

Profile of a Successful Person: Eminence versus Ability

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The paper reports research findings of a survey on primary, secondary, high school and university students opinions regarding what are the most important characteristics of a successful person in a local community. High achievement motivation and wealth predominantly characterise the profile of an eminent person, but the most prominent characteristics of a talented person are knowledge and abilities. The issue of a relation between eminence and high abilities is discussed in the framework of providing adequate educational support for the highly able during their schooling.

Giftedness is a combination of cognitive, conative, and environment variables (Maksic 1998). Social forces canalise the expression of abilities (Sternberg 1986). Only some of children who are doing well in school and on IQ tests, usually called gifted, academically advanced or highly able, become eminent contributors in the field of their talents when they grow up. For a gifted person to achieve eminence, his or her early giftedness has to be transformed into an appropriate set of values, drives, and skills (Albert & Runco 1986). Society decides on the direction towards high potential fulfilment by rewarding some kind of achievement while ignoring or even discouraging others (Tanenbaum 1986).

It is obvious that making a successful career is a complex phenomenon depending on the interaction of individual intellectual and non-intellectual characteristics as well as of his or her environment qualities. Gifted and talented people have the capacity to offer cognitive contributions to the community. The relation between talent (talent is giftedness expressed in a particular field) and eminence reflects actual position of talented individuals in their social surrounding. Number of talented people who become eminent reflect developmental prospects not only of the talented personally but of the whole regions where they are living and working (Maksic 2000). Consequently, the interest of current researchers moves from identification of human capacities towards its realisation through developing successful career (Wu 1998).

Researchers are trying to find out how to actualise someone's potentials, and how to create the best conditions for their expression in any particular case. The relevant aspect of the social surrounding in the process of making a successful career are examples of people who already have successful careers. The individuals who are seen as successful have the opportunity to influence the younger generation's development becoming models for imitation and identification. Eminent people have the characteristics of preferred models: They possess power and they succeeded in coping with obstacles with which youngsters are confronted (Janjetovic 1999, 2000).

The focus of the investigation here will be on characteristics, which are essential for a successful career, or what features of gifted individuals are crucial for the realisation of their potential according to the younger generation. The relationship between talent and eminence will be explored in a specific setting of one ex-socialistic country, with many social changes, conflicts, and shortages in the last decade. This could be the answer, at least partially, to the question who are successful people in European ex-socialistic countries today? Old value systems, stressing equality, solidarity and collectivism collapsed, with the intention to be replaced by Western individualism and personal initiatives as soon as possible. Where are we now in the period of transition? And, what characteristics of people are in transition: their behaviour, some reactions or the whole personality?

Namely, research questions were: 1) What does talent consist of? 2) What makes someone successful? And, 3) What does a successful person look like? The main objectives of the study are to examine: 1) What characteristics are essential for a successful career in Yugoslav setting nowadays, especially what are the characteristics of successful persons as potential models for younger generations, 2) What is the contribution of individual talent in developing a successful career, and moreover in his or her success in life, and 3) What is the relationship between talent and eminence in general?

A survey is made of adolescents' opinions on talent, personal and social success, eminence, and their relevant values concerning their life and local community. Adolescents' opinions were collected by a specially designed Questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions. There were questions of what talent consists of, what the most appropriate support for the talented is, what the conditions for eminence are, what vocational choices of adolescents are, and what their life goals and aspirations are. The participants were asked to select someone who is the most successful in their opinion among people that they know, and to describe that person.

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In sum, 343 students of both sexes from elementary school to university level, with ages ranging from 14 to 24 years, participated in the survey. Information on participants is given in Table 1. Elementary, secondary and high school students are students in the last year of their schooling: elementary eighth grade, secondary fourth grade, and second year of high

preschool teachers' college students. University students are represented by students preparing for primary school teachers in the middle of their schooling (end of the second study year) when they participated in the research.

Data analysis was qualitative with frequency and percent analysis.

Table 1: Participants (f)

Sex	Elementary school students	Secondary school students	High school students	University students	Total
Male	58	49	3	12	122
Female	33	44	73	71	221
Total	91	93	76	83	343

Results and Discussion

According to our respondents, the most prominent characteristics of talented people are their knowledge, abilities, and creativity (Table 2). These are characteristics present into almost all scientific conceptions of giftedness (Maksic 1993). Furthermore, research results are similar to

data obtained in a previous study on giftedness concepts of Yugoslav secondary school students, their parents and their teachers (Maksic 1998). In this survey, giftedness constituted of abilities, performance, learning, motivation, creativity, and some personality traits (such as independence, wit, intuition, intuitiveness, decisiveness, responsibility, sociability etc.).

