



FlashReport

Does affluence impoverish the experience of parenting?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ High-SES parents reported lower meaning in life while taking care of their children.
- ▶ SES was not related to the meaning parents reported during the rest of the day.
- ▶ A reminder of wealth reduced parents' sense of meaning when spending time with kids.

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ABSTRACT

Acquiring greater financial resources before having children seems like an intuitive strategy for people to enhance their well-being during parenthood. However, research suggests that affluence may activate an agentic orientation, propelling people to pursue personal goals and independence from others, creating a conflict with the communal nature of parenting. Coherence between one's goals and actions has been theorized to be essential for the experience of meaning in life. Thus, we hypothesized that affluence would be associated with a diminished sense of meaning during childcare. In Study 1, using the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), we found that socioeconomic status (SES) was negatively related to the average sense of meaning parents reported across episodes of the day when they were taking care of their children. In Study 2, a reminder of wealth produced a parallel effect; when parents were exposed to a photograph of money, they reported a lower sense of meaning in life while spending time with their kids at a children's festival. These findings contribute to our understanding of the relationship between wealth and well-being by showing that affluence can compromise a central subjective benefit of parenting—a sense of meaning in life.

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Introduction

One of life's biggest decisions is whether – and when – to have children. Financial concerns can weigh heavily on this decision; in a recent UK poll, over 42% of working women under 30 reported putting off parenthood for financial reasons (Visions of Britain, 2011). Acquiring more education and income before having kids is sensible given that children's health and well-being is linked to the socioeconomic status (SES) of their families (e.g., Chen, Matthews, & Boyce, 2002; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997). But how does affluence affect the experience of parenting? We argue that because affluence activates agentic goals that are inconsistent with the communal behavior of parenting, affluence may compromise the meaning in life parents experience when caring for their children.

People with an agentic orientation tend to value the achievement of personal goals and independence from others (Bakan, 1966). Research suggests that wealth is associated both with a primary concern for the achievement of personal goals (Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton,

& Keltner, 2012) and less interest in others' welfare (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). For example, Piff and colleagues found that upper-class drivers in California were more likely to cut off pedestrians at a cross walk (Piff et al., 2012; Study 2), showing a tendency to prioritize their personal goals over the goals of others. In addition, higher-SES American adults exhibited less trust towards their partner while playing an economic game (Piff et al., 2010; Study 3), demonstrating a reluctance to cooperate with others.

Although these correlational findings do not enable causal inferences, researchers have found parallel effects using experimental manipulations. For instance, Piff and colleagues found that people induced to see themselves as relatively high in SES allocated smaller proportions of their annual salary to charity (Piff et al., 2010; Study 2) and took more candy designated for children (Piff et al., 2012; Study 4). Indeed, because people have a strong network of associations with wealth, simply exposing people to subtle reminders of money produces similar effects; for example, after unscrambling phrases related to money (e.g. "high a salary desk paying"), participants donated less of their experimental payment to charity than participants who unscrambled neutral sentences (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006; Study 6).

Vohs et al. (2006) argue that reminders of money drive people to "prefer to be free of dependency and dependents" (p. 1154) because money

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makes it possible for people to get what they want without relying on others (see also Piff et al., 2010). Thus, after seeing a photograph of money (vs. a neutral photograph), people express a preference for engaging in leisure activities alone, rather than with friends and family (Vohs et al., 2006; Study 8). Similarly, people primed with money become more resistant to others' influence when making consumer choices (Liu, Smeesters, & Vohs, 2012) and show less liking toward people who mimic their behavior (Liu, Vohs, & Smeesters, 2011). Taken together, these correlational and experimental findings suggest that affluence is associated with an agentic orientation, characterized by the prioritization of personal goals and a desire to maintain independence from others.

We propose that this agentic orientation may undermine people's subjective experience during communal activities, such as parenting—which has been described as one of the most central communal activities in people's lives because it often involves sacrificing one's own independence and personal goals for the benefit of one's children (Clark, 2009). Previous theorizing suggests that parenting can potentially provide an important sense of meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991), but that incoherence between goals and behavior may compromise people's sense of meaning. King, Hicks, Krull, and Del Gaiso (2006), for instance, argue that “lives are experienced as meaningful when they have... coherence that transcends chaos.” Similarly, the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006) postulates that meaning is compromised through violations of the “coherence of social motivations.” From this theoretical perspective, activities are experienced as meaningful to the extent that they cohere within the larger framework of people's goals (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005). Indeed, Emmons (2003) claims that the concept of meaning in life can only be understood within the context of people's goals. To the extent that the communal activity of parenting conflicts with agentic goals activated by wealth, therefore, we predict that being wealthy – or simply being reminded of wealth – may undermine the meaning that parents derive from caring for their children.

