

Experientialism, Materialism, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Leaf Van Boven

University of Colorado at Boulder

Previous research indicates that materialistic aspirations are negatively associated with happiness and psychological health. Recent research extends these findings by demonstrating that allocating discretionary resources toward life experiences makes people happier than allocating discretionary resources toward material possessions. Respondents to various surveys have indicated that purchases made with the intention of acquiring life experiences make them happier than purchases made with the intention of acquiring material possessions. Thinking about experiential purchases has also been shown to produce more positive feelings than thinking about material purchases. Other studies suggest that experiential purchases make people happier because they are more open to positive reinterpretations, are more resistant to disadvantageous comparisons, and foster successful social relationships more than material purchases.

Most people want to be happy. Almost everyone I know devotes considerable time, energy, and money pursuing happiness, pleasure, and contentment. For many of us, pursuing the “good life” is surprisingly difficult. Despite being professionally and financially successful, we wonder whether we would be happier with more money, a more prestigious job, a bigger house, a newer car, more fashionable clothing, nicer furniture, and so on. Such rumination may be well advised. Among the most intriguing findings of research on subjective well-being is that increases in material goods are not met with corresponding increases in happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Easterlin, 1995).

The question addressed in this article is whether there might be a simple, empirically grounded prescription for allocating discretionary resources in pursuit of happiness. Recent years have seen a tremendous growth in research on the causes and correlates of happiness, or subjective well-being (Diener, 1984). Researchers have also begun to examine the relationships among consumption, consumer aspirations, and well-being. Does this research

suggest a strategy for allocating discretionary resources in the pursuit of happiness?

The central thesis of this article is that investing discretionary resources in life experiences makes people happier than investing discretionary resources in material possessions. Two lines of research support this thesis. First, dispositional materialism is negatively associated with subjective well-being and psychological health. Second, research from my own laboratory indicates that people in general are made happier by spending money with the intention of acquiring life experiences than by spending money with the intention of acquiring material possessions. Preliminary research suggests three reasons why experiential purchases make people happier than material purchases: (a) Experiences are more open to positive reinterpretation, (b) experiences are less prone to disadvantageous comparisons, and (c) experiences are more likely to foster successful social relationships.

Materialism

Epicurus, for instance, wrote, “we regard independence of outward things as a great good . . . so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it” (1966, p. 51). Fromm (1976) echoed these sentiments, criticizing American culture for emphasizing “having,” which prevents self-actualization and happiness, versus “being.” Along similar lines, Ski-

This article was based on a presentation made at the 2004 International Positive Psychology Summit. Portions of the material presented appeared in an earlier article (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leaf Van Boven, Department of Psychology, University of Colorado at Boulder, 345 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0345. E-mail: vanboven@colorado.edu

ovsky (1976) distinguished between “comforts,” which eliminate pains but produce little or no pleasure, and “pleasures,” which are arousing and pleasurable but short lived. Skitovsky claimed that people in industrialized countries—particularly America—pursued comforts to the detriment of pleasures, producing what he termed a “joyless economy.”

The observation that material gains fail to produce lasting increases in happiness has become painfully salient in recent decades, as Americans, in particular, have attained unprecedented levels of material abundance with little or no improvement in happiness (Easterlin, 1995). Frank (1999) observed that across-the-board “increases in our stocks of material goods produce virtually no measurable gains in our psychological or physical well-being. Bigger houses and faster cars, it seems, do not make us any happier” (p. 6).

Several studies confirm that the more people endorse materialistic goals, the less happy and satisfied they are with life (Belk, 1985; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Richins, 1994; Richins & Dawson, 1992). For example, the more people agree with statements such as “Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions” and “Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure,” the less satisfied they are with life (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Similarly, the more people endorse aspirations such as “You will buy things just because you want them” and “You will have a job with high social status,” the lower their self-reported subjective well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; but see Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003, for evidence that the negative association is moderated by income). Several studies have shown that materialism is positively correlated with a variety of psychological ills such as depression, paranoia, and narcissism (Cohen & Cohen, 1996; Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

The negative association between materialism and well-being is all the more disturbing because materialistic people incur substantial costs to pursue their materialistic aspirations. The more materialistic individuals are, the more credit cards they own, the more finance charges are on those credit cards, and the more likely they are to have loans of more than than \$1,000 (Watson, 2003). Taken together, these studies indicate that materialistic people are simply less

happy and less psychologically healthy than nonmaterialistic people.

