Does winning an Emmy or an election mean you will live longer than those you beat?

March 11 2013

Research has long linked high socioeconomic status with better health and lower mortality. But what's remained unclear is whether this association has more to do with access to resources (education, wealth, career opportunity, etc.) or the glow of high social status relative to others. Scholars call the latter "relative deprivation."

To tease apart these factors, a team of investigators at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health led by Dr. Bruce Link, studied Baseball Hall of Fame inductees, Emmy Award winners, and former Presidents and Vice Presidents, comparing each to nominated losers in the same competition or election. The result: There were no consistent advantages for winners. The association between winning and longevity is sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and sometimes nonexistent, though the specifics are revealing. Overall, the results suggest that access to resources and opportunity is more important than relative status.

Findings are published online in the American Sociological Review.

Dr. Link and his associates found the following effects of winning vs. losing in the three groups:

- Emmy-winning actors enjoyed 2.7 more years of life than nominees who did not snag the trophy. Though Emmy-winning screenwriters were, mysteriously, at a 3-year disadvantage.

- Baseball Hall-of-Famers enjoyed no advantage in longevity over non-inducted nominees
- Presidents and Vice Presidents lose, on average, 5.3 years from their lives compared to the candidates they bested. While some of this is due to the impact of assassination, the disadvantage persists even when assassination is taken out of the equation.

"The relative deprivation theory would predict that losers would consistently be at a disadvantage for health and longevity compared to winners, but this is not what we see," says Dr. Link, a professor of Sociomedical Sciences at the Mailman School.

A more likely explanation, he notes, is that the advantages and disadvantages of winning depend on the mix of opportunities and stresses that they bring. Winning an Emmy often leads to significant career opportunities that might not have been otherwise available. (The paper quotes actor John Larroquette saying "There's no doubt that having an Emmy preceeds you through the door.") On the other hand, Baseball Hall of Fame induction occurs after playing careers are over and therefore has little bearing on career opportunities and earnings.

As for presidential and vice presidential candidates, life circumstances do change for members of this elite club, but winning also brings significant risks: assassination threats and extreme stress from two of the world's most demanding jobs. The 15 men who led our country during the 20th century but died by the year 2008 lived an average of 1.9 years less than the average American male of the same age.

"Our findings provide an important correction to an overemphasis on relative deprivation as an explanation of health inequalities," said Dr. Link. "Relative deprivation likely plays some role in health inequalities, but it is not as important as the life circumstances and opportunities that result from one's socioeconomic position."

Medical Xpress

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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