Wisdom from Nobel Peace Laureates and Other Unlikely Sources

Like many of you, I am an avid reader of *Scientific American Mind*. Not only am I a subscriber; I also gleefully devour many of the book recommendations and research leads presented in each issue. I do this because it is more than a magazine. It is a template for a way of thinking that is adapted to the demands of modern life. Gems are plucked from neuroscience research by savvy contributors, and with impressive editorial prowess, implanted into articles on creativity and ingenuity. The stories instil in the reader a sense of belonging to a movement that is avant-garde, fit, and poised to scale steep asymptotes of quantum possibility. In short, I read out of a desire to be guided beyond the cognitive landmines of the past – such as the antiquated notion that ruthlessness is somehow adaptive. Kevin Dutton, I thought we were beyond this.

I was surprised that “Wisdom from Psychopaths” slipped past the editorial staff. Was it an accident that such machismo found its way into print, or was it an act of deference to the bottom-line? Dutton’s (2013) eye-catching article is steeped in a flavour of bias that harkens to the days of white supremacy. Yet, there is no white cloak with cut-out eyes. *It’s subtle*. This time, the bias most obviously relates to class and opportunity, which act as perceptual buffers against links to racial or gender bias. My purpose in responding to Dutton is to expose the invoking of Western success values for what it is: a subtle tool by which dominant groups maintain their dominance. Dutton’s article hinged on two problematic premises: first, that success is the ultimate, taken-for-granted goal for an individual; second, that successful people have a constellation of traits, “a triumvirate of charm, focus and ruthlessness” (p. 38), that is also found in psychopaths. Moderately-dosed psychopathy, Dutton recklessly extrapolated, is existential medicine, as it can help an individual live a better, more successful life. He used the life and works of Steve Jobs to illuminate his point. The notion of success that Dutton alludes to – ambitious, self-made individuals relating to others in utilitarian ways and striving for
materialistic superiority and environmental mastery – is derived from a Western ideology that stresses separateness from others (Carroll, 2010). I would like to counter Dutton’s assumptions by arguing that this version of success is both oppressive and unsustainable. Correspondingly, psychopathy is not medicine for modern times; it is an indication of our failures as a society.

**Rethinking Success**

**Success is Oppressive.**

It is unlikely that anyone has articulated the consequences of the Western success ideal more clearly than Robert K. Merton. Let us take a conceptual detour to 1938, the year in which this renowned sociologist published “Social Structure and Anomie.” In it, he punctured a hole in the prevailing medical and intrapsychic narratives (Alexander Street Press, 2011), by unveiling the social context as a causal factor in pathology. Though cause is more difficult to discern than correlation, there is an emerging consensus that human well-being is determined by the social contexts in which humans live (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Hausman, 2009; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Merton warned us that when cultures develop a disproportionate stress on the goal of success, antisocial behaviours (like ruthlessness) become an adaptive response, particularly when large numbers of people are prevented, through systemic barriers, from attaining success in institutionally legitimized ways. Merton’s analysis shows that there are negative consequences for society if large numbers are unable to live up to the cultural ideal. Is this the case today?

It appears so. The Western notion of success is a deeply-entrenched, oft unexamined value that undermines a more egalitarian approach to life. In particular, the rugged individualism that underscores this construct is disadvantageous to the Western world’s burgeoning immigrant population. Many source countries have cultures with value systems that are cooperative, versus competitive (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Torodova, Suarez-Orozoco, & Suarez-Orozoco, 2008).
When immigrants arrive in the West with those values intact, they are at a disadvantage. To illustrate, Todorova, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2008) noted that both the health and achievement aspirations of immigrant children decline significantly with increased length of residency in the U.S. To explore this trend, these researchers presented the children with a problem and asked them to use the problem as a point of departure for a story. They then studied how the children's narratives evolved longitudinally. In the first year, most children told stories with positive resolutions, and the problems were typically framed as being external and manageable. By year five, far more stories were left hanging with no resolution, and the protagonist, having internalized the problem, was often immobilized by feelings of inadequacy. Meanwhile, the emotional valence shifted from sadness to anger, and the stories became increasingly depopulated of supportive others. How does this relate to Merton's (1938) theory?