Because previous research focused on correlations between happiness and materialism, it is not altogether clear whether individual materialism causes diminished well-being, or vice versa, or whether the relationship between materialism and well-being is spurious. It could be, for instance, that lower levels of well-being cause people to be materialistic (failing to find inner sources of happiness, they may turn to external gratification). Extending this research on materialism, Tom Gilovich and I (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) sought to examine whether investing discretionary resources in life experiences makes people happier in general than investing in material possessions.

To Do or to Have?

It should be noted at the outset that the dilemma of how best to invest one’s discretionary income in pursuit of happiness may not apply to everyone. People who have little or no discretionary resources and who cannot meet their basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and security are unlikely to confront questions about how best to spend money in pursuit of happiness (Maslow, 1943). Fortunately, most people in developed countries enjoy a level of financial abundance that affords the luxury of worrying about how best to maximize happiness.

How can one empirically examine whether investing in life experiences makes people happier than investing in material possessions? The most straightforward approach—the one we have adopted in most of our research—is to simply ask people how happy they are made by different investments. A central challenge of this methodology, of course, is to delineate a distinction between experiential and material investments that is both theoretically meaningful and intuitively resonant with people in everyday life. An intuitive, readily recognized distinction would allow people to follow a simple heuristic when deciding how to spend money in pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, the distinction between purchasing a life experience and purchasing a material possession is not always clear cut. Nearly everyone would agree that a Rocky Mountain ski vacation is an experience and that a new watch is a possession. But

what about bicycles and kayaks? Are they material possessions or, literally, vehicles for experiences?

Although these ambiguities create some interpretive difficulties, they do not make the distinction meaningless. Other researchers have profitably employed distinctions with similar ambiguities. Some, for example, distinguish between hedonic purchases (those made with the intention of experiencing pleasure) and utilitarian purchases (those made with the intention of achieving practical aims; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Other researchers distinguish between intrinsic goals, which express “desires congruent with actualizing and growth tendencies natural to humans,” and extrinsic goals, which “depend on the contingent reactions of others” (Kasser & Ryan, 1996, p. 280). These distinctions, like the distinction between experiential and material purchases, can be ambiguous. Is a high-powered gas grill a hedonic or utilitarian purchase? Does exercising satisfy intrinsic goals for health or extrinsic goals to be physically attractive? Despite such ambiguities, these distinctions are reliable, are readily recognized, and have proved useful to researchers. Similarly, the results of our studies indicate that the distinction between experiential and material purchases is reliable, readily recognized, widely shared, and therefore a theoretically and practically meaningful distinction.

In a series of surveys, respondents were asked to think of experiential and material purchases and to indicate how happy the purchases make them (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). *Experiential purchases* were defined as those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one encounters, lives through, and “consumes.” *Material purchases* were defined as those made with the primary intention of acquiring a material possession: a tangible object physically retained in one’s possession. This intention-based distinction allows people to decide for themselves whether purchases are experiential or material. It therefore allows for the possibility that a particular purchase (e.g., a bicycle) could be defined as an experience by one person (being able to ride Colorado canyon roads) and as a material possession by another person (adding to one’s collection of high-end Italian bicycles).

National Survey

In a national telephone survey, respondents were solicited through random-digit dialing (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, Study 2). Among the approximately 100 questions included in the survey, most of which concerned financial planning, respondents were asked to think of an experiential purchase and a material purchase they had made during their lifetime with “the aim of increasing your happiness.” Respondents were then asked, “When you think about these two purchases, which makes you happier?” They answered this question by selecting “my experiential purchase,” “my material purchase,” “not sure,” or “decline to answer.”

