

# **Materialism: Origins and Implications for Personal Well-Being**

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# **Materialism: Origins and Implications for Personal Well-Being**

This study has two main parts. First we explore the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction. Findings from previous research are reviewed and replicated, showing that materialism is negatively associated with life satisfaction. These findings are extended by exploring in more detail what dimensions of materialism are most closely associated with various aspects of life satisfaction. Second, we test the psychological mechanism underlying a major theory of the origins of materialistic values (Inglehart 1990). Contrary to expectations, this psychological mechanism is strongly disconfirmed by the data. A possible alternative mechanism is proposed in the conclusion.

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## **Materialism: Origins and Implications for Personal Well-being**

Recently, materialism has caught the attention of consumer behavior researchers due to this topic's importance to marketing practitioners, social critics, public policy makers, and theorists alike. Because materialists place a high level of importance on acquiring more possessions (Belk 1985a, Fournier & Richins 1991, Richins & Dawson 1992), marketers may wish to learn how to better position their products to appeal to consumers' materialistic desires. Because high levels of materialism have been empirically associated with low levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Belk 1984, 1985a; Kasser & Ryan 1993; Richins & Dawson 1992), social critics and social policy makers may be interested in how to reduce levels of materialism. And because materialism is a central driving force in modern consumer society (Cushman 1990; Looft 1971), academicians studying the nature of marketing and consumption may wish to explore materialism simply because of its theoretical richness. This paper investigates the connection between materialism and happiness, and presents the first direct test of the psychological mechanism underlying a leading theory of why people become materialistic.

### **What is materialism?**

There are two major ways of understanding materialism in consumer research. Belk views materialism as a collection of personality traits. His current view of materialism includes three original traits of envy, nongenerosity, and possessiveness (Belk 1985); and a fourth trait of preservation, which was added in subsequent cross-cultural studies of the materialism scale (Ger and Belk, 1993). Belk sees envy as a desire for others' possessions; the envious person resents those who own what he wants. Nongenerosity is defined as "an unwillingness to give or share possessions with others", which also includes a reluctance to lend or donate possessions to others and negative attitudes toward charity. Finally, possessiveness is defined as a concern about loss of possessions and a desire for the greater control of ownership. Since this possessiveness focuses on physical objects, it was originally conceptualized as including a tendency to make experiences

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tangible through souvenirs and photographs. However, this tendency to make memories tangible was later redefined as a trait named preservation and is no longer subsumed within possessiveness (Ger and Belk, 1993).

In contrast, Richins (e.g. Fournier & Richins 1991; Richins 1994a, 1994b; Richins and Dawson 1992) sees materialism as a value (the basic enduring belief that it is important to own material possessions) rather than a behavior or personality variable. This includes beliefs about acquisition centrality, and the role of acquisition in happiness and success. Acquisition centrality refers to the importance materialists attach to acquiring more possessions which allows acquisitiveness to function as a life-goal for them. Materialists also hold strongly to the belief that owning or acquiring the right possessions is a key to happiness and well-being. Finally, Richins also defines materialists as people who believe success can be judged by the things people own.

Although the scales produced by Belk and Richins differ significantly, they both share a basic understanding of materialism as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. "At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction" (Belk 1984, p.291). Despite this convergence of views, there is increasing evidence that Western conceptualizations of materialism may only be applicable in cultures based on the Western concept of individualism (Wong & Ahuvia, 1995; Ger & Belk, 1993; Belk 1984). From the social constructionist perspective, material goods are viewed as symbols of identity whose meanings are socially constructed. These symbols may function on a social level representing class, gender, status, or membership in other social groups; or they may symbolize the personal aspects of identity such as, personal tastes, values, or one's life history (p. 40, Dittmar & Pepper, 1992). Therefore, the materialism construct can be defined according to the functions material possessions fulfill for the individuals, and these functions differ between cultures. Hence, the following study is intended only as an investigation of materialism in Western society.

