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Redefining Success: Role and Scope of Social Work

By Dr. Archana Kaushik & Ms. Shashi Rani Dev

University of Delhi

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Social work is one of the prominent human service professions that have been unflinchingly working to bring amiability and well-being in the society, and it has a crucial role in redefining and propagating the meaning of 'success', which is holistic and balanced encompassing healthy body, mind and social relations. The paper provides existing and suggestive interventions of social work profession to contribute towards establishing a vibrant and enriched society, where success means peace, happiness, compassion and wellbeing.

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Redefining Success: Role and Scope of Social Work

Dr. Archana Kaushik [α] & Ms. Shashi Rani Dev [σ]

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I. Introduction

Human species has practically ruled over the planet Earth. From a life of hunter-gatherer, humans have now stepped on the Moon and trying to demystify the components of galaxies. Today, we possess all the sophisticated machinery and technology to make our life comfortable and full of luxuries. Life is much easier these days than it was hundred years ago because of scientific and technological advancements. We can communicate with our fellow-beings sitting miles away within seconds with telephones, mobiles, emails, Skype, and other modes. We can travel much faster and in greater ease with airplanes and high speed trains. Modern entertainment systems also let us have more fun and recreational engagements. Moreover, in the last few decades, innovations in medical sciences and better public health system, world over, have amplified life expectancy. According to the World Health Statistics (2014), people everywhere are living longer. Based on global averages, a girl who was born in 2012 can expect to live to around 73 years, and a boy to the age of 68. This is six years longer than the average global life expectancy for a child born in 1990 (WHO, 2014). There are 131.4 million births every year in contrast to 55.3 million deaths each year (World Fact Book, 2011). Apparently, we have made progress in leaps and bounds in economic growth and development. Science and technology have contributed immensely to our material comforts and overall living.

However, despite material success, progress and development, somewhere we have terribly failed in bringing about peace, or in reducing pains and sufferings. Daily, in one part of the world or the other incidences of violence, wars and disasters erupt claiming human lives and causing much agony and grief. The World Health Organization (2002) observes that violence causes more than 1.6 million deaths worldwide every year, making it one of the leading causes of death in all parts of the world for persons aged 15 to 44 years. With 191 million people losing their lives in conflicts and violence in the 20th century, it has become one of the most violent periods in human history. And, well over half of them were civilians, notes the WHO (2002). Moreover, the United Nations (2015) asserts that 35 percent of women worldwide, reportedly, had experienced violence in their lifetime, whether physical, sexual, or both; one in 10 girls under the age of 18 was forced to have sex.

Further, terrorism is on the rise, with an almost fivefold increase in fatalities since 9/11 (Global Terrorism Index, 2014). In the year 2013 there was 61% rise in the number of people killed in terrorist attacks. In addition, World Report on Violence and Health brings out that in the year 2000, an estimated 1.6 million people in the world lost their lives to violence (WHO, 2002). Quite interestingly, Institute for Economics and Peace (2012) calculates that if financial resources spent on violence containment are represented as a discrete industry, it would be the largest industry in the U.S. economy—larger than construction, real estate, professional services, or manufacturing and it would be the seventh largest economy in the world, only slightly smaller than the UK economy.

Everyday newspapers and news channels show the same sad stories of violence, wars and disasters. It is clear that in modern times ecology – nature and life on the planet Earth – is not safe. This instills an awareness of fear and tension that any sensitive and

Authors α σ: Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Delhi. e-mail: bishnudash2006@gmail.com

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compassionate being must question the 'success and progress' we have made in our modern world.

Can we really consider the rise in human life expectancy and sharp decline in death rate as the triumph of human civilization, if there are ample evidences of genocide, violence and exploitation in almost every part of the world? It is ironical that a person suffering from tuberculosis can surely be cured to live a long and healthy life but it cannot be guaranteed that a healthy person going to workplace would not be killed by terrorists or communal/ethnic violence; a woman can receive best of ante natal care but may not be protected against sexual violence. And such instances of violence and insecurity to human life are seen, apparently, in industrially advanced societies, where unprecedented 'development' only seems to have fostered restlessness and discontent. Then the question arises – is this the success and progress and development?

What is the meaning of success? In a common parlance, success is measured by materialist possessions and position in the society where one can influence lives of others. More often than not, big houses, luxury cars, fat bank balance, and other items showing aristocracy are considered the indicators of success in the society. At an individual level, a person with plenty of money and materialistic possessions is considered 'successful', irrespective of the means to achieve the same or his/her state of happiness or misery. Do these materialistic possessions actually give us happiness and contentment?

