

Short research communication

Materialistic (and unhappy?) adult now, economically deprived child then: How are felt formative economic deprivation, materialism, and well-being measures related?

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Abstract

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2010, one in five children lived in poverty. The role of economic deprivation during childhood and its implications during adulthood has been explored by several researchers (e.g., Mheen et al., 1998). Of particular interest for the present study is to explore the role of economic deprivation and its relationship with materialism and well-being measures. Scholars (e.g., Inglehart, 1990) have maintained that economic deprivation experienced during childhood and adolescence years might lead to an adult who is materialistic, which has been linked to diminished level of life satisfaction (Wright and Larsen, 1993) and subjective well-being/happiness (Kasser, 2002). In other words, in the light of the rising numbers related to children living in poverty and findings from various research studies – it could be expected that the substantial proportion of the US population (also elsewhere) will be materialistic and consequently dissatisfied and unhappy in their lives. Thus, the present study explores the relationships between economic deprivation, materialism, and well-being measures.

Keywords: Economic deprivation, Materialism, well-being measures.

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1. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Definitions. Felt formative economic deprivation refers to the reduced sense of economic well-being, which is conceptualized as a negative psychological experience gained during the ages 0 to 18 years (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002). Materialism is defined as “the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions” (Belk, 1984, p. 291). Additionally, it has been noted that materialism is a personality trait (Belk, 1985) and a personal value (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Ahuvia and Wong (1995) labeled them as personality materialism and value materialism respectively. Both types of materialisms are considered complimentary (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002). Experiential buying tendency refers to an individual’s propensity to relatively buy more experiences over material possessions (Howell et al., 2012). Life satisfaction refers to “a judgmental process, in which individual assess the quality of their lives on the basis of their own unique set of criteria” (Pavot and Diener, 1993, p. 164). Subjective well-being (or happiness; hereafter happiness) refers to individuals’ evaluation of

their lives with regards to life satisfaction and their affective reactions (Diener and Suh, 1999).

Relationship: Felt formative economic deprivation with materialism, experiential purchase tendency, life satisfaction, and happiness. Socioeconomic status (SES) has been linked to childhood economic deprivation (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002). Several scholars (e.g., Chang and Arkins, 2002) have noted the positive relationship between SES and materialism. For example, Inglehart’s theory of materialistic socialization (Inglehart, 1990) proposed that adult materialism is intertwined with formative feelings of economic insecurity experienced during childhood and adolescence years, which is related to adult materialistic tendency. Additionally, researchers (e.g., Howell et al., 2012) have maintained that materialistic individuals tend to buy material purchases (e.g., designer bag) over experiential purchases (e.g., concert). Researchers (e.g., von Rueden et al., 2006) have noted that lower SES experienced during childhood contributes to psychological distress

experienced during adulthood, which has been linked to diminished well-being (e.g., Diener et al., 1993). Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Felt formative economic deprivation is positively related to: personality materialism (*H1a*), value materialism (*H1b*); and negatively related to experiential buying tendency (*H1c*), life satisfaction (*H1d*), and happiness (*H1e*).

Relationship: Materialism with experiential purchase tendency, life satisfaction, and happiness. Researchers (e.g., Howell et al., 2012) have noted that people who emphasize on materialism, are reluctant to purchase experiences. Furthermore, materialism has been linked negatively to life satisfaction (e.g., Wright and Larsen, 1993) and happiness (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002). Wright and Larsen (1993) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that focused on materialism and life satisfaction; they found a negative correlation between materialism and life satisfaction. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Personality materialism is negatively related to: experiential buying tendency (*H2a*), life satisfaction (*H2b*), and happiness (*H2c*).

H3: Value materialism is negatively related to: experiential buying tendency (*H3a*), life satisfaction (*H3b*), and happiness (*H3c*).

2. Method

An online survey was used to collect data. Responses were collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online survey data collection tool maintained by Amazon, Inc. Respondents in the sample came from across the United States (ages 18 to 65 years; mean, 29). Of the 349 usable responses, 59% were from men. The survey consisted of 60 items, which were adapted from existing scales: felt formative deprivation (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002), personality materialism (Ger and Belk, 1996), value materialism (Richins and Dawson, 1992), satisfaction with life scale (Diener et al., 1985), experiential buying tendency (Howell et al., 2012), and happiness (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999), along with demographic and socio-economic status related items.