Table 2: Characteristics of talented people (%)

Characteristics	Elementary school pupils	Secondary school pupils	High school students	University students	Total
Intelligence	33.0	18.3	22.4	38.6	28.0
School achievement	4.4	4.3	7.9	2.4	4.7
Out of school activities	5.5	9.7	5.3	7.2	7.0
Knowledge	34.1	30.1	39.5	25.3	32.1
Creativity	16.5	24.7	13.2	19.3	18.7
Life skills	6.6	7.5	6.6	3.6	6.1
Political engagement	0.0	3.2	1.3	2.4	1.7
Others	0.0	2.2	3.9	1.2	1.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Less frequent characteristics of talented people are their life skills, school achievement and political engagement. The last category was suggested by respondents themselves. The same happened with the question about preconditions for the success in a society (Table 4): Political engagement was mentioned in talent description from 1.3% to 3.2%, and 1.1% to 4.8% as a precondition for the social success. Although these are small percentages, it was thought they deserve comment because of implications. Talent is expressed throughout political engagement in the sense that some political functions and positions provide social power and opportunity to have impact on others and to fulfill personal interests out of politics or welfare of others.

What would be the most suitable support for the talented that will enable them to show and use their abilities and talents? Primary and secondary school students and university students declared that the most appropriate provision for the talented is specialisation and good practice abroad (Table 3). Only, preschool teachers college students give priority to employment of the talented on posts where they could use

their talents. The situation could be easily explained. In reality, high school students is the group nearest to its own employment. Better education in the country has high rank among the preferred provision for the talented besides higher education outside of the country. The young are looking for improvement of local schools and regular educational programmes.

With the intention to concentrate on the realisation of talent, putting talent into operation, the next question is dealing with characteristics which make possible ones' success. Offered items were high abilities and wisdom, hard work and learning (learning is accentuated because respondents are young), personal strength, high achievement motivation, special social skills of organising and leading others, creativity, having money for investment, usage of friendships with powerful people and corruption, and political engagement (the item added by respondents as it was said before). Dominant conditions for the success were corruption and money for secondary school, high school students and university students (Table 4). Only the youngest group,

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Table 3: Appropriate provision for the talented (%)

Type of Provision	Elementary school pupils	Secondary school pupils	High school students	University students	Total
Better education	24.2	21.5	14.5	30.1	22.7
Specialisation abroad	42.9	40.9	18.4	38.6	35.9
Job	22.0	26.9	50.0	25.3	30.3
Promotion	3.3	6.5	6.6	6.0	4.1
Incomes & beneficiaries	7.7	4.3	10.5	24.2	7.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4: Preconditions for the success of an individual (%)

Items	Elementary school pupils	Secondary school pupils	High school students	University students	Total
Wisdom	19.8	8.6	11.8	14.5	13.7
Work	24.2	7.5	6.6	4.8	11.1
Self-reliance	12.1	9.7	9.2	4.8	9.0
Ambition	12.1	11.8	15.8	6.0	11.4
Money	16.5	28.0	26.3	27.7	24.5
Organising skills	0.0	2.2	0.0	2.4	1.2
Creativity	1.1	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.6
Corruption	13.2	29.0	26.3	34.9	25.7
Political engagement	1.1	3.2	2.6	4.8	2.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

elementary school pupils, believed that someone could succeed by hard work, effort, learning and using his or her general and specific abilities.

The last questions refer to the characteristics of a successful individual. More than two thirds of participants (71.7%) gave the description of someone who they estimated as a successful person, although 28.3% were not able to describe the successful person (Table 4). The second group added that there were not successful individuals in their environment or that they did not know personally such people

(it is well known that some participants do not answer open-ended questions in surveys). The rate of description is decreasing with the age of respondents: Older respondents report that they know less successful people! One of the reasons could be the more liberal attitude towards surveys in the case of older respondents. Perhaps they have higher standards for success. Probably, older respondents experience cognitive dissonance between what they see as successful people and what they thought a successful person should be.

Respondents describe as a successful person someone who

Table 5: How many participants describe a successful person (%)

Description	Elementary school pupils	Secondary school pupils	High school students	University students	Total
Exists	89.0	76.3	65.8	53.0	71.7
No description	11.0	23.7	34.2	47.0	28.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

they know personally as a member of their family or friend (34.7%) or a popular person from media (12.8%). In the rest of 49.8% cases, it was not possible to reconstruct the relation between respondents and a described individual. Some respondents (20%) in their description of a successful individual wrote his or her occupation. Most frequent were sportsmen, scientists, artists, politicians, businessmen and criminals. These respondents usually gave the name of

successful people they thought (e.g. S. Mihajlovic, V. Divac, R. Vajda, M. Kezman, H. Ford, M. Oven, G. Bregovic).

