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Materialism and You

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ABSTRACT

Materialism -- the belief that possessions will bring happiness -- is regarded by most people as something negative. Yet many people who believe this are themselves highly materialistic. This article is not meant to recommend an alternative to materialism. It is instead meant to be a review of what we have learned about materialistic behavior. Is materialism good or bad? Are there different types of materialism that may be more good or less bad? Is materialism confined to the more affluent consumers of the world? These are the major questions I try to address. I conclude with a consideration of gift-giving and materialism, focusing on Christmas gifts.

ARTICLE

I recently attended a workshop hosted by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi on "Positive Psychology." Its purpose was to find benign alternatives to materialism. Positive psychology, like positive sociology, recognizes that abnormal psychology may help some people with what we have constructed as pathological behavior, but does little to help the rest of us who are pleased to regard ourselves as "normal." However if normal is taken to mean common or average behavior, then materialism is normal behavior for many of us, even though most of us would deny this vehemently and maintain that materialism is "bad." So this workshop, combining the members of four smaller small group meetings held over the past year, was designed to forge a research agenda that would help average people find happier, healthier alternatives to their materialism, even though they likely don't see their present material lifestyles as problematic. Unfortunately, despite the

concerted efforts of some very bright and caring participants, nothing very promising came of the workshop.

Although various interest groups were formed at the conclusion of the meeting, the researchers were almost all psychologists who found it impossible to think beyond laboratory experimental approaches and perhaps some intervention strategies to try to gently persuade people that there are non-materialistic lifestyles that are rewarding. When I suggested that it might be helpful to examine how materialism emerged historically, how it emerges in developing economies, and how materialistic and non-materialistic children differ in their development, I was informed that those present were not historians or anthropologists and that the study of developmental factors in children's altruism accounted for only a small proportion of the variance. Marty Seligman, one of the principles in the positivist psychology movement, suggested that the study of developmental factors could only be valid in research with paired twins raised in different environments. These views show the strong biases of psychology toward experimental methods coupled with a "willing suspension of disbelief" that basing these findings primarily on American undergraduate psychology students might limit the relevance of the findings of psychological studies (Fish 2000, p. 553).

Despite the intellectual and creative power represented in the workshop and the benign guidance of Mike Cskiszentmihalyi, I found it an altogether frustrating and discouraging experience. Perhaps it is the overwhelming presence of materialism and consumer culture in the contemporary United States that made us so impotent in envisioning alternatives. Perhaps materialism is more of a cultural problem than an individual problem (the individual is another lens through which psychology frames problems). While we all agreed that voluntary simplicity and downshifting would never become mainstream movements without some calamity precipitating a rationale for such "sacrifice," we could not agree on an alternative that would truly seem to be positive rather than sacrificial. Perhaps global warming and environmental degradation will get to the calamity stage and force sacrificial lifestyles upon us. Perhaps, as Twitchell (1999) suggests, we are really not materialistic **enough**, as evidenced by how quickly we discard one possession in order to pursue something newer and more glittering. I offer no real solutions in the present review. Rather, I summarize what we know about materialism so that perhaps we may be more inclined to step back and ask how rewarding our material lives are and whether there are alternatives that we might individually or societally wish to explore.

Stuff

Materialism has been defined as the importance a person attaches to material possessions and the belief that certain possessions are the primary source of happiness (Belk 1985). It has been envisioned as being composed of acquisitiveness, possessiveness, and envy (Belk 1985; Ger and Belk 1996a add a preservation dimension) or beliefs in possessions as being signs of success, as being central to life, and as bringing happiness (Richins and Dawson 1992). In order to invest such importance in objects, we must first come to believe that whether or not we possess certain material stuff is a significant source of well-being and identity. The stuff that best captures our desires is usually that which we regard as a luxury that not everyone can possess. Materialism involves a belief that those who own coveted luxuries are happier than those who do not. Gold was once the chief luxury object of consumer longing (before it became instrumental money), and was used to signify wealth and power (Bernstein 2000). Thus the ancient Jews could create a golden calf to worship, but could not use gold to buy their way out of slavery. Most gold in ancient times was owned by monarchs and priests, but some also became jewelry signaling the eminence of those wearing such adornments.

