

Go-getters fall short in happiness and health, new study shows

March 1 2012, By Shannon Chapla

People who are considered ambitious attend the best colleges and universities, have prestigious careers and earn high salaries, but they don't necessarily lead more successful lives, according to new research by Timothy Judge, professor of management at the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business.

The lead author of "On the Value of Aiming High: The Causes and Consequences of Ambition" forthcoming from the Journal of Applied Psychology, Judge seeks to create a better understanding of ambition — a commonly mentioned but poorly understood concept in social science research — and its consequences.

Is it a virtue, or is it a vice? Both, says Judge.

"If ambition has its positive effects, and in terms of career success it certainly seems that it does, our study also suggests that it carries with it some cost," Judge says. "Despite their many accomplishments, ambitious people are only slightly happier than their less-ambitious counterparts, and they actually live somewhat shorter lives."

Tracking 717 high-ability individuals over seven decades, Judge uses multiple criteria to measure ambition during periods of participants' lives ranging from childhood to young adults just beginning their careers. Their education ranged from attending some of the world's best universities — Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Columbia, Cornell, Northwestern, Berkeley, Oxford and Notre Dame — to more modest

educations, including high school diplomas and community college degrees.

“Ambitious kids had higher educational attainment, attended highly esteemed universities, worked in more prestigious occupations and earned more,” Judge says. “So, it would seem that they are poised to ‘have it all.’ However, we determined that ambition has a much weaker effect on life satisfaction and actually a slightly negative impact on longevity (how long people lived). So, yes, ambitious people do achieve more successful careers, but that doesn’t seem to translate into leading happier or healthier lives.”

Specializing in personality, leadership, moods, emotions and career and life success, Judge has published more than 130 articles in refereed journals, including more than 80 in top-tier journals. His study “Do Nice Guys — and Gals — Really Finish Last?” published last year, was widely cited in the media.

Judge’s new ambition study tracks individuals born in the early part of the last century and continued to follow them throughout their lives, which is how the mortality measure was derived; however, it doesn’t address the underlying reasons for the higher mortality of ambitious people.

“Perhaps the investments they make in their careers come at the expense of the things we know affect longevity: healthy behaviors, stable relationships and deep social networks.”

Most parents want their kids to be ambitious, attend the best schools and eventually have successful careers, and while it certainly isn’t wrong to have those parental hopes and dreams, Judge cautions that we shouldn’t delude ourselves into thinking they will make our kids happier.

“If your biggest wish for your children is that they lead happy and healthy lives, you might not want to overemphasize professional success. There are limits to what our ambitions bring us — or our children.”

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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