Looking at the macro level paradigm, nations have been categorized into 'developed' and 'developing' countries based on certain socio-economic indicators. In this regard, Gross Domestic Product and per capita income become the indicators of being rich and successful societies. And happiness – it is taken as fallout of being successful.

a) Measuring success

How much does material prosperity contribute to happiness? Hypothetically, the richest countries like United States of America, most European countries, Australia, Canada, should be having the happiest people. However, the results are paradoxical. The New Scientist magazine from Britain (2003) conducted a survey in 65 nations to rank the happiness. And the survey found that the world's happiest countries with the most satisfied people are Puerto Rico and Mexico, and those with the most optimistic people are Nigeria and Mexico. And the most powerful and richest nation the USA is embarrassingly ranked 16th on the list.

Interestingly, the results of the survey defy the conventional notion propagated and hyped by media that puts material prosperity as a pre-requisite to happiness. The GDP per capita in Puerto Rico is $16,800; in Mexico it is $9,000; in Nigeria it is merely $800 in contrast to the United States with GDP per person of $37,800 (which is nearly 47 times higher than that of Nigeria). Seemingly, money has little to do with happiness. Then, how does peaceful environment and sense of security make these 'not so rich' nations the happiest countries in the world? And ironically, the most serious problems emanate from industrially advanced societies, where unprecedented success and progress have, seemingly, fostered discontent, restlessness and sufferings. Undoubtedly, there has been vast progress in the areas of science and technology but somehow we have terribly failed in reducing human sufferings and pains. This success is ostensibly devoid of love, compassion and peace.

Findings of the survey bring out that though Puerto Rico, a small island, is endowed with rich natural resources its US territory suffers high rates of murders, violence and unemployment. Likewise, materially among the world's poorest people, Nigerians also encounter State induced violence, lack of basic infrastructure, apathy and defunct government services. So, people in these nations are happiest despite being in violent and unsecured environment. It implies that peace and security does not guarantee happiness.

Education and health are the important parameters of Human Development. The United Nations human development report (2003) ranks Nigeria at 152nd out of 175 countries, or 24th from the bottom for life expectancy, health, education, standard of living, and literacy. It is quite interesting to note that happiness is not linked to prosperity, peace, education, health or life expectancy. Then, what is the magic ingredient that makes these countries the happiest in the world?

Findings of the survey show that strong community ties and shared living is what makes these 'poor' (in terms of GDP and certain development indicators) nations the happiest countries in the world. Community living appears to hold the key for happiness among the inhabitants of these nations despite having challenges, sufferings and struggles.

Survey findings show that Puerto Ricans, Nigerians and Mexicans have lot of community festivals and celebration, ingrained in their culture that binds them into strong sense of trust and we-feeling. Puerto Rica has nearly 500 community festivals in a year. Community celebrations, singing and dancing together, merry making, act as antidote to stresses, pains and sufferings the people of these countries experience while living in harsh circumstances. The inter-dependence and shared living of these close knit communities provide courage to its inhabitants to thrive amidst adversity and poverty.

The findings above entail to break the popular notion that success is a prerequisite to happiness. Then, what are the facilitators and inhibitors of happiness and/or success? Few research studies in this regard may be looked into. Uchida, Norasakkunkit and Kitayama (2004) have noted that there are cultural

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constructions of happiness and well-being. The authors identified substantial cultural variations in shared meanings of happiness, motivations underlying happiness, and predictors of happiness. Specifically, in North American cultural contexts, happiness tends to be defined in terms of personal achievement. In contrast, in East Asian cultural milieu, interpersonal connectedness is what characterizes happiness. Moreover, happiness is best predicted by perceived embeddedness of the self in a social relationship. Likewise, Lu and Gilmour (2004) have theorized that distinct and different characteristics of the conceptions of happiness are prevalent in Asian and Euro-American cultures. For Asians, socially oriented Subjective Well Being emphasizes role obligation and dialectical balance; for Euro-Americans, individually oriented Subjective Well Being emphasizes personal accountability and explicit pursuit. These studies somewhere answer the reason why despite poor economy and State's apathy, Puerto Ricans, Nigerians and Mexicans are ranked higher on happiness index. It also provides insight to social researchers and policy makers in designing interventions for real, authentic and sustainable success, progress and development, key to which lies in strong community ties.

