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Running Head: Social Support and the Wealthy Porcupine

Social Support and the Wealthy Porcupine: Pain, Social Support, Money and Culture

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Social support and social integration have been major topics of research for social scientists for many decades (e.g. Durkheim, 1897). Social support is generally portrayed as a ‘good thing’, with numerous researchers providing evidence of both the buffering and direct impacts of support on mental and physiological well-being (e.g. Kraus, Liang, & Gu, 1998; Litwin, 2001) and the ability of support to be a buffer against physical and psychological pain (e.g. López-Martinez, Esteve-Zarazaga & Ramírez-Maestre, 2008). In their article, Zhou & Gao (2008) also suggest that the social support is an important buffer against pain, but argue for a further buffer against both physical and social pain – money – that may be important if social support fails. They cite a number of ingenious experiments for the link between social support, money and pain, claiming that money and support “complement each other in managing pain”, continuing in a tradition of research examining the compensatory dynamics of money and interpersonal support (e.g. Foa & Foa, 1974). In doing so, they raise a number of important questions about pain management, social exclusion, social support and material resources. In my commentary I focus in particular on their concerns with social support and materialism, aiming to address three aspects of their model: the relationship between social support and money; the connections between money, materialism and well-being, and the role of culture in moderating the relationship between social support and money. To do this I draw on some of my own work in changing cultures, and conduct brief analyses of data from the latest large-scale European Social Survey. I conclude by suggesting some ideas for further research that might help further elaborate the intriguing model proposed by Zhou & Gao.

Social support and money: the case of the rich porcupine

In their model, Zhou & Gao consider social support and money as separate buffers against pain, arguing that ‘money... complements social support’ and that ‘money restores social support’. In doing so, they imply a clear distinction between money and social support,

suggesting that money represents ‘something different to replace social support’. However, their analysis raised some important issues about the extent to which money and social support are really orthogonal. One reason for this is the way in which they conceptualise social support in their paper.

While Zhou & Gao do not define social support, such support is usually broadly viewed as ‘the resources provided by other persons’ (Cohen & Syme, 1985 p. 4). Significantly, such resources often include monetary resources, or other tangible aid (Cramer, 2006). For example, one of the most widely-used scales of social support –The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) - includes four dimensions of support (appraisal, self-esteem, belonging and tangible), the latter of which includes a measure of material and instrumental support. A typical item on this scale is “If I needed an emergency loan of \$100, there is someone (friend, relative, or acquaintance) I could get it from”. Another well-known scale, the Social Support Behaviors Scale (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987) also includes financial support (e.g. the other person “would buy me clothes if I was short of money”). In terms of Schopenhauer’s dilemma, cited by Zhou & Gao, our cold and confused porcupine may indeed find seeking emotional (cuddling) support painful; however, if one porcupine is sufficiently well-resourced to provide the other a warm home, the need for support would decrease. This suggests some refinement to Zhou & Gao’s model: emotional / esteem social support may be an important buffer against pain, but the failure of this form of support may be replaced by monetary means.

This distinction between different forms of support is important because of the various kinds of support needed to tackle varying problems in life (Sarason, Sarason & Pierce 1994). Someone in pain, and in need of urgent medical attention to address this, may sometimes need financial help (money) more than just kind and supportive words. In such a situation, money can overcome pain in a very direct manner, and need not go through the

buffer of emotional support. During times of social change, tangible support might be particularly significant for psychological health. Our own data provides evidence for this. We conducted a series of studies during the mid-1990s in post-Communist Eastern Europe, a time of great change for these nations. In data from more than 2,600 respondents in Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Belarus tangible, belonging, appraisal and esteem support were all positively correlated (with a typical r of around 0.4) but tangible support was the most significant predictor of psychological well-being ($r = .21$, compared to .13 for ‘belonging support’ and .11 for ‘appraisal support’)(Goodwin, 2006). This may be because the shared stresses inherent in these societies at this time made turning to others for emotional support particularly difficult (Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988; Hobfoll & London, 1986). Indeed, the often arbitrary and fast-changing regulations of Communist life in the Former Soviet Union led to a widespread sense of hopelessness and fatalism amongst the inhabitants of Eastern Europe (Markova et al., 1998). In other work conducted in this region during this period, we found that this fatalistic outlook on life acted as an inhibitor to the seeking of social support, and had a significant moderating effect on the beneficial impact of social support on mental health (Goodwin, Allen et al, 2002).