The hypothesis of cognitive dissonance came up from the meaning of collected data. The majority of stories about successful persons included respondents' personal attitudes of appreciation, participants admired the individuals they described (63.0%). In a small percent (16.7%) respondents described as a successful person someone whom they

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criticised, whom they did not appreciate but they experienced as successful. In sum, it was possible to distinguish two broad groups of profiles of successful persons: positive and negative,

“good” and “bad” guys. The last one fifth of participants (20.3%) gave neither description which were positive nor negative, so they were named neutral (Table 5).

Table 6: Distribution of successful people characters (%)

Successful person	Elementary school pupils	Secondary school pupils	High school students	University students	Total
Positive	69.1	59.3	62.0	63.6	63.0
Negative	9.9	19.7	18.0	22.7	16.7
Neutral	21.0	23.9	20.0	13.6	20.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Descriptions of a successful person (N=246) encompass remarks (f=747) on: ones' physical appearance and health (good looks, physical attractiveness, status of body and mind); abilities (general and specific abilities, intelligence, wisdom, creativity); knowledge and education (broad knowledge, a lot of information, well educated); personality traits (courage, affectionate, sincere, interesting sense of humour, patient, indulgent, aggressive); morality (high moral standards, honest,

fair, strong personality); achievement motivation (ambitious, commitment, persistence, diligence, self-actualisation); finance (high income, wealthy, richness); personal life and family (has own family or not, satisfied with relations with others or not); support of social surrounding (any kind of support, understanding and help. (Table 6 contains the ranks of characteristics in three types of successful person profiles,

Table 7: Profile of a successful person – Percent and rank of each characteristics

Characteristics	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Achievement motivation	(1) 21.4	(5) 9.8	18.0	19.1
Finance	(4) 12.1	(1-2) 25.0	(2) 27.8	16.6
Abilities	(2) 17.0	(3) 16.9	(1) 9.0	15.7
Personality traits	(3) 14.6	(4) 12.5	(4-5) 8.2	13.2
Moral	(7) 7.8	(1-2) 25.0	(6) 5.8	10.0
Knowledge & education	(5) 10.9	(6) 5.4	(7-8) 9.0	9.9
Family	(6) 8.4	(7) 3.6	(4-5) 2.3	8.3
Support	(8) 4.9	(8-9) 0.9	(7-8) 5.8	4.4
Health	(9) 2.9	(8-9) 0.9	(9) 4.1	2.8

The reader has to know that each category of characteristics has its favourable and unfavourable side, such as high abilities – low abilities, good looking – not good looking, high earnings – low earnings, etc. At this stage of the research, the ratio of favourable side of each characteristic with the frequency of that characteristic in positive, negative and neutral character were calculated. The proportions are presented in Table 7. Figure 1 is a graphic presentation of three successful person profiles. Lines link spots, which represent quotients of a favourable side of each characteristic with frequency of that characteristic in a particular profile of a successful person.

Positive character descriptions consist of high achievement motivation, high abilities, favourable personality traits, good but not high finance, high education, satisfying family life, high ethical standards, no sustained support of environment, and having good health. Negative characteristics among successful people have high earnings, but low morality, not so high abilities, unfavourable personality traits, high

achievement motivation, not high educational level and having some family problems. Neutral character is describe by wealth, high achievement motivation, having some problems in family, high abilities, high education, more favourable than unfavourable personality traits, having support of a surrounding, low moral standards but higher than negative character, and having some problems with health.

Several examples will illustrate differences among positive, negative and neutral character of successful individuals. Illustrations for positive character are following: 1) He studies at Michigan University, serious, persistent, steady, clever, able, no wife and children; 2) He reads a lot, he learns in many areas. He does not speak a lot, but what he said he always did; 3) She is very serious, persistent and committed to her work. She has been learning for a long time; she is studying continually and complements her knowledge. Lack of time for entertainment; 4) I will give a fiction, but I am sure that the person of this kind exists. He or she enjoys life, and his/her job, giving him/her satisfaction of his/her

