

Effects of Family Structure on Materialism and Compulsive Consumption: A Life Course Study in Brazil

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ABSTRACT:

Previous studies assume that stress created by changes in family structure plays a role in the development of materialism and compulsive consumption tendencies of youths. The present study provides additional and alternative explanations as possible causal mechanisms; it suggests that social processes account for these consumption orientations among young Brazilians. The parent-child communication styles that are fostered in disrupted families due to depletion of tangible and intangible resources promote the importance of material possessions, while peer influences during adolescent years are positively associated with the impulse-control dimension of compulsive buying in early adulthood. Peers appear to influence the two consumption orientations regardless of the family structure and processes in which the young person is embedded, while television viewing during adolescent years is associated with compulsive consumption tendencies in early adulthood.

Compulsive consumption and materialism have become topics of interest to researchers globally because these consumption orientations tend to have negative consequences on consumers and their families. These consumption orientations are believed to result in depression, unmanageable debt, and lower satisfaction with life in general. Given the known adverse consequences of compulsive buying, social workers and professionals in the field of family finance management need to understand the reasons consumers develop materialistic values and compulsive buying tendencies if they are to help consumers avoid and treat such buying tendencies.

The present research is based on the premise that compulsive buying and materialistic tendencies are rooted in childhood experiences. Specifically, our study assumes that family adversities experienced during formative years contribute to the development of such consumption orientations exhibited in adulthood years. It examines how the person's experience of disruptive family events, such as marital discord, parents' divorce or separation, affects parenting practices and generally the way the child is brought up. To test this assumption, we asked 177 students attending a Brazilian university fill out anonymous surveys in class.

The Life Course Paradigm

The life course paradigm, which is considered “one of the most important achievements of social science in the second half of the 20th century” (Colby 1998, p. *x*) and is widely used internationally and across disciplines (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe 2003), has flourished in recent decades as a framework that extends across substantive and theoretical boundaries of

the social and behavioral sciences (e.g., Elder et al. 2003). It suggests that behavior cannot be studied in isolation from one's experiences or expectations; rather it is embedded within circumstances one has experienced and anticipates at different stages in life. This framework views behavior at any stage in life or given point in time as product of responses to earlier life conditions, including cultural settings, and the way the individual or other units have adapted to these circumstances (e.g., Mayer & Tuma 1990).

The elements of the life course paradigm can be classified into three broad categories: events and circumstances that are experienced at a specific point in time in the person's life course, processes triggered by these events, and outcomes that occur at later points in time which are the consequence or outcome of these processes and earlier in-time-occurred events. The life course paradigm suggests that changing life conditions in the form of life events experienced create physical, social, and emotional demands and circumstances to which one must adapt. Patterns of thought and action at a given stage in life may be viewed as outcomes of a person's adaptation to various demands and circumstances experienced earlier in life, with adaptation entailing the processes of (a) stress and coping responses, (b) socialization, and (c) development or growth and decline. These processes, triggered by earlier-in-life events and moderated by contextual factors (e.g., culture), are the underlying change mechanisms of the three most widely-accepted life course perspectives: *stress*, *normative*, and *human capital*, respectively (Moschis 2007).

Findings

The study shows that the experience of disruptive family events during adolescent years creates stress and depletes parental support provided to adolescents. Specifically, the results of the present study suggest that family disruptions deplete tangible and intangible parental resources that, in turn, affect parent-child interactions. Further, our study suggests that the socio-oriented family communication environment that stresses conformity to social norms and the importance of judging others as persons based on their consumption habits promotes the importance of symbolic consumption and leads to the development of materialistic values.

While family disruptions are not directly associated with compulsive consumer tendencies in young adulthood, our data suggest that the development of materialistic values can be the result of stress experienced due to family disruptions, and materialistic values may lead to the development of compulsive buying tendencies.

Implications

The study findings have implications for those concerned with public education and consumer welfare. They point to the groups of young consumers who appear to be at risk of developing undesirable consumption tendencies, either because of economic hardship experienced as a result of lower or degraded SES, or due to less effective socialization practices parents of disrupted families tend to adopt. Minority youths, female in particular, and youths from socioeconomically disadvantaged families might be the most vulnerable groups. Thus, education and intervention programs should be designed for parents and

children. Adult education programs designed for groups at risk and disrupted families should make these consumer groups aware of the parenting and communication styles that may promote and deter the development of materialistic tendencies in their children. Specifically, parents experiencing disruptive events such as divorce and separation should be sensitized to the stressful effects of these events on their children; they should be encouraged to continue providing the same level of emotional support. Single parents in particular should be informed that their need for tighter supervision of their children using coercive strategies to monitor their behavior and disciplining them more harshly is likely to affect their children's perception that their parents are less supportive. Such parenting strategies could affect the parent's communication style with the child and promote the socio-oriented style, which emphasizes conformity to authority rather than self-expression; it does not promote independence and self-direction that promotes early cognitive development. Parents in disrupted families and vulnerable groups should not provide material support in the form of money or credit cards as a substitute for emotional support, and they should attempt to socialize their children in making proper use of money available to them. Because previous studies show that compulsive buying tendencies appear to be fostered among youths that have access to money, recent technological innovations (e.g., the Internet) gives youths an easy access to a wide array of products and services. Therefore, parents should try to teach their children money management skills at a young age.

References

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