Money, materialism and well-being: Can money buy you love?

Zhou & Gao’s analysis of the relationship between money, materialism and well-being can be perceived at three conceptual levels. At the individual level, when considering ‘the dark side of materialism’, they view an obsession with money as mal-adaptive for social life. At the group and cultural level they see a concern with money as a more adaptive response to social and cultural conditions. Thus they argue that “people with backgrounds that promote insecurity tend to be preoccupied with money”, with money providing the safety needs required near the base of Maslow’s needs hierarchy (Maslow, 1954). They also raise an interesting dilemma: while money can lead to the rejection of others and interpersonal

distancing, it may also service to reduce pain. Underlying this distinction may be an excessive desire for money, which may be seen negative in its social consequences (“the love of money is the root of all evil” (Timothy 1. 6:10, New Testament, King James Edition)) and the actual possession of money, which can be rather more functional for the maintenance of good social networks, as well as necessary for everyday survival.

At the individual level, Zhou & Gao suggest that money concerns are negatively correlated with social support, and that those who are concerned with money are less happy and experience lower life satisfaction. This accords well with the notion of extreme ‘self-contained individualism’ (Sampson, 1977), which leads to isolation from others (Dion & Dion, 2005). They cite several studies in support of this, and indeed data from the recent European Social Survey (ESS; Wave 3, 2007) provides some moderate support for this. This survey comprises one of the largest contemporary and nationally representative data sets available, with data from 23 countries with a total sample of $N = 43\ 000$. I conducted a pan-cultural analysis of selected items in this data¹. Using responses to the Schwartz Human Values Survey item “it is important to be rich, have money and expensive things” – the ESS item closest to most definitions of materialism (e.g. Richins & Dawson, 1992) - my analysis demonstrated a small negative correlation between life satisfaction and the importance of being rich and having money ($r = -.10$) and the importance of being rich / having money and happiness ($r = -.10$). There were also small significant correlations between the importance of having money / being rich and particular reported behaviours indicating some distancing implications of money (helping others who are non-family or work colleagues ($r = -.13$), attending local activities ($r = -.07$), enjoying family events ($r = -.04$), as well as feeling lonely ($r = .05$)). Those who stressed the significance of money were also less likely to report value responses that stressed helping and caring for the welfare of others ($r = -.30$) and being loyal and devoted to friends and those who are close ($r = -.25$).

As Zhao & Gao note, even the threat of physical pain can lead to individuals seeking social support. Such support may be of particular importance during times of war or following the witnessing of a terrorist incident (Applewhite & Dickins, 1997; Putnik & Lauri, 2004). According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), during time of stress, close relationships can act as a fundamental anxiety buffer, providing a “symbolic shield against the awareness of one’s finitude” (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003, p.37). We examined responses to the increased terror threat in London soon after the 2001 North American attacks (Goodwin, Willson & Gaines, 2005) and following the 2005 bombings in London (Goodwin & Gaines, in press). In these studies we found a significant increase in reported contact with friends and family following the raised awareness of threat attacks or the actual incidence of attack, with level of anxiety and sense of personal threat both predictors of such contact.

Given all this, it is important to note that the relationship between money, individual values and well-being may be complex. This is because money does not exist in the abstract, but has considerable symbolic value – and can be spent to further very different ends. Indeed the meaning of money is likely to vary greatly according to the purposes in which it is used, which can be both socially and personally orientated (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). Thus Schwartz (2007), again using data from his Values Survey items, notes that although competitive capitalism in society in general is correlated with an individual’s lesser concern for others in general, it is less related to motives to help the in-group. Hence the welfare of close others may have a lower correlation with money. One reason for this may be that while money may promote autonomy, it may also, in some circumstances, lead to far greater social dependency, as financial expenditure can be embedded within a set of social obligations and roles. Hence, if I buy myself medicines for my own illness then maybe I cannot pay for my son to study in college. Individuals regularly make such social calculations and sacrifices,

particularly in societies where the social obligations of wealth extend well beyond the immediate nuclear homestead, a point I return to below when I consider cultural influences.

