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Why are materialists less happy? The role of gratitude and need satisfaction in the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Materialism has been consistently related to lower levels of life satisfaction. We suggest that one reason for this negative relationship may be that high materialists find it harder to be grateful, and lower levels of trait gratitude may be related to unmet psychological needs. 246 undergraduate marketing students (129 female) completed self-report dispositional measures of materialism, gratitude, need satisfaction, and life satisfaction via online questionnaire. Statistical mediation analyses were performed using conditional process modeling. Consistent with predictions, gratitude and need satisfaction mediated the relationship between materialism and decreased life satisfaction in-sequence. Gratitude was also a direct mediator, whereas need satisfaction played an indirect role through its relationship with gratitude. Results may shed light on why those high in materialism are less happy than those low in materialism, and suggest possibilities for interventions to increase life satisfaction.

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Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not; remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for.

–Epicurus

Research suggests that materialists, despite their increased tendency to achieve material goals, tend to be less globally satisfied with their lives. For example, materialists are more likely to be depressed (Mueller et al., 2011), lonely (Pieters, 2013), and have lower self-esteem. Understanding the nature of this relationship is an important goal for materialism research (Christopher, Drummond, Jones, Marek, & Theriault, 2006). A number of constructs have

been posited to account for this relationship, but one factor that has received less attention is gratitude. A better understanding of the role of gratitude may be the antidote to the increasingly negative outcomes associated with the rising tide of materialism in the ever-expanding global consumer culture. In the present research, we outline a model that examines decreased gratitude and impaired need satisfaction as mediators of the link between materialism and life satisfaction. We propose that one reason materialists are less satisfied with their lives is that they experience less gratitude. Rather than being satisfied with what they have, materialists may instead focus on what they do not have, making it difficult to appreciate the positive in their lives. Such an orientation may make it more difficult for materialists to get their psychological needs met, further contributing to lower life satisfaction.

1. Materialism and life satisfaction

Richins and Dawson (1992) outlined three key facets of materialism: (1) *centrality*, or making acquisition of material possessions a central focus in one's life, (2) *happiness*, or making the pursuit of material possessions one's main source of life satisfaction, and (3) *success*, or viewing possessions as a marker for success. Given its importance for life satisfaction, we restrict our discussion of materialism to the happiness facet, defining materialism as the degree to which one believes that material possessions are a large determinant of one's happiness in life.

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A number of studies have shown that materialism predicts decreased life satisfaction. Higher materialism scores are related to dissatisfaction not only with one's standard of living, but also dissatisfaction with the amount of fun in life and relationships with one's friends, along with dissatisfaction with life as a whole (Richins & Dawson, 1992; see also Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Christopher, Saliba, & Deadmarsh, 2009; Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011; Kasser, 2002; Otero-López, Pol, Bolaño, & Mariño, 2011; Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2001). Materialism is also associated with several negative indicators of well-being, such as loneliness (Pieters, 2013), depression (Mueller et al., 2011), and low self-esteem (Christopher et al., 2006; Richins & Dawson, 1992). A series of studies by Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996, and 2001) found that those expressing highly materialistic values experienced fewer positive emotions and greater levels of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Kasser (2002) concludes that a value system dominated by materialistic values undermines one's sense of self, the quality of his or her relationships and willingness to get involved in community events. These may be particularly related to the *happiness* facet of materialism, which Roberts and Clement (2007) found was negatively related to satisfaction in eight different life domains.

Why are materialists, on average, less happy? Gap theory (Solberg, Diener, & Robinson, 2004) posits that materialists have unrealistically high expectations for the satisfaction that material goods will bring them. Consistent with this, Richins (2013) showed that prior to making a purchase, materialists experience higher levels of expectation and anticipatory positive emotion than non-materialists. However, the acquisition of material goods is unable to meet expectations or sustain these emotions, leading to a decline of positive emotion. In order to maintain positive emotions, materialists may therefore need to continually seek out new purchases, resulting in a chronic dissatisfaction and potential decreases in psychological states that are important for well-being, such as gratitude.