For starters, these children equated success with acquiring an education. They viewed education as a pathway to helping their families or communities; a way to lift others out of poverty. Yet, as time wore on, the children showed a strong awareness of systematic barriers in their access to education, and a greater sense of hopelessness to surmount those barriers (Todorova, Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2008). As Merton (1938) warned, there is a risk that if these children are systematically excluded from achieving success in Western cultural terms, they are likely to find less conventional (read: criminalized) means of attaining it, if they do not drop out of the game altogether. Either option is costly both to them, and to society as a whole. If society incurs great costs in maintaining certain values, do those so-called values not merit closer scrutiny? Next time I cross paths with an actuary at my local watering hole, I'll ask.

Mizinska (2007) highlighted the problematic nature of the Western success ideal by reminding us that a competitive system is one that necessarily has winners and losers. Thus,
“success is related to the calculus of probability…The procedure of becoming a success, drawing the winning lot, is reduced, to increasing such probability” (p 18). Doing this, he says, often involves renouncing identity factors in an attempt to match the expectations of those in positions of power. The act of creating a desirable image places a disproportionate emphasis on packaging over content, and leads many allegedly successful individuals to self-destruct (Minzinska, 2007). Must I pause here and point to the obvious disadvantage for non-dominant populations, particularly those who do not look like Steve Jobs? What if Leymah Gbowee, who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize for her courageous efforts to end a long war in Liberia and to improve the lives of African women, became the poster child for success, instead of Steve Jobs? My guess is, in addition to being less oppressive; this version of success might also prove more sustainable.

**Success is Unsustainable.**

Hedlund-de Witt (2012) argues that when the natural world is not perceived from an interconnected position that recognizes its intrinsic worth, it will, by default, be perceived in an instrumental and materialistic fashion, which in turn, will lead to the exploitation and destruction of nature. Instrumentality, therefore, is unsustainable. If psychopaths can be summed up in a word, “instrumental” would be a viable contender. Let us move beyond the decontextualized image presented by Dutton (2013) and take a more scientifically-grounded inventory of their traits, shall we? According to Skeem, Polaschek, Patrick, and Lilienfeld (2011), psychopathy includes a configuration of multiple traits, including disinhibition, boldness and meanness, accompanied by immunity to stress, anxiety, and worry. Harris (2010) added to the list extraordinary egocentricity, a total lack of concern for the suffering of others, and proneness to calculated aggression (p. 142). While Dutton seems to feel this population can provide wisdom and insight that us lesser mortals can learn from, it seems to me that if we took a close look at the
issues confronting humanity today and began to deliberately redefine success in more sustainable
terms, linked to human and ecological well-being, as Hausman (2009), Robbins (2006) and
countless others have suggested, the traits of psychopaths would not prove terribly useful. The
question remains: Shrewd instrumentality might predispose an individual to success, but can it
predispose humanity as a whole to wellness, let alone survival? If not, is success as we know it a
useful concept, or is it merely a tool that dominant forces use to placate the masses (through the
implication that, with hard work, it can also be theirs) and to thereby justify their dominance?