Gold is a special type of luxury because it has retained its luxury status for thousands of years. Most of the stuff we covet moves from the category of luxury to necessity as soon as a large number of people have access to it (in which case it looses both its mystical fascination and its ability to signal status). Luxury is also a category that usually involves increasing refinement of objects (Berry 1994). Thus printing, lithography, and other techniques to cheaply reproduce artwork have not made art into a necessity, but they have resulted in taste refinements whereby only originals, highly limited editions, old masters, and specific artists esteemed by culture brokers have attained the rarified status of coveted works of art. Likewise "costume jewelry" has not lessened the value of rare jewels, but it has caused us to be more discriminating and so that we judge a Rolex as more precious and desirable than a Timex.

Marketers have become very adept at creating new luxuries through creating fashions, intentionally limiting supplies, setting high "skimming" prices for new innovations, producing serial collectibles, as well as by making claims of new and improved technologies. Today we are hardly at a loss for luxuries and it seems as if we are possessed by "luxury fever" (Frank 1999). But this is not a new phenomenon. During the Seventeenth Century when new wealth poured into the Netherlands, driven by its command of the seas, the most coveted luxuries were rare tulip bulbs recently imported from Turkey (Mackay 1932; Moggach 1999). The mania got to the

point that in order to acquire a single rare bulb, one farmer traded "two *last* of wheat and four of rye, four fat oxen, eight pigs, a dozen sheep, two oxheads of wine, four tons of butter, a thousand pounds of cheese, a bed, some clothing, and a silver beaker" (Schama 1987, p. 358). And inasmuch as tulip mania emerged largely without marketing activity, it suggests that we ourselves are often willing participants in stimulating our desires (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2000; Belk forthcoming).

Effects

Whether it is a new pair of shoes, a vacation cottage, a BMW, a meal at a special restaurant, a certain CD, a large screen TV, a new computer, or some other luxury that we have set our fancies on, few of us have any difficulty thinking of objects we fervently desire to own. This may not be altogether bad. Desire is a source of hope for a better future. Our desire for such stuff may motivate us to work harder and achieve more. Working hard for these objects of desire may help us feel that we deserve them and we may come to regard them as fitting rewards. Having the things that admired peers have may help us and our children feel better about ourselves. By possessing certain brands like a Macintosh computer or a Saab automobile, we may come to feel that we are part of a brand community with which we identify (Boorstin 1973; Muniz and O'Guinn forthcoming). And regardless of what people may say, we do tend to judge others based on what they own (Dittmar 1992). But what we are saying through such observations is that consumption is not inherently **bad**, **not** that materialism is inherently **good**. Remember that materialism is the belief that material goods are the chief source of happiness or unhappiness in life. It is not the act of consuming things, but the way that we regard such consumption. Consumption may have its problems, especially when it depletes the environment, exploits others, or possessions get to be burdensome (Csikszentmihalyi 2000). But materialism goes beyond mere consumption and implies excessive, perhaps obsessive, and more than likely overly expectant consumer desire. As these adjectives imply, materialism is something we generally regard as negative (see Wuthnow 1994; Schor 1998). It is a misguided belief that happiness lies in having more things (Campbell 1987).

This is not just a popular impression. Studies attempting to measure how materialistic different people are consistently show that more materialistic people are not as happy and satisfied with their lives as less materialistic people (e.g., Belk 1984, 1985; Richins 1987; Richins and Dawson 1992). It can't be said for certain whether materialism causes unhappiness or whether unhappy people turn to materialism as a source of hope. Csikszentmihalyi