Zhou & Gao also point to other experiences in life that may make moderate the seeking of social support from others. Insecure attachments and fear of rejection, they claim, may understandably reduce an individual's willingness to resort to a social support buffer to deal with pain. They report research where social exclusion led to participants activating the secondary buffer of money. It may be useful here to make another distinction between different kinds of social support; this time between perceived, global evaluations of support ('helping behaviour that might happen'; Norris & Kaniasty, 1996, p. 498) and reports of the 'actual' support received after a stressful event (Sarason, Sarason & Pierce, 1994). In their experimental evidence, Zhou & Gao focus on how the lack of particular support may lead to a greater focus on money. As such they are manipulating actual support. Although both kinds of support inevitably reflect an individual's perceptions of support, perceived support may be better seen as reflecting a stable personality characteristic in its own right (Goodwin & Hernandez-Plaza, 2000; Lakey & Cassady, 1990), and the 'working model' that an individual inherits through their life experiences. Actual support is more functional and attuned to a particular event or domain (Sarason, Sarason & Gurung, 1997), and this support may be more closely determined by culture and other ecological factors. These two forms of support may be only weakly correlated (Barrera, 1986), and their correlation with pain management may differ. Thus individuals may perceive that they have the availability of a supportive other, reflecting a positive self-esteem and a faith in others, but the actual support they would receive when facing pain may be less forthcoming. Alternatively, individuals might later appraise their pain experience differentially in accordance with their perception of the support available at the time.

Turning now to group interactions, money may also mean greater accessibility to social networks amongst social groups - indeed, Zhao & Gao note that the possession of money can be “a path to social acceptance”. Employment situations influence the opportunities for supportive interaction (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995; Wellman, 1985) and provide normative frameworks for how these relationships should develop (Allan, 1993). This does not mean that money is necessarily respected equally amongst all social groups; indeed, the middle-classes may sometimes denigrate excessive exhibitions of wealth as ‘vulgar’ and of lesser importance than education or other acquired qualities. Nevertheless, money is usually important for the maintenance of social capital (Furstenberg, 2005): groups with low economic status usually report lesser support availability, even from family and friends (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996). In our work in Central and Eastern Europe we compared the relationships between different social classes, with different financial assets, and their support networks (Goodwin, Nizharadze et al., 2002; Goodwin, 2008). In data collected in Russia, Georgia and Hungary we found that manual workers enjoyed less social support than wealthier business people. This lack of support seemed to stem from a climate of marked interpersonal distrust that had arisen in a climate of growing unemployment (Barner-Barry & Hody, 1995). Distrust can easily lead to the social pain of social exclusion (Twenge, Baumeister, Dewart, Ciarocco and Bartels, 2007). In our study, Georgian business people in particular reported greater support levels than their counterparts in the other countries, with the full development of social networks amongst Georgian entrepreneurs not only providing individuals with a major economic resource, but also allowing for the extension of the ‘grey economy’ relationships established under the former Soviet system. Consequently, although Georgian entrepreneurs spent only limited time with their spouses and family, the enhanced social standing that arose from their economic activities reflected positively on their social networks and the status of their family group. In this way their economic activities – and the

relative obsession with money making during a time of considerable economic uncertainty- helped bolster their family support network. Hence an 'extrinsic orientation' within this group was a very functional viewpoint that helped enable smooth social interaction.

Our findings amongst different social classes in East Europe also suggest that, at both the individual and group level of analysis, social support is rarely cost-free, and that the sacrifices involved often underline the painful aspect of social support. Individuals may have to suffer a loss of face when requesting help from others, and they may risk painful social exclusion when approaching already burdened groups for help (Coyne et al., 1988). Using money to help build a social network might ultimately lead to dissatisfaction, as individuals may feel that their relationships are based purely on materialistic convenience. Seeking social support can be associated with increased symptomology in certain situations (Amirkhan, 1990). This is most likely to occur in situations of uncertainty where support allows an individual to focus on their emotional distress for a prolonged period of time (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). Economic circumstances can severely strain and limit support provision, meaning that shared pain can make both the provision of social support less likely, and the financial resources (money) required for this alleviation more difficult to access. Thus social factors, alongside individual dispositional variables, may limit social interaction. Iecovich et al (2004) examined social support networks and loneliness amongst elderly Jews in Russia and Ukraine. During the Soviet era, the state took on the responsibility of meeting all the (basic) needs of its peoples, but the rapid collapse of the Communist system in the early 1990s led to the withdrawal of much of the previous 'safety net' provided for the most vulnerable parts of the population. This meant that responsibility now lay on the existing informal networks, such as family members. At the same time, the ability of those in the family network to provide such support was stretched by their own financial troubles, while large-scale emigration, primarily to Israel, further weakened their established community.

