

Psychological Costs of Material Wealth

Children in wealthy families are usually thought of as being happy and well-adjusted, but recent research suggests that they can be quite troubled. In two studies affluent, suburban teenagers reported higher levels of substance use, as well as symptoms of anxiety and depression, than did other children of the same age. Exploration of causes suggested that two factors might be implicated: excessive pressures to achieve, and isolation from parents (both literal and emotional).

Studies also indicate that parents in very wealthy communities can be more emotionally vulnerable than those in the middle classes. When adults place inordinate emphasis on material success, for example, they tend to compromise attainment of other rewards critical for their psychological well-being, such as close interpersonal relationships. At the community level, too, material affluence can inhibit the formation of supportive networks, as services – such as child- or elder-care -- tend to be bought and not shared with neighbors.

Some stressors tend to be specific to mothers in wealthy communities, and others specific to fathers. Many upper-class mothers give up careers and are thus deprived of work-related gratifications; those who remain employed can face exacting demands both in their jobs and at home. Fathers, in turn, can contend with the substantial ramifications (or fears) of losing positions of power – the higher the status, the greater the fall – and with frequent absences from home due to professional obligations.

Many might believe that rich people should simply walk away from their pressured lifestyles, but to relinquish a lucrative career can be hard for anyone. While not all possess wealth, the desire for more of it is universal. Moreover, many rich parents may stay with their high-pressure jobs not out of personal greed but to provide their children with the best they can (in many cases, a stellar education).

Classism is directed to some degree at the rich, as it unambiguously has been directed at the poor. Without question, for those concerned about the next meal, the misery borne of ennui can seem ludicrous. On the other hand, the desire to be liked and accepted by others is universal, and the rich are not only often the focus of envy and dislike -- from society in general and sometimes from clinicians – but are also aware that their misfortunes tend to evoke malicious pleasure in others.

There is clearly a need for more research to illuminate the precise nature, magnitude of problems among children of affluence. Even as we await such research, however, it is critical that we consider the mental health needs of these children -- who unlike adults cannot obtain psychotherapy for themselves, and many of who may be discouraged from using services available in their schools or communities. As a beginning step in this direction, much can be accomplished by promoting parents' awareness of the emotional damage incurred by the unrelenting pursuit of "more".

While in no way detracting from the formidable challenges faced by the poor, it is vital that psychologists correct their long-standing lack of concern with the isolation unique to affluence. No child should want for either food or affection; at the same time, it is worth remembering Mother Teresa's words of counsel: The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread. In their future work, then, scientists must continue to examine the psychological costs of material affluence, and as they learn more from research, must convey the essence of their findings to the lay public.

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