Respect matters more than money for happiness in life

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New research suggests that overall happiness in life is more related to how much you are respected and admired by those around you, not to the status that comes from how much money you have stashed in your bank account.

Psychological scientist Cameron Anderson of the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, and his co-authors explore the relationship between different types of status and well-being in a new article published in Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

"We got interested in this idea because there is abundant evidence that higher socioeconomic status – higher income or wealth, higher education – does not boost subjective well-being (or happiness) much at all. Yet at the same time, many theories suggest that higher status should boost happiness," said Anderson.

So if higher socioeconomic status doesn't equate with a greater sense of well-being, then what does? Anderson and his colleagues hypothesized that higher sociometric status – respect and admiration in your face-to-face groups, such as your friendship network, your neighborhood, your co-workers, or your athletic team – might make a difference in your overall happiness. "Having high standing in your local ladder leads to receiving more respect, having more influence, and being more integrated into the group's social fabric," Anderson said.

Over a series of four studies, Anderson and his colleagues set out to test this hypothesis.

In the first study, they surveyed 80 college students who participated in 12 different campus groups, including sororities and ROTC. Each student's sociometric status was calculated through a combination of peer ratings, self-report, and the number of leadership positions the student had held in his or her group. The students also reported their total household income and answered questions related to their social well-being. After accounting for gender and ethnicity, the researchers found that sociometric status, but not socioeconomic status, predicted students' social well-being scores.

The researchers were able to replicate these findings in a second study that surveyed a larger and more diverse sample of participants and they found that the relationship between sociometric status and well-being could be explained, at least in part, by the sense of power and social acceptance that the students said they felt in their personal relationships. And in a third study, Anderson and his colleagues provided evidence that the relationship between sociometric status and well-being could actually be evoked and manipulated in an experimental setting.

In the fourth study, the researchers decided to bring the causal story into the real world. Following students in a MBA program, they found that changes in sociometric status from pre-graduation to post-graduation corresponded to changes in the MBA students' social well-being. And post-graduation sociometric status predicted social well-being more strongly than did post-graduation socioeconomic status.

"I was surprised at how fluid these effects were – if someone's standing in their local ladder went up or down, so did their happiness, even over the course of 9 months," said Anderson.

Together, the four studies provide clear evidence for the relationship between sociometric status and well-being. But why does sociometric status seem to matter so much when socioeconomic status doesn't?

One possible explanation, which Anderson hopes to explore in future research, is that people adapt. "One of the reasons why money doesn't buy happiness is that people quickly adapt to the new level of income or wealth. Lottery winners, for example, are initially happy but then return to their original level of happiness quickly," said Anderson.

That kind of adaptation may simply not occur with local status. "It's possible that being respected, having influence, and being socially integrated just never gets old," Anderson said.

More information: "The Local-Ladder Effect: Social Status and Subjective Well-Being" *Psychological Science* (2012).

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