



Implicit and explicit assessment of materialism: Associations with happiness and depression



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 January 2017

Received in revised form 13 April 2017

Accepted 15 April 2017

Available online 23 April 2017

Keywords:

IAT

Implicit

Materialism

Material

Eudaimonia

Happiness

Depression

ABSTRACT

Research to date have begun to provide evidence that indicate that doing things, or having experiences, is more strongly related with psychological well-being than having material goods. However, most studies have used self-report measures to assess materialism, while implicit measures seem to provide an objective and less biased approach. In the present study we aimed the implicit assessment of the materialism, and the study of the links between psychological well-being and materialism. To reach these aims, a sample of 327 Spanish consumers, aged from 18 to 65 years old filled in some self-report measures, i.e. Pemberton Happiness Index, Major Depression Inventory and the reduced version of Material Values Scale. Furthermore, the same participants completed an Implicit Association Test developed in order to assess implicit materialism. A reliable and valid implicit measure of materialism has been developed. Both explicitly and implicitly measures of materialism were modestly associated, whereas only explicit measures of materialism were associated with self-reported happiness and depression. Specifically, increased happiness and less depressive symptoms were observed in those participants with lower explicit materialism. Our conclusions agree with other previous studies, concluding greater psychological well-being as a consequence of the consumption of experiences, compared to consumption of materialistic goods.

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1. Introduction

“Don't think money does everything or you are going to end up doing everything for money.”

[(Voltaire)]

It was in the fourth century BC, in Aristotle's Greece (2001), when eudemonism arose, an ethical framework that links human happiness to the practice of virtue. After a lot of vicissitudes over the centuries, we can say that this eudaimonic perspective of human well-being has become an empirically validated paradigm in several disciplines for the study of human behavior, especially in the field of Positive Psychology. Under this perspective, there are numerous studies that link human unhappiness with the non-virtuous materialism, as it could have been assessed by Aristotle in its *Nicomachean Ethics* (2001). This is: as far from greed as from prodigality. Thus, the exacerbated attachment that a person may have to money and, in general, to material possessions (Belk, 1985; Dittmar et al., 2014) correlates with lower

happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Luthar, 2003; Oswald & Wu, 2010; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012, Kasser et al., 2014, Lee & Ahn, 2016). Moreover, materialism is also closely related to a higher tendency to depression (Azibo, 2013; Iqbal & Aslam, 2016; Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Mueller et al. 2011; Villardefrancos & Otero-López, 2016), although it's true that there could be mediated by some social and psychological variables (Brown & Gray, 2016; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005; Wang, Liu, Jiang and Song, 2017a; Wang, Liu, Tan and Zheng, 2017b).

Richins and Dawson (1992) defined materialism as “the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states”. Three main dimensions have been proposed by these authors within this construct: a) the centrality of acquisition in the life of people, b) the acquisition understood as the pursuit of happiness, and c) possession-defined success in life. From this theoretical framework, Richins and Dawson (1992) developed their own materialism scale. Furthermore, Kasser (2002) and Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) postulated that materialism is not just a question of beliefs, but a life-style based on acquiring and accumulating goods beyond what is reasonably necessary, which is always difficult to define objectively. Those life-styles more focused in experiences than in the accumulation of material goods would stand aside of this definition. No consistent differences in materialism by

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demographics and socioeconomic variables have been observed in literature to date. Richins and Dawson (1992) detected no significant association with household size, level of education, gender, marital status and income, while they observed a negative relationships with age (so that, older participants were less materialistic). However, Ryan and Dziurawiec (2001) reported that males were more materialistic than females, and Thomas and Millar (2013) showed that people with low socioeconomic status were more materialistic. A recent meta-analysis by Dittmar, Bond, Hurst and Kasser (2014) concluded that the negative impact of materialism on well-being was not reduced by controlling the effect of demographic or socioeconomic moderators.

In this sense, the question is whether there are differences, in terms of psychological well-being, between both kinds of life-styles: having things versus doing things. There are several studies that indicate that doing things, or having experiences, leads better to our hedonic and eudaimonic happiness than having material goods (Carter & Gilovich, 2014; Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Diener, Horwitz & Emmons, 1985; Dunn, Gilbert & Norton, 2011; Dunn & Norton, 2013; Gilovich & Kumar, 2015a; Gilovich & Kumar, 2015b; Howell, Pchelin & Iyer, 2012; Schmitt et al., 2015; Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003). However, this focus contains a problematic assumption: One can 'do things' and be oriented towards material acquisition (indeed, acquiring things is an activity, albeit not one that facilitates happiness). In addition, one can seek material goals through experiential activities—e.g., attempting to achieve fame, status or a reputation. It may be better to frame the distinction in terms of experiences related to non-material vs material goals (similar to Kasser's et al. 2014 distinction between material and non-material aspirations). Apart from this dichotomy between objects and experiences, some mechanisms can explain why experiences lead to increased happiness (Guevarra & Howell, 2015). For example, experiences' consumption is less likely to be related to hedonic adaptation (Armenta et al., 2014; Carter & Gilovich, 2014; Gilovich and Kumar, 2015a). Moreover, a good experience will be recalled better over the time (Peng & Ye, 2015; Howell & Guevarra, 2013). Moreover, experiences allow us to be more in contact with our own identity and personal goals, encourage closer bonds with the self, and at the same time they are less associated with social comparison than objects' acquisition is (Peng & Ye, 2015), which is other happiness antagonist. Experiences also satisfy social and affective needs (Caprariello & Reis, 2013), because those experiences are enjoyed in company of others. In addition to this, experiences continue to be shared with others later as stories to tell and remember, something that is also good for our psychological well-being (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015).