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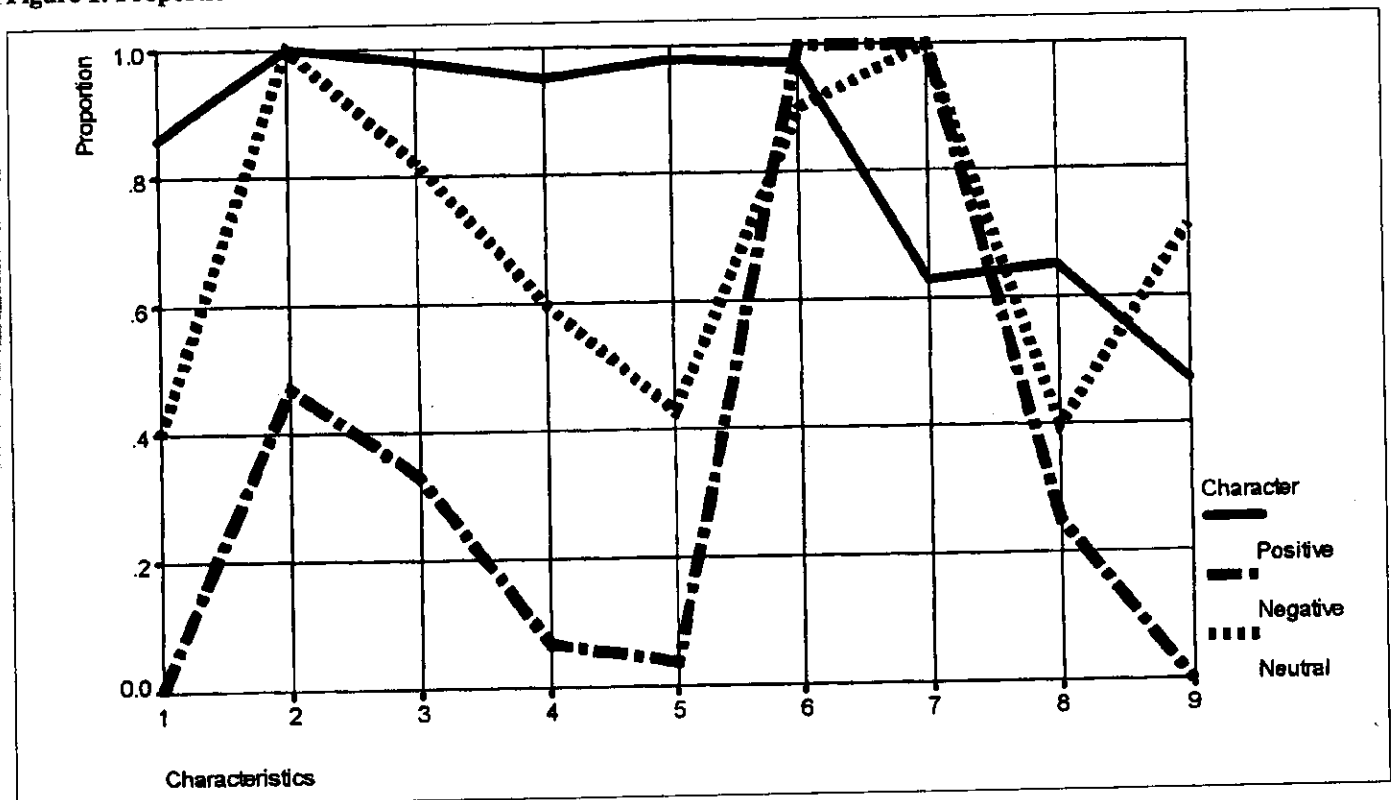
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spirit, has great openness in relations with people, openness to novelty, so he/she could live in any time. I admire people who get a sense of their function in society by learning; 5) Someone who makes something useful, beautiful and valuable from nothing.

Examples of negative characters descriptions are: 1) He has money, is ambitious, has relations with important people, has knowledge and skills for what he wishes to do, and he wishes for high social status and power, has no respect for others; 2) He has a flat, car, money and a thousand of people

on his conscience; 3) He has a mobile, good car, saloon, dog, is overweight, but no permanent girl; 4) Money, real property, respect, popularity, but no sincere friends; 5) He has BMW, but no brain. Neutral characters among successful people are depicted in such a way: 1) He has money but no time; 2) He has a lot of money, is ambitious, persistent, knows people well; 3) She has a job, family, money, flat, no time for all, so it is the same as she has nothing; 4) Stable, persistent; 5) Capital, high ambition, willing to fulfill his aim in life.

Figure 1: Proportions of favourable side of characteristics included in positive, negative and neutral characters



Characteristics

1 – Physical Appearance and Health. 2 – Abilities. 3 – Knowledge and Education. 4 – Personality Traits. 5 – Morality. 6 – Achievement Motivation. 7 – Finance. 8 – Family. 9 – Social Support.

