

Submission for Symposium International and Interdisciplinary Symposium on Good Life

Indicators

What does “success” mean to European young adults?

Background

The Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) is one of the most widely used measures of the content of an individual’s life aspirations and personal strivings (Grouzet et al, 2005). Participants are asked to rate the importance of six types of life aspirations which fit into two over-arching goal types. 1) Extrinsic goals which are defined as goals pursued to achieve another end. These are categorised as goals for financial success, attractive appearance and social recognition. 2) Intrinsic goals which are deemed to be inherently satisfying and so pursued for their own sake. These are categorised as self-acceptance, affiliation and community feeling. These six goal domains were developed in the USA in the 1990’s and so we were interested to find out whether aspirations might be different for young adults in Europe in the 2020’s. Kasser and Ryan (1996) described the reason that they chose financial success, attractive appearance and social recognition to represent extrinsic goals was that they *“exemplify the most salient aspects of popular American culture, in which fame, money and good looks are often portrayed as signs of one’s ultimate success”* (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). We were therefore interested to find out what young working adults in European countries perceive as the hallmarks of success today.

Method

We asked young working adults in three European nations (UK, Italy, Hungary) to write down 5 words that came to mind when they thought about the word “success”. Qualitative methods of content and thematic analysis were used to categorise these words and then group them into broader themes. Themes identified were then compared to the six goal domains used in the Aspiration Index to explore similarities and differences in the types of life areas described.

Results

Seven core themes representing “success” were identified (in order of the number of times these themes were cited) 1) Personal development and achievement, 2) Positive wellbeing 3) Relating to others 4) Financial security 5) Freedom and experiences 6) Wealth and power. The main differences in the perceptions of success to the domains of the Aspiration Index were that financial aspirations were split into two categories, one for security and another for wealth and power. Perceptions of success as positive wellbeing, and specifically, as the experience of positive emotions is also not accounted for within the Aspiration Index.

Conclusions

Our results indicate that “success” is strongly linked to personal achievement and positive wellbeing for European young adults today. Having financial security to get by in today’s world was more important than, and seen as distinct from, being “wealthy”. It could therefore be useful to expand the range of life aspirations within the Aspiration Index to account for financial aspirations motivated by security rather than simply for wealth and status, and to include aspirations for positive emotions. Further research is needed with larger cross-cultural samples to develop exactly what additional aspiration domains should be included.