Answers to this question, grouped by various demographic categorizations, are displayed in Table 1. Respondents’ answers yielded three important points. First, participants were overall more likely to indicate that their experiential purchase made them happier than their material purchase (57%) than they were to indicate that their material purchase made them happier than their experiential purchase (34%). Second, although there was some variability among demographic groups, members of nearly every group were more likely to indicate that experiences made them happier than they were to indicate the reverse. People more than 55 years old, single people, and those living in rural environments were all less likely than their counterparts to endorse experiential purchases; however, individuals in these categories were still more likely to endorse experiential purchases than to endorse material purchases. Finally, as can be seen in Figure 1, people’s household income was negatively correlated with their propensity to endorse experiential purchases. This pattern is not surprising given that individuals with very limited incomes presumably must allocate most of their resources toward satisfying basic needs.

These demographic differences invite speculation. Although they are intriguing, however, care should be taken not to overinterpret these results. Because respondents did not specify exactly what they spent their money on, it is not clear whether these demographic differences represent different evaluations of similar types of purchases or different types of purchases.

Table 1
Percentages of Respondents in Various Demographic Categories Who Indicated That Their Experiential Purchases Made Them Happier Than Their Material Purchases and Percentages Indicating the Reverse

Demographic category	Type of purchase (%)	
	Experiential	Material
Age (years)		
21–34 (350)	59	36
35–54 (645)	58	31
55–69 (268)	49	38
Employment		
Employed full or part-time (941)	58	33
Retired or unemployed (218)	47	39
Students and homemakers (102)	67	25
Ethnicity		
White (1,000)	58	33
Black/African American (133)	53	36
Asian/Pacific Islander (17)	47	29
Other/decline to answer (113)	46	42
Gender		
Male (591)	51	38
Female (672)	62	30
Marital status		
Single, separated, or divorced (336)	60	32
Married or living together (895)	56	34
Political affiliation		
Democrat (418)	55	35
Republican (454)	63	29
Independent (267)	57	33
Region		
East (288)	59	33
South (411)	55	35
Midwest (295)	57	32
West (267)	56	35
Residential environment		
Urban (363)	56	35
Suburban (654)	59	31
Rural (246)	49	40

Note. From “To Do or to Have? That Is the Question,” by L. Van Boven and T. Gilovich, 2003, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, p. 1197. Copyright 2003 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of respondents in each demographic category ($N = 1,263$). Respondents within each demographic category who declined to answer are not included. The remaining percentages of respondents in each demographic category were unsure whether experiential or material purchases made them happier.

Establishing the reasons for these differences, I hope, will be an active topic in future research.

Recent Purchases

In another survey, we examined whether people report not only that experiential purchases make them happier than material purchases but also that experiential purchases are better financial investments (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, Study 1). University students were asked to describe and evaluate either their most recent experiential purchase or their most recent material purchase that cost at least \$100 and that made them happy. As with the national survey, students rated their experiential purchase as making them happier and contributing more to their overall happiness in life than their material purchase. Importantly, respondents also rated experiential purchases as better financial investments than material purchases: Relative to their material purchase, respondents rated their experiential purchase as “money better spent,” and they were less likely to say that the money could have been better spent elsewhere.

Respondents’ purchase descriptions in this survey afford an examination of people’s intuitive definitions of experiential and material purchases. The different types of purchases described are displayed in Table 2. As can be seen, there is very little overlap between the types of purchases described as experiential and the types of purchases described as material. In fact, the most frequently described category of experiences (fees and admissions) was described by only one person as a material purchase, and the most frequently described category of material purchases (clothing and jewelry) was described by only one person as an experiential purchase. This clear differentiation between the two types of purchase descriptions suggests a shared intuitive definition of experiential and material purchases.