### *What's wrong with materialism?*

It is safe to say that it's no compliment to call someone a materialist, but what exactly is wrong with placing importance on worldly possessions? Theologians and philosophers have long complained that materialism is incompatible with a virtuous life. Frequently, pursuing material wealth is viewed as empty or shallow and precludes one's investment in family, friends, self-actualization and participation in social community (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Belk 1985, 1988; Richins 1987; Fournier and Richins 1991; Kasser and Ryan 1993).

It has been said that the primary consequence of the pursuit of a materialistic lifestyle is its failure to yield the promised states of happiness and satisfaction with one's life in general. This is an important outcome in light of the fact that most materialists expect their possessions to make them happy (Fournier and Richins, 1991). Empirical evidence on the connection between materialism and happiness comes primarily from three studies (Belk 1983, Kasser & Ryan 1993, and Richins & Dawson 1992) and a meta-analysis of work in this area (Wright & Larsen 1993) which all find a negative correlation between materialism and happiness or well-being. It is unclear, however, which way the causation (if any) runs. Does materialism cause unhappiness? Are unhappy people drawn toward material possessions for fulfillment? Or perhaps, does poverty or some other third factor cause both materialism and unhappiness?

Looking in more detail at this data, Belk found negative correlations between materialism and happiness and between materialism and life satisfaction. These correlations were around -.30 for the nongenerosity and envy subscales, but lower (around -.10) for possessiveness. Richins and Dawson correlated materialism with various aspects of life satisfaction, but did not provide a breakdown of these correlations by the different subscales within their measure. They found that materialism as a whole was

negatively related to satisfaction in all the aspects of life measured. The relationship was strongest for satisfaction with income or standard of living ( $r = -.39$ ) and weakest for satisfaction with family life ( $r = -.17$ ). Correlations for

satisfaction with life as a whole, fun, and friends were -.32, -.34, and -.31, respectively (all  $p < .01$ ). (Richins & Dawson 1992).

In a similar vein, Kasser and Ryan (1993) investigated financial success as an aspiration or life goal and found that "whereas the relative centrality of aspirations for self acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling were associated with greater well-being and less distress, this pattern was reversed for financial success aspirations. Highly central financial success aspirations . . . were associated with less self-actualization, less vitality, more depression and more anxiety" and a higher control orientation (p. 420). Their findings are consistent with past research which had shown that when people value extrinsic rewards or social acceptance over intrinsic rewards, they are more likely to experience distress and lower levels of well-being. This thinking grows out of humanistic psychology in its emphasis on intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan 1987), and the view that a focus on "having" diverts one's actualizing tendencies (Fromm 1976).

Instead of roundly criticizing all forms of materialism, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) introduced a distinction between instrumental and terminal materialism (pp. 225-249). Instrumental materialism consists of using material objects as symbols to strengthen interpersonal relationships (i.e. photo albums, mementos, etc.) or engage in creative self-actualizing activity such as art or science. On a darker note, terminal materialism occurs when the desire for more possessions runs amok and the *habit of consumption becomes an end in itself*. Whereas instrumental materialism is seen as a healthy manifestation of a creative engagement with the material world, instrumental materialism is viewed as destructive to both the individual and the natural environment. Fournier & Richins (1991), however, muster arguments from Bentham (1824/1987), Beaglehole (1932), Klineberg (1940), and others for the view that "terminal" materialism may not be common or even possible. This is because acquisitive behavior is rarely if ever an end in itself, but rather is "a means of satisfying needs such as desires for prestige, self-assertiveness, pre-eminence, and dominion" (Fournier & Richins 1991, p. 405). In a sense Fournier & Richins are reiterating Bauer & Greyser's (1967) insight that

(a)t first hearing, one might conclude that criticism of a materialist society is a criticism of the extent to which people spend their resources of time, energy, and wealth on the acquisition of material things. One of the notions that gets expressed is that people should be more interested in pursuing nonmaterial goals.

The perplexing matter is, however, that the criticism becomes strongest on the circumstance that people do pursue nonmaterial goals - such as ego enhancement, psychic security, social status, and so on - but use material goods as a means of achieving them. Perhaps the distinctive feature of our society is the extent to which *material* goods are used to attain *nonmaterial* goals. (pp. 7-8, italics in original).

