

Success as a new dimension of cultural variability: linear vs. relational cultures: aspects of success in Bulgaria and Hungary

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Abstract: The following paper discusses a proposition for the notion of success as a new cultural dimension. The main goal is to discuss whether “connected” and “linear” characteristics of success can be considered a new dimension of cultural variability in Bulgaria and Hungary. It can be speculated that such classification exists among more cultures but further research is necessary to support that. With regard to this, the paper presents the results of a 5-month pilot study on the notions of success in Bulgaria and Hungary which was conducted in the period of March – July 2015 with 395 Bulgarian and 110 Hungarian citizens aged 18 – 65. The empirical evidence collected by means of a free-word association experiment indicates that aspects of “linearity” and “connectivity” are present in both cultures’ notions of success. The main value of this study is that results could be used for developing approaches in recruitment for education and business, as well as in various problem-solving practices across cultures.

Keywords: success; intercultural communication; cultural orientations; linear culture; connected culture; values; Hungary; Bulgaria

1. Introduction

Success is one of the most popular subjects of discussion in contemporary social sciences and humanities. Considering the profound change of economic and political regime in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism in 1989, success has become a widely discussed topic in social interactions, media and popular literature both in Bulgaria and Hungary. The transition to democracy and capitalism has led to the transfer of Western values such as supporting individual achievement and self-expression, striving for financial independence from the state, re-establishing private initiative. All these new (or even left and forgotten from before communism) concepts inspired motivation for new opportunities. People in both countries started to search for success – what it was, how it could be achieved. According to the author’s observations there has been a steady rise in scientific interest in the notion of success both in Europe and around the world. Bulgaria and Hungary are no exception. The following empirical study makes an attempt at outlining the main components of success as a concept in both European countries and speculates about possible implications of results, valid for more cultures. The goal is to pinpoint the features of success as a possible new dimension of cultural variability.

2. Background

2.1. Cultural values in Bulgaria and Hungary

In order to conceptualize our research on the notions of success in Bulgaria and Hungary, we would like to make a brief summary of the main value orientations in both cultures. Being a part of the Eastern European cultural family and having similar histories, Bulgaria and Hungary enjoy a rising interest in cultural studies research (intercultural communication). The countries’ peculiarities still remain an uncharted territory but, so far, substantial data have been gathered by

local scientists [1-10]. These along with the value orientations present in literature (G. Hofstede, F. Trompenaars, E. Hall, Sh. Schwartz, R. Inglehart) [11-17] give us grounds to produce a classification of the cultural orientations of the two cultures (Table 1).

Bulgaria	Hungary
Polychronic time	Monochronic time
High context, Diffuse	Low context, Specific
Particularism	Universalism
Equal individualism and collectivism	High individualism
Affective orientation to work	Neutral orientation to work
Ascribed status	Low degree achieved status
External locus of control	Internal locus of control
Survival values	Secular-rational values
Orientation to present	Orientation to future
High power distance	Moderately high power distance
Femininity	Masculinity
Uncertainty avoidance	Uncertainty avoidance
Restraint	Restraint

Table 1. Bulgarian and Hungarian value orientations.

Our main assumption is that the upper mentioned cultural orientations are represented in the notions of success. Furthermore, we can analyze the notions from the perspective of value orientations. Thus we can suggest success as a cultural dimension in the researched sample. As we can see, there are *more differences than similarities* between both cultures. What we are interested in is *how these similarities and differences are represented in the notions of success*.

2.2. Success in modern research

Conceptualisation of success in contemporary research seems tentative according to the author's observations of various empirical and theoretical studies [10-18]. The main reason for that is the complexity of the concept and the fact that it is often presented as an already existing and explained phenomenon, mostly seen as variations of *achievement* in psychology and personality development studies [18]. In sociology, linguistic and cultural studies (intercultural communication) it is integrated into various notions such as *well-being, happiness, personal realization, social capital, professional and sports achievement* [19-22]. The following classification represents the main *semantic groups in success conceptualisation* that come out as a result of the research performed by the author on a rich spectrum of studies on the topic [1-8; 18-38].

2.2.1. Achievement

Achievement is the most common concept, connected to success and the successful person. It includes components such as *career development, achievement motivation, recognition, social status* [23-26]. Achievement is mostly associated with "progress", "autonomy", "independence", "prestige", "personality development", "risk-taking" [25], the result of the interaction between cooperation and competition in order to achieve a particular goal [24]. Therefore, according to the above mentioned sources, achievement can mostly be defined as an aspiration for successful

career development. It's important to note that attitudes to achievement depend mostly on value orientations of the cultural group and their interpretation by the individual [18].

2.2.2. Well-being

The second most important marker for success is well-being – a highly popular research subject in social sciences and humanities [21, 28-34]. Different studies mention similar definitions of well-being, as the most typical ones concern the *individual's subjective feeling of general satisfaction with life*. In this range we can find a number of definitions such as *psychological well-being, subjective well-being, satisfaction with life, quality of life, lifestyle, standard of living* and many others [28-29]. Psychological well-being represents the acknowledgement of personal development and progress, having interpersonal and coping skills, the ability to make decisions independently [28]. Subjective well-being includes all notions of satisfaction with life [35], where the cultural differences play a major role on these assumptions [29]. According to Eurobarometer 2011 the major factors for subjective well-being are: mood, general attitudes to life, uncontrollable events (luck, fate, genetic traits, personal characteristics), specific set of values, opportunities for personal development, stability and predictability, decisiveness, opportunity for planning and achieving goals [33].

2.2.3. Happiness

Happiness research is a separate category which includes studies in sociology and psychology. Firstly, it is presented as having mental balance and feeling harmony in one's life, having meaning in life, experiencing general satisfaction with life [36]. Secondly, it is used as an indicator for well-being and is presented interchangeably in many studies [21, 27, 30, 34, 36-38]. Third, some studies outline a positive correlation between individual happiness, freedom of choice and career success [34, 37], as well as between having higher income and the overall percentage of happy people in European countries (people with higher income are more satisfied with their lives and therefore happier) [22]. There are attempts at indexing happiness according to a methodology in European and world values surveys. (ESS, EVS, WVS)[21].

2.2.4. Social capital

The last component of individual success is social capital – the achieved individual social status in interaction to the social status of the others [23]. According to different sources social capital may include the *social connections and interactions, socioeconomic status, social success* of the individual [23, 25, 28]. *Social connections* (networks) represent several elements: 1. support from the others, 2. positive interactions between family members, friends, close acquaintances, 3. positive evaluation received from the others (e.g. colleagues, superiors) and 4. higher social position [28]. The result is higher self-esteem and social recognition [28]. *Social interactions* include all variety in interpersonal connections and opportunities for making decisions [25]. The last element of social capital is a new concept – the so called *social success* [23]. This includes the social aspects of an individual's success [23]: developing one's professional skills, improving goal-setting, forming of moral values (empathy, cooperation, mutual respect, etc.), building interpersonal connections, investing in personality development, high social responsibility.

The essential characteristics of the concept of success presented and discussed in the current part of the paper, give us grounds to suggest a model of their interconnections (Success Pyramid Model). The structure is presented in the figure below (Fig. 1):

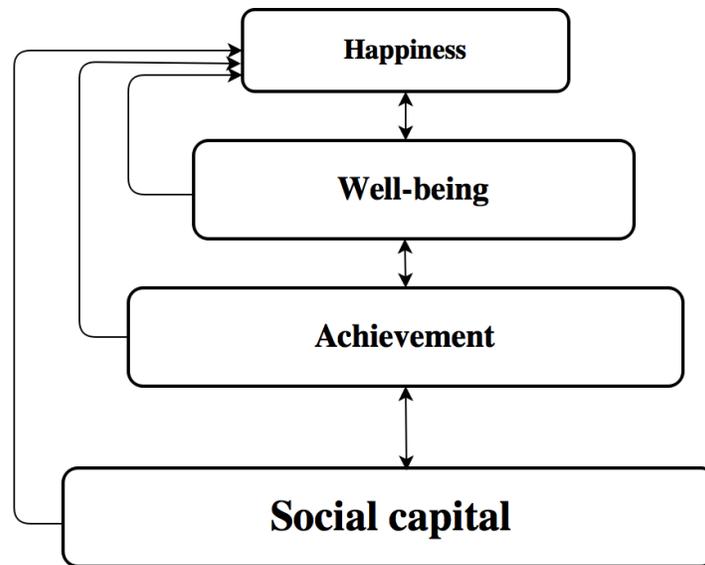


Figure. 1. Pyramid model of success according to social sciences and humanities

The model presents the connections and interactions between the components of success. The pyramid comprises a basis (social capital) and 3 consecutive layers (achievement, well-being and happiness). It is our assumption that these elements are in a causal relationship: favorable social capital conditions help the individual in achieving their goals (material, professional, personal). The acquired result leads to improved well-being, which produces happiness at the top of the pyramid. We consider that non-hierarchical interactions between the components of success may exist. For example, social capital on its own can lead to feelings of happiness. The same applies to the upper two layers – achievement and well-being. Additionally, all components can influence each other in an interchangeable fashion. Overall, we assume these four elements are a set of conditions necessary to experience success.

3. Method

3.1. Hypotheses

For the purpose of our research we have 3 main hypotheses:

1. The notions of success will represent the main value orientations in both cultures. A certain degree of pessimism (Uncertainty avoidance, Restraint) is expected in both samples, as well as differences of conceptualisation where there is cultural differentiation.
2. The notions will include the 4 layers of the Success Pyramid Model we introduced above – social capital, achievement, well-being and happiness.
3. There is sufficient data that suggests success is a dimension of cultural variability, valid for both cultures only.

3.2. Design and sample

This is a pilot non-representative study that uses a quantitative method included in questionnaire - a *free word-association experiment*. It was completed in the period March – July 2015 among Bulgarian and Hungarian citizens. The research was voluntary and accessible on Facebook and e-mail. 395 Bulgarians and 110 Hungarians took part. The questionnaire was accessed on the following locations: Bulgarian language -

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1oD1qlZMJsxYTjLpoF0V_uFmIkfBMNWAxGAfHpzOajUg/vi
ewform;](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1oD1qlZMJsxYTjLpoF0V_uFmIkfBMNWAxGAfHpzOajUg/vi
ewform;) Hungarian language -
[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/196My9SxguO6qiLDxepUAhwz25DOHVkzLMsA6_R2J7G4/v
iewform.](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/196My9SxguO6qiLDxepUAhwz25DOHVkzLMsA6_R2J7G4/v
iewform.)

The goal of the *free word-association experiment* [28] is to collect the affective (subjectively emotional) meanings of success. The affective meanings represent the emotionally subjective reactions to the success stimulus and they carry deeply set cultural assumptions as well. Data retrieval is completed through presenting the “success” stimulus to the respondents, who have to write down the first few words (associates) that come to their minds when seeing the word. Interpretation of collected data is obtained in relative shares of associative units, their percentage ratios and frequency analysis of their occurrence with Statgraphics software [39-40]. Particular attention is paid to less common associations that we believe bear the cultural characteristics of success. As a result, the semantic relationships between the associates of success and the formation of the semantic fields of the concept were made.

The reason for choosing a quantitative method is to analyze the affective (subconscious) nature of the success concept. We believe the free-word association experiment provides enough data to propose or study cultural orientations.

4. Data analysis and results

The free-word association experiment compares 1689 associative reactions of the stimulus "success" in both languages. Bulgarian respondents produced a total of 1272 associative responses (words and phrases), reduced to 251 single associations with a total incidence of 693 times. Hungarian respondents produced a total of 417 associative reactions (words and expressions), down to 99 single associations with a total frequency of 176 times.

Associates are analyzed according to their incidence and their belonging to value orientations by H. Hofstede, F. Trompenaars, E. Hall, Sh. Schwartz, R. Inglehart and GLOBE project. The following results are based on the relative weight of the types of value orientations and the Success Pyramid Model (social capital, achievement, well-being and happiness).

The most frequent associates of Bulgarian and Hungarian respondents fall into the four elements of the success model: happiness, well-being, achievement and social capital, but with different priority.

According to *Bulgarians* the first 10 most frequent associations of success are: 1. *happiness* (77 times), 2. *money* (74 times), 3. *labor* (49), 4. *family* (48), 5. *work* (46) 6. *realization* (34), 7. *career*(33), 8. *luck*(32), 9. *satisfaction* (30) and 10. *purposefulness / purpose / goals* (28).

According to *Hungarians* the first 10 most frequent associations of success are: 1. *money* (27 times), 2. *satisfaction* (26), 3. *recognition* (25), 4. *joy* (18), 5. *happiness* (18), 6. *security* (17), 7. *work* (14), 8. *family* (11), 9. *life* (9) and 10. *self-realization* (8).

Culture specific associates (the least frequent) **according to the Bulgarians are:** *selfish, (high) self-esteem, sense of satisfaction, peace with oneself, Simeon the Great (a Bulgarian ruler), equilibrium, passion, loyalty, potential, dignity, struggle, high position, high social status, corruption, arrogance, workaholic, optimism, family life, family harmony, morality, traditions, spiritual progress, entrepreneurship, strategy, maturity, profession, education, initiative,*

proactivity, communicativeness, adaptability, high standard of living, "All obscene words.", problem solving, "suit, house, car, partner, writer, vanity, blank, glitter, cold, surface," "to want positive emotions and smiles", evolution, transformation, government, parliament, scrupulousness, authority, pragmatism, honesty, deprivation, self-affirmation, urge, fire, goodness, respect, USA, dollar, light, stars, self-improvement, salary, secure old age, consistency, diligence, racing, imagination, lottery, innate, short-lived, engagement, stubbornness, elevation, self-control, sadness, resources, charm, example, obstacles, non-recognition, price, enthusiasm, mind, enjoyment, leaving your comfort zone, happy, wakefulness, charismatic personality, estate, karma, destiny, housing, completeness, finale.

Culture specific associates (the least frequent) **according to the Hungarians are:** *impulse for success, good position, aggressiveness, unscrupulousness, arrogance, perfect looks, comfort, calmness, pride, happy family life, experience, health, love, to do good, faith, fame, progress, smile, agreeing, motivation, values, more opportunities, status, unintelligible, cliché word, influential, responsible, victory, God, existence, vision, optimism, effort, catharsis, patience, protection, scrupulousness, "There is no such thing in Hungary!", time, investment, exuberance, efficiency, vocation, mission, desiring to, winning in life, progress, longing, emeritus, property, independence, corruption, wealth, positive, motivated, sport, music, dance, nature, personal.*

The following table presents the value orientations shown in the respondents' notions of success. The classification is made according to the number of associates among Bulgarian and Hungarian respondents, the relative shares of associative units, their percentage ratios and frequency analysis of their occurrence.

Hungary	Bulgaria
Universalism (Schwartz)	Adaptation (Schwartz)
Monochronic time (Hall)	Polychronic time (Hall)
Assertiveness, achievement (Schwartz)	Benevolence (Schwartz)
Individualism (Hofstede)	Collectivism (Hofstede)
Low context (Hall)	High context (Hall)
Masculinity (Hofstede)	Femininity (Hofstede)
Restraint (Hofstede)	Indulgence (Hofstede), Hedonism (Schwartz)
Long-term orientation (Hofstede)	Short-term orientation (Hofstede)
Self-expression values (Inglehart)	Survival values (Inglehart)
Secular-rational values (Inglehart)	Traditional values (Inglehart)
According to components of the Success Pyramid Model:	
Achievement	Social capital
Happiness	Well-being
Linear success	Connected success

Table 2. Value orientations present in the Hungarian and Bulgarian notions of success.

Based on the obtained data, we assume the presence of **linear and connected aspects of success**. The **linear aspects** include the notion of sequence and timing of actions and concepts (*self-realization, labor, work, impulse for success, good position, aggressiveness, unscrupulousness, arrogance, selfish, (high) self-esteem, deprivation, self-affirmation, urge, workaholic, money,*

career, purposefulness / purpose / goals, recognition, strategy, profession, initiative, proactivity, evolution, motivation, more opportunities, etc.). The **connected aspects** include the notion of interconnectedness between people and the environment in actions and concepts (happiness, family, luck, satisfaction, joy, security, life, sense of satisfaction, peace with oneself, equilibrium, passion, loyalty, dignity, struggle, social status, corruption, comfort, calmness, pride, happy family life, experience, health, love, to do good, faith, music, dance, nature, personal).

The following tables represent the value orientations of linear and connected success according to numbers of associates in both groups of respondents.

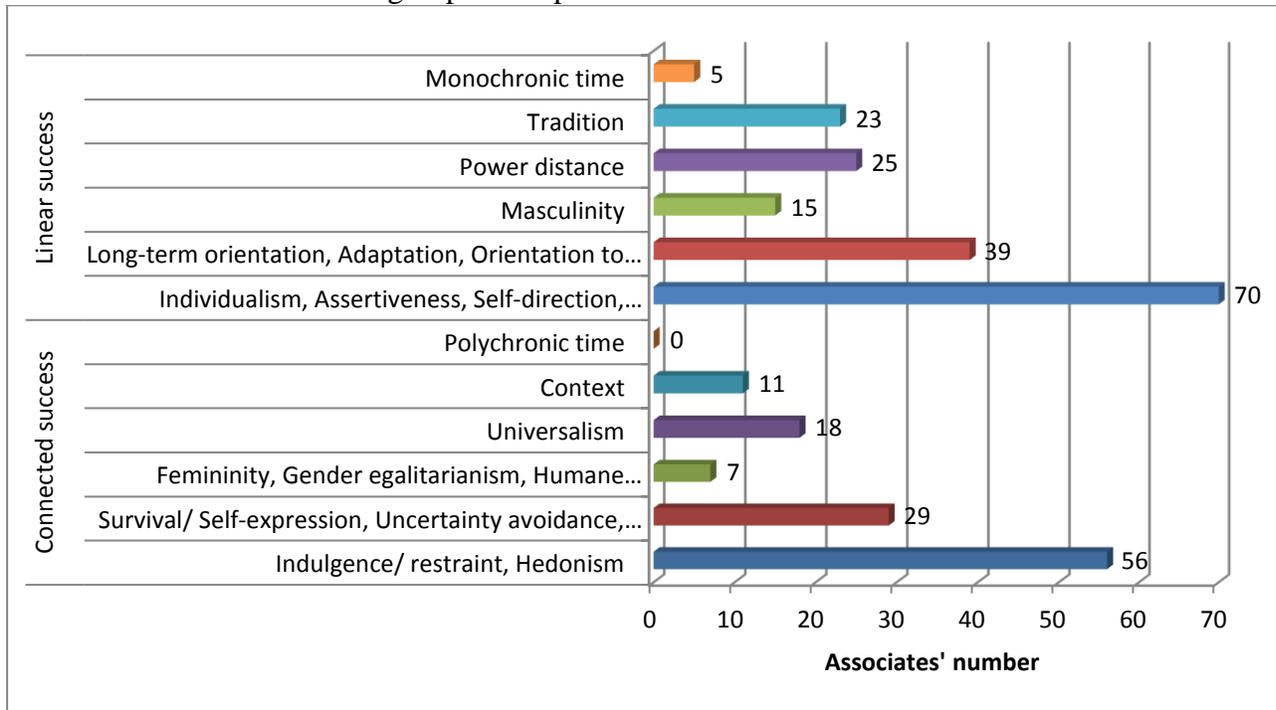


Table 3. Notion of success according to number of association items among Bulgarians.

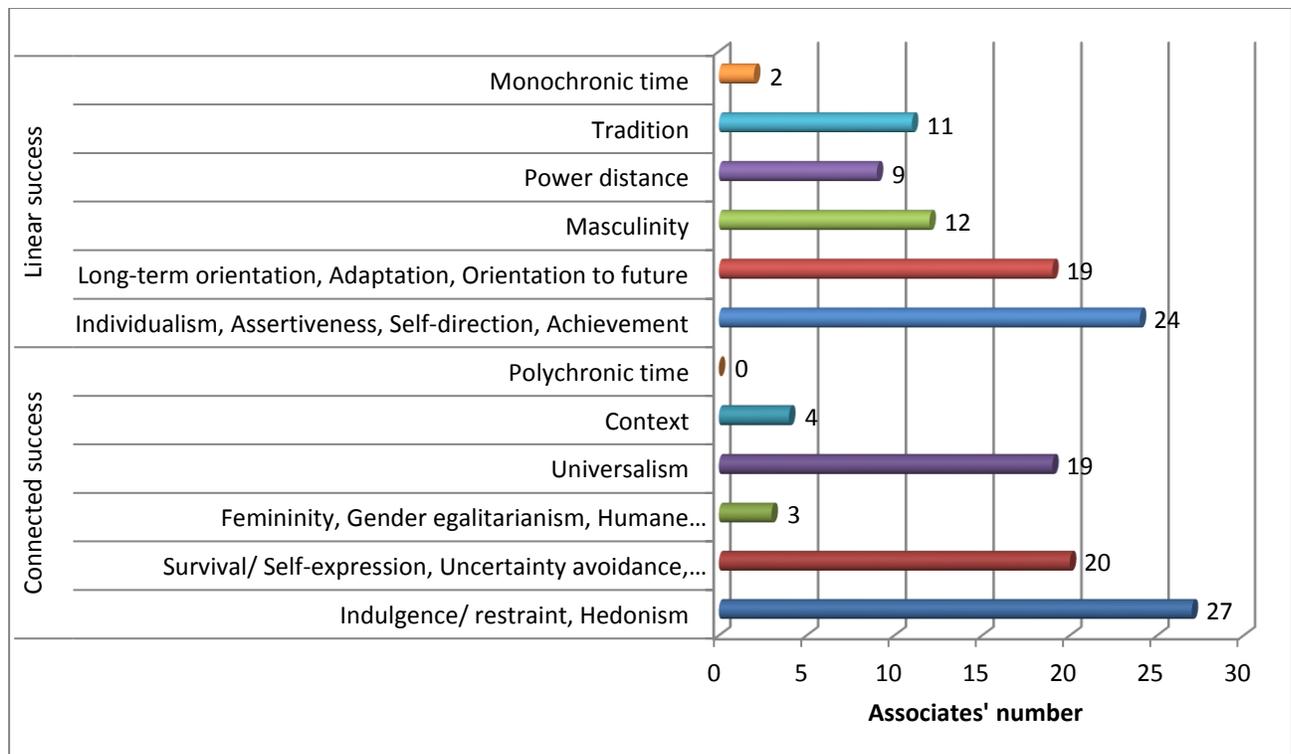


Table 4. Notion of success according to number of association items among Hungarians

As we can see in the tables above (Table 3 and Table 4), linearity indicates the concept of success where achievement and its close-knit semantic groups are present - for example self-assertion of personality, expression, striving, ambition, time-building of success, purposefulness and everything else that contains a *linear connotation*. Connectivity of the concept involves the *interaction between the individual and the environment or other individuals* - these may be collectivist views of success (family and friends), denotative objects that reveal elements of social capital such as cohesiveness, cooperation or trust.

Predominantly linear notion of success with moderately connected aspects is present among for Bulgarians (68% similarity). Linear-connected notion of success with equally present linear and connected aspects (95% similarity) is observed among Hungarians.

5. Discussion

According to the presented research we can outline the following aspects of success characteristics in Bulgarian and Hungarian culture.

First, in the reported study we observe the influence of the local cultural values on the concepts of success - cultures of individualism, masculinity, low context, self-expression (Hungary), and collectivism with a transition to individualism, uncertainty avoidance, restraint, pragmatism (Bulgaria). We must emphasize that the differences are obvious when comparing these two cultures but in the context of more cultures, more similarities might actually occur. As a result, we consider our first hypothesis supported, but the degrees of pessimism seem to vary slightly in both cultures, with less of it in Hungary. Generally, we see the existing pessimism in both

cultures. Differences in conceptualization also occur based on the main cultural differences outlined in the Cultural values section.

Second, the notions do include all 4 layers of the Success Pyramid Model we introduced in this text – social capital, achievement, well-being and happiness occur in the word association experiment’s responses. This confirms our second hypothesis. Both cognitively and emotionally Hungarians and Bulgarians seem interested in the abstract, non-material aspects of success because they evoke the most responses. The main difference lies between associates determined by cultural values.

Third, our results show two major value representations of success - linearity vs. connectivity. *Linearity* attributes merit to the success of the individual and their potential, as is the case with some of the registered results of the Bulgarian respondents and the main tendency in the Hungarians' results. This could be explained with the ongoing value transformations in both societies - from relying on external support to putting success in the hands of the individual. *Connectivity* reveals success as the dependence on external circumstances - interpersonal relationships, the presence of a favorable environment, etc. That is why we assume there is provisional data that success has features of a cultural dimension, valid for both cultures.

Fourth, interesting observation is the difference between answering patterns – Hungarians seem particularly clear what to answer (explicit choices), while Bulgarians are more tentative. This is probably due to the low vs. high context differences between cultures. It can also be attributed to the masculinity/femininity dichotomy between both cultures, as well as collectivism vs. individualism differences.

Fifth, results propose success as a possible cultural dimension in studied cultures, based on the indicators found in both groups of respondents. Linearity of success is more prevalent in Hungary, while connectivity is more typical for Bulgaria. Such new cultural classification may be valid for more cultures but representative research is necessary to confirm this. Free-word association experiment is an easy to apply method that can contribute to future research in cultural orientations.

Sixth, the main proposition of the study is that dimensional characteristics of success in Bulgaria and Hungary are the following: 1. stimulus aspect, 2. threat-opportunity dichotomy, 3. connection to people, 4. nature of success and 5. continuum aspect.

Cultural aspects of success	Connected Culture (C)	Linear Culture (L)
Stimulus aspect	Success is an <i>external</i> stimulus.	Success is an <i>internal</i> stimulus.
Threat-opportunity dichotomy	Success is a <i>challenge</i>.	Success is a <i>trigger</i>.
Connection to people	Success as a connection <i>with</i> people.	Success as <i>dominance over</i> people.
Nature of success	Success is of <i>implicit</i> nature.	Success is of <i>explicit</i> nature.
Continuum aspect	Success is a <i>process</i>.	Success is a <i>sequence of completed tasks</i>.

Table 5. Cultural aspects of linearity vs. connectivity dimension.

6. Limitations

The main limitations of the study are the non-representative samples in both countries, the need for a combination of research methods (qualitative and quantitative), the number of studied cultures (only two) and the content and language of questions (we cannot be sure the respondents interpreted the stimulus in the way we intended them to because of peculiarities in lexis understanding in Bulgarian and Hungarian language). To make further propositions for a potential new dimension, representative research is necessary among more cultures. Surveys like the European and World Values Studies can provide provisional data about perceptions of success' components (social capital, well-being, achievement, happiness) among different cultures.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the reported research clearly show that the notions of success represent the main value orientations in Hungarian and Bulgarian culture. The notions include the 4 layers of the Success Pyramid Model– social capital, achievement, well-being and happiness. There is sufficient data that proposes success as a potential dimension of cultural variability, valid for both cultures only. Linearity and connectivity of success are present to a different degree in Hungarian and Bulgarian culture. Their characteristics include a stimulus aspect of success, a threat-opportunity dichotomy, connection to people, nature of success and a continuum aspect.

The author believes that exploring the concepts of success is an appropriate tool for solving a number of problems in the fields of education, economy and social policies. This could be done in the form of cultural value profiling of respondents. It can be applied in educational and organizational activities, for example: optimizing selection of staff; improving internal communication in organizations; applying modern methodologies to diversify the educational process in schools and universities; facilitating intercultural cooperation in schools, universities, business organizations, etc.; improving success rate during international negotiations; improving interpersonal contacts between representatives of different nationalities.

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