

How do Poles react to success?

Joy or Tears?



BOGDAN WOJCISZKE
University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Faculty in Sopot
bwojcisz@swps.edu.pl

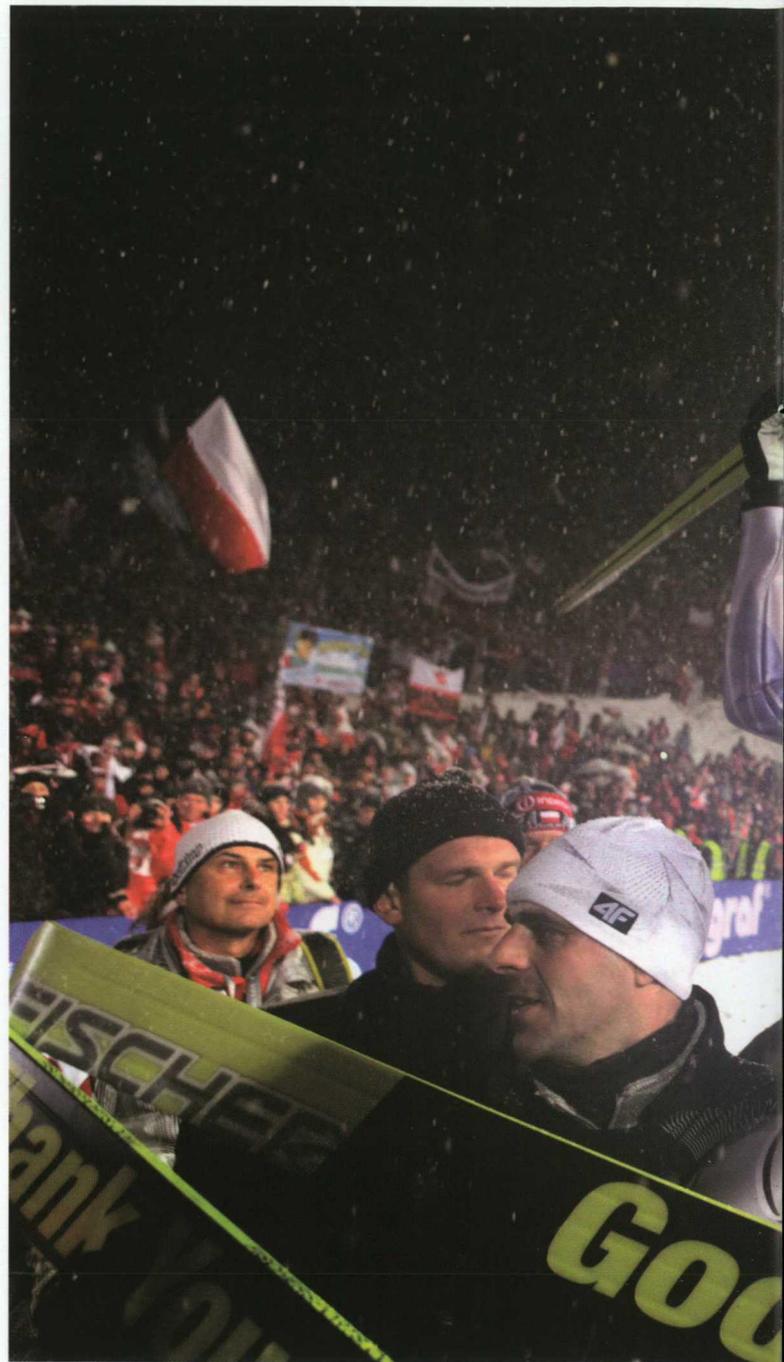
Prof. Bogdan Wojciszke, a top Polish social psychologist, tells us about whether Poles admire success and what factors affect how they perceive successful people

Academia: Do Poles admire success and successful people?

Bogdan Wojciszke: *The problem is that they have an ambivalent attitude towards success: they are positive about success as such, but negative about successful persons. On the one hand, successful people are treated with a certain reserve and respect, yet that respect comes with a certain antipathy, a belief that their success is ultimately morally suspect. Poles view success as attesting to the effectiveness and skill of those who achieve it, but it also to their lacking morality. In other words, successful people are evaluated one way in terms of their effectiveness, but another way in terms of their morality.*

What kinds of success are Poles able to view positively?

Successes in sports, art, science, in other words where people need special talents to be successful. But material success sparks dislike, because our society has spent a very long time under the influence of a rhetoric of equality, which was promoted both by communism and by Catholicism. Prior to 1989, the average salary of an engineer differed only slightly from that of a manual laborer – and in the laborer's favor, at that. Such was the reality, and we are having a hard time leaving it behind.



People who work in private corporations view the issue differently. They can clearly see that success is justified, that one simply has to work hard for it, deserve it. But things are different in any field related to state institutions, which is quite a large sphere in Poland. Success here is less noticeable, because it does not translate into earnings. For example, at a state-owned university there are rigid salary schemes and they do not depend on the given employee's indi-



BEW

Poles are positive about other people's successes in the fields of sports, art, science, where special talents are required. Shown here: champion Polish ski-jumper Adam Małysz

vidual successes. In the United States, researchers negotiate their salaries. In the state sector in Poland, the principle of "uravnilovka" (Russian for leveling out everyone's salaries) prevails, and it is deeply rooted in the Polish mindset: people believe that equal pay is good and fair.

How about the success of Polish entrepreneurs? Are we pleased at their affluence, or not?

It arouses a lot of dislike. That is due to a

tendency to evaluate affluence in accordance with our preconceived notions of what is fair or unfair in terms of income, and it is also related to potentially unclear dealings in the relations between the entrepreneur and state institutions. On the one hand, various state agencies, such as tax institutions, are able to persecute a business owner with impunity, and bureaucrats face no personal accountability for such things. A lot gets written about this, but there is little change.

