



Short Communication

The role of materialism in self-disclosure within close relationships



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ABSTRACT

Research has reliably shown a negative association between materialism and relationship well-being. This study examined a possible link between materialism and self-disclosure exchange, a process that is central to relationship adjustment. To address this question, we recruited dating couples for a videotaped self-disclosure task. In each session, partners took turns to be a discloser or a listener. Participants' disclosure level (when they were disclosers) and responsiveness level (when they were listeners) were assessed by ratings from the participants, their partner, and trained coders. The results showed that actor's disclosure level was negatively associated with partner's materialism, whereas actor's responsiveness was negatively associated with actor's and partner's materialism. Materialism appears to be related to poor self-disclosure processes within close relationships.

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1. Introduction

Materialism has been shown to relate to negative relationship functioning (Carroll, Dean, Call, & Busby, 2011; Dean, Carroll, & Yang, 2007). This study was proposed to further examine the role of materialism in one important interpersonal process, namely self-disclosure.

2. Materialism and well-being

Materialism is defined as “a set of values and goals focused on wealth, possessions, image, and status” (Kasser, 2016, p. 489). A recent meta-analysis (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014) showed that materialism is consistently associated with poor personal well-being. Importantly, the meta-analysis also revealed that materialistic individuals have poor well-being because they prioritize extrinsic goals that cannot fulfill their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Although close relationships are a vital source of need fulfillment and well-being (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014; Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013), it is clear that materialistic individuals tend to have poor close relationships (Carroll et al., 2011; Dean et al., 2007). This study focused on self-disclosure, as a vehicle to understand how materialism may relate to poor interpersonal functioning.

3. Materialism in self-disclosure: its impact on disclosure level and responsiveness

Self-disclosure process is critical to the development of intimacy and relationship well-being (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994). In particular, we studied self-disclosure level and responsiveness. Self-disclosure level is defined by the extent to which a person tells a partner about his or her intimate feelings, attitudes, experiences (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Responsiveness is defined by the extent to which a person understands, validates, and cares for the partner's (disclosed) needs (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004).

Our first hypothesis is that materialistic individuals are less responsive to their partner's needs. Materialistic individuals tend to value self-promotion over interpersonal bonds (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Li, Lim, Tsai, & O, 2015). As a consequence, materialistic individuals should be less responsive to their partner's needs, given their devaluation of close relationships (Canevello & Crocker, 2010).

When a person expects the partner to be unresponsive to one's disclosed needs, he or she is less willing to self-disclose (Lemay & Melville, 2014; Wood & Forest, 2016). Accordingly, our second hypothesis is that, given that materialistic individuals are less responsive (as predicted in the first hypothesis), their partner should disclose less.

4. Overview of the study

This study recruited dating couples to engage in videotaped self-disclosure interactions, so that we could directly assess the contributions of both partners' materialism in a more controlled setting. Furthermore, participants' self-disclosure level and responsiveness during the interactions were rated by themselves, their partner, and trained coders.

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Therefore, we could test the effect of materialism without sole reliance of self-reports.

Self-report measures of relationship quality and need fulfillment were also included, in an attempt to replicate the established negative associations between materialism and these variables (e.g., Dittmar et al., 2014). Based on the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), we tested if actor's outcome variables could be predicted by actor's materialism (*actor effect*) and partner's materialism (*partner effect*).

5. Method

5.1. Participants

A power analysis was conducted to determine the minimum number of couples needed to carry APIM analyses (Ackerman, Ledermann, & Kenny, 2016). We assumed that (a) the within-dyad correlations of the independent variable (i.e., materialism) and dependent variables were moderate (all $r_s = 0.30$) and that (b) according to our hypotheses, for each dependent variable, only one actor or partner effect of materialism was present. Based on these assumptions, to detect the actor or partner effect (with a moderate magnitude; $\beta = -0.30$), a minimum of 43 couples ($n = 86$) should be recruited to achieve a power of 0.80.

College students were recruited via mass mails and flyers posted in the campus. Forty-seven heterosexual dating couples participated in this study. Two couples were excluded in the analyses, as the self-disclosure exercises were not properly recorded. The final sample consisted of forty-five dating couples ($M_{Age} = 20.63$, $SD = 1.86$, range = 18–26), meeting the minimum requirement. The average relationship length was 18.02 months ($SD = 17.14$; range = 2–77 months).