Further, Kaushik (2005) finds that irrespective of their financial conditions, sense of security and well-being among elderly women in Delhi, depends on their relationships with their family members. Thus, an aged lady in rugs is contented with amicable and loving family relationships while another elderly lady with crores of property feels insecure and grumpy, having incongruent relations with significant others. In the same wavelength, Chan and Lee (2006) observe that older persons with a larger network are happier and that social support plays a mediating role. On similar lines, Lu and Argyle (1991), through series of experiments conclude that cooperativeness is one of the important determinants of happiness. Kim, Sherman and Taylor (2008) note that social support is one of the most effective means by which people can cope with stressful events. They observe that Asians and Asian Americans are more reluctant to explicitly ask for support from close others than are European Americans because they are more concerned about the potentially negative relational consequences of such behaviors.

Thus, the survey concludes that once our basic needs for survival are met, our happiness and quality of life is largely determined by the quality of our personal relationships – with ourselves, our partner, family, friends and community.

Osho quotes, "Who will you call a success – Alexander the Great or Jesus the Crucified". It has become imperative for us to ask this question to ourselves, what success means to us. Moreover, it also implies that one should carve out one's own definition of success, rather than 'others' defining it for us. Each one of us is born with unique endowments, then how can we all have singular and same meaning of success and happiness?

Mr. Ratan Tata, in his speech at Symbiosis, Pune, on July, 2015, said, "Don't just have a career or academic goals. Set goals to give you a balanced, successful life. Balanced means ensuring your health, relationships, mental peace are all in good order. There is no point of getting a promotion on the day of your breakup. There is no fun in driving a car if your back hurts. Shopping is not enjoyable if your mind is full of tensions. Don't take life seriously. Life is not meant to be taken seriously, as we are really temporary here. We are all like prepaid card with limited validity. If we are lucky, we may last another 50 years. And 50 years is just 2,500 weekends. Do we really need to get so worked up?...It's OK, bunk few classes, score low in couple of papers, take leave from work, fall in love, fight a little with your spouse…Its ok….we are people, not programmed devices…! "Don't be serious, enjoy life as it comes".

Mr. Tata has raised a pertinent issue – if success is not coupled with happiness, contentment and well-being, then it should not be a pursuable goal. Happiness and well-being should be the crux of success. Happiness is an emotional state that shows our satisfaction with life. It is a measure of our quality of life. Psychologists and philosophers have asserted that happiness is the most fundamental motivation for all human actions. It is the hedonistic principle and our ultimate goal in life – to be happy.

Surprisingly, if questioned, most of us would maintain that our race for material prosperity is in fact to achieve greater happiness. We strive to attain material success as we believe that it would bring us more pleasure and satisfaction.

So, what is success? Do material possessions make us successful? Results of several studies, as delineated above, raise doubts over the very notion of success. Many of us do believe that money is the main measure of success, because of the materialistic nature of society. Even the mental agony suffered and negative behavioural dispositions of the affluent and the rich are readily overlooked under the shine of their 'success' and prosperity. Seemingly two aspects need to be understood in this regard –

One, studies have shown that culture plays a critical role in determining the notion of success in that society. The Market or the culture of consumerism has been continuously bombarding us with the messages that our happiness lies in materialistic possessions (see: Goldberg, 2006). It is the Market that is creating demand for consumer goods and making us believe that 'success' is the pre-requisite for happiness. And we cannot be successful and hence happy till the time we 'achieve' and 'own' certain material possessions. Thus, the Market culture creates an inner discontent and convinces us that we can 'buy' happiness and that

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wealth is the path to permanent fulfillment and well-being. We hardly realize that this inner discontent cannot be fulfilled with material possessions.

We look to external things to try to alleviate our inner discontent. Materialism certainly can give us a kind of happiness - the temporary thrill of buying something new, and the ego-inflating thrill of owning it afterwards. And we use this kind of happiness to try to override - or compensate for - the fundamental unhappiness inside us.

Coming to the second aspect, quite paradoxically, the race to material possession is endless – it 'seems to' provide happiness (in future) but actually it doesn't. Material success does bring happiness, but the amount of happiness gained makes only a small contribution to our feeling of wellbeing. Dr. Michael Fordyce describes this phenomenon as the "happiness law of diminishing returns" which states that achievement in any area of life adds to happiness only up to a certain point. For instance, even slight raise in salary, when one's income is quite low, may add to one's personal happiness but once he/she reaches a median income level, each increase in income produces an ever diminishing level of additional happiness for his/her efforts.

Thus, evidences fail to show any correlation between wealth and happiness, though it may appear to. Studies have shown that once our basic material needs are satisfied, our level of income makes little difference to our level of happiness. Researchers in positive psychology have concluded that true well-being does not come from wealth but from other factors such as good relationships, meaningful and challenging jobs or hobbies, and a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves (such as a religion, a political or social cause, or a sense of mission).

