



Research Review

# Materialism pathways: The processes that create and perpetuate materialism☆

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## Abstract

Materialism has been examined in many social science disciplines from multiple perspectives. This review synthesizes this extensive literature into two organizing frameworks that describe how materialism develops in children and how materialism is reinforced and perpetuated in adulthood. The major components of the developmental model are the daily event cycle, developmental tasks, cultural influence, and family environment, all of which interact to influence how materialistic a child becomes. The reinforcement model describes how personal qualities that materialists tend to possess make them more vulnerable to threats in daily events, resulting in psychological discomfort. The desire to reduce this discomfort, in conjunction with the transformative powers that materialists ascribe to acquisition, results in actions and outcomes that reinforce materialistic tendencies. Suggestions for furthering the study of materialism are also included.

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## Introduction

Some consumer needs are best met by things. There's no substitute for a good umbrella on a rainy day, a smart phone provides convenience in communication, and nonstick cookware makes after dinner cleanup easier. But products are limited in what they can do for us, and some needs are better met by experiences than by things. The desire for emotional security and tenderness is fulfilled by spending time with family and friends. A sense of competence and achievement can be enhanced by learning to play tennis or how to fix a bicycle flat. People meet their needs with a mix of the material and experiential. A family camping adventure, after all, is more successful if there's a cook stove and tent along for the trip. But some people place a disproportionate emphasis on things to meet their needs, and they highly value acquisition as a means to achieve important life goals. Western culture has labeled these people materialists.

Materialism has been the subject of debate and discourse throughout recorded history (see [Belk, 1983](#); [Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996](#), for reviews). More recently, scholarly research has undertaken empirical examination of materialism. This review synthesizes this burgeoning empirical literature by presenting two frameworks that describe how materialism develops in individuals and how it is sustained by responses to events in daily life. These frameworks focus on materialism in economically developed Western countries. Although materialism exists in countries around the world, regardless of level of economic development ([Belk, 1988](#)), the development and expression of materialism is culture-specific ([Ger & Belk, 1996](#)), and a discussion of these cultural differences is beyond the scope of this review.

## Conceptualizing materialism

Before describing how materialism develops, it is essential to define it. Scholars have used varying conceptualizations of materialism, and the term can mean different things to different people in everyday conversation. To better understand the

materialism construct, [Fournier and Richins \(1991\)](#) examined how it has been conceived in the social science literature and compared those conceptualizations with popular understandings of materialism among American consumers. The authors concluded that materialism is best conceptualized as a value orientation in which materialists place a high value on acquisition as a means to reach important life goals. This value-oriented approach accords well with the first formal characterization of materialism in the consumer behavior literature, which described materialism as the importance a consumer places on worldly possessions ([Belk, 1985](#)).

Following on this foundational work, [Richins and Dawson \(1992\)](#) defined materialism as “the importance a person places on possessions and their acquisition as a necessary or desirable form of conduct to reach desired end states” (p. 307). This definition is widely accepted and is the one used for purposes of this review. Richins and Dawson further refined understanding of the materialism construct by delineating three facets. First, acquisition centrality is the extent to which possessions and acquisition are a central focus of one's life. Second, the pursuit of happiness through acquisition is the belief that acquiring more or different things will increase happiness and well-being. The third facet, possession defined success, is the tendency to gauge the success of oneself and of others by possessions. Thus, materialism is characterized as a set of value-laden beliefs that guide people's daily lives and their consumption decisions.

This conceptualization also allows us to specify what materialism is *not*. It is not a behavior or set of behaviors. More specifically, counter to the impression of some, materialism is not the consumption of luxury goods, nor is it conspicuous consumption. Although materialists may engage in these consumption practices, this relationship is not deterministic. Materialism involves the desire for more, but the nature of that “more” is unspecified.

Furthermore, materialism is not a dichotomy, and the population cannot be divided into materialists and non-materialists. Instead, materialism is a continuum ranging from low to high, and there may be no such thing as a non-materialist. People recognize that goods have value and can be used to improve

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