How do Poles react to success?

As a result, the Polish public feels that material success must be morally suspect, because as they see things, hard work alone is not enough to achieve success. Yes, people do see that one has to be talented, one has to have a good business idea. But it is also obvious to them that one also needs to have good connections and the ability to pull strings and skirt around the law. Polish people do not like that. So they simply consider affluence to be immoral. The existence of wide material disparities, which arose so sharply around 25 years ago, has not met with a positive reaction from society. The percentage of Poles believing that income differences are too large is high and steadily rising - from 80% in 1992 to 92% in 2008.

Material success sparks dislike, because Polish society spent a very long time under the influence of a rhetoric of equality, promoted both by communism and Catholicism

Does a person's own material status affect how they view the wealthy?

Crucially. But also important is whether they believe that the world operates justly. We have studied both objective and subjective factors. Those who consider themselves to be positioned

Americans. In the United States, up until the recent economic crisis, two-thirds of society felt that the system was generally OK, that it was basically fair; whereas in Poland absolutely no one feels that way, not even 1% of the population. People in fact believe the opposite, although that is a myth we have forged for ourselves. The Americans forged their myth that the world is fundamentally a fair place, whereas we did the opposite. Those convictions are very hard to verify.

Can anything persuade the Poles to be less suspicious of wealth and have more faith in the system?

I think there is a certain experience that is missing in our history: seeing large social groups gain by playing according to the rules. It is still missing because things have been this way for only 20 years, and that is still much too short a time-span. Something like this needs to be practiced for at least 100 years. The Poles have a terrible approach to rules, simply believing that they are there to be circumvented. The Germans are astonishingly different, very rigidly abiding by such rules. I am not an optimist but in the longer-term perspective, once two or three generations play by the rules and see for themselves that it pays to do so, this proportion will change. But we cannot expect miracles.

Are those Poles who have achieved success able to take pleasure in it?

They are, but out of necessity they also conceal that joy, because material success is seen as linked with moral dubiousness. Just the mere knowledge that someone is financially successful serves as grounds for others to treat

low on the social ladder, or more precisely too low, feel that the world is unjust. Indeed, that is the dominant stereotype in our country - as many as 60% of Poles hold that conviction to the maximal extent, which is a much higher percentage than found among Germans or

them cautiously, if not to conclude straight away that they must be a thief. Although it is true in many countries of the world that the material aspect of success is more hidden than displayed. Take Sweden, or all of Scandinavia - one does not see it there.



Jakub Ostrowski

What else does psychology say: when are we pleased at the successes of others, when not?

People may react to the success of others with joy, or with dislike and envy. I recently performed a study that reached a very simple conclusion, that whether we react with joy or dislike to someone else's success depends in essence on whether we like that person or not. That is very simple and differs from the results presented in the literature, where one can find really a lot of "sweetened" models that assume that such joy or dislike are mainly the result of whether we view someone's success or defeat as deserved or undeserved.

What did your study look like?

From a website we selected pictures of persons who provoked sympathetic or antipathetic feelings, showed them to our subjects and told them that this person had done something, for instance: "he passed his driver's exam." Next we asked: what do you think, did he deserve it or not? And antipathy alone sufficed for someone to be seen as undeserving. A more complex study had participants listen to job interviews where the applicant behaved in a way that provoked sympathetic or antipathetic feelings, depending on whether she spoke well or badly about the group of observers. If the observers were psychologists, for instance, then during the interview the applicant was asked whether she had ever thought about taking a post-graduate course in psychology. And depending on whether her response was "yes, I always dreamed of doing that" or "no, I never wanted to have anything to do with psychologists," the observers liked or disliked the applicant.

Then it was revealed whether the applicant had landed the job, in other words whether she was successful or not. And here things correlated perfectly: if she got the job and had spoken well about the group of participants, they reported positive emotions at her success. But if she had spoken badly of them the reverse was of course true: they were pleased at her failure, displeased by her success.

In other words, we are more inclined to be pleased at the successes of people whom we find to our liking - one of the factors involved is that they are then perceived as one of "us," someone from "our group."

Did you also study the successes of sportsmen?

Those are achievements that do not threaten the rest of us in any way. And some of them even contribute to our self-esteem. It is very simple that if someone enjoys success in a field where I also have aspirations, then compared to his success I look mediocre. If someone enjoys success in fields where I have no aspirations, for example because I have no desire to be a sportsman or a pianist, but that someone is somehow linked to me, for example sharing the same nationality, then I can bask in the glow of reflected glory, because their success does not threaten me.

Outside commentators stress that Poland and the Poles have been successful in the country's post-communist transformation. That view is much less commonly expressed by the average Pole. Why so?

There is a certain mechanism of inter-society, international comparison. I once studied this with a representative sample of Polish adults. I can say that most Polish people do compare us to other nations. But mostly to those who are faring the best, not those performing similarly. For example, an excellent and very well justified point of comparison for the Poles should be Ukraine, which 25 years ago was somewhat wealthier than Poland. The two countries have similar historical experiences, locations, and geopolitical difficulties. But the Poles feel insulted when they are to compare themselves to Ukraine. They want to be compared to Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom. We choose the societies who are the best off as our point of comparison. That is somewhat unfounded, given that while we were staging an uprising back in January 1863, in a failed attempt to regain our independence, the first metro line was opened to the public in London.

But perhaps it is a good thing, because it gives people a certain kind of motivation? When doing science, it is good to compare ourselves to Nobel winners?

Motivation, yes, we might have that, but not satisfaction. One can live in a state of constant frustration if one compares oneself to star performers in the social or individual dimension. ■

Interview by Anna Zawadzka