### **What leads to materialism?: Inelehart's Postmaterialism hypotheses**

Most of the literature on the origins of materialism in the consumer behavior literature has focused on mass media influences (Belk & Pollay 1985, Fournier & Richins 1991, Ger & Belk 1993, Pollay 1986, Richins 1987, 1992). However, in the wider sociological literature, one of the most influential and widely cited theories on the origins of materialism (Inglehart 1971, 1990; Inglehart & Abramson 1994) uses the subjective experience of affluence or deprivation to explain how materialistic values shift within a culture over time. Inglehart's theory can be broken down into three parts: (1) the claim that values are shifting towards "Postmaterialism," (2) the scarcity and socialization hypotheses which explain how this shift is taking place at a macro level, and (3) a psychological model of human development which explains why values are shifting towards Postmaterialism and not in some other direction.

First, Inglehart maintains that there has been a general shift in post-industrial society from materialist to "Postmaterialist" values. Postmaterialism is not asceticism; postmaterialists simply de-emphasize material pleasures in comparison to higher order needs such as freedom, self-expression, and the quality of life. Inglehart's definition of materialism differs from Belk's and Richin's because they focus on one's feelings about oneself as an individual (i.e. I wish I had more possessions) whereas Inglehart focuses on social values (i.e. materialist say our society should focus on having a healthy economy whereas Postmaterialists say we should develop a society where ideas matter more than

money). Nonetheless, all three definitions share a common element in that materialists place a high value on money and possessions.

Inglehart sees a shift to Postmaterialism taking place on a global scale, at least within the developed world. The World Values Surveys carried out in 1981-83 and 1990-91 yielded evidence for the rise of Postmaterialist values in 40 societies containing over 70% of the world's population (Inglehart & Abramson, 1994). Yet cultural differences still play an important role. As Inglehart found in his research in Japan, "peace and prosperity, in the long run, encourage both Japanese and Western publics to give heightened emphasis to non-material goals. They do not necessarily turn to the *same* nonmaterial goals" (Inglehart 1990, p. 153, italics in original). Hence cultural differences can help determine which higher order needs will form the basis for that culture's unique form of Postmaterialism.

Second, Inglehart believes that this cultural shift in values is due to two factors: scarcity and socialization. The scarcity hypothesis states that "an individual's priorities reflect one's socioeconomic environment: one places the greatest subjective value on those things that are in relatively short supply" (1990, p.68). Therefore, people who are economically deprived should place a higher emphasis on material acquisition than those who are more affluent. This helps explain short term fluctuations in material values as when, for example, during economic downswings, people's concern about money increases. The socialization hypothesis states that "one's basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one's preadult years" (1990, p.68), and these values remain largely stable over time. In other words, as they grow, children are socialized to value what's scarce, forming a value system which generally remains through adulthood, although it may fluctuate slightly due to changes in the larger environment in keeping with the scarcity hypothesis. Thus people who felt material goods were scarce deprived during their formative years are likely to develop a lifelong fixation with material rewards, while the

children of affluent families may stress personal fulfillment at the expense of higher incomes (pp. 56-70, Inglehart 1990).