This shared definition was corroborated by the ratings of “outsiders.” These people, who did not describe their own purchases, read purchase descriptions generated by respondents to the main survey without knowing whether a purchase was originally described as experiential or material. They then rated, on the basis of the definitions described earlier, the extent to which each purchase was material or experiential. Outsiders rated purchases originally de-

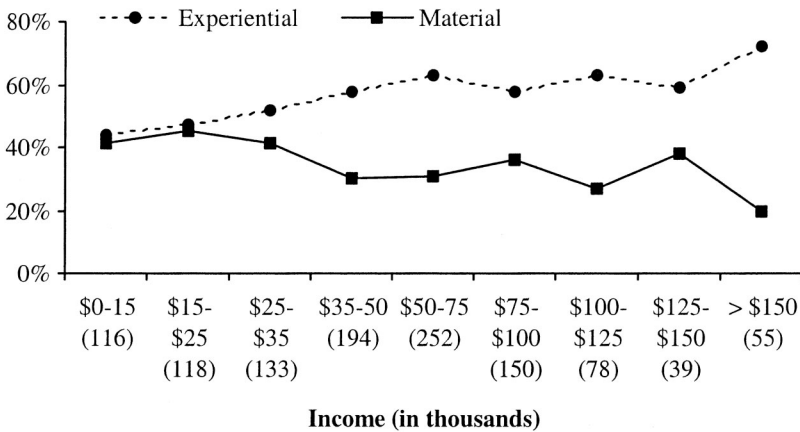


Figure 1. Percentages of respondents in the Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) study who had different levels of income and who indicated that their experiential or material purchase made them happier. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of respondents in each income category; the 127 respondents who were either not sure of their income category or declined to answer are not included. The remaining percentages of respondents in each category were not sure whether their experiential or material purchase made them happier.

scribed as experiential as substantially more experiential than purchases originally described as material. The fact that outsiders readily distinguished between experiential and material purchases is important, because outsiders have no personal intentions regarding the purchases. This finding suggests that experiential and material properties are somewhat inherent to the

purchases themselves and are not totally based on idiosyncratic categorizations.

One reasonable critique of the results of the national and recent purchases surveys is that the results were due largely to socially desirable responding. Because there is a negative stereotype associated with materialistic people (Richins & Dawson, 1992), respondents may have been reluctant to trumpet the value of their material possessions. Such concerns were diminished in the recent purchases survey, because respondents were never asked to directly compare their experiential and material purchases. They simply evaluated each purchase. Still, social desirability concerns would be more substantially diminished if people were never directly asked to evaluate how they felt about their purchases.

Table 2
Recent Purchase Survey: Percentages of Experiential and Material Purchases in Different Categories

Purchase category	Type of purchase (%)	
	Experiential	Material
Beauty spas and products	4	2
Books and compact discs	0	2
Clothing and jewelry	2	62
Dining	17	0
Fees and admissions (to concerts, ski slopes, etc.)	43	2
Televisions, stereo, and computer equipment	0	26
Travel	32	0
Other	2	6

Note. From "To Do or to Have? That Is the Question," by L. Van Boven and T. Gilovich, 2003, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, p. 1196. Copyright 2003 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

Moods and Memories

Many researchers assume that people can accurately report their own subjective well-being (it is subjective after all; Larsen, Diener, & Emmons, 1985; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Other researchers criticize this assumption, noting that contextual factors, such as question framing or transient moods, can influence self-reported happiness and life satisfaction (e.g., Schwarz & Strack, 1999). Some researchers

therefore advocate moment-to-moment reports of experienced feelings rather than summary evaluations of feelings (Kahneman, 1999; Stone, Shiffman, & DeVries, 1999). With this critique in mind, we conducted an experiment to examine whether thinking about experiential purchases causes people to experience more positive feelings than thinking about material purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, Study 3).

University students wrote a detailed description of either an experiential or a material purchase. Then, approximately 1 week later, they were asked to read and contemplate their purchase description. At both the initial and the follow-up sessions, students reported their current, momentary feelings by rating their current mood (as good or bad and as happy or sad) and by completing the Affectometer 2 (Kammann & Flett, 1983). Consistent with previous survey results, students experienced more positive feelings after thinking about their experiential purchase than after thinking about their material purchase. These results indicate that the experience of contemplating experiential purchases is more positive than the experience of contemplating material purchases.

The fact that thinking about experiences places people in a better mood than thinking about material possessions provides further evidence that people's endorsement of their experiences is not entirely due to socially desirable responding. A report of one's mood is simply that: a report of how one feels at the moment. It is not a report of the happiness afforded by one's experiences or possessions. Thus, there is no reason for people to shade their true feelings because experiential purchases may be more socially desirable than material purchases.

