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Culture, Visual Perspective, and the Effect of Material Success on Perceived Life Quality

Derrick Wirtz¹ and Christie Napa Scollon²

Abstract

Is a life characterized by material success one that will be seen favorably by others? In two studies, we explored the effect of a target person’s material success on perceptions of the target’s life quality. Participants viewed a survey ostensibly completed by another person—which experimentally varied the target’s material success in the form of income—before globally rating the target’s life. Study 1 provided a cross-cultural comparison, finding that Singaporeans, but not Americans, rated a target high in material success as having a life of greater quality than a target low in material success. Study 2 investigated the moderating effect of visual perspective among Singaporeans, hypothesizing that adopting another’s perspective emphasizes the shared belief that material success is an indicator of life quality. Consistent with this reasoning, participants who adopted a third-person visual perspective rated a target high in material success as having a life of greater quality than a target low in material success, but those who adopted a first-person visual perspective did not rate targets differently based on material success.

Keywords

perceived life quality, material success, intersubjective perceptions, visual perspective

Is a life characterized by material success one that will be seen favorably by others? Although material success—in the form of income—positively predicts people’s global assessments of their own lives (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010), it has been found to be relatively unimportant in shaping perceptions of others’ lives. For example, college students in America did not view a target person with high income as having a more desirable life than one with low to moderate income, and both American students and community adults perceived a life’s desirability to be less dependent on income than on the presence of happiness and meaning in life (King & Napa, 1998). In the present research, we compare Singaporeans and Americans to explore cross-cultural differences in the effect of a target person’s material success on perceptions of the target’s life quality (Study 1). Then, among Singaporeans, we experimentally activate the shared

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belief that material success relates to life quality by asking participants to adopt a third-person (vs. first-person) perspective, just prior to evaluating the target’s life (Study 2).

The prediction that Singaporeans’ perceptions of life quality may be particularly affected by a person’s material success is raised by research on materialism: Singaporean and Chinese students have been found to be more materialistic than Mexican and American students (Eastman, Fredenberger, Campbell, & Calvert, 1997; Swinyard, Kau, & Phua, 2000). Similarly, both Chinese and Japanese adolescents have been reported to endorse the statement “Owning the right things is the most important thing in life” to a greater degree than American adolescents (Schaefer, Hermans, & Parker, 2004). Furthermore, luxury goods may be sought and valued in Asian societies for symbolic purposes—signaling status, virtue, and appropriate role fulfillment (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Together, these findings suggest that material success is valued differently across cultures, and that Singaporeans, compared with Americans, may perceive a target high (vs. low) in material success as having a high-quality life (Study 1).

We further propose that Singaporeans’ attention to material success reflects a culturally shared belief—a widespread notion that material success equals a better life. In fact, the Singaporean Dream is often summarized as the “5 Cs”—condo, car, club, credit card, and cash. Although individual Singaporeans may not necessarily endorse these ideas, the mere belief that other Singaporeans hold these ideas is enough to influence behavior (see Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Zou et al., 2009). Thus, in Study 2, we sought to accentuate this shared belief by experimentally manipulating the visual perspective of Singaporeans. Specifically, we ask Singaporeans to adopt a third-person (vs. first-person) perspective on the self prior to examining the effect of material success on perceived life quality.

**Study 1**

Our first study assessed the importance of material success, as well as happiness and meaning in life, in perceptions of a target’s life quality. Singaporeans and Americans viewed a career survey ostensibly completed by a real individual (cf., King & Napa, 1998) and then rated the target’s life quality. The career survey responses were experimentally varied to reflect a target high or low (i.e., lower-middle class) in material success. We also manipulated the target’s happiness and sense of meaning because they have been shown to affect perceived life quality in past studies, although these two factors were not the focus of the current study. We expected that Singaporeans would perceive the high material success target as having a better life quality than the low material success target; Americans, we predicted, would not link material success with life quality and consequently would not be affected by this variable.

**Method**

**Participants**

*Sample 1: Singaporean college students.* One hundred and fifteen undergraduate students (48 female; \( M_{age} = 21.6, SD = 2.5 \)) at Singapore Management University participated in exchange for course credit or $2. The sample was largely ethnically Chinese (78%), Indian (10%), or South East Asian (10%, e.g., Thai, Filipino, Indonesian); responding Caucasian for ethnicity resulted in exclusion \((n = 1)\), as did failure to complete one or more measures \((n = 2)\).

*Sample 2: Singaporean community adults.* One hundred and twenty Singaporean adults (50 female; \( M_{age} = 37.7, SD = 11.4 \)) were recruited in metropolitan Singapore and paid $2. The sample was largely ethnically Chinese (74%), Malay (15%), Indian (6%), and South East Asian (5%). One Caucasian participant was excluded, as were participants who omitted one or more measures \((n = 4)\). A majority of participants spoke predominantly English at home (56%).
**Sample 3: American college students.** Two hundred and four undergraduate psychology students from East Carolina University (138 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.7, SD = 1.6$) participated in exchange for course credit. The sample was largely ethnically Caucasian/White (78%), African American (12%), and Latino/Hispanic (3%); responding Asian/Asian American resulted in exclusion ($n = 5$).

