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Success in America

By: Ian Clark

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Abstract: I belong to a generation ridiculed; accused of being lazy, lacking a good work ethic, at home living in someone’s basement. Though I soundly reject these derisions, I understand what so-called millennials find abhorrent about the average American’s work-life balance. Can redefining success within the United States aid in allowing its people to achieve both better health and a more secure sense of well-being? Additionally, What effect does the American construct of success have on the well-being of an individual? Additionally, does a wealth and “work without complaint” centered interpretation of the American Dream have a positive, negative, or neutral effect on the well-being of an individual? Lastly, what are the true origins, interpretations, and experiences of this term?

Key terms: uniformity, capital, wealth, ownership, hard work, well-being.
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Part 1

The main point of success in America seems to revolve around materialistic ideas of success and wellbeing as core characteristics of what many know as the American Dream. When thinking about what constitutes success in America or “The American Dream” a corollary question arises: what possible effects does the stratified materialistic fixation of success in America; aka the American Dream, have on individual well-being? For the purpose of this article, well-being will be defined in terms of mental, emotional, and physical states of being and an individual’s happiness and fulfillment in relation to these states of being.

The creation of the commonly used term "American Dream”, finds it origins in James Truslow Adams’ nineteen-thirty-one literary work, *The Epic of America*. Adams defines the American Dream as: "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” Interestingly, Adams does not focus on material wealth, but instead, offers general guidelines for self-improvement. Adams’ idea of the American Dream as an opportunity for greater self-improvement and well-being is further supported during later interviews with the author, after the book became a best-seller. Adams did not advance the notion of material well-being, and lamented the emerging focus on materialism in others’ interpretations and use of his increasingly-ubiquitous term. Adams was also troubled by materialistic definitions of success which began being equated with the American Dream. In *The Epic of America*, to this point Adams states,” in our struggle to
make a living, we were neglecting to live.” This quote illustrates a stark contrast between the author’s view of personal, versus material well-being (Adams, 1931).

During my research, I identified further questions arising from discrepancies between material-focused ideas of success and the holistic well-being of people, as each relates to the American dream. For instance, how does material wealth translate directly to other forms of well-being, or lack thereof? Additionally, where did the material focus of the American Dream originate and/or who or what created it? How did wealth-centered ideas of success evolve to become so closely associated with the American dream?

More specifically, how did material wealth begin to supplant the universal-human needs identified in renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy? Had personal safety, food and shelter, companionship, love (of others and self), and personal achievement all fallen to the wayside in favor of shallow materialism? It seems the golden thread which binds together definitions of success in American mainstream culture, or the ability to have achieved the American Dream, is complex and consists of many interconnected pieces which can be broadly interpreted. However, the story of this so called American Dream/American success, which is often said to position the United States as the "greatest nation in the world," is in deep need of revision. This idealized story of current and past greatness, which presents a troubling truth which is intended to be internalized by both the collective and individual, has been heavily based on material or hierarchical commodities, such as material wealth or titles, and is not always equal, which is in contrast to how it may be presented. Part of this story is contained within the psychological phenomenon known as “American exceptionalism,” which was introduced by Seymour Lipset (1996), that builds upon the problematic and mostly baseless assumption that the
United States is the greatest country in the world in every regard. Lipset’s work, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (1996), states that the United States traces the beginnings of a perceived complete superiority to a post-American Revolution notion, within which many people thought of the United States as *The First New Nation*; coincidentally the title of Lipset’s 1963 work examining American political sociology. Obviously, this idea is problematic, ill-founded, and a rather revisionist view of world history, considering the U. S. was certainly not the first “new nation,” but instead, a relatively recent creation, structured and governed somewhat like ancient Greece, as well as based on some ideals held by French democracy as well. Thus, the interpretation of success in America (American Dream), I chose to isolate as a place of revision is the ‘post-Adams’ American Dream, the American Dream which holds as truth, that hard work always translates to material wealth; and that wealth is the prerequisite for attaining all other forms of personal well-being. The belief that material wealth underpins individual well-being directly contradicts Maslow’s Hierarchy, a model which prioritizes the conditions humans need to achieve states of well-being and self-actualization; that model is as follows:

“1. **Physiological needs** - these are biological requirements for human survival, e.g. air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, sex, sleep.
   
   If these needs are not satisfied the human body cannot function optimally. Maslow considered physiological needs the most important as all the other needs become secondary until these needs are met.