Indeed, more than 190 million people worldwide are migrants, working and living in a culture different from where they were born (UNHCR, 2007). For migrants the personal support environment – at least on first arrival in a new country - is often small and consists largely of compatriots and kin (Maya Jariego, 2006). This can be stressful for both the new migrant and his or her ethnic community in the new country, as the new arrival may not only be demanding of their own ethnic networks, but may be unable to offer support themselves. At the same time, for many new migrants, the sending of remittances ‘back home’ are an important feature of everyday life. Such finances are very important for the maintenance of a social structure – for both the migrant and their families. Such a sending of remittances often means that migrants live in relative poverty in their newly adopted homes (Maya Jariego, 2006).

In their paper Zhou & Gao rightly note that culture is likely to be a moderating factor in determining the meaning of money. They also briefly consider the relationship between social support and culture. The concern amongst Georgian entrepreneurs for their social networks, noted above, is consistent with other work on Georgian communities that emphasises the high levels of collective support that characterises this society, and which was critical for survival for many during the turmoil of the last decades (Sumbadze, 2006). Although their focus is at the individual level of analysis, Zhou & Gao suggest that collectivistic values are associated with higher levels of support, a finding also noted in the cross-cultural literature. Collectivist cultures have been defined as ones in which “people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups” (Hofstede, 1991 p.2), and unsurprisingly, collectivists have been found to enjoy closer and more supportive networks (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai & Lucca, 1988). In such cultures social exclusion can be particularly painful, as interpersonal relationships are central to subjective well-being (Goodwin, Cook & Yung, 2002). In contrast, those living in individualist cultures exhibit

fewer skills for interacting intimately with others, and are more emotionally detached from their in-groups (Goodwin & Hernandez-Plaza, 2000; Triandis et al., 1988). Economic conditions in a culture are also likely to help guide materialism and the emphasis on extrinsic needs. Money is associated with food, shelter and protection so it is unsurprising that money is likely to be significant when these are threatened. Hunger, although treated by Zhou & Gao alongside pain, can also be seen as another manifestation of reduced resources. Data from The World Values Survey (Inglehart, 2003) shows how, with economic development, societies have moved from a heavy emphasis on security values – where the emphasis has been on economic and physical security – to a greater valuation of subjective well-being and life quality. In particular, being raised during a period of physical insecurity and scarcity encourages materialistic values. A further analysis of recent data from the European Social Survey (Wave 3, 2007) underlines this (Table 1). Using raw country means we can see that a comparative emphasis on the importance of being rich (a key component of materialism; Richins & Dawson, 1992) is generally greatest amongst those from countries from the less affluent post-Communist East of Europe (Estonia, Poland, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine). Similarly, it was primarily citizens of those countries that were most eager to compare their incomes with others. This suggests that, to rephrase Zhou & Gao, the ‘role of prestige acquisition’ may be *particularly* significant in collectivist cultures.

Putting this together it can be argued that collectivist societies are generally poorer (individualism correlates with GDP (Hofstede, 1991)) and members of collectivist societies are more materialistically orientated. This raises an apparent paradox for our findings at the individual level; while poorer countries are more money orientated, they also exhibit greater levels of social support. In their analysis of the structure of goals across cultures, Grouzet et al. (2005) note how affiliation goals are closer to financial success in poorer rather than wealthier cultures. This dilemma may be resolved when we consider that citizens of poorer

societies will need this social support – including practical, material support – to deal with their daily physical stresses and needs. Indeed money, as Zhou & Gao hypothesise, is about survival in poorer countries. Thus, at the cultural level, a materialistic orientation complements, rather than opposes, a well-developed social support network.