So, time has come to redefine success. The noted physician and spiritual guru, Dr. Deepak Chopra defines it as, "Success in life can be defined as the continued expansion of happiness and the progressive realization of worthy goals. There are many aspects of success; material wealth is only one of them. Moreover, success is a journey, not a destination. Material abundance in all its expressions; happens to make the journey more enjoyable, but success includes good health, energy, enthusiasm for life, fulfilling relationships, creative freedom, and a sense of well-being".

This is the holistic definition of success that integrates various facets of life and calls for balance or equilibrium. Chasing materialistic gains at the cost of health and/or love relationships in life cannot bring us happiness. The corporate infuse huge resources in advertising their products that tend to define our needs and aims of life. These advertisements seep deeply in our unconscious mind and we start believing that there is no happiness in life without the possession of the luxury car, the big house and other limitless items and products. The chase of materialistic acquisitions cannot fulfill our inner loneliness; rather the stress encountered takes a heavy toll of our health. Social work profession can and should play crucial role in deconstructing 'success', whose indicators are set by the Market. Sensitizing, cognitive restructuring, behavior modification techniques, are some of the strategies that can be helpful in dealing with compulsive thoughts and behaviours related to lopsided materialistic success.

Drawing from the findings of research studies showing strong linkage between community ties and happiness, social work professionals may work for harmonious familial and neighbourhood relations. Shared activities in the community and mobilizing and institutionalizing people's participation are some of the aspects of harmonious community and social relations, which social workers can focus upon. The byproduct of these interventions would ensure happiness.

Further, lopsided success characterized by principles of consumerism has led to indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources like rivers and forests that has precipitated an accelerating environmental crisis and serious decline of the eco-system. To save our planet, we require a balanced notion of success. A growing body of research is demonstrating that as we become happier and healthier (physically as well as emotionally) we become more compassionate and start caring more about others (including ecological concerns). With happiness, we start healing our relationships with ourselves first, followed by our family, community, humanity and the ecosystem. Happy people naturally care about others. On the contrary, unhappy people do not connect naturally – rather, they feel alienated and separated from others, nature and the world. Social work profession along with other human service professions may work on improving intra-personal, inter-personal and social relationships, which can realign people on the path of true success.

Another significant aspect that must be looked into is the seed of frustration and violence is inherent in the notion of 'success'. It is the intrinsic characteristic of success that only a few reach to the destination while most fail. The failed ones are clasped with frustration and despair. And, since only the successful people are appreciated and respected whereas the failures receive rejection, ridicule and isolation, ends become more important than means. In their quest for success, people do not hesitate in using different methods, and all too often, these means are aggressive and harsh. For the sake of selfish gains, many people commit terrible cruelties and sufferings upon their fellow-beings. In the modern world, perhaps we have forgotten values of interdependence, shared living, cooperation, and such others as competition, independence and personal achievement have taken over. For attaining success (which would provide happiness), we assume that winning through the cut-throat competition, race against

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time, selfish focus are crucial. However, research studies mentioned above claim otherwise – community ties, social support and amicable personal relationships are ingredients of happiness.

For achieving true success which brings happiness and contentment and is not at the cost of others' happiness, renowned surgeon and spiritual leader Dr. Deepak Chopra delineates seven (spiritual) laws of success. Details are as below:

The first one is the Law of Pure Potentiality which depicts the power of our inner being or consciousness or the power of our spirit. In common parlance, we identify with our false image or the ego. And, the ego is dependent on others' perceptions about us. It thrives on the approval of others. It wants to control because it lives in fear. The modern day notion of success, which is mad race for materialistic possessions and external power, is linked to the ego. It is dependent on selfish motives, competition and proving oneself the best. But the ego is merely the social mask and not who we really are. The need for approval, the need to control things, and the need for external power are fear based. This kind of power is not the power of pure potentiality. Chopra (2008) quotes, "If you want to reach a state of bliss – make a decision to relinquish the need to control, the need to be approved and the need to judge". The more we connect with our 'real self' the more we are able to experience and use the law of pure potentiality. For this, practicing non-judgmental attitude is required as through the lens of ego we judge others. Mindfulness is the key to self-knowledge, which can go a long way in making us capable enough to use our inner potential. Engaged in ruthless competition, often, we fail to cherish little joys of the nature. Connecting with nature not only makes us healthier but also happier. It is easier to be 'silent' and away from the constant chattering of the mind when one is connected with the nature.