2. **Safety needs** - protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear.

3. **Love and belongingness needs** - after physiological and safety needs have been fulfilled; the third level of human needs is social and involves feelings of belongingness. The need for interpersonal relationships motivates behavior

   Examples include friendship, intimacy, trust, and acceptance, receiving and giving affection and love. Affiliating, being part of a group (family, friends, work).
4. Esteem needs - which Maslow classified into two categories: (i) esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and (ii) the desire for reputation or respect from others (e.g., status, prestige).

Maslow indicated that the need for respect or reputation is most important for children and adolescents and precedes real self-esteem or dignity.

5. Self-actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences. A desire “to become everything one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1987, p. 64) (Maslow, 2018).

Part 2

The unique time frame which allowed this “post-Truslow” idea of American success to take a massive hold within the American populous was during the period just after World War II. As this era gave birth to sweeping ideas of uniformity and wealth as admission requirements for success and well-being in America. Assimilation, at the time, entailed weaving oneself into the fabric of society as much as possible in exchange for what was thought to secure a better future for oneself and their loved ones. Portions of this mentality seemed very simple, controlled and certain, which was appealing but also problematic, as because this ideology held that material wealth and personal well-being were guaranteed outcomes of hard work. However, for many, this proved unrealistic, as indicated in the work by Bohanon below:

After World War II a huge shift took place. The United States was growing faster than ever, and had entered the world stage as a new superpower. Prosperity increased, as industrial advances and a booming economy brought modern conveniences to many families. The number of homes in the United States and gross domestic product more than doubled from 1950 to 1960. Education was becoming more available with the help of the GI Bill which funded higher education for returning veterans. It appeared that the
American Dream was becoming a possibility for everyone, but in reality, for most, attaining the dream was an illusion (Bohanon, 2015).

The false idea of universally-achievable wealth, via hard work, and its direct correlation with personal well-being becomes, and in many cases still is, a source of self-loathing, stress, and sadness in American society. This sentiment is evident in Sandler’s article, “American Nightmare,” within which, she poses that wealth is not only, not connected to personal well being, but instead, can actually hinder it (Sandler, 2011).

We the people have grown continuously more depressed over the last half-century. A recent analysis of the World Database of Happiness, covering the years 1946 to 2006, found rising happiness levels in 19 of 26 countries around the world; the United States was not one of them. As Andrew Oswald, who studies the intersection of economics and happiness at the University of Warwick, in Britain, states, "The U.S.A. has, in aggregate, apparently become more miserable over the last quarter of a century?" Oswald and many other behavioral researchers say much of our discontent seems linked to the unrealistic expectations of the American Dream (Sandler, 2011).

Further examples of the post-World War II era having a drastic effect on the current thinking and interpretation of success and the American dream are expounded in the book, “Low-income Homeownership: American Dream or Delusion?” by Anne Shay. In her work Shay states:

Homeownership became a tool to stimulate consumption and increase production while improving Americans’ housing conditions. While World War II created a temporary hiatus in the homeownership push, when the troops came home, they were welcomed with federally insured long-term amortization loans—a central ingredient to the success of a homeownership strategy (Wright, 1983). It is not clear who pegged homeownership as the American Dream. Homeownership policy, however, has not been about imagining the unattainable but about creating the expectation of owning one’s own home. Ideologically, homeownership has been portrayed as a political right seemingly more popular than voting (Shay, 2006).
Thus, a recurring theme becomes evident: constant competition and the pursuit of material wealth hinder individual well-being in many cases. The current discourse regarding the American Dream/success and period just after World War II also emphasizes home ownership as a proverbial key to the lock of success and also illustrates an interplay between well-being and success, therefore, the home becomes a quintessential symbol of materialistic focused success underpinning the overall ideology of American Dream/success, during this time period. Another symbolic key to “unlock” success which persists during this same time period and sometimes today in America, is tied to the social requirement that a person must work hard, without complaint, have children and get married as part of their duty to the American social contract. Therefore, societal pressures are added for Americans to conform and obey in order to enjoy this type of subjective success and happiness in America. These constructs eventually became social norms via the catalyst of the suburban housing boom, thus, the as a result, home ownership, marriage, bearing children, and a hyper-focus on career advancement become normalized perceived social necessity to achieve material wealth, which as stated before, is the alleged vector to living in a state of healthy well-being (Clark, 1988). Later these tenets of the American Dream, perceived as ‘success’ are called into question, through the writing of Lauren Sandler. In her work, “The American Nightmare,” Sandler states:

One of the most common findings in contemporary empirical social science is that being married is associated with higher measured levels of happiness, or life satisfaction. The result seems to be consistent across both countries and time, and is apparently robust to statistical method, including with respect to econometric specification and fixed effects modeling. Our contribution is to propose that quality of a marriage is likely to be a very important factor in our understanding of the role of marital status, and to conjecture that for some married people being in an alternative state would be conducive to a higher level of happiness. We test this simple idea with conventional OLS modeling using life satisfaction data from three countries, the US, the UK and Germany, and the findings are very clear. We find that the coefficient on the marriage dummy is significant and
important with the usual modeling but once marriage quality is controlled for, the effects of being married are extremely different between those in good compared to those in poor marriages. In all three data sets people in self-assessed poor marriages are fairly miserable, and much less happy than unmarried people, and people in self-assessed good marriages are even happier than the literature reports. We also find that the results differ importantly between women and men, with members of the former sex showing a greater range of responses to marriage quality than do men. A final set of results is that, when marriage quality is controlled for, the apparent marriage effects on other outcome variables, such as self reported health and trust, change significantly (Sandler, 2011).

Additionally, the large emphasis on wealth, the nuclear family, and home ownership, for status as well as shelter, applies further pressure on individuals to assimilate and achieve these markers of personal success rather than strive for what they define as vital to their own definition of well-being. Many times in American culture achievement is often thought of in terms of marked milestones; touted as necessary to achieve well-being. Uniformity also manifests itself as an additional lifeline of security along the route to success. Success defined in terms of symbols, or markers of material success mentioned previously, now define the American Dream. The current discourse outlines the basic structure of assimilation needed by the individual to achieve the wealth-centered version of the American Dream in those terms (Clark, 1988).

Furthermore, internalizing the subjective attributes of a ‘successful’ person under the material and wealth-focused idea of the American Dream is almost inescapable. Especially since the post-World War II era. Without question, that period in American history spawned the popularity of defining success and happiness with wealth, work and assimilation (Clark, 1988).

As previously stated, a large shift in how the American Dream was perceived and defined took place just after World War II. However, current trends and literature demonstrate that American society is witnessing another shift in the way success is defined and perceived. This shift is in almost direct opposition to fixations on ownership and career which took hold and
flourished in post-World War II America. Another physical construct of the post-World War II era, the suburban neighborhood, is currently being questioned as well. The rise of suburbia in American consciousness is outlined in Clifford Clark’s article: “Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities. Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War.” Within this text, the suburban structure is identified as a major catalyst in the further institutionalization of happiness. This was carried out, for millions of Americans, by feeding the need for uniformity via owning a home in the suburbs. This served as a segway to security, hinged on the predictability of living in such a community. Additionally, the idea of the continuation of the suburb is also questioned in Clark’s text. (Clark, 1988).

Part 3

“The American Dream being an ideal, within which the government should protect each person's opportunity to pursue their own idea of happiness,” is one stated by Kimberly Amadeo. Amadeo also states that the “‘Declaration of Independence,’ if read properly, actually legally protects this type of American Dream”. This is an alternate reading of the American Dream, from Amadeo’s aptly named “What Is the American Dream?” I included this interpretation of the American Dream, as it is another representation of the reframing of the idea of American success, in this case based on that which is said to be the foundation of America itself (Amadeo, 2015).

Thus, to reframe the idea of success in America in favor of a more equitable and individually determinate idea of success involves a sort of rejection of post-World War II notions
of success and also requires a challenge to ‘traditional’ ideas of success. Some of these ideas are also expressed by Dr. David Graeber; a seminal thinker within the literature relevant to my work. Graeber’s work embodies the sentiment of change which must replace traditional thinking and proposes ways in which a person might pursue happiness outside of the material, wealth-focused paradigm. Also, Graeber presents definitions of wealth, capital, advancement, hard work, and ownership in ways which could be utilized to increase citizens’ collective quality of life, as opposed to the more individual-centered, competition focused model (Graeber, 2014).