To address this hypothesis, in Study 1, we employed an alternative to the experience-sampling method – the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM; Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004) – and asked parents to reconstruct what they did on the previous day, episode-by-episode. Using this method, we explored whether higher SES was negatively associated with parents' sense of meaning when caring for their children. To examine the causal link between wealth and meaning in life, in Study 2 we manipulated the salience of wealth and measured parents' sense of meaning while they were attending a festival with their children. Because coherence is theoretically essential for the experience of meaning, which has been depicted as a central benefit of parenthood, we were particularly interested in this component of well-being, but we also examined positive affect and happiness to capture well-being more broadly.

Study 1

Method

Participants

As part of a larger study, 186 parents completed survey items relevant to our research question (76% women; median age: 36; median education: college/university degree; median household income: \$70,000–\$80,000). All participants had at least one child 18 years old or younger living at home. Sixty-six participants were recruited in person in British Columbia and completed paper surveys; 120 participants completed the survey online—91 of those were recruited through MTurk¹ and 29 through our lab's website and local schools.

¹ Sixty-three additional MTurk participants were excluded for failing the Instructional Manipulation Check, a validated tool for eliminating participants not following instructions; this elimination rate is consistent with past online research (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009).

Procedure

Parents reported what they did on the previous day, episode-by-episode (DRM; Kahneman et al., 2004). For a predetermined subset of episodes, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they experienced a sense of meaning and purpose in life during the episode; a separate study with 136 parents (Ashton-James, Kushlev, & Dunn, 2011) confirmed that this single item was strongly correlated ($r = .83$) with a 4-item version of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire's presence of meaning subscale (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). As in the original DRM, we also measured participants' positive affect (PA; i.e., the average of *happy*, *warm/friendly*, and *enjoying myself*). Both meaning and PA were rated on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*). Participants also reported their gender, age, education and income on measures drawn from the DRM.

Results and discussion

Following recent research examining SES and communal behavior, we created an index of SES by standardizing and adding income and education scores (Kraus & Keltner, 2009; Piff et al., 2010). Correlational analyses showed that higher-SES parents reported lower levels of meaning when taking care of their children, $r(182) = -.20$, $p = .008$. In contrast, SES was unrelated to the average level of meaning throughout the rest of their day, $r(181) = -.05$, $p = .513$.² Next, we examined the meaning individuals experienced during childcare, while partialing out the variance associated with their general tendency to find meaning in daily life. We entered SES into a regression predicting the meaning parents reported when taking care of their children, while controlling for the average level of meaning they experienced while doing all other activities (the two meaning scores were correlated, $r[183] = .41$, $p < .001$). This analysis showed that SES was negatively related specifically to the meaning parents experienced when taking care of their children, $\beta = -.17$, $t(180) = -2.59$, $p = .011$ ³; this effect was substantively unchanged when controlling for parents' age and gender, $\beta = -.22$, $t(175) = -3.02$, $p = .003$. In contrast, our analyses revealed that SES was not significantly associated with PA when parents were taking care of their children, ($r[175] = -.001$, *ns*) or with their PA during the rest of the day, ($r[177] = .057$, *ns*).

Taken together, these findings show that higher SES is associated with a decreased sense of meaning during childcare, but not with decreased PA. Because Study 1 was conducted as part of a larger exploratory research project and relied on correlational analyses, however, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Although we controlled for age and gender, SES is linked to numerous other individual differences, from religion (Mueller & Johnson, 1975) to health (Adler et al., 1994). Thus, to explore whether affluence actually causes decreased meaning during childcare, in line with other recent research (Quoidbach, Dunn, Petrides, & Mikolajczak, 2010; Vohs et al., 2006), we used experimental methodology in Study 2, temporarily activating the concept of wealth while parents were taking care of their children. According to our theoretical perspective, simply activating the concept of wealth should impair parents' sense of meaning during childcare.

² When income and education were analyzed separately, both were negatively correlated with meaning during childcare, though the effect of income alone was marginal [income: $r(182) = -.13$, $p = .09$; education: $r(184) = -.19$, $p = .01$]. Meaning during the rest of the day was unrelated to income, $r(181) = -.040$, $p = .588$, or education: $r(183) = -.047$, $p = .527$.