Conclusions

In their paper, Zhou & Gao make an intriguing argument for the relationship between social support, money and pain. In their model pain activates a need for social support; when this is not available, money acts as a secondary buffer. This emphasis on the significance of finances in managing pain is to be welcomed: despite some accusations that economically and financially orientated models are colonising the social sciences (Fevre, 2000), accounts which consider the significance of material conditions are lacking in mainstream psychological research, leading to an individualistic science which ignores the influence of broader, environmental pressures (Orford, 2008). In my response I aimed to elaborate on the model of Zhou & Gao by suggesting that a) the relationship between money and social support might actually be rather close, especially considering that tangible aid is often considered to an important component of social support and b) at times it may not be a personal unwillingness that activates the requirement for money following pain, but the specificity of the demand that requires this (for example, when money is needed to pay for an operation). At the same time, I examined data from a recent large-scale European survey which supports their contention that there is a relationship – albeit a modest one – between a strong orientation towards financial gain and lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and social integration. This relationship, however, is likely to be culturally mediated: in fact, a concern with monetary matters is likely to be characteristic of some of the world's most collectively orientated - usually poorer - societies. As such, materialism does not necessarily conflict with collectivistic values.

In Zhou & Gao's paper, much of the most direct evidence for the pain buffering implications of money and social support is taken from— often ingenious — experimental studies, conducted primarily with relatively small numbers of students. While these studies are illuminating in themselves, the manner in which they include money (for example, by counting large quantities of notes) does raise some questions about ecological validity of the findings. Using money as a prime does not necessarily require that participants think of this money, let alone experience the pain often associated with losing it. Furthermore, such experimental research usually tests 'short-term' effects; the longer-term impact of financial provision on enduring painful conditions might also usefully be explored in future work. Several naturalistic extensions suggest themselves: hospitals and other medical locations are a good location for finding those undergoing pain, as are the clientele of certain self-help groups and medical charities. Ethical requirements permitting, such locations could form valuable backdrops for examining the impact of support, and the secondary buffer of money, in more natural surroundings. Such additional research may help complement and further test the evidence for the intriguing model suggested by Zhou & Gao.

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Psychological Inquiry.

Notes

¹To control for individual scale use I used partial correlations, partialing using mean value ratings (Schwartz, 2003).

Table 1: Data on selected variables from the European Social Survey (Wave 3)

| Country | How important to compare with other people's incomes | | | Important to be rich (low score shows strong belief) | | |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------------------------------------------------------|------|------|
| | N | Mean | SD | N | Mean | SD |
| Austria | 1430 | 2.06 | 1.81 | 2369 | 3.81 | 1.35 |
| Belgium | 900 | 2.10 | 1.82 | 1796 | 4.22 | 1.20 |
| Bulgaria | 581 | 2.34 | 2.00 | 1347 | 4.02 | 1.43 |
| Denmark | 945 | 2.23 | 1.46 | 1468 | 4.32 | 1.21 |
| Estonia | 846 | 2.49 | 1.88 | 1472 | 3.93 | 1.38 |
| Finland | 999 | 2.00 | 1.49 | 1654 | 4.45 | 1.16 |
| France | 1093 | 2.35 | 1.96 | 1980 | 4.88 | 1.13 |
| Germany | 1486 | 2.09 | 1.83 | 2888 | 4.16 | 1.27 |
| Hungary | 636 | 2.34 | 2.14 | 1468 | 3.93 | 1.45 |
| Ireland | 940 | 2.15 | 1.90 | 1644 | 4.13 | 1.34 |
| Netherlands | 1105 | 1.92 | 1.76 | 1858 | 4.25 | 1.16 |
| Norway | 1214 | 2.31 | 1.75 | 1550 | 4.49 | 1.14 |
| Poland | 794 | 2.59 | 1.96 | 1698 | 3.89 | 1.23 |
| Portugal | 991 | 2.15 | 1.79 | 2203 | 4.24 | 1.22 |
| Russia | 1192 | 2.50 | 1.98 | 2367 | 3.32 | 1.45 |
| Sweden | 1239 | 2.36 | 1.85 | 1602 | 4.35 | 1.18 |
| Slovakia | 946 | 2.80 | 1.92 | 1740 | 3.48 | 1.23 |
| Slovenia | 687 | 2.50 | 1.99 | 1466 | 4.31 | 1.24 |
| Spain | 991 | 2.65 | 1.99 | 1853 | 4.19 | 1.20 |

Social Support and the Wealthy Porcupine

| | | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|------|------|-------|------|------|
| Switzerland | 1084 | 1.97 | 1.80 | 1793 | 4.49 | 1.12 |
| Ukraine | 824 | 2.68 | 2.03 | 1915 | 3.62 | 1.44 |
| United Kingdom | 1300 | 2.14 | 1.77 | 2363 | 4.32 | 1.28 |
| TOTAL | 22223 | 2.28 | 1.87 | 41486 | 4.11 | 1.32 |
