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Exploring the relationship between mothers' and fathers' parenting practices and children's materialist values

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Abstract

Data on 2218 British secondary school age children were used to explore the relationship between parenting and materialism. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis carried out to explore the role of parenting in children's materialism showed that although father involvement was unrelated to materialism, mother's involvement was negatively and inter-parental conflict was positively related to child's materialism. Emotional and behavioural problems and goal-directedness were both positively associated with materialism in adolescents. Compared to girls boys scored higher in materialism. Age and materialism were positively related. Peer support was more strongly associated with children's materialism when both fathers' and mothers' involvement were low rather than high. Neither child's sex nor family structure moderated the relationship between parents' involvement and children's materialistic attitudes. © 2003 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Materialism or ‘an orientation which views material goods and money as important for personal happiness and social progress’ (Ward & Wackman, 1971, p. 422) cannot be easily explained. Inglehart (1990) proposed two hypotheses to explain materialism/postmaterialism; his scarcity hypothesis argues that people value things in short supply, and his socialization hypothesis argues that individuals’ values (retained throughout adult life) reflect the economic conditions at the time they reached adulthood. Further, Inglehart argued that contemporary factors may influence the adoption of postmaterialist values. Education, for instance, new middle-class membership and low integration (i.e. low religiosity, not married and no children) have strong effects on the adoption of postmaterialist values whereas frequent church attendance and female sex roles are related to materialist values (*ibid.*). In the shortened version of Inglehart’s index materialist and postmaterialist values were measured by asking respondents to rank order 4 political goals; these goals were ‘maintaining order in the nation’, ‘fighting rising prices’, ‘protecting freedom of speech’, and ‘giving people more say in important government decisions’. People whose first and second choice were the first two values were considered materialists, those whose first and second choice were the last two values were postmaterialists and those whose first and second choices were a materialist and a postmaterialist value constituted the ‘mixed’ group. In consumer research materialism is measured differently. Belk (1985) was the first to develop personality-trait measures to assess materialism which was inferred from scores on three subscales developed to assess envy, possessiveness, and nongenerosity. More recently, Ger and Belk (1996) developed a new scale of materialism which is essentially an improved version of Belk’s (1985) scale along with a fourth subscale labelled ‘preservation’ which involves the conservation of events, experiences and memories in material form. Richins and Dawson (1992) used a different approach. In their conception, materialism is defined as either an instrumental or a terminal value (Rokeach, 1973). Their measure, an improved and longer version of Richins’ (1987) scale, assesses materialism by measuring the three elements of the value that consistently emerged in their review of the theoretical and lay conceptions of materialism: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. Therefore, although the definition and measurement of materialism offered by Belk (1985), Inglehart (1977, 1990) and Richins and Dawson (1992) differ from each other, they all share a basic understanding of materialism as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions, and as the emphasis on individualistic as opposed to societal concerns.

While many agree with Inglehart’s thesis that Western societies place less emphasis on economic concerns, there is far less agreement on his contentions about the causes of this trend (Tepperman & Curtis, 1995). Psychological research, on the other hand, continues to demonstrate the importance of parental socialization and parenting (Flouri, 1999, *in press*). The usual research approach echoes basic organismic theories which suggest that environments that do not support growth and self-expression are associated with valuing financial success relatively more

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