and Rochberg-Halton (1981) distinguish between instrumental materialism (desiring objects because of the things they help us do) and terminal materialism (desiring objects for themselves). They suggest that while terminal materialism is negatively related to happiness, instrumental materialism can be positively related to happiness. When Twitchell (1999) suggests that we may not be materialistic enough he is using materialism to mean attachment to possessions (possessiveness) rather than desire for possessions (acquisitiveness) or resentment at others' possessions (envy). Commonly however, materialism is regarded by researchers as something that is negative and misguided (e.g., Fournier and Guiry 1994). Consumers share this impression. Güliz Ger and I (Ger and Belk 1999) found that the consumers we interviewed in the U.S., Turkey, Romania, and Western Europe overwhelmingly regarded materialism as something negative. Ironically however, they almost all engaged in consumption practices that appear quite materialistic. Rather than label themselves as materialists, they account for their own consumption attitudes by employing various justifications and excuses that tend to differ according to the culture. Americans are apt to justify our consumption on the basis of deservingness; we have worked hard and deserve to enjoy a few of the good things in life. Turks are more apt to excuse their consumption behavior by saying that it isn't so much for them as it is for their children and other family members. Romanians make comparisons to the rest of the world and their own experiences under communism and use their relative deprivation as an excuse. And Western Europeans tend to say that it is Americans who are the crass materialists because we lack the knowledge of how to spend money. They (Western Europeans) themselves have taste and know how to spend money on worthwhile things like travel, dining, art, and music. This, they argue, is not materialism but proper spending.

What is wrong with materialism? We should be careful in answering this question not to jump to easy, but superficial, condemnations that it is dissipating, weak, naïve, childish, or stupid. These are the sorts of answers that the Spartans of ancient Greece were likely to give, but these characterizations were judgments given in order to make an austere military life seem more honorable. Likewise we should be careful not to condemn materialism on elitist grounds as being a shallow, crude, bourgeois fascination with kitsch. This is the sort of criticism used to justify a feeling of superiority that my materialism is good while yours is bad. And we should not be too quick to say that materialism is bad because it leads to behavior that is indulgent, selfish, hedonistic, and vain. While there may seem to be some truth to these claims, they involve cultural judgments and may err too far in the direction of puritanical condemnation of things that bring pleasure. In this regard Marty

(1999) recounts a telling Hasidic tale:

A world-denying Jew heard the call to asceticism. He thought it a part of the commandments that he must do without good food, good wine, and the company of good women and friends in general. He took no place at their festive tables; he heard no good music and did without great art. All this he did with an eye on the promise of paradise for the renouncer. He died. He did indeed find himself in paradise. But three days later, they threw him out because he understood nothing of what was going on (p. 184).

This echoes discussions of the golden or harmonic mean that go back to the ancient Greeks at least. The idea is that there is a happy medium between the desire to spend and consume (materialism) on one hand, and the desire to deny ourselves material gratification (asceticism) on the other hand. Money is a powerful symbol and few of us regard it in merely a utilitarian way (e.g., Boundy 1993; Buchan 1997; Crawford 1994; Goldberg and Lewis 1978). These days we are more willing to talk about our sex lives than to reveal our income and financial resources. But let's restrict our discussion to materialism.

One problem with materialism is that it may become addictive, compulsive, or mindless. Compulsive buying in which, like compulsive hand washing, we temporarily reduce anxiety without gaining any real pleasure, is one illustration (O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Benson 2000). Collectors can also become obsessive in their behavior (Belk 1995), which in one interpretation is a futile attempt to make up for a felt lack of security and love during childhood (Muensterberger 1994). One characteristic of addictions is a tendency to narrow sources of pleasure-seeking to a smaller and smaller number of sources. Thus, the materialist who becomes compulsive or obsessive tends to narrow his or her activities to those involving acquiring possessions and also tends to withdraw from participation in family, friendships, and broader community. Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) and Richins (1994) find that those who are high in materialism tend to value possessions for their prestige value, while those low in materialism instead value possessions for the friends and family members with whom they are associated (e.g., gifts) or for their spiritual significance. Likewise Doyle (1999) finds that those he labels drivers or acquisitive people tend to be at the opposite end of the spectrum from those he labels amiables or affiliative people. Furthermore, an excessive focus on material and financial well-being tends to result in a self defined by what we have rather than what we are able to do (Belk 1988a; Kasser and Ryan 1993). As Erich Fromm (1976) once asked, "If I am what I have, and what I have is lost, who then am I?"

So far, these negatives about materialism are all at the individual level. But there are also family and societal consequences of materialism. Religions have long opposed materialism on the grounds that avarice and greed oppose altruism and charity. It leads people "to squander on useless superfluities what ought to be given to the poor" (Berry 1994, p. 224). Because materialists tend to gain self esteem only when they gain relative to others (Easterlin 1973; Wachtel 1989), a society of general anonymity and materialism can result in ruthless competition to see who can consume the most conspicuously (Doyle 1999). Since others are doing the same, no one gains status and those left out experience greater frustration as the gap between haves and have-nots increases. Furthermore, by emphasizing private consumption over public consumption and participation in a civil society, we become more alienated and isolated from our communities (Cross 2000; Putnam 2000).