In order to assess materialism, several explicit instruments have been developed (Richins & Dawson, 1992). However, as all self-reported measures of psychological constructs, the explicit assessment presents some problems, i.e. social desirability bias or the assessment of perceived materialism rather than an objective measure of this construct (van de Mortel, 2008). Consequently, it is necessary to explore alternative and complementary pathways, to join implicit and objective measures to classic explicit measurements offered by self-reports. We found a wide array of scales aimed to measure materialism (Richins, 2004; Atay & Sirgy, 2008; Trinh & Phau, 2012; Howell, Pchelin & Iyer, 2012; Sidhu & Foo, 2015), evaluating it as a value or tendency of the consumer and linking it to his/her own psychological well-being and happiness. The reliability and validity of Material Values Scale, developed by Richins and Dawson (1992), have been well-documented. A reduced version of this scale was used in the present study, given its good psychometric properties, as well as its easy administration (Richins, 2004).

Furthermore, one of the most supported models of implicit assessment of psychological constructs is the Implicit Association Test (IAT). This paradigm was developed by Greenwald and Farnham (2000) for the measurement of attitudes and preferences on the basis of reaction times to certain stimuli to which individuals are exposed. According to these authors "the IAT's procedure has the subject give one response to two sets of items that represent a possibly associated concept-

attribute pair and a different response to a second pair of item sets that is selected to complement the first two". IAT has been applied to many psychological and psychosocial variables because of its strength to observe implicit mental associations, providing an objective assessment of automatic processes not affected by conscious processing, which could show more reflective responses and could be biased (e.g. by social desirability). So, IAT has also been used in the study of consumer behavior, with notable predictive validity over explicit assessment, e.g. regarding attitudes to food, health and diets (Maison, Greenwald & Bruin, 2004; Mai et al., 2015), brands and their values (Gattol, Sääksjärvi & Carbon, 2011), or consumption and environment (Tate, Stewart & Daly, 2014). Respect to materialism itself and its bonds with well-being, IAT has been less used than desirable, given its potential for an objective evaluation (Brunel, Tietje & Greenwald, 2004; Gregg & Klymowsky, 2013). In this sense, Schmuck (2001) and Solberg et al. (2004) used the IAT in order to explore the inverse relationship between materialism and well-being. Solberg et al. (2004) exposed to a sample of 36 participants some words related to themselves (e.g. I) and related to others (e.g. them), and "expensive objects" (e.g. diamonds) versus "inexpensive objects" (e.g. flower). They concluded that materialism was negatively associated to well-being. Park and John (2010) also used the IAT in order to observe the relationship between implicit and explicit self-esteem and the different relationships with materialism. They detected a clear link between the discrepancy of their self-esteem assessments (implicit vs explicit) and their attachment to material possessions. So, studies to date encourage the use of the IAT for the implicit and objective measurement of materialism, as well as to examine its relationship with different aspects of well-being, as well as offering a long way to explore yet. As Solberg et al. (2004) pointed out, if we are interested in a deep knowledge of this inverse relationship between materialism and happiness (both hedonic and eudaimonic), the IAT can be a great tool for it. In the present study, we have developed an implicit measurement of materialism, based on IAT paradigm and the definition of materialism by Richins and Dawson (1992), by examining, on the one hand, the associations of expensive objects with positive or negative emotions, and, on the other hand, the associations of eudaimonic actions with positive and negative emotions. So, this implicit measurement of the automatic associations aimed to examine the centrality of objects vs actions for the emotional state of the person. In materialistic people, objects would present a greater importance for emotional state, while in eudaimonic people, actions would be strongly associated with emotional state.

2. Aims and hypothesis

Following suggestions provided by authors like Kasser (2016), among others, in regard of the use of implicit measures of materialism, the first aim is to validate a test to evaluate implicit associations for measuring people's materialism, based on the paradigm of Greenwald and Farnham's IAT (2000), by examining in the participants the associations between words related to expensive objects vs eudaimonic actions and words describing positive vs negative emotions. The second aim is to examine more closely the relationship between materialism and subjective well-being, following the recommendations provided by Peng and Ye (2015), and developing a confirmatory model which integrates the associations between study variables. Our main hypotheses are:

H1. We expected to validate a measurement of IAT for evaluating implicit materialism, along the lines of previous studies measuring attitudes (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000) and the first results given by Solberg et al. (2004).

H2. We also hypothesized no remarkable differences in materialism by demographics and socioeconomic variables, as pointed out Richins and Dawson (1992) and Dittmar et al. (2014).

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