The second one is the *Law of giving and receiving.* Since our childhood, we are taught 'whatever you sow, so shall you reap'. This is based on the fact that everything in the universe operates through dynamic exchange. Love begets love. If you want appreciation give appreciation. While running behind the success, we often create hatred and enmity against our competitors or anyone posing hurdles in the way of our goals. Seeds of hostility breed much of aggression and antagonism filling our life with sufferings and pains. On the other hand, if our heart is filled with love and happiness, we radiate with positive energy, joy and ecstasy. Social work professionals can help in myriad of ways in promoting mutual respect and positive regard, amicable relationships at workplace and inculcating values of love, care and compassion. In fact, instilling sense of gratitude among people, which is very simple but very powerful application, can help in creating a loving and caring community.

Third, related to the above one, is the *Law of Karma or cause and effect.* Every day, in our lives, we make choices and oftentimes this decision-making is unconsciously. As an instance, a story from the life of Gautam Buddha may be cited here. A man came to Gautam Buddha and started abusing him. The Buddha calmly and patiently listened and after a while asked him, "brother! Do you have to say anything else"? The man got bewildered and uttered, "I rebuked and abused you, why are you not using harsh words against me"? The Buddha replied, "It is my choice… whether to react or not, whether to accept your abusive words or not..". Most of us would have reacted, whether overtly and silently, creating much of grief inside us. So, witnessing the choices we make every moment and examining these choices, evaluating the consequences of these choices and making conscious choices would make us free from the compulsive reactions and negative thinking patterns.

Fourth one is *Law of Least Effort*. It includes complete acceptance of people, circumstances and events as they are in this moment. We exhaust lot of energy in resisting, cribbing and reacting when situations go adverse. Acceptance saves that energy which can then be utilized in finding creative solutions. One component of this law is taking every hurdle as opportunity. History is full of numerous examples where common people have achieved success by converting their adversities into opportunities. A small American businessman had an adhesive making factory. Once due to inappropriate proportion of chemicals mixed, made the adhesive far less sticky than the desired levels. This created the fear of huge loss to the company. The owner got the idea of making 'stick-on' strips. And he earned profits multiple times than the usual rate. This is one small example of changing hurdles into stepping stones.

Law of Intention and Desire is the fifth one that focuses on 'attention'. It claims that whatever we put our attention on grows stronger in our life and vice versa. It also stresses on 'creative thinking'. If we focus on positive aspects of life, remove thoughts of failure, pain, despair, from our mind, success becomes all the more a predictable event in our lives. Thoughts are very powerful. They are often taken as the seeds of reality. Negative thoughts add to the problems and challenges while positive thinking makes us more creative, happy and more close to our destination or success.

Sixth one is the *Law of Detachment.* Here, practicing detachment means freeing oneself from the attachments of the results of our actions. Detachment helps us remain calm and composed and even accept uncertainty as it means staying alert to the opportunity within every problem by letting go of your idea of how things should be. In one's willingness to accept uncertainty, solutions spontaneously appear. It also means enjoying mystery and magic of pure potentiality.

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Lastly, the *Law of Dharma or Purpose in Life* seeks to discover one's unique talents, divinity and serve humanity with the expression of these talents. When one's creative expressions match the needs of fellow humans, wealth spontaneously flows. It may be reiterated that oftentimes, we learn the faulty meaning of success based upon the competition and struggle, creating antagonism and rivalry. And then we set goals of life to achieve success by acquiring materialistic gains – big bungalow, cars, luxuries and power to control others. Though seemingly few of us may achieve our goals but internally we fail terribly as we get disconnected with true meaning and purpose of life – world hardly remembers rich and wealthy people but those who devote their life for the well-being of humanity.

Thus, the above discussion shows that success and happiness can go hand in hand rather than the popular myth that happiness follows success. It also falsifies the idea that a few win or succeed at the cost of others – that life offers dichotomous and opposite aspects of success and failure. Happiness is holistic and is felt by remaining connected with nature, with fellow beings, and not preoccupied by rigid mental frameworks of how the life 'should be'.

Social workers are considered as the 'doctors of relationships'. Though a gigantic task, social workers can and should redefine meaning of happiness and success. This newly defined success is based on nurturance of human relationship, love, care, interdependence rather than mad race after materialism. Here, happiness is not the byproduct but one of the ingredients of success. While the popular belief of success indirectly results in aggression, cruelty and exploitation, this new notion of success is not only cost effective but also a way to get rid of violence, torture and abuse. It is the real and true meaning of success, which is natural and sustainable. For achieving this, social workers are required to work on reviving the culture of strong community ties and cultivating love and respect, care and support among individuals, groups and communities. Tint of spirituality in social work practice would help in finding 'real' solutions of human problems. Lastly, in the words of Charlie Chaplin, "You need power (and success), only when you want to do something harmful, otherwise, love is enough to get everything done".

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