### Percentage of Age Group in Given Value Type

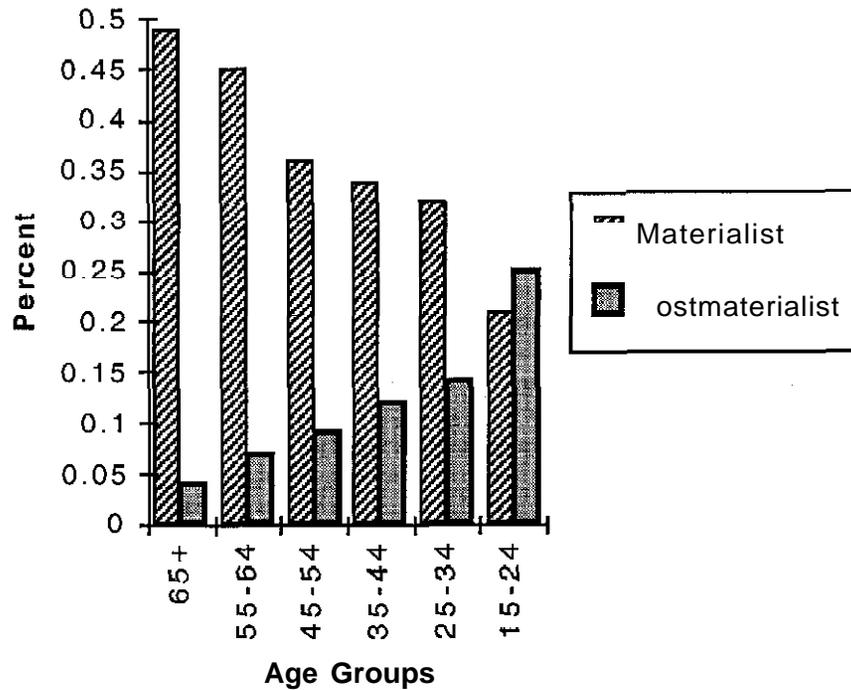


Figure 1. Value type by age group among the combined publics of Britain, France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands in 1970. Figure reproduced from Inglehart (1990), pg. 76.

In Europe, as the older more materialistic generation dies off, it is being replaced by more post-materialistic thinkers. The socialization hypothesis is used to account for this shift. Figure 1 shows that the percentage of materialists vs. Postmaterialists in Europe differed systematically based on the age of the respondent. Data also shows that this difference is due to cohort effects rather than life cycle effects (i.e. people's values are stable throughout adulthood and hence people do not get more materialistic as they age (Inglehart 1990, pp. 104-129)). Therefore widespread social change in these values

happens through generational replacement as the older generations die off and the younger Postmaterialists take their place on the cultural center stage.

Third, Inglehart presents a theory of developmental psychology which underlies his socialization hypothesis. This theory is based on a quasi-Maslowian model of a hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1970). Like Maslow, Inglehart uses a distinction between higher and lower order needs, but unlike Maslow he does not propose finer hierarchical distinctions within these broad categories (i.e. Inglehart does not claim that, say, social needs are necessarily higher or lower than ego needs). Also unlike Maslow, Inglehart's socialization hypothesis predicts that people will not generally move smoothly between focusing on higher or lower order as their circumstances change. As was discussed above, once a predilection with lower order needs (materialist values) or higher order needs (Postmaterialist values) is established in one's formative years, it tends to remain intact throughout adulthood. Inglehart contends that these value orientations become ingrained through one's subjective experience of economic (in)security during one's formative years. The more economically secure one felt while growing up, the more prone toward Postmaterialist values one will be.

Despite Inglehart's general sensitivity to the importance of cultural values, it is interesting to note that his theory of developmental psychology operates at an individual level. The measure he provides for "formative security" consists entirely of questions about one's nuclear family and does not include any reference to the larger society. With regard to Postmaterialism, cultural change happens because economic prosperity produces a large number of families who are able to give their children a sense of security and hence these children are more likely to develop Postmaterialist values. The cultural shift to Postmaterialism is reducible to the simple aggregation of these individual formative experiences within the family.

While the first two parts of Inglehart's theory have been extensively tested, his theory of developmental psychology has only been tested indirectly. In general, Inglehart

relies on showing that children brought up in periods of general economic instability tend towards materialism and those brought up in periods of general affluence tend towards Postmaterialism. However, this effect may be caused by factors other than one's personal sense of economic well-being during childhood. In a more direct test, Inglehart shows that what he labels "formative security" is positively correlated with Postmaterialist values (Inglehart 1990, pp. 320-325). However, his measure of "formative security" consists of father's occupation, father's education, mother's education, and respondent's education, and hence is really a measure of social class. In using social class as a proxy for formative security, Inglehart's reasoning appears to be that those currently in the upper classes were probably in those classes as children, and that upper class families are more likely to provide a sense of formative security to their children. Unfortunately, this is a very noisy measure of formative security because class standing may change over time and "there is no one-to-one relationship between economic level and the prevalence of Postmaterialist values, for these values reflect one's subjective sense of security, not one's economic level per se" (Inglehart 1990, p. 68). Furthermore, the upper classes may indeed pass along Postmaterialistic values to their children, but they may do this by modeling, lecturing about or rewarding children for displaying Postmaterialistic values; indeed, there are any number of ways these values may get transmitted which have nothing to do with a preadult sense of economic security.