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to view one of eight career surveys consisting of the fictitious respondent’s material success (i.e., income) and answers to questions focused on happiness and meaning. The target high in material success indicated an income of greater than $10,000 Singapore dollars/month (the equivalent category in U.S. dollars was greater than or equal to $105,000/year). The target low in material success reported earning $2,100 to $3,000 Singapore dollars/month ($26,000 to $35,000 U.S. dollars/year). Target happiness and meaning were manipulated through the target’s high or low endorsement of five survey items such as “At my job, I feel happy most of the time” and “My work is very rewarding and I find it personally meaningful.”

**Manipulation checks and dependent measures.** Three manipulation check items assessed perceptions of the target’s wealth, happiness, and meaning in life, on 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely much) scales. Participants also rated how much they (a) thought the target was living a high-quality life (1 = lowest quality, 10 = highest quality) and (b) would like to have the target’s life (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely much). For ease of interpretation, the latter two items were combined into single life quality index ($\alpha = .75$) and rescaled into a POMP (percentage of maximum possible) score that ranged from 0 to 100.

**Results and Discussion**

**Sample characteristics and manipulation checks.** A one-way ANOVA indicated that the Singaporean community adults were older than the Singaporean college students, who were older than the American college students, $F(2, 421) = 332.67, p < .001$. The American sample had more females than the two Singaporean samples, $\chi^2(2) = 30.35, p < .01$, but there were no main effects of sex on any of the dependent measures, nor any interactions between sex and the independent variables (all $F$s < 2). Therefore, all further analyses include age as a covariate and omit participant sex. ANOVAs using the manipulation check items confirmed that the career survey had the expected effect on participants’ perceptions of the target’s material success, happiness, and sense of meaning, $F$s > 143.3, $p$s < .001, $\eta^2_p > .25$, though U.S. students perceived a greater difference between the wealth of the high- and low-income targets ($M = 4.18$ vs. 2.21, respectively) compared with the Singaporean adults ($M = 3.60$ vs. 2.58) and students ($M = 3.91$ vs. 2.54), $F(2, 424) = 9.70, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .04$.

**Material Success × Culture interaction.** We predicted that Singaporeans’ ratings of the target’s life quality would be affected by the target’s material success to a greater degree than Americans’ ratings. In support of this prediction, a 2 (Material Success: High vs. Low) × 2 (Happiness: High vs. Low) × 2 (Meaning: High vs. Low) × 3 (Sample) ANCOVA, controlling for participant age, revealed the expected Sample × Material Success interaction, $F(2, 393) = 3.27, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .02$. The target high (vs. low) in material success was judged as having a higher life quality by Singaporean community adults ($M = 44.09$ vs. 36.14), $t(113) = 2.02, p < .05, d = .38$; Singaporean college students exhibited a similar trend with a comparable effect size ($M = 49.86$ vs. 42.99), $t(108) = 1.60, p = .11, d = .30$, but American college students were not affected by the target’s material success ($M = 43.23$ vs. 42.97), $t(197) = 0.08, p = .93, d = .01$. The direction of the interaction is remarkable given that, as noted previously, the material success manipulation had the largest effect on the U.S. sample’s perceptions of the target’s wealth.

We also observed main effects of target happiness and meaning on perceived life quality, such that participants judged targets high (vs. low) in each attribute as having a superior quality of life,
A significant Happiness × Meaning interaction showed that while the high-meaning (vs. low-meaning) target was perceived as having a superior life quality even when low in happiness ($M = 42.0$ vs. $24.29$), the effect of meaning was greater when the target was high in happiness ($M = 66.76$ vs. $40.01$), $F(1, 393) = 9.14$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2_p = .02$; that is, the combination of high happiness and high meaning was perceived particularly favorably. There were no other significant main effects nor interactions.

**Study 2**

In our first study, Singaporeans viewed targets high in material success as having a better life quality than targets low in material success. We propose that this finding reflects a cultural belief among Singaporeans that, when active, guides perceptions of the target individual. In Study 2, we use a perspective-taking exercise to examine this hypothesis. We submit that adopting a third-person (vs. first-person) perspective, or the viewpoint of a *generalized other* (Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Suh, 2007), emphasizes material goods and displays of wealth as perceived through the lens of others’ presumed beliefs. In other words, Singaporeans oriented to a third-person visual perspective will perceive a target individual as they believe a typical person would view the target, by applying the cultural beliefs assumed to be shared by most others (Chiu et al., 2010). Thus, Singaporeans oriented to a third-person (vs. first-person) perspective should evaluate the target’s life more positively when the target is high (vs. low) in material success.

**Method**

**Participants.** Ninety (43 female; $M_{age} = 21.9$, $SD = 1.8$) undergraduate students at Singapore Management University participated in exchange for $5$. Two participants (1 female) were dropped from analyses because they indicated having previously participated in a similar study. The majority of the sample was ethnically Chinese (81%), and more than half the sample was most comfortable speaking English at home ($n = 59$).