2. Gratitude, well-being, and materialism

Gratitude is a positive emotion that is experienced when people perceive that they have received a valued benefit (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; Tsang, 2007). Research has linked gratitude with various indices of well-being (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), including decreased depression (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012), increased positive life appraisals (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), positive affect (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Toepfer et al., 2012), perceived meaning in life (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006; Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009), and life satisfaction (Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2011; Toepfer et al., 2012; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008). Gratitude seems to confer robust benefits for well-being.

If materialism is associated with decreased gratitude, it may explain in part why materialists are less happy. Recent research has demonstrated that materialism and gratitude are negatively related (Froh et al., 2011; Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Polak & McCullough, 2006). This research has at times pointed to a causal relationship from state gratitude to temporary decreases in materialism (Lambert et al., 2009; Polak & McCullough, 2006). However, it is also plausible that a materialistic outlook, which looks for satisfaction in what one does not have, would impair the ability to be grateful for what one has now. In the present study, we examine whether gratitude mediates the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction.

3. Need satisfaction as second potential mediator

What mechanisms might underlie the mediating effect gratitude might have on the lower life satisfaction of high materialists? Gratitude may lead to increased life satisfaction because grateful people have important psychological needs satisfied, whereas materialistic people may have unmet psychological needs. Extending the previous theoretical model, we suggest that materialism and decreased gratitude may impact life satisfaction indirectly through a third variable: impaired psychological need satisfaction.

Sheldon (2011) defined psychological needs as “evolved tendencies to seek out certain basic types of psychosocial experiences and to feel good and thrive when those basic experiences are obtained” (p. 552). Well-being increases when basic psychological needs are met, which include relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Materialism may impact life satisfaction by leading individuals to neglect important psychosocial needs. Sheldon (2011) noted that although individuals often work toward satisfying unmet needs, people sometimes engage in unsatisfying behaviors. For example, a person high in materialism may deal with unmet relatedness needs by putting in even more hours at the office, leading to further deficits in relatedness and decreased life satisfaction (Kasser, 2002; see also Norris, Lambert, DeWall, & Fincham, 2012). Materialism might decrease autonomy by compelling people to acquire more wealth rather than choosing other activities. It might decrease competence if materialistic people chronically focus on where they fall short in terms of material resources.

Research has supported a link between materialism and unmet psychological needs. Kashdan and Breen (2007) found that materialism was associated negatively with relatedness, autonomy, and competence, along with lower levels of dispositional gratitude. Howell and Hill (2009) had college students remember a past experiential purchase (e.g., concert, road trip) or a past material purchase (e.g., clothing, electronics) and found that experiential purchases increased well-being over material purchases via increased relatedness and decreased social comparison. By making life satisfaction contingent on the acquisition of material possessions (Richins & Dawson, 1992), materialists may be likely to neglect other important needs, fostering dissatisfaction with life.

Materialism may also impair need satisfaction as a result of decreased gratitude. As a social emotion, gratitude often leads people to feel connected to others (Algoe, 2012). If gratitude is impaired, individuals may be less likely to have those relatedness needs met. Gratitude may also be closely related to autonomy: if one is able to be appreciative for the positive aspects of one's life, it might make it easier for one to freely engage in other necessary but less enjoyable tasks. Gratitude may be positively related to competency, given that individuals may feel empowered when they perceive support from those in their social world; however, gratitude could instead impair competence if individuals perceive that they cannot meet important goals without the support of others. Recent are suggestive of a relationship between gratitude, need satisfaction, and life satisfaction. Boehm, Lyubomirsky, and Sheldon (2012; as cited by Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013) demonstrated that both a gratitude and an optimism intervention positively affected life satisfaction through increases in need satisfaction (particularly relatedness and autonomy). Similarly, Sheldon et al. (2010) found that longitudinal interventions to increase need satisfaction produced increases in happiness. Thus, in general, we would expect grateful people to be more likely to have their psychological needs met, and be more satisfied with their lives.

4. The present study

We examine the potential mediating role that need satisfaction and gratitude have for the relationship between materialism and

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