### Research Questions

#### Materialism and life satisfaction

Consistent with previous research, we expect materialism to be negatively associated with life satisfaction. To expand on previous research, we plan to perform a more detailed analysis of which aspects of materialism from both Belk's and Richin's definitions are related to various aspects of life satisfaction. Because this research question is exploratory and theory-generating in nature, an inductive approach that seeks to interpret the observed data is appropriate.

## Materialism and socialization

In this study we will present the first direct test of the theory of developmental psychology underlying Inglehart's Postmaterialism I-hypothesis. This will be accomplished by relating felt economic (in)security in childhood and adolescence to adult materialism. It is important to clarify that the existence of a cultural shift towards Postmaterialism via generational replacement is not at issue in the current study. Only Inglehart's theory of developmental psychology is being investigated. If this theory does not work at an individual level, it implies that the cultural shift to Postmaterialism may be due to a different causal mechanism. Because this research question is *theory testing* in nature, an deductive falsificationist approach is appropriate.

## Methodology

### Respondents

Data were collected as part of a larger study conducted in a Midwestern university. Completed questionnaires were collected from 200 students (110 female). Subjects were seniors enrolled in the undergraduate marketing course. Questionnaires were administered in scheduled group sessions in the fall semester of 1994.

### Measures

#### Materialism

Two different materialism scales were used in this study: Ger and Belk's (1993) revised materialism scale and Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale. In their cross-cultural study on materialism, Ger and Belk (1993) modified and expanded some scale items from Belk's (1985) original materialism scale. The modified scale includes 4 subscales:

(1) *possessiveness* - the inclination and tendency to retain control or ownership of one's possessions. This subscale consisted of 4 items, e.g. "I get very upset if something is stolen from me, even if it has little monetary value."

(2) nongenerosity - an unwillingness to give possessions to or share possessions with others. This subscale consisted of 9 items, e.g. "I enjoy donating things for charity" (reverse scored), or "I don't like to lend things, even to good friends."

(3) envy - a displeasure or ill will at the superiority of another person in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable. This subscale consisted of 5 items, e.g. "there are certain people I would like to trade places with."

(4) preservation - the conservation of events, experiences, and memories in material form. This subscale consisted of 3 items, e.g. "when I travel I like to take a lot of photographs."

Because this scale measures materialism as a personality variable, it will henceforth be referred to as "Mat<sub>pers</sub>."

Richins and Dawson (1992) on the other hand, conceptualized materialism as a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life. Their scale consists of 3 subscales:

(1) Acquisition centrality - the importance materialists attach to possessions which allows acquisitiveness to function as a life-goal. This subscale consists of 7 items, e.g. "I usually buy only the things I need" (reverse scored).

(2) Happiness - the extent to which materialists view possessions as essential to their satisfaction and well-being in life. This subscale consisted of 6 items, e.g. "I have all the things I really need to enjoy life" (reverse scored).

(3) Success - the belief that one's own and others' success can be judged by what they own. This subscale consisted of 5 items, e.g. "Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions."

Because this scale measures materialism as a value, it will henceforth be referred to as "Mat<sub>val</sub>."

Confirmatory factor analyses using LISREL (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1989) were conducted to examine the reliability, convergent validity, and uniqueness of the subscales

all item 1 valid  
0-07/0/59/0/7a

within the two materialism scales. An incremental fit index is used to assess the models' goodness-of-fit. Such an approach is recommended over the  $\chi^2$  test because of the latter's sensitivity to sample size (Gerbing & Anderson, 1992; Bentler 1990). The normed fit index (NFI) for the two materialism scales are .95 (Ger & Belk's Scale) and .99 (Richins & Dawson's Scale) respectively, indicating excellent fit.