In addition to the work of Graeber, another prominent work entitled, “The Biomimicry Primer,” by Janine Benyus, rejects traditional ideas and lobbies for change. In her work, Benyus, speaks to the need of people to turn to nature rather than hard work, in the occupational sense, to create things intended for use by human beings to improve their quality of life in a more sustainable manner than those currently employed within consumer capitalism. The primary component needed for this turn to nature, she asserts, is altering the method with which people create technology. The proposed change to our current method, which relies on synthesis and harnessing, focuses on mimicking nature rather than dominating and altering it. This will supposedly result in less - or no- harm done to the natural world (Benyus, 2016). According to Benyus, this method could also be a means to foster better awareness of conservation and sustainable practices in the way human societies relate to the natural world. Benyus goes on to say these alterations in approach could theoretically influence a spirit of collaboration between people, as well as between people and the natural world (Benyus, 2016). The ideas presented in Benyus’ work, relating to society, increase our focus on symbiosis rather than competition;
something which seems in line with underlying themes of change currently being expressed in current discourse on the American Dream.

Lastly, another portion of the underlying message Benyus’ work touches on is a desire to inhabit a world where fewer people are sacrificing inherent ideas of well-being for the apparent fallacy of pursuing material wealth. Abandoning the believed certainty, that working hard without complaint will eventually bring a state of well-being, can help people recognize the fallacy. Altering their method of living and working will positively affect both people and the environment (Benyus, 2016).

The major frameworks present within the context of my reframing of the American Dream are individuality and self-governance, versus uniformity and assimilation, as well as collectivism versus individualism in a financial sense. The individualism versus uniformity and assimilation frameworks has mostly to do with reducing the focus on tangible representations of success and happiness – material goods - and increasing focus on environmental sustainability and interpersonal relationships, as well as working for a place which people can create more, rather than simply work harder.

As a result, the thought emerges: the need for a collective focus on protecting each person’s individual and creative ability to engineer their own sense of well-being rather than coercion by a system or elected official(s) to subscribe to a universal absolute version of it. Also the need for a more direct form of democracy as to allow for the people themselves to determine what is in their best interests, rather than the representatives of representative democracy simply protecting their jobs and/or bank accounts in many cases.
Thus, if the common occurrence of people putting material first, undoubtedly, many Americans will remain focused on material possessions and unquestioningly perform hard work with hopes of material wealth and the faith that wealth will miraculously translate into well-being. Instead, if people are encouraged to adopt their own, more self-determinant model of society, these same people can adopt their own parameters of well-being and how to achieve it, while also being cognizant of the fact the environment we share is not infinite and requires care from all people to continue harboring life.

This type of critical analysis of the direction we are going in America is very crucial at this time as there are many possible disconnects between well-being and traditional American ideas of success, which many people think are normal and thus, not worthy of examination. While at the same time many environmental factors are beginning to hit critical mass.

Hunter S. Thompson’s book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, takes a gritty and often grotesque view of the disconnect between a person’s freedom to create his own happiness and that of the post-World War II American Dream. Thompson delves into the problem of uniformity and suppression of individual needs to an extent when he paints himself in an “ugly” fashion in order to expose the “ugliness” he sees around him (Thompson, 1998). The ugliness I am referring to is the suppression of self in favor of assimilation for pay and touted security via material wealth. Another piece of literature which also uses a similar grotesque portrayal to expose the “ugly” side of the disconnect between the post World War II idea of the American dream and well-being is the book, *American Psycho*. This book and later, film, undermines the notion and all-encompassing certainty that material wealth translates to well-being. This work does this by exposing material wealth as more of a veneer of success, rather than success truly
fulfilled with a life of healthy well-being for that person and people around them. Instead, items such as a prestigious career and money are presented as more of a catalyst for pathology, as they are correlated with rage brought on by social pressures, leading to the manifestation of a serial killer (Ellis, 1991). This also connects to work done regarding the “dark triad” which is a combination of narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy; traits which have been tied to the achievement of position of authority in America, as well as traits which are in some ways rewarded in many areas of business and government via higher titles and salaries (Furnham & Treglown, 2021). Thus these traits are literally being encouraged by the current definition and purported pathway to “success” in America (Furnham & Treglown, 2021).

These types of personality traits being encouraged as well as popularizing unsustainable models of success are a direct threat to the necessities of survival which, according to Maslow, serve as the foundation of the path to well-being. Therefore, a systemic and structural retooling is needed in order to enable a larger portion of the population to exist in a state of better health and heightened well-being. This is quite apparent within the view of current discourse, as well as the direct negative correlation to societal and structural emphasis on work, material wealth, and power.