Why Experiences Satisfy

As is the case with many psychological phenomena, the hedonic superiority of experiential over material purchases is multiply determined. As mentioned earlier, there are at least three classes of reasons why experiences are more gratifying than material purchases: First, experiences are more prone to positive reinterpretations; second, experiences suffer less from disadvantageous comparisons; and, third, experiences are more likely to foster successful social relationships.

Experiences Improve With Time

A few years ago, before I moved to Boulder, Colorado, my friends and I attended a conference in Denver. We spent a day hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park. What had promised to be a splendid hike turned into a near disaster. A beautifully sunny June day turned stormy—first rain, then thunder and lightning, followed by a blanket of snow—and we were nearly lost in the wilderness.

Objectively, this was not a fun hike. My moment-to-moment experience was not pleasant. Nevertheless, I have a very favorable retrospective evaluation of this trip. It was a highlight of that summer. I am glad I did it.

Experiences are often like this. They often give us pleasure in retrospect—in the memories we revisit and in the stories we tell—even when they were unpleasant at the time. As one forgets the incidental annoyances and distractions that detract from the online, momentary enjoyment of an experience, one's memory of an experience can be sharpened, leveled, and "spun" so that the experience seems better in retrospect than it actually was (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997).

It is hard to think of material possessions that exhibit the same feature. One of the central conclusions of research on subjective well-being is that people adapt to material advances, and they fail to provide enduring pleasure (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). In the words of a respondent to one survey, "Material possessions, they sort of become part of the background; experiences just get better with time."

One important reason why experiences improve with time more than material possessions is that experiences are more open to favorable abstract construals than material possessions. Visiting a museum, for example, may have more favorable higher level meanings (e.g., "learning" or "becoming cultured") than a new shirt. These deeper meanings may figure more prominently in people's construal of the museum visit from a temporal distance than in the here and now. Research has shown that people tend to construe objects in terms of their higher level features when adopting a temporally distant perspective but tend to construe them in terms of lower level features when adopting a temporally proximal perspective (Trope &

Liberman, 2003). Attending an academic conference, for example, is construed more abstractly and favorably in the distant future (it is about advancing science and gaining knowledge) than when the conference is to take place in the near future (it is about packing bags and preparing talks). As a result, objects that have more favorable abstract features than peripheral features are evaluated more favorably from a temporally distant perspective than from a temporally proximate perspective. This appears to be truer of experiences than of material possessions.

In one study, participants considered various choices between pairs of experiential and material purchases (e.g., going out to dinner and getting a new shirt; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, Study 4). For each pair of purchases, participants indicated which would make them happier. While doing so, they adopted either a temporally distant perspective (imagining facing the choices 1 year in the future or 1 year in the past) or a temporally proximate perspective (imagining facing the choice the following day). Participants were more likely to indicate that experiential purchases would make them happier when adopting a temporally distant perspective than when adopting a temporally proximate perspective. This finding suggests that experiential purchases have more favorable abstract features than material purchases but equally or less appealing peripheral features. As a result, experiential purchases are relatively more desirable when one adopts a temporally distant perspective than when one adopts a temporally proximal perspective.

Experiences Are Resistant to Disadvantageous Comparisons

Social scientists have often observed that social comparisons can diminish the subjective value of objectively positive events (Brickman, 1975; Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Easterlin, 1995; Frank, 1985, 1999). Receiving a raise, owning a home, or buying a new automobile feels less rewarding—and may even be disappointing—when other people receive larger raises, own bigger homes, and drive nicer cars. We may be fully aware that our brand new luxury, German, all-wheel-drive vehicle is high quality. But we also glean pleasure from the fact

that our Audi is nicer than our next-door neighbor's Honda Civic.