### **Well-Being**

Well being was measured using a well established instrument described by Andrews and Withey (1976). Subjects filled out 6 scale items on feelings of well-being about (1) life as a whole, (2) amount of fun and enjoyment, (3 & 4) personal relationships with family and friends. (5 & 6) and standard of living. Responses were marked on a 7-point scale ranging from "terrible" to "delighted." This measure was also used in Richins and Dawson (1992) so data is comparable across these studies.

### **Early Economic Insecurity**

Because established scales to measure subjective affluence during childhood and adolescence were not available, measures were created for this study. Three items for two age periods (age 0-12, 13-18) were generated to measure the sense of economic well-being of the respondents during their formative years. The items read as follows:

#### Age 0-12

1. As a child, I felt that we were poorer than most typical families.
2. As a child, my parents rarely seemed concerned about having enough money.

(reverse scored)

3. As a child, I frequently felt that I was not able to have the things that I wanted because we could not afford them.

#### Age 13-18

1. As a teenager, I felt that we were poorer than most typical families.
2. As a teenager, my parents rarely seemed concerned about having enough money.

(reverse scored)

3. As a teenager, I frequently felt that I was not able to have the things that I wanted because we could not afford them.

The items were marked on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. High scores on this scale indicated high levels of felt economic deprivation. Alpha for the six items as a whole is .77.

### **Family Income**

Current family income was measured to serve as a control variable. Because respondents were college undergraduates, parental income was judged to be the most appropriate indicator of the students' current standard of living. Respondents checked one of four boxes corresponding to their parents' current annual income: (1) less than \$25,000, (2) \$26,000 - \$50,000, (3) 51,000 - \$100,000, (4) more than \$100,000.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Materialism and Life Satisfaction**

Consistent with past studies, there was a general negative relationship between life satisfaction and materialism (see table 1). Not surprisingly, Richins & Dawson's  $Mat_{val}$  scale was most closely related to satisfaction about level of income ( $r = -.34$ ) and standard of living ( $r = -.33$ ), although it was also significantly related to satisfaction with friendships ( $r = -.16$ ) and a general sense of fun and enjoyment ( $r = -.14$ ). This shows that  $Mat_{val}$  is primarily associated with unhappiness through its direct connection to material satisfaction, but it was not inconsistent with the idea that materialists may neglect their social relationship and more intrinsically enjoyable activities in favor of material acquisition. Looking at the  $Mat_{val}$  subscales, the happiness subscale, which measures the degree to which respondents believe that acquiring more stuff would make them happy, is clearly the most closely associated with life dissatisfaction. The belief that success in life can be measured by possessions is modestly but frequently related to life dissatisfaction. But the connection between possessions playing a central role in one's life and being dissatisfied with one's life is fairly weak, although still statistically significant for the scale as a whole.

**Table 1: Pearson Correlations Between Materialism and Life Satisfaction**

Measures	Life Satisfaction With . . .						
	whole scale	life as a whole	fun & enjoyment	family, friends, & studies	level of income	standard of living (possessions)	relationships with friends
Mat <sub>val</sub> all	-.30***	-.12	-.14*	-.07	-.34***	-.33***	-.16*
Success Subscale	-.24***	-.09	-.12	-.07	-.24***	-.24***	-.19**
Centrality Subscale	-.14*	-.05	-.06	-.00	-.13	-.18**	-.05
Happiness Subscale	-.37***	-.14*	-.15*	-.11	-.52***	-.42***	-.14*
Mat <sub>pers</sub> all	-.31***	-.18**	-.27***	-.10	-.27***	-.21**	-.21**
Nongenerosity Subscale	-.30***	-.16*	-.27***	-.04	-.23***	-.20**	-.28***
Possessiveness Subscale	-.07	-.02	-.08	-.02	-.09	.03	-.09
Envy Subscale	-.39***	-.29***	-.30***	-.25***	-.29***	-.24***	-.23***
Preservation Subscale	.04	.05	.04	.04	-.02	-.05	.17**

