
RESEARCH NOTE

Materialism and the Family Structure–Stress Relation

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In this study, we examined the role that materialism plays in the family structure–stress relation in a sample of adolescents. Materialism is a complex construct that appears to both mediate and moderate the family structure–stress relation as well as have both positive and negative effects. The happiness dimension of materialism in particular appears to both mediate and moderate the family structure–stress relation. Adolescents who associate happiness with material possessions report higher levels of family stress due to family disruption (parental divorce) compared with those who are less likely to associate happiness with material possessions. This finding runs contrary to recent marketing research. Additionally, we found the success dimension of materialism to have a direct and salubrious impact on family stress levels.

The role that materialism plays in reactions to family disruptions such as divorce merits further investigation. Roberts, Manolis, and Tanner (2003) and Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton (1997) have hypothesized and have found that materialism is an outcome of divorce. Young adults and adolescents of divorced parents expressed higher levels of materialism than their counterparts from intact homes. Rindfleisch et al. suggested that “children experiencing the disruption of their families appear especially likely to place greater emphasis on material objects in an effort to adjust to their new roles as members of a disrupted family” (p. 313).

Chang and Arkin (2002) characterized materialism as an attempt to cope with uncertainty and self-doubt, mediating the effects of divorce on family stress levels. Kasser (2002) asserted that individuals orient to material possessions when they encounter uncomfortable family situations. Researchers have concurred, however, that materialism is not an adaptive coping response to the stressful events of life (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Kasser, 2002). Indeed, research has revealed a negative association between materialism and self-esteem, subjective well-being, quality of life, and general life satisfaction (Kasser, 2002; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) and Kasser (2002) have shown that people who focus on financial success have relatively low levels of well-being and happiness, are more likely to be depressed, to exhibit antisocial behavior, and to suffer from more physical ailments.

In contrast, research in marketing has suggested that materialism may play an instrumental role in helping young adults cope with the stress associated with parental divorce (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 1997; McAlexander, Schouten, & Roberts, 1993). Using the original Rindfleisch et al. (1997) data set, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (1997) conducted a second study of the relations between divorce, materialism, and family stress. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (1997) stated that their original research “failed to provide a conclusive explanation of the underlying dynamics behind this relationship” (p. 89) and accordingly tested the hypothesis that materialism moderates the relation between family structure (divorce) and family stress. Somewhat surprisingly, materialism was found to reduce the stress associated with divorce. Young adults high in materialism seemed to suffer less family stress as a result of divorce than young adults low in materialism did. In addition to suggesting a moderating role of materialism in coping with family disruptions, the findings of Burroughs and Rindfleisch (1997) raised an important ad-

ditional research question: Does materialism have a negative or positive impact on family stress levels?

Understanding the role of materialism in the family structure–stress relation is important for several reasons. First, the present inconsistencies in the literature as to the role of materialism in family disruptions and stressful events such as divorce require further scrutiny, specifically, whether materialism mediates and/or moderates family stress levels and whether it reduces or increases family stress. One of the most important issues regarding materialism that needs to be addressed is whether materialism is a positive or negative trait (Belk, 1985). The ubiquity of divorce and its many negative consequences (Amato, 2000) makes this an important area of inquiry. Additionally, high levels of materialism in contemporary adolescents (Roedder, 1999; Clapp, 1998) suggest the timeliness of such research. A recurrent theme of the modern consumer culture is that happiness can be purchased at the mall, on the Internet, or in a catalogue (Kasser, 2002). In this study, we reexamined the role of materialism in the family structure–stress relation in a sample of adolescents.

MATERIALISM AS A MEDIATOR OF THE FAMILY STRUCTURE–STRESS RELATION

Levels of materialism can vary considerably across individuals. Various antecedents of materialism have been suggested, including (a) perceptions of normlessness, (b) feelings of self-doubt, (c) need for control, (d) susceptibility to normative influence, and (e) socioeconomic status (Chang & Arkin, 2002). Consistent with the results of Chang and Arkin, Kasser (2002) found that feelings of self-doubt may best explain why divorce engenders materialism in adolescents.

Divorce has been shown to create self-doubt in children. Disruptions in families are associated with a number of stressful events including parental conflict, change of residence, loss of friends and relatives, and change in adult caregivers that may lead to feelings of uncertainty in those affected. Changing roles tend to destabilize the self-concept temporarily and may lead to acts of materialism as a means of coping with uncertainty (Chang & Arkin, 2002). Research findings have suggested that some people may look to materialistic acquisitions for a sense of security in the face of self-doubt. As noted by Rindfleisch et al. (1997), various researchers have suggested that divorce precipitates acts of consumption that function as mechanisms for coping with the stress associated with divorce (e.g., McAlexander et al., 1993).

Individuals orient to material possessions when they encounter uncomfortable situations (Kasser, 2002). In two experimental studies, Chang and Arkin (2002) found that people made to doubt themselves expressed greater materialistic values than people not so influenced. Other studies (cf. Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004) have demonstrated that people express greater levels of materialism and

consumption-oriented behavior when reminded of their own mortality. Intimations of mortality increase materialism as an attempt to enhance self-esteem. These experiments suggest that insecurity produces materialistic tendencies. Materialistic behaviors are both a symptom of insecurity and a coping strategy used to alleviate problems and satisfy needs. Materialism is, however, a poor coping strategy that at best only provides short-term relief by way of denial, hedonistic pleasures, and self-isolation. In the long term, materialistic pursuits may deepen feelings of insecurity (Kasser, 2002).

The question remains as to the impact on family stress associated with heightened levels of materialism (precipitated by divorce) in children and adolescents. Kasser and Ahuvia (2002) found that materialism was positively correlated with time spent unhappy. When materialistic values take precedence, more meaningful pursuits such as family and community are neglected (Kasser, 2002). Thus, it appears that materialism may increase family stress levels.

Having studied the relation between consumption and key life transitions such as divorce, McAlexander et al. (1993) concluded that divorce leads to “acts of consumption which function as mechanisms for coping with stress and other negative emotional states” (p. 177). In other words, divorce leads to higher levels of materialism as one attempts to cope with stressful events and life changes associated with divorce. In the end, it would appear that materialism is an outcome of divorce that in turn impacts family stress levels. However, it would appear that higher levels of materialism should intensify the positive relation between divorce and family stress (Kasser, 2002).

MATERIALISM AS A MODERATOR OF THE FAMILY STRUCTURE–STRESS RELATION

Burroughs and Rindfleisch (1997) found that materialism serves as a moderator of the relation between family disruption and family stress. Specifically, Burroughs and Rindfleisch found that young adults (ages 20 to 32) with higher levels of materialistic values experienced lower levels of family stress associated with family disruption compared with young adults who exhibited lower levels of materialistic values. Not only did Burroughs and Rindfleisch cast materialism as a moderating (vs. mediating) variable, but they also found materialism to play a positive (vs. negative) role among young adults who came from divorced families. Rindfleisch and Burroughs (1999) subsequently observed that materialism was positively associated with childhood satisfaction for young adults from disrupted family structures.

Sufficient research has suggested that various family-related factors can engender materialism in children and adolescents that then may be helpful or harmful in dealing with the stress associated with divorce. Most theorists would agree that values such as materialism are strongly influenced

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