Who Are the Materialists?

If this talk about civil society sounds like materialism is purely an adult problem, research with children and families suggests otherwise. In Australia, Wilson (1999) finds that a large incentive for parents to become more materialistic comes from children. Colleagues and I found a high degree of concern with consumer goods and an ability to understand the status implications of different brands among children as young as 8 in the United States (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Belk, Mayer, and Driscoll 1984). Orr (1999) reports that American children can identify more than a thousand corporate logos and only a dozen or so plants and animals native to their region. This is a reflection, in part, of the brand-driven world in which we find ourselves (Klein 1999; Pavitt 2000). But it is also a reflection of our apparently increasing levels of materialism.

We might expect that materialism is a phenomenon of affluence and that poorer people and poorer nations are largely exempt. Such an expectation is quite mistaken however. Güliz Ger and I (1996) found that out of a dozen countries around the world in the early 1990s, two of the top four in levels of materialism were Romania and Ukraine, both of which are not only poor by world standards, but also recently communist. Granted the other two countries in the top four were the U.S. and New Zealand, but all Western European countries were either near the middle or in the bottom half in terms of materialism. In developing countries there are two additional detrimental effects of materialism. One is what it does to widen the gap between the consumption of the rich and the poor. The other detriment is the increased tendency to sacrifice "necessities" like food and health care in order to afford "luxuries" like televisions and

refrigerators (which ironically then cannot be stocked with food because there is no money left - Belk 1988b, 1997, Ger and Belk 1996b).

Solutions?

What then might be done to reduce the level of materialism in the world today? As I write this I have just experienced another materialistic American Christmas - the holiday Marling (2000, p. 163) calls "a joyous ceremony of sanctified greed." In the past I have also experienced Christmas in a half dozen other countries and realize that the U.S. is not alone in its materialistic secular Christmas celebration. Hong Kong and Singapore, for example, have grander Christmas decorations than any American city I have seen (see http://www.business.utah.edu/~mktrwb/XMAS.HTM). A volume edited by Daniel Miller (1993) suggests that Christmas may be emerging as the world's first global consumer holiday. This holiday season I monitored an on-line month-long discussion on "Simplifying the Holidays," sponsored by the Center for the New American Dream (see http://www.newdream.org/discuss/archive.html). I found the discussion (in which I only lurked and did not directly participate) enlightening regarding the problems of materialism in the United States. Keep in mind that the participants were mostly highly educated people from privileged backgrounds who joined the discussion because they were looking for simple living alternatives to complex materialistic consumption. The alternatives they shared and discussed are not likely to be as appealing to those from less privileged backgrounds and those with a more materialistic bent. It is also important to remember that Christmas today is thought of as a time for gathering together as a family, feasting, and exchanging gifts. While this might not seem to be the epitome of materialism, many people think that it has become so (e.g., see Belk 1987; Miller 1993; Nissenbaum 1996; Schmidt 1995; Waits 1993).

Suggestions on the Simplifying the Holiday forum that I find relatively more feasible for reducing materialism include the following. Don't make gift-giving a competition with other givers and don't necessarily strive to make the celebration of the holiday bigger and more splendid than last year. This helps avoid an ever-upward spiral of giving. Don't equate the cost of the gift with the amount of love it conveys. Give edible gifts that won't clutter up a person's home or sit in a corner collecting dust. Give gifts that mean a lot rather than gifts that cost a lot (photos are one example). Give a non-material gift of service (e.g., washing the recipient's car, baby sitting, mowing their lawn). Pick someone needy outside of the normal gift-giving circle and give gifts (ideally anonymously) to them rather than to each other. Make re-usable

cloth gift bags rather than throwaway wrapping paper and trimmings.

