happiness across the life span? Findings from the Longevity Project, the world’s longest running longitudinal research, may shed light on these important questions on the basis of excellent empirical data. Since 1921, this renowned project has tracked 1,528 talented children from age 11 to the end of their life journeys. Initiated by Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman, the original aim was to explore factors that contributed to later success for gifted children.

The scope of the project was expanded by psychologists Howard Friedman and Leslie Martin, who wanted to examine factors related to health and longevity in the same study
sample. While over 150 journal articles have been published using data from the project, Friedman and Martin have taken an admirable step by translating scientific findings into a jargon-free, easy-to-read, and engaging book about health and longevity: *The Longevity Project: Surprising Discoveries for Health and Long Life From the Landmark Eight-Decade Study*.

**Secrets to a Long and Healthy Life**

The authors open each chapter with an interesting case or scenario that successfully piques the reader’s interest. Additionally, self-assessments are provided throughout the book to help the reader easily relate his or her own health patterns with the important constructs examined in the study.

Some of the study findings confirm conventional beliefs, whereas other findings are a total surprise. For example, people tend to think that cheerfulness and optimism are benefits to health and well-being; however, these positive personality traits may play a negative role in health outcomes as cheerful and optimistic people tend to underestimate the threats of risky health behaviors during their pursuit of happiness. Conversely, worrying may not always exert a detrimental effect on one’s health. In fact, worrying combined with conscientiousness may be a protective factor for health and longevity.

The authors discuss other interesting study findings such as the following: (a) The quantity of social ties is a better predictor of a long life than the quality of social interaction; (b) engaging in physical activity does not predict better health; finding activities that are enjoyable and consistently engaging in those activities is the key; and (c) coping styles used in response to stress, rather than the stress alone, determine health outcomes. One of the most important findings from the 80-year project is that conscientiousness is the personality trait most predictive of longevity.

**Pitfalls and Limitations**

The longitudinal nature of the project is laudable as it provides extremely rich empirical data. However, the generalizability of the findings may be limited due to the original sampling strategy. The Terman study focused on a group of middle-class, gifted, Caucasian children, making the findings less generalizable to other racial/ethnic groups and groups with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, additional longitudinal studies with more diverse samples are needed.

Another limitation related to generalizability is cohort differences and change of historical contexts. The data vividly represent the life course of people born in the early
1900s; however, with the rapid societal changes, developmental trajectories and the roles males and females assume have changed tremendously over the past century. Data from a recent longitudinal study on health and aging confirm that increasing one’s social ties can be a protective factor for quality of life in old age (Zaninotto, Falaschetti, & Sacker, 2009).

However, findings regarding the relation between personality traits and longevity are less conclusive as different samples and measures have been used in various longitudinal studies (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001; Martin et al., 2006). Friedman and Martin acknowledge this issue and make deliberate efforts to compare findings from the Longevity Project with more recent studies.

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the authors have done a great job translating scientific findings into plain language. Thought-provoking questions and lively depictions of the *Termites*—a term the participants used to refer to themselves—engage the reader to ponder the relevant factors that promote health outcomes. The authors satisfy the readers’ curiosity about what happened to the Termites by providing a brief update.

The range in life span has varied, with some of them dying young while others have lived to be 100. Many of the Termites became productive citizens; they pursued both blue- and white-collar professions including business, engineering, writing, education, law, and administration, and some chose to be housewives. While the data are confidential, some of the Termites proudly self-identified. One of the more famous self-identified Termites worked with Lucille Ball to create the *I Love Lucy* show.

The book goes beyond just dispelling many myths regarding health and aging; instead, it suggests how personality traits, career trajectories, and social interaction patterns interact to determine whether an individual thrives well into old age. The intended audience includes students and professionals in a variety of fields including psychology, public health, education, health policy and administration, gerontology, and history.

In particular, psychologists may benefit from the books’ discussion of the impact of personality, emotion, and life events on longevity and health. The book would be of great value as reading material in several courses such as life-span developmental psychology, health psychology, and theories of personality.

**References**