In contrast to material possessions, experiences seem resistant to social comparisons. Consider the results of a survey in which respondents were confronted with a series of choices regarding different types of hypothetical worlds they would prefer to live in (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). In one question, respondents were asked whether they would prefer a yearly income of \$50,000 while others earned \$25,000 or a yearly income of \$100,000 while others earned \$200,000 (assuming that prices, and therefore purchasing power, were the same). Approximately half of the respondents reported that they would prefer the “positional outcome”: earning twice as much as their peers (a positional advantage) but less absolute money (an absolute disadvantage). Note that there is no ambiguity in how much a given salary is worth. Clearly, \$100,000 is twice as much as \$50,000. Nevertheless, many respondents would rather have earned less money if it meant earning more than their coworkers.

Now consider the responses to a different question in the same survey. Respondents were asked whether they would prefer to have 2 weeks of vacation annually while others had 1 week or whether they would prefer to have 4 weeks of vacation while others had 8 weeks. This time, only 15% of respondents reported that they would prefer the positional outcome. Unlike the results involving salary, most of the respondents (85%) would rather have had a longer vacation, even if their coworkers would have twice as much vacation time as they would. The differential appeal of the positional outcome for salary versus vacations suggests that experiences (i.e., vacations) are resistant to status concerns and therefore are resistant to disadvantageous social comparisons.

Just as social comparisons can diminish the subjective value of material possessions, so too can counterfactual comparisons. The things we buy frequently fall short of our (often idealized) expectations, and few things we buy are perfect. The large screen TV's picture may be less clear than we hoped, or the beach's sand may not be as fine as we imagined. When purchases do not meet our expectations, we may be prompted to compare what we actually have with our (unrealistic) expectations of what we hoped to have, and these comparisons are likely to diminish our

happiness (Schwartz, 2004; Weaver & Brickman, 1974). Similarly, if we had considered different types of purchases, then the imperfections of what we actually have may prompt us to make counterfactual comparisons with what we could have had, producing disappointment and regret (Roese, 1997).

Experiences seem to be less prone than material possessions to counterfactual thinking, disappointment, and regret, as illustrated by a study in which participants imagined purchasing an experience or a material possession that turned out badly (e.g., a digital camera that took bad pictures or bland food at a restaurant; Van Boven, Roese, & Alvero, 2004). Participants who imagined purchasing a disappointing experience reported that they were less likely to experience regret and were more likely to make a similar purchase in the future than those who imagined purchasing a disappointing material possession.

It is not entirely clear why experiences are less prone than material possessions to disadvantageous social comparisons and counterfactual thinking. One possibility is that experiences are regarded as more unique than material possessions, and this perceived uniqueness inhibits comparative processes. Comparing the attributes of televisions, articles of clothing, or vehicles may be easier than comparing the attributes of fine meals, vacations, or mountain hikes. The veracity of this conjecture is an open question for future research.

Experiences Have More Social Value

For a variety of reasons, experiences are more likely than material possessions to foster social relationships. One reason is that experiences are inherently more social than material possessions. We go out to dinner, ski, and travel with other people. Buying and wearing sweaters and shoes and purchasing stereos are more likely to be solitary activities.

A second reason is that, because there is a negative stereotype of people who are materialistic (Richins, 1994; Richins & Dawson, 1992) and a positive stereotype of people who are "experiential" (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2004), spending money on experiences may portray the consumer in a more favorable light than spending money on material possessions. Consider the results of a study in which participants

read and evaluated profiles of two university students (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2004). Amid other information about these students' preferences and beliefs (e.g., whether they preferred skiing or snowboarding, Apple computers or PCs, or analog or digital watches), participants learned that one student invested most of his or her "entertainment dollars" in material possessions, whereas the other invested in life experiences. When later asked about their impressions of the two students, participants reported that they had formed more favorable impressions of the experiential student than of the materialistic student.

The negative stereotype of materialistic people is sufficiently strong to influence people's impressions of each other even in live, face-to-face conversations. In another study, participants had a conversation with a student they did not know (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2004). On the basis of random assignment, participants were asked to discuss either experiential or material purchases they had been happy with. After the conversation, participants who discussed experiential purchases, relative to those who discussed material purchases, reported a more favorable impression of their partner, liked their partner more, were more interested in pursuing a friendship with their partner, and enjoyed the conversation more.