\* p < .05  
 \*\* p < .01  
 \*\*\* p < .001



While the overall correlation between Ger & Belk's Mat<sub>pers</sub> Scale and life satisfaction (r = -.31) was very similarly to the correlation between Mat<sub>val</sub> and life satisfaction (r = -.30), the actual structure of the relationship was quite different. Whereas Mat<sub>val</sub> was most closely associated with distress about life's material pleasures, nongenerous and envious people (i.e. those high in two dimensions of Mat<sub>pers</sub>) seem to be just as unhappy with their friendships and general sense of fun and enjoyment as with their economic circumstances. This distinction between Mat<sub>val</sub> and Mat<sub>pers</sub> may reflect a difference in the conceptual breadth of the two measures. Mat<sub>val</sub> measures a tightly focused group of beliefs about material consumption. But Mat<sub>per</sub>, taps into broader personality traits. One can envy one's neighbor's spouse as well as her or his car, and one can be nongenerous with one's time or love as well as one's money. Hence, the potential

breadth of these  $Mat_{pers}$  constructs may help explain their significant relationship to so many aspects of life satisfaction.

More interesting still, the preservation subscale had a generally positive association with life satisfaction and a statistically significant correlation ( $r = .17$ ) with satisfaction with friendships. Preservation is measured by three statements: (1) I like to collect things, (2) I have a lot of souvenirs, (3) I tend to hang on to things I should probably throw out. Hence, preservation might tap into what Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) called "instrumental materialism" which includes using material objects as symbols to strengthen interpersonal relationships. If this finding is confirmed in further research, it leaves researchers two options; either re-define materialism so as to exclude preservation, or develop theories that overtly recognize materialism's possible positive effects as well as destructive aspects. Future research might explore the possibility that people differ in a general ability to form close attachments. Hence, those likely to form close friendships are also likely to become attached to their possessions and score high on Preservation.

Skeptics of the connection between materialism and unhappiness might argue that all we have really uncovered is poverty. Perhaps poor people tend to be unhappy and also tend to be preoccupied with their financial difficulties, which shows up as materialism. However, because family income and materialism were almost perfectly unrelated (correlation of  $Mat_{val}$  and income =  $-.01$ , correlation of  $Mat_{pers}$  and income =  $-.00$ ) this objection can be generally ruled out. The only place where it might have relevance is in explaining the particularly strong correlation between the  $Mat_{val}$  Happiness subscale and satisfaction with level of income ( $r = -.52$ ) or satisfaction with standard of living ( $r = -.42$ ). Some correlation is probably attributable to the significant correlation ( $r = -.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ) between the Happiness subscale and family income. None of the other materialism subscales even approached significance in correlating with family income.

## Materialism and Economic Insecurity .

In order to test Inglehart's Postmaterialism hypotheses, the relationship between economic insecurity and materialism was checked. Recall that Inglehart proposes that personal feelings of economic insecurity during one's formative years lead to a lasting materialistic orientation. Perhaps the most striking finding of this study was the lack of empirical support for this influential theory (see Table 2). Neither  $Mat_{val}$  nor  $Mat_{pers}$  were significantly correlated with preadult economic insecurity. Even when looking at the seven subscales, only the  $Mat_{val}$  Happiness subscale shows a significant correlation, and this is a modest .18.

**Table 2: Correlations between Materialism, Economic Insecurity, & Family Income**

Materialism Scales 1st study	Economic Insecurity Correlation	Econ. Insecurity Corr. Controlling for Current Family Income	Family Income Correlation
$Mat_{val}$ all	.09	∅	-.01
Success	.05	∅	-.02
Centrality	.04	.05	.10
Happiness = \$	.18**	-.09	-.18*
<hr/>			
$Mat_{pers}$ all	.02	-.03	-.01
Nongenerosity	-.01	.05	-.03
Possessiveness	-.02	-.12	.11
Envy	.09	.08	-.02
Preservation	.00	∅	-.05

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Why might the happiness subscale be alone in showing support? The happiness subscale measures the degree to which respondents believe they would be happier if they owned more things, which can be interpreted as a general desire to own more possessions. Perhaps respondents' early developmental experiences are not as important here as their current economic situation? It could be that a lack of current income leads to a desire to own more things and hence a higher score on the happiness subscale. But the correlation between preadult economic insecurity and current happiness-seeking through acquisition could be spurious. That is, it could exist simply because incomes tend to be stable over

time and those whose parents have lower incomes now also had parents with lower incomes during their formative years. There may be no direct effect of past deprivation on materialism, instead materialism would only be related to current deprivation. This would imply that the scarcity hypothesis has some validity (i.e. poor people value what they lack), but the socialization hypothesis is unsupported - it is current scarcity, not preadult scarcity, that matters.

