

In Pursuit of Affluence, at a High Price

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By Alfie Kohn

The adage that money cannot buy happiness may be familiar, but is easily forgotten in a consumer society. A much more persistent and seductive message is beamed from every television screen: Contentment is available for the price of this car, that computer, a little more getting and spending.

Over the last few years, however, psychological researchers have been amassing an impressive body of data suggesting that satisfaction simply is not for sale. Not only does having more things prove to be unfulfilling, but people for whom affluence is a priority in life tend to experience an unusual degree of anxiety and depression as well as a lower overall level of well-being.

Likewise, those who would like nothing more than to be famous or attractive do not fare as well, psychologically speaking, as those who primarily want to develop close relationships, become more self-aware, or contribute to the community.

Earlier research had demonstrated that neither income nor attractiveness was strongly correlated with a sense of well-being.

But Richard Ryan, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, and Tim Kasser, a former student who is now an assistant professor of psychology at Knox College in Illinois, have discovered that the news is even worse.

In three sets of studies published in leading psychology journals since 1993, with a new article expected later this year in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* and still more papers on the way, the researchers sketch an increasingly bleak portrait of people who value "extrinsic goals" like money, fame and beauty.

Such people are not only more depressed than others, but also report more behavioral problems and physical discomfort, as well as scoring lower on measures of vitality and self-actualization. While not every study has investigated the full list of effects, the pattern that emerges from the research project as a whole is remarkably consistent.

Professors Ryan and Kasser said their studies provided a look at the "dark side of the American dream," noting that the culture in some ways seemed to be built on precisely what turned out to be detrimental to mental health. Americans are encouraged to try to strike it rich, but, "the more we seek satisfactions in material goods, the less we find them there," Ryan said. "The satisfaction has a short half-life; it's very fleeting."

Moreover, the detrimental effect of extrinsic goals seems to hold regardless of age or even level of income: A preoccupation with money bodes ill regardless of how much money one already has. The effects also appear not to be limited to any one culture. Kasser and his associates have now collected data from subjects in 13 countries, including Germany, Russia and India. The fact that pursuing wealth is psychologically unhelpful and often destructive, he reports, "comes through very strongly in every culture I've looked at."

Affluence, per se, does not necessarily result in an unsatisfying life. Problems are primarily associated with "living a life where that's your focus," Ryan said. Nevertheless, the negative psychological picture does seem to be associated with the extent to which people believe they are already on the way to attaining extrinsic goals. For example, the paper to be published this year surveyed about 300 youths, some in the United States and some in Russia. In both countries, lower levels of mental health were found not only in people who wanted to make a lot of money but also in those who thought they were likely to succeed at it.

Another study by the same researchers, not yet accepted for publication, found that college students who were already "relatively high in the attainment of appearance, financial success and popularity" were nevertheless "lower in well-being and self-esteem." Those who aspired to affluence also had more transient relationships, watched more television and were more likely to use cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs than were those who placed less emphasis on extrinsic goals.

Apart from its obvious implications for a culture that thrives on material gain, this whole line of research raises questions about the proclivity of some psychologists to analyze the dynamics of what is often called goal-directed behavior while, in effect, ignoring the nature of the goal.

Likewise, it challenges homespun advice to "follow one's dream," whatever it may be.

These data strongly suggest that not all goals or dreams are created equal.

According to the researchers, pursuing goals that reflect genuine human needs, like wanting to feel connected to others, turns out to be more psychologically beneficial than spending one's life trying to impress others or to accumulate trendy clothes, fancy gizmos and the money to keep buying them.

The latter quest may amount to using compensation to try to compensate for something more meaningful. The empirical support for this piece of the puzzle comes from a particularly provocative study that Kasser and Ryan conducted with Melvin Zax at the University of Rochester and Arnold J. Sameroff at the University of Michigan. These researchers discovered that 18-year-olds for whom financial success was especially important turned out to be disproportionately likely to have mothers who were not very nurturing. When parents are "cold and controlling," the researchers wrote, "their children apparently focus on attaining security and a sense of worth through external sources."

This seems consistent with anecdotal accounts of very wealthy men who grew up in troubled homes. Such stories are sometimes cited as evidence that they made the best of a bad thing, turning out well despite or because of their unhappy childhoods. The problem with this interpretation, according to the research, is that they may not have turned out so well after all. They just turned out wealthy.

It is not entirely clear why a poor psychological profile would go hand-in-hand with a quest for extrinsic goals. It may be that unhappy people are more likely than others to chase after money and fame. Conversely, the very act of chasing after money and fame may reduce one's sense of well-being, perhaps because "it makes you ignore the goals that could lead you to have more satisfying experiences," Kasser speculated. Yet a third possibility is that extrinsic goals and poorer psychological health are symptoms of something else that is amiss.

More investigation may be needed to tease apart cause and effect. Some of that research is being conducted by scholars in the field of consumer behavior, who have been collecting data about materialism.

Aric Rindfleisch, who teaches in the business school at the University of Arizona, and his colleagues published a paper in 1997 showing that "young adults whose parents were divorced or separated demonstrated higher levels of both material values and compulsive buying." This, they argued, suggests that such people "use material objects as surrogates for absent parents."

There is a modicum of good news, Prof. Rindfleisch added. In a still-unpublished study, he and James Burroughs of Rutgers University found that while "people who are more materialistic tend to be unhappy with their lives," this effect may be moderated or even eliminated for those who have close, caring relationships.

But the bad news, according to the Ryan-Kasser work, is that close, caring relationships may be among the casualties of a life devoted to getting rich.

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