3. Results

Data were analyzed using MPlus 6.0 and SPSS 19 statistical software packages. The measurement model of structural equation modeling confirmed the structure for all of the factors. Confirmatory factor analysis of the six latent variables and 34 indicators (personality materialism and value materialism items were parceled [random assignment; see Little et al., 2002]) resulted in an adequate model fit ($\chi^2_{(df=506)} = 1241.43$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR =

0.05). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.85 to 0.96 (except personality materialism scale with Cronbach's alpha = 0.51), supporting factor reliability. It is important to note that a causal path between personality materialism and value materialism was introduced for two reasons: (1) significant decrease in χ^2 ($\Delta \chi^2 = 58.81$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < 0.001$) and (2) significant increase in R^2 for value materialism (model without the path: $R^2 = 0.1\%$, $p = 0.833$; model with the path: $R^2 = 22.2\%$, $p = 0.000$). Consequently, the results for structural equation modeling in which personality materialism as a predictor of value materialism path was included are reported. The structural model supported *H1(a)*, *H1(d)*, *H3(a)*, *H3(b)*, and *H3(c)*. Conversely, *H1(c)* and *H1(e)* were not supported the path coefficients failed to reach statistical significance. On the other hand, *H1(b)*, *H2(a)*, *H2(b)*, and *H2(c)* reached statistical significance but the path coefficients were in the opposite direction.

As expected, felt formative deprivation was positively related to personality materialism ($\gamma = 0.377$, $p = 0.000$) and negatively related to life satisfaction ($\gamma = -0.153$, $p = 0.012$). Value materialism is negatively related to experiential buying tendency ($\gamma = -0.427$, $p = 0.000$), life satisfaction ($\gamma = -0.441$, $p = 0.000$), and happiness ($\gamma = -0.352$, $p = 0.000$). The relationships between felt formative deprivation with experiential buying tendency ($\gamma = 0.016$, $p = 0.803$) and happiness ($\gamma = -0.090$, $p = 0.151$) were not statistically significant. Conversely, felt formative deprivation was negatively related to value materialism ($\gamma = -0.174$, $p = 0.003$). Personality materialism was positively related to experiential buying tendency ($\gamma = 0.145$, $p = 0.058$), life satisfaction ($\gamma = 0.275$, $p = 0.000$), and happiness ($\gamma = 0.229$, $p = 0.002$). Furthermore, personality materialism and value materialism were positively related ($\gamma = 0.508$, $p = 0.000$). To further explore the validity of the model, a two-group (based on gender) was analyzed. The χ^2 difference test comparing the fit of constrained and unconstrained measurement models to the data was non-significant ($\Delta \chi^2 = 22.46$, $\Delta df = 26$), indicating that the models were equivalent for the two groups. Hence, two-group structural equation modeling wasn't pursued any further.

To explore the role of demographic and socio-economic status variables with materialism and well-being, multiple regression analyses were performed. Regression analyses yielded some useful results. For example, personality materialism was found to be independent of age ($\beta = -0.51$, $p = 0.435$), whereas, value materialism is dependent on age ($\beta = -0.158$, $p = 0.12$). Furthermore, participants' mother's education was related to value materialism ($\beta = 0.139$, $p = 0.053$) and not personality materialism ($\beta = 0.003$, $p = 0.970$). See Table 1 for an overview of various regression models.

Table 1: Multiple regression analyses predicting personality materialism, value materialism, life satisfaction, and happiness

	Dependent variables			
	Value materialism	Personality materialism	Life satisfaction	Happiness
Age	-0.158•	-0.051	0.022	0.074
Income	-0.101	-0.112*	0.262**	0.168•
Gender	-0.195**	-0.144*	0.043	0.056
Father's education	-0.013	0.002	0.011	0.042
Mother's education	0.139*	0.003	-0.040	-0.084
R ²	0.074 (p=0.000)	0.015 (p=0.130)	0.05 (p=0.004)	0.02 (p=0.075)

•Borderline significance at $p=0.1$, * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.01$

4. Conclusion

This study analyzed the relationships between felt formative economic deprivation, materialism, and well-being measures. The findings of the present study have several theoretical implications. For example, it has been maintained that materialism is negatively associated with well-being (e.g., Wright and Larsen, 1993). However, the present study findings suggest that personality materialism is positively related to well-being measures. Furthermore, scholars have used personality materialism and value materialism interchangeably. The findings of the present study questions such an assumption.

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