Suggestions from the same forum that, for varying reasons, I find less workable include some that may initially sound feasible. A number of these are unfeasible, I feel, because they deny the characteristics of an ideal gift that it involve an extraordinary sacrifice, that the giver wishes solely to please the recipient, that the gift is a luxury, that the gift is uniquely appropriate to the giver, that the recipient is surprised by the gift, and that the recipient desires the gift and is delighted by it (Belk 1996). Thus for example giving children gifts of needed socks and underwear seems to fly in the face of the spirit of gift-giving. Giving people books about sustainable consumption similarly seems a bit too pragmatic rather than magical. Like donating to a favorite charity of the giver in the name of the recipient, it may also reflect the giver's desires more than those of the recipient's. And giving the recipient money so he or she can select a gift that better matches desires, makes gift-giving a rational economic exercise rather than an emotional expression of love and caring. Likewise, telling givers what you want and requesting that they stop giving you junk you will never use is a bit too self-serving and unromantic. And perhaps the worst suggestion I encountered is to spend the money that would otherwise be spent on gifts to others on gifts to self, so that all the waste of poor or inadequate gifts will be eliminated. This "solution" recommends egoism over altruism.

There were also a few suggestions on the Simplifying the Holiday forum that I am uncertain about. They may or may not work. For example, instead of giving gifts, pool the money that would otherwise be spent and donate it to a charity that participants jointly choose. Maybe I'm too steeped in gift-giving traditions and nostalgic about childhood, but I fear this may not work well with young children who have previously learned to look forward to gifts at Christmastime. Another suggestion is to hand-make gifts, cards, and wrappings. For some people this may be a good alternative, but for others it may use more resources, cost more, and result in an altogether shabbier gift than store-bought alternatives. Suggestions for calling a gift moratorium seem likely to work only if everyone in a gift-giving group agrees to it and those involved find some other way to express their love and support for one another. This appeared highly problematic in the discussions on the forum; it seemed that some family member was almost certain to object. Drawing names from a hat and only giving a gift to this one person may work, but in a large group these gifts are likely to so poorly reflect the recipient's desires that I wonder if it is worth the bother. Another suggestion that I am unsure about is to e-mail Christmas

greetings rather than waste paper and postage on a card. This seems a bit too easy as well as a bit too ephemeral. Maybe this will become the norm, but I am a bit wary of this one too.

Conclusion

As I look over the suggestions culled from the Simplify the Holidays forum, I realize that the list of what I think might work is shorter than the lists of what I fear will not work, or what I am somewhat doubtful about. The length of the lists means less than the merit of the ideas however. As an illustration of the power of Christmas gift-giving in socializing children to materialism, one discussion participant recounted four Christmases with her niece, Emily. In the child's first year, she ignored gifts entirely. In her second year, Emily was more interested in the wrapping paper than the gifts, but the relatives oohed and ahhed each object she opened. In her third year she began to be pretty interested in the gifts and continued to be reinforced by relatives who emphasized that she must be a very good girl for Santa to have brought such gifts. In her fourth year, Emily began to beg to open gifts before dinner and continued to beg throughout dinner. After opening her gifts, instead of watching others' open theirs she screamed for more presents. This may be a single anecdote, but it conveys a powerful idea of how Christmas (and other) gift-giving can help socialize material attitudes.

But other scenarios are possible. Could Emily have instead learned that giving to others is a real source of joy? Could she have appreciated, even at her young age, that it is the thought that counts? Contrary to the expectation that young children are only gift recipients and not givers, Cindy Dell Clark (1995) finds that even in their gift request letters to Santa Claus they include counter-gifts of drawings, pledges of good behavior, and offerings of cookies. By the time they have learned that Santa is not real (assuming parents sustain this cultural myth until then), the wishes of some children begin to become more focused on others rather than themselves. Organized religion is one force that encourages such behavior. But whether someone is religious or not, Christmas is a time of family ritual that encodes powerful material messages. It is important to keep the golden mean in mind here too. We can go overboard in both materializing and rationalizing Christmas. Christmas is a continuation of older Solstice celebrations that provide hope at the darkest time of year; we would be missing something significant if we somehow did away with the holiday. But, as I said at the start of this paper, I have no solutions to problems involving materialism. Rather, I hope that this look at some of the research findings about materialism may cause us to examine our own material behaviors and think about whether we are really pursuing our path to bliss.

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