**Materials and procedure.** Study 2 used a 2 (Perspective: First Person vs. Third Person) × 2 (Target Material Success: Low vs. High) × 2 (Target Happiness: Low vs. High) between-subjects design. The “meaning in life” variable used in our first study was omitted to simplify the overall design. Participants were randomly assigned to write about their own lives from the first- or third-person visual perspective for at least 5 minutes (cf., Kim & Cohen, 2010). Visual perspective was subsequently reinforced by asking participants to recall what they had written, and then participants viewed and responded to the target career survey using the same items from Study 1. Participants were also asked to indicate their sex, language preference, and how easy they found the writing task.

**Results and Discussion**

**Manipulation checks.** The manipulation check items confirmed that the career survey affected participant perceptions of the target’s material success and happiness as expected, $F$s(1, 84) > 78.1, $ps < .01$. There was no effect of visual perspective on ratings of the writing task’s ease, $r(86) = .00$, $p = 1.0$, or on the amount of time spent writing, $r(86) = -.10$, $p = .34$. No significant main effects or interactions were found involving participant sex or language preference.

**Material Success × Visual Perspective interaction.** We predicted that when oriented to a third-person visual perspective, participants’ perceptions of life quality would be affected by a target’s material success (high vs. low) to a greater degree than when oriented to a first-person perspective. A 2 (Visual Perspective: First vs. Third Person) × 2 (Target Material Success: High vs. Low)
Low) × 2 (Target Happiness: High vs. Low) ANOVA yielded the expected Perspective × Material Success interaction, $F(1, 82) = 5.34, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .06$. Singaporeans in the third person condition perceived the target high (vs. low) in material success as having a better life quality ($M = 67.22$ vs. $44.41$), $t(43) = 2.78, p < .01, d = .83$. Singaporeans in the first person condition did not perceive the target differently based on material success (high: $M = 52.45$, low: $M = 55.68$), $t(41) = 0.38, p = .71, d = .11$. The analysis also indicated a main effect of target happiness, such that happy targets (vs. less happy targets) were perceived as having a superior life quality, $F(1, 82) = 100.09, p < .001$.

**General Discussion**

Singaporeans, particularly community adults, viewed a target high (vs. low) in material success as having a life of greater quality (Study 1). While Singaporean students closely resembled community adults in their perceptions, also giving higher ratings to the more successful (vs. less successful) target, the effect—though comparable in size—was only marginally significant. American students, in contrast, did not rate targets high in material success differently from low-success targets. Overall, these results are consistent with the hypothesis that Singaporeans share a cultural belief linking material success with life quality, a possibility we examined directly in our second study.

In Study 2, we activated the cultural belief that material success is associated with life quality among Singaporean college students by manipulating visual perspective. Students were asked to adopt the third-person viewpoint of an observer, employing both the externally focused vantage and the presumed beliefs of a generalized other (i.e., the belief that a quality life is one with a high income), or the first-person viewpoint, anchored in one’s own phenomenology (Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Suh, 2007). When oriented to the third-person perspective, Singaporean students perceived the target high in material success as having a superior life to the target low in material success; when oriented to the first-person perspective, participants did not rate the target differently based on material success.

These results are consistent with an intersubjective approach to culture (Chiu et al., 2010), showing that shared perceptions are powerful forces that influence behavior. The third-person perspective highlighted people’s sense of having an in-group audience, which in turn activated the use of the intersubjective norm—e.g., the Singaporean “5 Cs”—in judgments of a life’s quality. On the other hand, participants in the first-person condition relied less on the shared notion that a good life is a wealthy life because, as Chiu et al. (2010) noted, “when one’s behaviors have little social implications or cannot be subject under social scrutiny, the pressure to conform to intersubjective norms [is] weakened” (p. 487).

In future research, it would be useful to examine how other factors (e.g., social relations) and target survey contexts (family, leisure) interact to influence global evaluations of another person (cf., Twenge & King, 2005). For example, East Asians might define a quality life as one with the presence of harmonious relationships, while North Americans may regard self-esteem and personal achievement as paramount (Uchida, Narasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). Also, the view of culture as “common sense” (Zou et al., 2009) refers to the notion that people’s private or personal beliefs may diverge from the beliefs they believe are consensually held, but that the degree to which ideas are judged consensual is the primary mediator of cultural effects in social judgment. For example, it is possible that some Singaporeans may not personally associate material success with life quality, yet assume that most others do hold such a belief, a pattern that future research can examine by assessing both personal views and the beliefs assumed to be held by others. This method would further allow a test of our proposal that visual perspective moderated the effect of material success on perceptions by amplifying awareness of cultural beliefs.
In conclusion, the research we have reported demonstrates that Singaporeans and Americans weigh material success differently in other-focused perceptions of life quality. Our findings also highlight cultural similarities: Singaporeans and Americans both strongly valued happiness and meaning when judging global life quality. We have also presented evidence that the third-person (vs. first-person) visual perspective enhances the effect of material success on the perceptions of Singaporeans, presumably activating and reflecting a notion believed to be widely held among cultural members—that a life of quality is a life of material success.

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