That people enjoyed their experiential conversation more than their material conversation highlights a final reason why experiences foster social relations more than material possessions: Experiences are more fun to talk about. Experiences, more than material possessions, tend to have a typical narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end. Experiences are thus a better source of entertaining conversation than material possessions. To the extent that people like others with whom they have entertaining conversations more than those with whom they do not, this greater "story value" of experiences will foster social relationships.

Conclusion

The research reviewed here indicates that materialistic pursuits pose a barrier to the "good life." The more people aspire to materialistic goals, the less satisfied they are with life, and the more at risk they are for developing psychological disorders. Furthermore, research from

my own laboratory indicates that allocating discretionary resources in pursuit of life experiences makes people happier than pursuing the acquisition of material possessions.

Although the research reviewed here paints a clear picture that experiential pursuits foster happiness and materialistic pursuits diminish happiness, this research is preliminary and raises at least as many questions as it answers. For one, does continued investment in experiences increase happiness over the long term? Several researchers have suggested that people have a (genetically based) happiness set point (Headey & Wearing, 1989; Lucas, Clark, Yan-nis, & Diener, 2004; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996) that might pose a barrier to long-term increases in happiness through experiential pursuits. However, other researchers have found that interventions can increase happiness over the long term (Fordyce, 1977, 1983; Lichter, Haye, & Kammann, 1980; Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002), so it is plausible that increasing experiential consumption would increase happiness. Whether avoiding materialistic pursuits and increasing experiential pursuits increases long-term happiness is, of course, an important question for future research.

Another question is whether individuals' materialism moderates the hedonic superiority of experiential over material purchases. On the one hand, materialistic people might garner less value than nonmaterialistic people from experiential pursuits. For highly materialistic people, material possessions might fulfill personally relevant goals, increasing their happiness. On the other hand, experiential purchases might make materialistic people happier indirectly. Even a materialistic person would presumably be better liked after describing an experiential purchase than after describing a material purchase. And even a materialistic person would benefit from having successful social relationships.

Finally, would informing people about the results of research on materialism and the associated prescriptions for increasing happiness—to avoid materialistic goals and to increase experiential consumption—lead them to change their consumption behavior? One would certainly hope so. Unfortunately, there are at least two psychological barriers to reigning in materialistic pursuits. First, people may be somewhat blind to their own materialistic ambitions. Although we can easily see that our

coworker's penchant for buying the newest, most expensive technological gizmos derives from her materialistic desires, it may seem that we acquire our own laptops, cell phones, and personal digital assistants out of nonmaterialistic desires to make work more efficient and to maintain contact with friends and family. Materialistic pursuits must be identified to be avoided. Blindness to our own materialism may inhibit such avoidance.

A second psychological barrier to limiting materialistic pursuits is that people (Americans, anyway) seem to have a luxurious definition of "needs." Our sense of necessity can be influenced by social comparisons (Richins, 1995) and adaptation. We often talk about "needing" new, fashionable clothing (to dress appropriately at work), newer and larger vehicles (to haul the family and drive safely in inclement weather), and so on. Clearly, consumers should not forgo basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing in pursuit of life experiences. But many material possessions that fail to meet objective definitions of necessities may satisfy more lenient subjective definitions. Before consumers forgo experiences to meet their basic needs, they might take a critical look at how pressing their "needs" truly are.

References

- Belk, R. W. (1985). Trait aspects of living in the material world. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12, 265–280.
- Brickman, P. (1975). Adaptation level determinants of satisfaction with equal and unequal outcome distributions in skill and chance situations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32, 191–198.
- Brickman, P., & Campbell, D. T. (1971). Hedonic relativism and planning the good society. In M. H. Appley (Ed.), *Adaptation level theory* (pp. 287–302). New York: Academic Press.
- Brickman, P., Coates, D., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1978). Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 917–927.
- Cohen, P., & Cohen, J. (1996). *Life values and adolescent mental health*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95, 542–575.
- Diener, E., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2002). Will money increase subjective well-being? *Social Indicators Research*, 57, 1119–1169.

- Easterlin, R. (1995). Will raising the incomes of all increase the happiness of all? *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 27, 35–47.
- Epicurus. (1966). