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# 'My Own House, Car, My Husband, and Children': meanings of success among Ghanaians

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which contemporary social, economic, and religious developments inform social constructions of success in Ghana. Participants, consisting of 21 females and 39 males, aged between 20 and 70, from different educational and occupational backgrounds were interviewed about what they consider as success. Participants belonged to either Traditionally Western Mission Churches or Charismatic Christian denominations and were selected from three regions of Ghana. Thematic analysis revealed four dimensions of success: (1) Social (including marriage, children, social recognition, and social contribution to society); (2) Material (comprising meeting basic needs; economic independence; material wealth); (3) Educational; and (4) Religious (e.g., God's work, relationship with God). Three pathways to success were also observed in the data: (a) Divine blessings; (b) Adaptability; and (c) Striving. Discussion focuses on social, policy, counselling, and research implications.

Keywords: Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology

## 1. Introduction

Success has been defined as ‘a broad, culture-bound, multidimensional phenomenon related to issues pertaining to a person’s sense of well-being, their family, and surrounding social contexts, opportunities, and ethnic identity, sense of control over their lives, and other related topics’ (Llorénc and García-Quijano, 2012, pg. 85). The definition notes that cultural beliefs shape what people consider as success. Within some Ghanaian settings, cultural importance attached to marriage and children informs conceptions of success in both young and old (Laube, 2015; Van der Geest, 1997). Llorénc and García-Quijano’s definition also shows that success is multi-faceted. In this regard, previous studies in Ghana have shown that material wealth, social status, social power, and social increase are important in the construction of success (De Witte, 2003; Fallon, 1999; McCaskie, 1983; Van der Geest, 1998). Material wealth comprises physical assets; social status reflects one’s social standing in society; and social power describes one’s ability to wield power over others. It also connotes the extent to which one has access to those who have power in society. For example, being an elder in most African contexts is associated with social power. The elder exercises influence on others; and may have social connections to other authority figures in society. Social increase is the extent to which one contributes to the welfare of others. To be considered successful, one is expected to excel in more than one of these domains. Further, access to one can often facilitate access to the others. For example, someone who is materially wealthy may also have social power. Llorénc and García-Quijano’s (2012) definition of success also highlights the important role of the social context; success in one context may not necessarily be considered as such in another context. Further, since social contexts are dynamic and opportunities vary across time, we expect meanings of success to change over time and across settings (Recken, 1993). Recent studies in Ghanaian settings reveal that traditional meanings of success are changing in response to socio-economic developments. For instance, recent educational expansions have given impetus to new aspirations among the youth (Asafu-Adjaye, 2012; Behrends and Lentz, 2012). Laube (2015) observed among a section of youth in rural Northern Ghana that success was associated with higher education and social mobility.

A major limitation in Llorénc and García-Quijano’s definition of success is that it does not include religious dimensions. It is envisaged that religion might be important in the constructions of success in Ghana. In most parts of West Africa, including Ghana, Christianity exercises a great amount of influence on personal and social life (Freeman, 2016). Although Christianity was introduced to Ghana in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, recent church renewals that began in the 1980s are contributing to major social change

(Dovlo, 2004; Meyer, 1998a, 1998b; Omenyo, 2011). The focus of this current study is to explore how Ghanaian Christianity and developments in the socio-economic sectors (e. g., education and employment) contribute to constructions of success in contemporary Ghana. The purpose is to find out how Ghanaian Christians understand success and the extent to which current social developments have shaped meanings of success. The research question is how do Ghanaian Christians conceptualize success? Discourses on success are a major feature of Charismatic Christianity. Church sponsored billboards, car stickers, as well as television and radio programs saturate Ghana's public spaces with new ideas about success (Gifford, 2004).

Explanations about personal success do not only reflect personal beliefs, values, goals, and preferences, but also reflect social expectations, life opportunities and constraints. Knowing people's beliefs about success allows us to ascertain what motivates people and the group to which they are affiliated; as well as know what influences everyday life choices which affect social and work life (Anyidoho et al., 2012; Hermanowicz, 2006; Vijayakumar, 2013).

### 1.1. The Ghanaian context

Ghana is a relatively small West African state with the second largest economy in that region and a population estimated at 25 million in 2010 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Over half (50.2%) of this population live in urban areas. Rural-urban migration is a common phenomenon especially among the youth (Dadzie, 2013; Laube, 2015). Ghana has been described as a transnational nation with large numbers of Ghanaians emigrating each year (Orozco et al., 2005). There is no accurate data but a 2005 estimate suggests that the number of Ghanaians living abroad could be over one million (Orozco et al., 2005).

Developments in Ghana's economic, social, educational, religious, and political spaces have seen some changes over the years and might have important implications for social constructions of success. Economically, conditions in Ghana give ambiguous optimism. The country transitioned from lower income to lower-middle income status in 2010 (Douglas, 2013; Ghana Statistical Service, 2014), and the average income was estimated at US\$1,283 (Dadzie, 2013). However, data from the 6<sup>th</sup> Ghana Standards of Living Survey covering the period of 2012–2013 shows that about 8.4 percent of Ghana's population is considered to be living in extreme poverty (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). To alleviate the impact of this extreme poverty among vulnerable populations, different social interventions such as the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP); School Feeding Programme; Labour Intensive Public Works (LIPW) have been implemented. Although Ghana's economy offers different kinds of employment to its population, skilled agriculture, forestry, and fishery are the most dominant occupations for both men and women.

Unlike the economic sector, Ghana's education sector has seen tremendous growth and offers a lot of promise. Over the past decade, there has been an upsurge in investment in education at all levels (from basic to tertiary) by both private and public sectors. The result is that more people are being educated and this has social and economic implications. According to [Asafu-Adjaye \(2012\)](#), education has had a positive effect on employability in Ghana; wage returns (with higher educational qualifications being associated with higher wage premium); and other social returns such as social cohesion, and health benefits. Furthermore, changes in the educational and the financial sectors have had significant impacts on women ([Arku and Arku, 2009](#); [Fallon, 1999](#)). The education of women has contributed to changes in the economic role of women leading to shifts in the domestic power relations in marriages in contemporary Ghana ([Assimeng, 1999](#)).

Another area that has seen tremendous change is the religious sector. According to the [Ghana Statistical Service \(2012\)](#), over 94 percent of Ghana's 25 million people identify with some religious faith. Christians constitute about 71.2 percent of Ghana's population ([Ghana Statistical Service, 2012](#)). Ghanaian Christianity has influence on different life domains, including marriage, work, and family life ([Asamoah-Gyadu, 2012](#); [Gifford, 2004](#); [Lauterbach, 2010](#); [Laube, 2015](#)). Recent studies show that religion is an important framework for family and socio-economic values ([Heaton and Darkwah, 2011](#); [Heaton et al., 2009](#)). According to [Assimeng \(1999\)](#), western education (especially, Christian western education, not education of Islamic tradition) contributed to the postponement of marriage and the individualization of marital commitment.

The developments reviewed have ramifications for how Ghanaians think of success. Research shows that the frameworks people rely on to define success begin forming early in childhood but they get modified by experience, the environment, and development ([Nathan, 2005](#); [Gutman and Akerman, 2008](#)). The confluence of the developments in economic, social, and religious contexts of Ghana on constructions of success is an unexplored area of study which this paper seeks to address.

## 1.2. Assessment of success

Success can be assessed objectively and subjectively ([Parker and Chusmir, 1992](#)). Objective measures of success allow us to assess what may be considered universal to a group and are often standardized ([Heslin, 2003](#)). For instance, the life success scale developed by [Parker and Chusmir \(1992\)](#) assesses six dimensions of success: status or wealth; contribution to society; family relationships; personal fulfilment; professional fulfilment; and security. This measure taps into values peculiar to American settings. People from non-American settings who do not share American values might talk about success differently as such the dimensions identified by Parker and Chusmir cannot be assumed to be universal.

Subjective assessment of success is important in identifying what may be unique to specific individuals, groups, or cultures, revealing the socially constructed meanings bound to times and space. Subjective assessments allow people to define success in different life domains which may not have been captured on an objective measure. Given the dearth of information on success dimensions in Ghana, the current study focused on gathering qualitative information on meanings of success that may be important to people in Ghana. The findings can inform us of the extent to which personal success meanings in Ghana are similar to others elsewhere.

### 1.3. Sources of success

Literature on success reveals two main sources of success: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic forms of success originate from within the individual and include sense of personal worth, personal growth, fulfilment, and well-being. Extrinsic success is often linked with material or financial success and social position, status, or recognition (Kasser and Ryan, 2001; Parker and Chusmir, 1992). Both forms of success are influenced by personal and cultural values, as well as direct behavior (Stevens et al., 2011).

Limited studies have explored conceptions of success in the Ghanaian context. Findings from these studies have shown that Ghanaians often focus on extrinsic meanings of success such as social status, family and community obligations, and material wealth (Laube, 2015; Fallon, 1999; Van der Geest, 1997). For instance, Van der Geest's (1997, 1998) study among the Kwahus of Ghana gives a glimpse of what they considered as success (e.g., good family relationships; children's social status; material wealth (including having built 'a proper house'); and social position). Fallon (1999) also found that wealth and social status are important indicators of success among the Larteh, in the Eastern Region of Ghana. In addition, Gyekye (1996) argues that social contribution is a moral responsibility, and that those who do so are considered a success in Ghanaian communities.

A recent study by Laube (2015) conducted among 120 school-leaving students, parents, teachers, and local authorities in 194 households in the Kasena-Nankana East Municipality in the Upper East Region in Northern Ghana found that meanings of success were focused on four main domains: personal; marital life and reproduction; economic achievement; and reciprocity. Participants aspired to become financially independent, have good access to social services such as health care and education and look for material improvements such as food security, housing and means of transport. Laube (2015) categorized the participants' conceptions of success into 'traditional' and 'modern' forms. Traditional forms of success included marital life and reproduction success. Here, participants defined a successful person as one with multiple wives, and many children. Modern definition of success shifted to having a single wife, fewer children, and educational attainment of children

(such as ensuring that children go up to, or beyond, secondary school or vocational training). Traditional economic attainment was defined as ability to feed the family, cattle ownership, agricultural surplus; whereas modern definition included financial independence, home ownership, and good clothing. Reciprocity remained the same for both modern and traditional definitions of success and included labour exchange, community rituals (such as exchange of food, drinks, and animals), and attending funerals.

Although the findings of the studies reviewed show that material wealth and social status are important in defining success, they only targeted specific localities. None of the studies focused on religious groups or included different regions in Ghana. The current study expands on those by examining the influence of social and religious developments in contemporary Ghana on meanings of success across religious groups in three different regions of Ghana. The research question: is to what extent do current social developments in religious spaces in Ghana influence constructions of success?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research design

We used an ethnographic interview approach to explore meanings of success in the everyday life of Ghanaian Christians. Ethnographic research aims to obtain a holistic view of a phenomenon as portrayed in everyday experiences (Creswell, 2003).

### 2.2. Participants

We interviewed 61 participants in 3 regions of Ghana for the study as part of a bigger study. However, one person did not complete the section on conceptions of success. Hence, 60 participants took part in this part of the study; 20 were from the Greater Accra region (10 each from rural and urban settings); 30 from the Ashanti (15 each from rural and urban); and 10 from one urban centre in the Northern Region. Originally, we intended to interview 20 participants each from the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions; and 10 from the Northern region. Both regions are more populous than the Northern region. However, following our first round of data collections in the Ashanti region, we observed that we had inadvertently interviewed mainly male participants (this also explains why our sample includes more males than females). As such, a second round of interview was conducted in the Ashanti region to interview female participants. Participants' ages ranged between 20 and 70 years (Mean = 38.88; SD = 12.73); and included 39 males and 21 females. Thirty-six (36) participants were affiliated with Traditionally Western Mission Churches (TWMC) (namely: The Ghana Methodist Church; The Anglican Church, Ghana; Presbyterian Church of Ghana; and Catholic Church in Ghana); and 24 associated with

Charismatic churches (including Christian Action Faith International, Royal House Chapel International, International Central Gospel Church, Winners Chapel International, and Lighthouse Chapel International). Missionaries who introduced Christianity to then Gold Coast (now Ghana) from the 15<sup>th</sup> century established churches of various denominations. These churches became more established in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and they include the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican denominations (Amanor, 2009; Omenyo, 1994). Independent African-led churches comprising Pentecostal and Charismatic churches emerged in Ghana about 35 years ago (Gifford, 2004; Omenyo, 1994). The basis of participation in this current study was that a prospective participant was affiliated with a TWMC or charismatic church. Participants' level of education ranged between primary (basic) and tertiary education. Majority of the participants ( $n = 33$ ) were married, 24 were unmarried, 1 person each was divorced, separated, or widowed. Twenty-five (25) participants had no children of their own; but the remaining had between 1 to 7 children. Majority of the participants ( $n = 42$ ) were engaged in some form of paid employment. Table 1 has more information on the demographics of the participants.

### 2.3. Data collection

Ethical clearance was issued for the study by the Ethics Committee of the Humanities, University of Ghana (ECH 095/14-15). Interviews were conducted between July and November 2015, as part of a bigger research project exploring experiences with love, success, and relationships among TWMC and Charismatic Christians in Ghana. A semi-structured interview guide was used which allowed for follow-up questions. Questions relating to this portion of the study included: To you, what is success? In terms of your career, how would you describe success? In terms of your relationships, how would you describe success? Can you please share with me some of your success stories? What is your dream for the future? Other questions on love have been published elsewhere (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018).

### 2.4. Procedure

One research assistant, with a Bachelor's degree in psychology, conducted all the interviews. Preparatory training included completing the National Institute of Health (NIH) certification on working with human subjects. Participants were contacted at home, church, or public spaces. Individual interviews were conducted at places which allowed privacy and were conducive for audio recording. Before each interview, the research assistant explained the purpose of the study and obtained verbal consent. Next, the research assistant conducted a face-to-face interview with each participant using the interview questions above as a guide. Follow-up questions were asked as appropriate. All interviews were conducted in the English Language.

**Table 1.** Demographic details of participants.

Characteristic	Number of Participants
<i>Gender</i>	
Females	21
Males	39
<i>Age</i>	
20–29	14
30–39	22
40–49	12
50–59	7
60–69	3
>69	2
<i>Education</i>	
Primary/Basic Education	7
Secondary	19
Post-graduate Diploma	6
Tertiary	28
<i>Occupation</i>	
Formal sector workers	27
Informal sector workers	19
Students	7
Pensioners	4
Unemployed	2
No data	1

Source: Field data

Over 39 local languages are spoken in Ghana; but English is the formal language as part of Ghana's colonial legacy. Each interview was recorded digitally. At the end of the interview, the research assistant gave the equivalent of 1.50 Euros (6 Ghana Cedis) to the participant as a token of appreciation. Information about this token was contained in the consent form which was made available to all who indicated an interest in participating in the study.

### 2.4.1. Interview transcription

Two research assistants transcribed the interviews verbatim. In transcribing the audio files, emphasis was placed on what was said rather than the narrative styles. We also did not correct grammar.

## 2.5. Thematic analysis

Coding was done inductively following the thematic analysis processes outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three of the authors coded the data. First, a coding team

made up of two of the authors read the transcriptions and jointly generated a list of recurring codes. They then decided on a word that captured common codes (e.g. basic needs; material prosperity). Themes were agreed on based on consensus; and disagreements were addressed through discussions. Next, the third coder independently reviewed the codes and suggested broader themes. For example, similar codes such as ‘basic needs’ and ‘material prosperity’ were organized around the theme of ‘material dimensions of success.’ The independent coder also suggested additional codes where appropriate. For instance, the independent coder suggested that business ownership; house ownership, and car ownership should stand as independent codes. We used NVivo version 11 to facilitate the coding and analysis.

## 2.6. Credibility and trustworthiness

We used data triangulation which included the use of multiple sites and different categories of Christians. In terms of researcher trustworthiness and potential bias, the two-team coders have a clinical psychology background, and the third independent coder is a Ghanaian university professor trained in counseling psychology. In the reporting, we use thick descriptions of participant voices. To address transferability, multiple sites were used for instance, rural and urban as well as three regional areas viz southern, middle belt and savannah.

## 3. Results

We identified two major themes: Dimensions of success; and Pathways to success. Under dimensions of success we observed four major themes: (1) Social; (2) Material; (3) Educational; and (4) Religious. The pathways to success had 3 themes: (a) Divine blessings; (b) Adaptability; and (c) Striving. For the frequency of occurrence of each theme and sub-themes, see [Table 2](#). In the following paragraphs, we define the themes and their respective sub-themes.

### 3.1. Dimensions of success

#### 3.1.1. Social dimension

Majority of the participants (n = 43) talked about issues we classified under social dimension, which we defined as success that is tied to some social obligation, expectation, or motivation. The theme consists of sub-themes such as *Social Expectations*; *Social Recognition*; and *Helping the needy*. *Social Expectation* was endorsed by over a third (n = 26) of the participants in the study and refers to signals of success tied to being married; having one’s children; concerns about children’s future; and having good family relationships. The participants said that their ability to take care of their children and ensuring the children grow to be independent, educated, and fit into society are all indicators of success.

**Table 2.** Frequency of themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme <sup>a</sup>	Frequency <sup>b</sup>	No. of Participants <sup>c</sup> (N = 60)
<b>Social</b>		<b>62</b>	<b>42 (70.0)</b>
	Social expectation	30	26 (43.3)
	Recognition	12	10 (16.7)
	Helping	9	9 (15.0)
<b>Material</b>		<b>38</b>	<b>28 (46.7)</b>
	Basic needs	17	15 (25.0)
	Economic Independence	8	8 (13.3)
	Material prosperity	19	19 (31.7)
	House ownership	12	10 (16.7)
	Business ownership	11	9 (15.0)
	Car ownership	4	4 (6.7)
<b>Education</b>		<b>24</b>	<b>20 (33.3)</b>
	Career	3	3 (5.0)
	Educational status	18	17 (28.3)
	Aspirations for Higher Education	5	5 (8.3)
<b>Religious</b>		<b>25</b>	<b>18 (30.0)</b>
	Do God's will	11	8 (13.3)
	Relationship with God	5	4 (6.7)
	God's work	15	13 (21.7)
<b>Divine blessings</b>		<b>22</b>	<b>18 (30.0)</b>
<b>Striving</b>		<b>14</b>	<b>14 (23.3)</b>
<b>Adaptability</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>4 (6.7)</b>

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> The subthemes are not mutually exclusive as such they do not equal the frequencies in their respective main theme.

<sup>b</sup> Frequency describes number of observations.

<sup>c</sup> Describes number of people who talked about a theme.

*Being married with a family, being married with three kids I think that's a success (44 year old female).*

*I have to work hard, push my children. They too they'll become to [sic] somebody. If a place I didn't reach, they'll be there (40 year old male).*

A number of participants (n = 10) ascribed conspicuousness as an important attribute of success. According to them, success had to be visible, with markers such as positions of respect in society. We labelled this as *Social recognition*; and it can be attained through the acquisition of multiple assets; rising to a reputable social status (such as Member of Parliament; becoming a famous pastor or evangelist; international trader; and reaching the highest career position). Some participants also noted

that being *honoured* and *respected* in society are indications of success. One participant said that a person can achieve social recognition by sharing their assets for others to recognize that the giver is successful. In addition, some participants expressed their sense of pride in their current career positions.

*Your success have [sic] to be visible and tangible... You have to share. If you're able to share, it means you are there (30 year old male).*

*...my dream is to become on top, to be on top, in a position that I will be respected (23 year old male).*

Some participants ( $n = 9$ ) shared that success involved meeting some philanthropic goals such as building an orphanage; home for the elderly; or reaching some utopian ideals such as wishing for world peace, and equal access for all. A few participants stated that they would like to have disposable income for helping others who may be in need. We classified all these under the sub-theme *Helping the needy*.

*...to even set up... get a big land, build, take care of the elderly and the needy (46 year old female).*

*I pray that He [God] bless me to be a successful man on earth. Maybe... I mean bless me with so many things so I can help people around (27 year old male).*

### 3.1.2. Material dimension

Material success is defined as success that is directly related to acquisition of material wealth. Material success was the second most frequent theme and was reflected in close to half of the participants ( $n = 28$ ). It includes sub-themes as such: (i) Basic needs; (ii) Economic Independence; (iii) Material prosperity; (iv) House ownership; (v) Business ownership; and (vi) Car ownership (not in the order of their frequency). Some participants ( $n = 15$ ) related ability to meet basic needs (including, food, clothing, and shelter) to success. Others ( $n = 8$ ) said that success means more than meeting basic needs; it involves leading a comfortable life and not depending on others. We coded this as *Economic independence*. Further, a number of participants ( $n = 19$ ) indicated that success means the accumulation of material wealth, and we classified them under *Material prosperity*. This often included having unlimited resources or multiple assets (houses, properties, and money).

*If you feel you don't need anything in life; you're able to get your clothing, your shelter, mmm..., I think that is success in life (70 year old male).*

*...someone has worked for a long time and therefore has houses, families and a lot of properties so we see him as a successful person (55 year old male).*

Some participants ( $n = 10$ ) equated home ownership with success. Those who already owned house(s) stated that as one of their success stories; whilst those

who did not, indicated that building their own house would be a measure of success. Whilst most of these participants expressed satisfaction with having their own house as a signal of success, a few others stated that owning one house or a simple (two-bed room) house is not success. *Car ownership* was also cited as a sign of success. Some participants (n = 4) stated that owning a car, in addition to other material acquisitions, is a sign of success.

*I was able to buy my own car; I was able to get eh... put up my own building (70 year old male).*

*If you own a house, you're not successful. You have to get about 2 or 3 houses. If you own a car you are not successful. You have to get more than one (30 year old male).*

Another recurrent sub-theme related to *Business ownership*. A number of participants (n = 9) linked success with establishing and or expanding one's business. The businesses which were mentioned include schools; consultancy firms; and engaging in international trade.

*I do my own business, one two one two [pursuing other business opportunities], attached [to] my job [regular employment]. So I'm a successful man (40 year old male).*

*...I also wish to be an entrepreneur where I'll establish schools and then consultancies firms [sic] in my later life (35 year old male).*

### **3.1.3. Educational dimension**

Close to a third of participants (n = 20) related success to educational accomplishments such as completion of formal education; pursuance of higher education; and career-related advancements. Participants stated that their success stories included having attained their current educational level (ranging between completing basic to tertiary education) (n = 17); advancing to the highest level of education (including a master's degree and other unspecified educational goals) (n = 5); and meeting career goals (n = 3).

*...also acquiring a degree even though I'm not all that through but I know I will be through so I know it's also part of my success (30 year old female).*

*I was able to go to the training college, I was [sic] done. I was able to go to the university, I didn't know I'll go, but I've been able to make it. I wanted to even to end up... even if I'll die, I'll still end up as a lecturer (34 year old male).*

### **3.1.4. Religious dimension**

The religious dimension defines goals that are linked to religious tenets such as: (1) Doing God's will; (2) Relationship with God or Christ; and (3) Working for God. A

number of participants (n = 18) discussed issues classified under these sub-themes. Working for God (n = 13) includes building a temple; establishing a church; and becoming a pastor or an evangelist. Most of the participants who spoke about these were already in church roles such as pastors, evangelists, or church elders; but others aspired to take up these roles later in life. Other participants defined success in terms of fulfilling God's will (n = 8); or having a relationship with God or Christ (n = 4).

*...later after pension, I have to dedicate myself to God. Now I cannot go to evangelism because I will go to work (39 year old female).*

*... I want to be a great evange[elist]... prophet, a great prophet (31 year old male).*

### **3.1.5. Multi-dimensionality of success**

All the participants cited more than one dimension of success. Typically, they listed a number of things they counted as success.

*I have education, I have children, I have a husband, I have a job and above all, I have the One [God] who provides everything (59 year old female).*

*...my dream is to have my own house, car, my husband and children (21 year old female).*

*The successes I have chalked so far probably in the sphere of... erm... marriage, family, erm... relationships, erm... apart from that professionally, educationally, erm... I'm a biomedical scientist. Erm... I live a very portable life. Erm... at least I'm able to meet my basic needs (35 year old male).*

## **3.2. Pathways to success**

Participants described different ways to success, namely (1) *Divine blessings*; (2) *Striving*; and (3) *Adaptability*.

### **3.2.1. Divine blessings**

A number of participants (n = 18) focused on divine interventions in their success stories. Some said they prayed for success; others said that they have been successful because of God's will or blessings.

*I think my success story has to also do with the way God promoted me because the Bible says promotion cometh from above and not from any human being, so when I joined my job I was the least officer I will say the whole of Ghana, so I have worked under people but now they are working under me either here or somewhere and it all happened not by my might or my power but it is about God's promotion so I think it's worth sharing (45 year old male).*

### 3.2.2. *Striving*

Striving encapsulates the notion that success is achieved by overcoming difficult situations and barriers. Specifically, some participants ( $n = 14$ ) related the challenges they faced in their education, in their attempts to start their own business, career-related barriers, and home-work, or home-school conflicts.

*For me I was not fortunate to go to the senior high school. I had to sacrifice myself for my junior sister so that she can go and by the grace of God my sacrifice was not in vain... yeah so for me [it] is a success in its self and then personally going to the fashion designing school I didn't have the hope of going through because the means was not there [there was no money] but by the grace of God I was able to go and also finished (29 year old female).*

### 3.2.3. *Adaptability*

This theme overlaps with the previous category. However, we retained it because it highlights how people use determination, networking, and being open to opportunities, in their attempt to become successful. A few participants ( $n = 4$ ) talked about this.

*I will say that one of my success stories is taking opportunity... I was trained to be a natural... a renewable natural resource person. That's what I graduated with, with a degree in renewable natural resources. You see, then I... because of the ministry work I entered into teaching as a lay person so that whilst I teach, I do my pastoral work, okay. But every opportunity that came my way in the teaching field I used it, I didn't say that oh I'm a renewable natural resources person so what has that one got to do with teaching? (39 year old male).*

A few participants ( $n = 3$ ) talked about their or other's use of get-rich-quick schemes or cheating to become successful. We did not give it an organizing theme name because it was mentioned by a few participants.

*...there are so many channels for you to be successful. But we have to make sure we choose the right channel. Now people are going for they say something called sakawa [get-rich-quick schemes] to be successful. People are duping people to be successful, which I think Biblically, morally, it's wrong (35 year old male).*

## 4. Discussion

We explored meanings of success in the context of contemporary social developments in Ghana. Participants who were of TWMC and Charismatic Christian backgrounds were purposely sampled from rural and urban areas in three regions of Ghana and interviewed on what success means to them. Findings revealed four

dimensions of success: (1) Social; (2) Material; (3) Educational and; (4) Religious. We also found 3 pathways to success including: (i) Divine blessings; (ii) Striving; and (iii) Adaptability. These findings expand on previous studies and also reveal new findings of social and academic importance.

#### 4.1. Ghanaian definition of success

Meanings of success were influenced by the social, economic, and religious realities in Ghana. The findings from this study have revealed that contemporary social developments in Ghana provide frameworks for conceptualization of success. These findings allow us to define success, at this time and in the current Ghanaian context, as ‘personal expectations about social, material, educational, and religious domains of life that can be achieved through divine and personal effort (striving, being adaptable).’ People think about success as the extent to which one’s life meets societal expectation (about marriage, children; physical property; wealth). Outcomes of success are always visible; and any sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, or fulfilment is associated with a social or visible marker. Success is defined not by internal markers (such as inner satisfaction) but by external markers. Further, success needs to be visible and tangible and needs to be socially endorsed. The findings reaffirm the notion that in collectivistic cultures success is driven by the achievement of societal markers.

#### 4.2. Perceived sources of success

The social, material, and educational dimensions found in this study are similar to those that have been described by previous studies. Studies by [Van der Geest \(1997\)](#), [Fallon \(1999\)](#), and [Laube \(2015\)](#), all reported that people in Ghana described a successful life or a successful person in social and material terms. [Laube’s \(2015\)](#) study also reported some aspect of education in the aspirations of youth in rural Northern Ghana; and [Van der Geest \(1997\)](#) reports about level of children’s education as a sign of success for the elderly. However, the religious dimension of success is a unique finding. In addition, the four dimensions of success identified in this study are different from that recorded in the life success scale developed by [Parker and Chusmir \(1992\)](#). Parker and Chusmir categorized family relationships and contribution as separate dimensions. We found both of these meanings of success, but we coded these two facets under the social domain because family relations and social contributions have high social desirability in most Ghanaian cultures. As such, they are more social than personal. We did not find fulfilment (or inner satisfaction) and security as domains in our dimension of success. One participant mentioned contentment, but it was not exclusively internal. A few others mentioned fulfilment or accomplishment but they linked it to something visible (completing school or a project) and socially acceptable not an inner experience. Further, this study found religious dimensions of success; but Parker and Chusmir’s scale did

not include religious dimensions. [Brimeyer \(2008\)](#) however, observed that in some American settings, people give individual, structural, and divine explanations for success and poverty.

The social dimension of success found in this study encompasses meeting societal and personal expectations for marriage, children, as well as the need for social recognition, and contributing to society (by helping the needy). The meanings attached to marriage and children reflect the fact that the marriage institution, as well as value of children remains very important in Ghana – both men and women in Ghanaian context derive their social status from being married and having children. Indeed, [Assimeng \(1999\)](#) argues that within the Ghanaian context ‘it is only when a person is married that he or she is taken seriously in social deliberations’ (pg. 79). Further, in most Ghanaian societies, social position is an important indicator of one’s worth ([Van der Geest, 1997](#)). An individual can enhance their social worth by contributing to the welfare of others in society. According to [Gyekye \(1996\)](#), such contributions underpin and guide social relationships.

The material dimensions of success found in this study were focused on meeting basic needs, economic independence, and material wealth. Specifically, participants talked about having food, clothing, shelter, owning a house or houses, business and car as signals of success. The need for food, clothing, and shelter are basic needs consistent with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs ([1968](#)) and the lower-middle economy status of the country. The findings also show that conceptions of success may be different in the context of developing economies, such as Ghana, as compared to what would inform conceptions of success in a ‘first’ world perspective. In Ghana, meeting needs is difficult and as such people consider it a success if they are able to meet their basic needs ([Ghana Statistical Service, 2014](#)). [Laube \(2015\)](#) reported that individuals want to become financially independent and have enough to cater for their basic needs. The findings from this study shows that some people have moved past the struggle for basic needs and can thus aim for abundant wealth. It is important to note that access to material wealth often gives people access to power and increase in social status ([De Witte, 2003](#)). The desire for houses and cars as well as the importance of owning a business reflects some of the social and economic changes taking place in Ghana.

The dimension of educational attainment reflects on the fact that the educational sector is one of the most promising developments in the country. The sector seems promising; giving people hope of getting out of extreme poverty. As [Asafu-Adjaye \(2012\)](#) observed, education increases people’s employability in Ghana. People who have higher educational qualifications can have better wages and they can also have the extra benefits of meeting their material needs and aim to establish their social status in society. Another interesting finding relates to the dimensions of religious and inner satisfaction. The religious dimension highlights the impact of contemporary

Ghanaian Christianity on meanings of success. The aspirations about church work demonstrate how (religious) leadership is a new form of success. Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity has created a new avenue or source of social status. [Lauterbach \(2010\)](#) found similar religious aspirations in youth who were engaged with independent Pentecostal churches in the Ashanti Region of Ghana.

#### **4.2.1. Routes to success**

The three pathways to success observed in the study—divine, striving, and being adaptable—reflect the socio-religious context which the participants are engaged with. The idea that success is of a divine origin is embedded in the teaching of contemporary Ghanaian Christianity. Words such as success, advancement, prosperity, and increase are prominent in modern church discourse in Ghana ([Gifford, 2004](#); [Meyer, 2004](#); [Lauterbach, 2010](#)). Although the prosperity gospel—which challenges contemporary Christians to apply the principles of wisdom, negotiation, hard work and perception choices to succeed in life—is often associated with Charismatic Christianity, it has gained some acceptance in TWMC Christianity ([Asamoah-Gyadu, 2012](#)). In addition, most Ghanaian societies have appreciation for hard work ([Gyekye, 1996](#)). A recent study by [Asumeng and Assan \(2015\)](#) among corporate managers in Ghana found hard work as an important facet for defining career success and progression. Striving reflects some of the constraints typical of living in Ghana. Thus far, we can answer the research question by saying that current social developments in religious spaces in Ghana influence constructions of success.

### **4.3. Implications**

#### **4.3.1. Social implications**

The findings demonstrate that success is socially constructed; and that in Ghana, social endorsement is critical in framing what success is. These conceptions of success have important implications on formation and maintenance of social attitudes ([Forgas et al., 1988](#)). The constructions of success may influence attitudes towards family life, work, and other relationships. The emphasis on external markers of success might impact life choices in Ghana. For example, decisions about marriage and child-bearing will be greatly influenced by societal expectations. The social desirability of the social dimensions can have effects on well-being. For instance, how would society view someone who has attained in the material, educational, and religious but not the social domain? The perceived ways of success may also influence work attitudes. Also, the gender differences (such as the fact that females neither focused on their career advancement nor financial independence) is worthy of note. Is this possibly linked to the fact that women's success have not expanded beyond the scope of family obligations?

### 4.3.2. Policy implications

It is noteworthy that most of the participants in this study identified attaining basic necessities as signs of success. However, available data show that majority of Ghanaians are struggling along most of the dimensions of success identified (Gallup, 2014). It is, therefore, not surprising when they feel that success should come from a divine origin; and that they need to strive in every aspect of life. To help minimize some of the constraints, social interventions programs such as LEAP; School Feeding Program; LIPW need to be strengthened to ensure that people meet their basic human needs for clothing, food, and shelter. In the area of education, government efforts at introducing Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) should also be strengthened so that people who might feel unsuccessful due to lack of education can attain some measure of success through their education. Scholarship schemes and individual trusts should also be established to satisfy the needs of those who aspire to higher education.

### 4.3.3. Implications for counselling

The constructions of success have important implications for emotional well-being, as well as career implications (Ross, 1990). People who are able to meet the dimensions will no doubt have positive emotional well-being; whereas others who struggle to meet any of the needs may have poor emotional well-being. It may be useful to discuss how these conceptions of success influence career and life choices and discuss culturally relevant paths to reaching these successes in counselling. Ross (1990) notes that belief in God's determination of success may be a source of distress leading to faith crisis. However, we saw that in this study the attribution to God was not purely external where people left everything to God. Rather, people often talked about striving or being adaptable; even when they talked about divine intervention. This suggests that there is a dual focus on how success can be attained which may serve as a support and thus override possible negative effects that an overreliance on a divine source of success might occasion. Given that measures of success focus on social and external markers, it is possible for people to also feel pressured where they are not able to meet these tangible social markers or they feel that their achievements are not being socially endorsed. These issues can be considered in counselling. Assessment of life satisfaction, life success, and career success among Ghanaians may have to include items that assess the perceived role of God and striving, two of the key perceived routes to success.

## 4.4. Limitations and future research directions

The limitation of the study is that the sample is not representative of all Christians in Ghana nor is it of all Ghanaians. Notwithstanding, we think the findings have merit. Researchers who intend to use life success scale in Ghanaian samples have to include

items that assess social and religious meanings of success. Alternatively, it would be expedient to re-create a scale of success that would accommodate the contextual differences in the conceptualization of success found among this Ghanaian sample. Furthermore, it is also important to explore the role of intrinsic sources of success in Ghanaians. The current study did not find internal markers as signals of success. The question is: are internal markers not important in the construction of success; or there should be other methods to capture these? Studies can also explore the extent to which people feel fulfilled on all the four dimensions of success identified in this study.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has successfully demonstrated that contemporary social realities in Ghana colour social constructions of success. We found general dimensions of success include social, material, education, and religious; and found perceived routes to success include divine, striving, and being adaptable. We suggest that other studies replicate ours to ascertain the generalizability of our findings.

### 5.1. Recommendations

From the above, we recommend that churches take advantage of the multiple meanings of success and teach their congregants to work hard even as they aspire for divine help in attaining success. The *other-reference* for success in which participants aspire for success so as to be of help to others should also be encouraged. Success should go beyond just acquiring multiple assets to creating lasting trust funds and other philanthropic activities for others in need.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

Annabella Osei-Tutu: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Vivian Dzokoto, Glenn Adams: Conceived and designed the experiments; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data.

Katja Hanke: Conceived and designed the experiments.

Charlotte Kwakye-Nuako: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Francis Adu-Mensa: Performed the experiments.

Rita Appiah-Danquah: Analyzed and interpreted the data.

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## Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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