Table 8: Proportion of characteristic in description of different types of successful person characters

Characteristics	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Physical appearance & health	0.86	0.00	0.40
Abilities	1.00	0.49	1.00
Knowledge & education	0.98	0.33	0.82
Personality traits	0.95	0.07	0.60
Morality	0.98	0.04	0.43
Achievement motivation	0.97	1.00	0.90
Finance	0.63	1.00	1.00
Family	0.65	0.25	0.40
Support	0.47	0.00	0.71

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Finally, respondents explained some of their relevant values. Answers to the question what occupation they find is the best are given in Table 9. Primary, secondary and high school students said that the individual had to be master in his/her field no matter what the occupation was (well educated and highly skilled). 42.2% university students thought that

someone had to be professional, able to learn fast and work in different fields, to survive in the labour market. The most promising category was the answer suggested by respondents that a human being has to work out what she/he likes and that to fall in love with the profession is the most important characteristics of job.

Table 9: The best occupation (%)

Occupation	Elementary school pupils	Secondary school pupils	High school students	University students	Total
Have money without work	1.1	8.6	6.6	8.4	6.1
Expert	46.2	49.5	39.5	24.1	40.2
Specialist	15.4	9.7	11.8	12.0	12.2
Professionals	25.3	14.0	23.7	42.2	25.9
Manager	6.6	5.4	14.5	6.0	7.9
Whatever you love	3.3	8.6	2.6	2.4	4.4
Others	2.2	4.3	1.3	4.8	3.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 10: Adolescents life goals and aspirations (%)

Goals	Elementary school pupils	Secondary school pupils	High school students	University students	Total
Fun, travel & sports	13.2	8.6	13.2	3.6	9.6
Young & healthy	26.4	9.7	13.2	18.1	16.9
Enjoy life	25.3	35.5	19.0	16.9	24.8
Money	1.1	3.2	5.3	13.3	5.5
Loved job	24.2	31.2	22.4	27.7	26.5
Balance personal & personal life	5.5	6.5	15.8	10.8	9.3
Contribute to prosperity of local community	2.2	0.0	2.6	0.0	1.2
Improve life of humankind	1.1	2.2	6.6	3.6	3.2
Others	1.1	3.2	1.3	6.0	2.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Answers to the following question about life goals and aspiration of adolescents confirm how important it is that someone is working in the fields she/he likes (Table 10). The respondents have to choose among several goals that all were very attractive. The most frequent answers were "to have a job you like", "to enjoy life" and "to stay young and healthy as long as possible". Primary school students were interested mostly for healthy life, secondary school students for enjoyment, though future preschool and primary school teachers gave priority to a profession and are looking for a loved job.

Conclusion

The conclusions are limited by the fact that relations among talent, success and eminence were studied only on the level of adolescents' opinions. We do not know anything about the

personal experiences of these people who were estimated as successful (namely, what do successful individuals think of their own success). We do not know about our respondents' talents and success, too. Although the study included four basic groups of youngsters (primary, secondary, high school and university students), the sample was convenient. There is not information on the validity and reliability of the instrument used for collecting data designated for this particular study.

However, according to these Yugoslav youths, talent consists of broad knowledge, high abilities and creative thinking and production, but all of them represent only one of many preconditions for success in society. Essential ingredients of success are achievement motivation and high income. Money is a visible outcome and desirable precondition of social success. Eminence could be reached in

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different ways with different characteristics such as ability, education, personality traits, achievement motivation, morality, support of the surroundings. The most promising conditions for the successful career at the present time is having large amount of money and a network of interpersonal relationships with high status people.

Nurturing achievement motivation could be one of the possible implications of these research findings. If the social success or success in a local community is the final goal of an individual is using his/her potentials, the school has to emphasise achievement motivation. If we accept adolescents' opinions on preconditions for success, the situation could be quite depressing for those who are trying to attain social appreciation by the abilities, learning, knowledge or creative production. They have to pass through obstacles of unfair play in business (the shorter route is by money and corruption). However, an appropriate combination of ability, personality and motivation will make an individual successful in any occupation (Barrett & Williams 1994).

Successful persons could be powerful models for youngsters. They will be more willing to develop those characteristics which promise success instead of those which do not. Here we meet the danger of the influence of successful people who are "bad guys" or negative characters. The question which should be investigated in further research is how many negative characteristics are represented among models. And moreover, what are the most important characteristics of successful people in general. The author invites colleagues to undertake transcultural research about character and morality of successful persons in different countries. For example: What does a successful person in Great Britain, France or Germany mean?

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