5.2. Procedures

One couple was recruited for each session. Upon arrival, the partners were assigned to complete questionnaires in separate cubicles. Each participant was asked to nominate one negative event to be disclosed to the partner later in the study. Specifically, the event to be nominated should occur outside the relationship and make the participant feel either sad, anxious, or afraid of.

The couple then engaged in two 10-minute self-disclosure exercises. In the first exercise, one partner was assigned to be a discloser and the other a listener. The discloser then disclosed the event he or she had chosen earlier, whereas the listener freely responded to the discloser's disclosure. In the second exercise, participants switched roles and repeated the exercise. Both exercises were videotaped. Afterward, participants returned to the cubicles and completed the remaining questionnaires.

5.3. Measures

Except for materialism, all measures were administered after the self-disclosure exercises.

5.3.1. Materialism

Participants completed an 18-item material values scale (Richins & Dawson, 1992; e.g., “I like a lot of luxury in my life”) on 5-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

5.3.2. Relationship quality and need fulfillment

Participants completed two scales regarding their perception of relationship quality and need fulfillment within the relationship. Relationship quality was measured by an 18-item perceived relationship quality components inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; e.g., “How satisfied are you with your relationship?”). Need fulfillment was measured by a 9-item need satisfaction scale (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; e.g., “As I am with my partner now, I feel

free to be who I am”). Participants rated these items on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*).

5.3.3. Disclosure level and responsiveness: Self-ratings and partner's ratings

Participants then completed two counter-balanced sets of questions related to the self-disclosure exercises.

In one set of questions, participants reported their experiences as a discloser. Specifically, they reported their own level of disclosure to their partner on three items constructed for this study (“How much did you tell your partner about yourself?”, “How much did you disclose your private experiences?”, and “How honest were you with your partner?”; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Participants also indicated their partner's responsiveness to their own needs on a 6-item responsiveness scale (e.g., “My partner tried to be sensitive to my feelings”; 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*; Canevello & Crocker, 2010).

In the other set of questions, participants reported their experiences as a listener. Specifically, they reported their partner's disclosure level and their own responsiveness to their partner's needs. The same scales were used after changes of the targets (e.g., “How much did your partner tell you about himself or herself?”). Therefore, each participant's disclosure level and responsiveness were assessed by both self-rating and partner's rating.

5.3.4. Disclosure level and responsiveness: ratings by coders

The videotaped self-disclosure was coded by six trained raters. Three coders rated the participants' disclosure level when they took the role of discloser, whereas the other three rated the participants' responsiveness when they took the role of listener. Again, the same scales were used after changes of the targets (e.g., “How much did the discloser tell his or her partner about himself or herself?”).

5.4. Analytic strategy

Given that participants' responses were nested within couples, the statistical dependence was controlled via multilevel analyses with the aid of SPSS Mixed Model (Campbell & Kashy, 2002). As partners of each couple were distinguishable by sex, actor's sex was specified in fixed-effects and random-effects estimates. Based on the APIM (Kenny et al., 2006), we modeled the fixed effects of actor's and partner's materialism (plus actor's sex) simultaneously on actor's outcomes to examine the actor and partner effects of materialism.

6. Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 2 summarizes the APIM analyses. Each participant's disclosure level and responsiveness were independently rated by the participant, his or her partner, and a group of coders. Past research suggested that the ratings from these three sources are important and yet non-redundant markers (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007). Since we did not have any a priori predictions regarding which of these markers allowed more sensitive tests of our hypotheses, we decided to use the average across the three indices for statistical inferences. The analyses for the separate indices are also presented in the table.

Supporting our two hypotheses, analyses showed that, in the self-disclosure exercises, actor's responsiveness was negatively associated with actor's materialism, whereas actor's disclosure level was negatively associated with partner's materialism. Surprisingly, partner's materialism was also negatively related to actor's responsiveness. These overall results demonstrated the roles of materialism on the self-disclosure process.

In addition, replicating the past findings (Dittmar et al., 2014), actor's relationship quality and need fulfillment were negatively related to actor's materialism. Partner's materialism was also negatively related to actor's relationship quality.

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