This possibility was tested by controlling for the effects of current income. When we do this (see Table 2), we find that not only does the significance of the correlation with the happiness subscale go away, but the sign reverses itself. Furthermore, we find that the direct correlation of current family income to the happiness subscale (-.18) is the same as the direct correlation between the sense of economic insecurity felt while growing up and that subscale (.18). Hence there is no support in this data for the theory of developmental psychology used by Inglehart to explain shifts in cultural values.

### **Conclusion**

This study confirms the generally negative relationships between life satisfaction and materialism. Because this basic finding has been replicated with no conflicting evidence, we can have increased confidence in its robustness. Future research needs to investigate more closely the nature of this relationship. In particular we need to know if materialism causes unhappiness and if so *how*. The current research gives us some hints. Social critics have long argued that a problem with materialism is that it is unquenchable. Consistent with this idea, evidence from the Mat<sub>11</sub> scale shows that it is those people who place the highest value on material possessions that are the least satisfied with this area of their lives. In fairness, one might object that this finding is almost tautologically obvious. "Of course, the more you care about something the more disappointed you'll be if you fall short. It's only natural that those most concerned about possessions would be the most disappointed in this area of their lives." This objection however begs the question by assuming that in regards to material possessions one will inevitably fall short. This logic

would not seem as compelling when applied to other areas of one's life, such as, say, friendships. It is certainly possible that those people who place the highest priority on their friendships are also the *most* satisfied with them. We do know that high aspirations for friendship and community are positively associated with life satisfaction, whereas high aspirations for income is negatively associated with life satisfaction (Kasser & Ryan 1993). Perhaps these social critics are right and there is something especially unquenchable about materialism.

From the *Mat<sub>pers</sub>* scale we learn that not everything that passes for materialism, at least by some definitions of it, is negatively associated with life satisfaction. This suggests a more radical turn in research in this area. Much of the impetus for research on materialism comes from the conviction (or at least suspicion) that it is individually and socially destructive. Perhaps we need to address the issue of consumer welfare head on. Instead of studying materialism per se, we might want to create a more open ended research stream by asking, "what are the most psychologically constructive and destructive orientations towards possessions and consumption?" Inductive research could begin by identifying individuals particularly high or low on satisfaction with the material spheres of life. Then interviews and other more exploratory techniques could be used to determine which psychological orientations are associated with these outcomes.

In our view, the most important finding of this research was the striking lack of support for the psychological underpinnings of Inglehart's Postmaterialism theory, one of the most important current theories in the sociology of value change. We realize that there are limitations to our study. It used a student sample. The instrument used to measure the preadult sense of economic insecurity, although high in face validity and achieving a good alpha reliability score, was still an ad hoc measure. And our measures of materialism,

while more reliable and better validated than the short questionnaires used by Inglehart<sup>1</sup>, were still not identical to his measures. However, from a falsificationist perspective, all that is required for a solid test of a theory is to submit it to a challenge that it should pass. The psychological mechanism underlying much of Inglehart's theory failed such a test. Of course, future research which corrects for the above mentioned limitations is needed to replicate these findings. But for now the search should also begin for another theoretical explanation of the process underlying the observed shift to Postmaterialist values. While it is only speculative, we would suggest that a possible alternative theory might emphasize the zeitgeist of an era rather than the individual's preadult economic circumstances. Economic prosperity might lead to a zeitgeist of Postmaterialist values which are then adopted by people in their formative years in a way that is not directly related to their own individual economic circumstances. Hence, people coming of age in periods of affluence tend towards Postmaterialism, but this cannot be reduced to a result of their individual sense of economic security.

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<sup>1</sup> Because Inglehart relied on data collected from huge ongoing national samples, he was frequently forced to use inexact measures of the constructs he wished to study and/or to collect data using very short instruments.

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