³ To explore whether this effect depended on the recruitment method, we used dummy-codes with MTurk as the reference group and found that the interaction terms between the dummy codes and SES were nonsignificant (p 's $> .744$). The correlations between SES and meaning for each subsample were also consistently negative (paper: $r = -.18$, online-MTurk: $r = -.14$, online-other: $r = -.22$) and not significantly different from each other (Fisher Z p 's $> .686$).

Study 2

In Study 2, we conducted a field experiment, priming half our participants with wealth while they were attending a children's festival and then measuring their sense of meaning and happiness.

Method

Participants

Sixty-six parents (59% women; median age: 37; median education: college/university degree; median household income: \$80,000–\$90,000) participated in the study. All participants were attending a children's festival in Vancouver, British Columbia with at least one of their children.

Procedure

Parents were asked to complete a short survey on their experiences at the festival (no other information about the purpose of the study was provided). They received a questionnaire affixed to a clipboard, which had a sticker showing either a large number of Canadian bills (*wealth condition*) or flowers (*control condition*); both pictures were identical to stimuli used in previous research (Quoidbach et al., 2010; Vohs et al., 2006). We asked parents to report how *happy* they had felt and to what extent they had experienced *a sense of meaning and purpose in life* during their time at the festival from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*). Participants also answered demographic questions from Study 1, including age, gender, education and income.

Results and discussion

We found no significant differences between conditions in terms of gender, age or SES (p 's > .392), confirming the success of random assignment. In support of our hypothesis, we found that participants in the wealth condition reported significantly less meaning and purpose in life during the children's festival ($M = 3.33$) than people in the control condition, $M = 4.14$; $t(64) = 2.15$, $p = .035$. Furthermore, consistent with Study 1, the wealth prime had no effect on participants' happiness, $t(62) = .94$, $p = .349$. Study 2 thus extended our findings from Study 1 by showing that activating the concept of wealth diminished parents' sense of meaning in life when they were taking care of their children.

General discussion

By using two complementary methodologies, we showed that affluence is associated with an impoverished sense of meaning – but not positive affect or happiness – during childcare. In Study 1, higher-SES parents experienced relatively low levels of meaning in life during childcare, though SES was unrelated to their meaning during the rest of the day. In Study 2, a simple reminder of wealth produced a parallel effect. These studies together suggest that financial resources undermine a central subjective benefit of parenting (Baumeister, 1991; White & Dolan, 2009).

Whereas a voluminous literature has examined the overall relationship between wealth and well-being (for a review, see Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002), the present findings join a new wave of research in documenting the costs and benefits of affluence in daily life. In a correlational study, for example, wealthier individuals indicated they would derive less pleasure from positive experiences, such as seeing a beautiful waterfall (Quoidbach et al., 2010). In a follow-up experiment, participants exposed to a photograph of money (vs. a neutral photo) exhibited significantly less enjoyment while eating chocolate (Quoidbach et al., 2010). Extending these findings, our research shows for the first time that affluence compromises another important component of well-being—meaning. The fact that wealth was linked to reduced meaning during childcare, but not reduced PA or happiness, is notable given that PA and meaning are typically highly correlated (King et al., 2006). These findings highlight

the value of measuring multiple well-being indicators in studying people's subjective experience, given that even closely related aspects of well-being may be affected differently by important variables.

Building also on recent work showing that affluence may reduce individuals' inclination to engage in communal behavior (Piff et al., 2010; Vohs et al., 2006), we find that wealth may also compromise the experience of meaning during these activities. It remains to be established whether the effect of wealth on meaning generalizes to communal activities other than parenting (e.g., volunteering).

The present research dovetails with previous work showing that high-SES individuals are especially likely to experience decreased marital satisfaction after they become parents (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). The decreased meaning high-SES parents experience when caring for their children may provide one explanation for why parenthood compromises marital quality more in high-SES individuals than their lower-SES counterparts.

The present research provides only initial evidence for our hypothesis and should be interpreted with caution, especially because our participants were reasonably well-off and primarily from North America. Indeed, there is some evidence that the relationship between SES and communal behavior may be different at extreme ends of the socioeconomic spectrum (Nettle, Colleony, & Cockerill, 2011) and may depend on culture (Henrich et al., 2010).

Again, we do not wish to suggest that parents avoid climbing the socioeconomic ladder before having children. The present findings, however, do suggest that high-SES parents may benefit from strategies designed to reduce the activation of agentic goals during childcare. Alternatively, high-SES parents may derive meaning from childcare by selecting activities that enable them to satisfy their agentic goals, such as teaching their child to play the violin or use a microscope. At its core, our research provides further evidence of the dual effects of prosperity, showing that affluence can both support and subvert important aspects of well-being.

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