**Existential Ailments and Proposed Remedies**

It would seem that if mental health is largely determined by social conditions, then
psychopathy is not medicine for modern times; it is an indication of our failures as a society.
Indeed, there are societies such as the Okinawans of southern Japan, the Hunza of northern
Pakistan, and the Abkhasians of Soviet Georgia, in which mental and physical illness, never
mind psychopathy, are virtually unknown. Not surprisingly, those societies are characterized by
values that include egalitarianism, biophilia, and a profound respect for all members, to name a
few, and these have been dubbed *synergistic societies* (Robbins, 2006). A wide body of research
on terror management theory (TMT) indicates that humans strive for a sense of belonging, and
that we attenuate existential concerns by affirming our connections to the groups with whom we
identify (Holbrook, Sousa, & Hahn-Holbrook, 2011). If belongingness assuages existential
concerns, then the Western world might do well to shed the chrysalis of individualism in favour
of the more collectivist values observed in synergistic societies. To this end, those of us who
hold dominant cultural identities have a responsibility to level the playing field, armed with our
knowledge that there’s something in it for us, too: Egalitarian societies are simply better, for all
members. After all, they score higher on indexes of human well-being (Hausman, 2009).
Beyond greater connectedness, another way to attenuate existential concerns is through Buddhist practices of non-attachment (Sahdra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010), and awareness of the present moment (Gunaratana, 2011). Dutton (2013) must be aware of this because he claimed that “a psychopath's proclivity to live in the moment can arm against anxiety and bring joy” (p. 38). The implied similarities between psychopaths and Buddhist monks, however, might be a little, um, spurious. I would venture that there is a qualitative difference between fully absorbing a beautiful sunset, and capitalizing on an impulse to sneak into a woman’s house; dress in her underwear, rape, and murder her, as was the habit of Russell Williams, Canada’s most recent psychopath hall-of-famer. That Dutton is able to shamelessly equate the depths of depravity with spiritual enlightenment, and thus to offer subtle justification for the depravity, makes me wonder if this article is an attempt by Dutton to assuage his own existential concerns that the values of the dominant culture are under attack. Is he placing metaphorical sandbags around a way of life that has been beneficial to him, as the City of New York did with the Stock Exchange prior to Hurricane Sandi? Regardless of Dutton’s agenda, this kind of reckless journalism perpetuates a classist, sexist and racist status quo, and it is irresponsible, at best.

**Conclusion**

Though this is an American publication, it is also distributed in Canada. Please allow me, my American friends, to share some intimacies about Canada: Ours is a nation committed to pluralism, though in policy more than in practice. Many Canadians have seen past the gleaming policies, the radiant beams of hope shone offshore in an effort to court immigrants, who, too often, are used to pad our tax base from the bottom up (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010, p. 33), thus easing the strains between a declining birth rate and an aging population. The truth is that we are a country that continues to be plagued by differential privilege, inequitable access to resources,
and lack of full participation, and though we talk a big game, these differences remain rooted largely in cultural identity factors and group affiliations (Arthur & Collins, 2010). Many Canadians have noticed these problems, and have taken up the fight for social justice. The opponent in this fight, however, is often subtlety itself (Smith, Constantine, Graham, & Dize, 2008). It is those messages in popular media that perpetuate oppression, just beneath the consumer’s radar. Dutton’s (2013) article contained just this kind of message. We must train ourselves to perceive such messages and to ascend past them.

Successful people (by that I mean rich) are prone to bemoaning all things income tax. They complain about the rates, what the taxes get spent on, and the politicians doing the spending. Admittedly, I share some of these concerns. What surprises me is that of all the things we choose to subsidize with our tax dollars, those that exacerbate pathology invariably top the list. Prisons, for example, are simply a one-way ticket for money. They are very costly, and serve almost no purpose, since they do not rehabilitate inmates (Phelps, 2011). Personally, I would prefer to subsidize genius. In the current model, genius finds its way into Ivy League schools, only to become hijacked by corporate interests. Eventually, almost inevitably, it is harnessed for such innovations as credit default swaps, instead of being used to improve human life. Perhaps if we discovered genius at early ages and nurtured it through special education programs that stressed cooperative value systems, then followed up by paying the best and the brightest richly for their contributions to society, we might be better off. My only suggestion is that in the screening process for genius, we include a personality test. The catch: any candidates who score high on measures of psychopathy are relieved of the task of bettering society. Why? Because there are better proverbial wells from which to divine wisdom and existential medicine than maximum security penitentiaries. I’m thinking Nobel Peace laureates, as a start - you?
References