As previously stated, there is a demonstrated need for change when it comes to the collective motivations of the American mainstream society. As a result of my research, the most easily adoptable beginning to a change may be adopting the already established model or, in the least, some parts of the Gross National Happiness model. The Gross National Happiness model, in its essence, is a model which is cognizant of and attempts to ensure a high degree to which citizens in a country enjoy the life they live (Veenhoven, 2006). This model has been adopted
officially in Bhutan; however, many other countries use elements of this model, in attempts to enhance the degree to which citizens are achieving their goals for a life of well-being in their countries. The work of Ruut Veenhoven, entitled Happy Life Years: A Measure of Gross National Happiness (2006) posits that this index and indexes like it are quite necessary to aid in that which most individual people see as the overall motivation of life.

In this way, many of the social problems mentioned earlier in this paper could be solved at the larger collective levels as something of a summative reaction to solving a root cause to these problems (Veenhoven, 2006). In addition, Veenhoven introduces useful concepts for attempting a more precisely defined and hopefully measured degree of happiness present within a population in a specific place (Veenhoven, 2006). The most useful terms he touches upon toward this end, are classifications, set in the form of a table which defines certain terms to aid in modeling and measuring well-being. In order to help readers understand the tables, Veerhoven explains: “The difference between part and whole is presented vertically, and the distinction between passing and enduring enjoyment horizontally” (Veenhoven. 2006).

**Figure 1**

*From Ruut Veenhoven’s Happy Life Years: A Measure of Gross National Happiness; pgs. 28-35*
This table is a useful tool in aiding the effort to define the use of the National Happiness Index model in more scientific and replicable ways, as it creates a more concrete, yet adaptable, model to allow for a reading of the impact of different changes in terms of the state of well-being, when changes or additions to the social structure are introduced. The included tables, are meant to serve as a tangible aide for measuring and defining what is meant when alluding to the sensation of happiness or well-being; this is helpful to my work as it allows for a specific and more exact definition of what is meant when terms such as happiness, fulfillment, or well-being are used in realms such as science or social policy, as there is a tendency to very liberally and generally use these terms. Furthermore, the important difference between passing “delight” versus enduring “satisfaction” are discussed, which could be something of a pitfall of attempting to create a model which enhances continuous and measurable well-being (Veenhoven, 2006). Building upon this point, Veenhoven describes that

“…the experience of enjoyment can be short-lived or enduring; the word happiness is often used for both phenomena. Sometimes it refers to passing moods and at other occasions for stable satisfaction. Once more, these matters are related but not the same. When combined, these distinctions produce the fourfold classification presented in scheme 2.” (2006, p. 6).

Figure 2
**From Ruut Veenhoven’s Happy Life Years: A Measure of Gross National Happiness; pgs.28-35**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Aspects</th>
<th>Passing</th>
<th>Enduring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life as a whole</td>
<td>Instant Satisfactions</td>
<td>Domain-Satisfactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Instant utility)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Top experience</td>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Happiness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My intent in using these tables and technical research done by Veenhoven is not aimed at attempting to prove every part of his research as completely correct, but instead, to illustrate there is a space which my research could be used in combination with what exists in current discourse, to achieve the outcome of higher well-being for the individual person and collective people in an effort to solve problems in the United States and/or other countries. In contrast to the Gross National Happiness Index model, there exists the Gross Domestic Product Index. This model, conversely, measures only the sum of the total monetary or market value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country’s borders in a specific time period. The obvious difference being the main concern with the GDP model is simply to put a value on the efforts and resources of a country rather than take effort with items which allow for life, happiness and health. Thus, the problem in utilizing this model is quite obvious, as it prioritizes the values of a created system above the fabric of what allows its creators to live, such as well-being, livability and sustainability of the two.
The most immediate effect of a new model of collective systematic focus would be a positive effect, in affecting a higher instance of well-being within the American populace. The higher instance of well-being is the main outcome which I predict, based on the research mentioned above, as well as my own personal lived experience within the current GDP based system to take place if an alternate model was adopted. To further qualify this statement, currently, Bhutan is the subject of many studies which indicate there is merit to attempting to measure and enhance happiness of a population in a direct and systemically supported way, the work of Achim Steiner (2019), of the World Economic Forum (WEF) indicates that the use of such a systemic fixture is having profound effects not only in Bhutan but in places such as Yale University, where there now exist classes which study how to increase the state of well-being in one’s life. Thus, it is my opinion that there is not only a space within the current discourse for my research, there may be a pressing need for it, as my research ties together many currently pressing projects in a new, and perhaps helpful way.
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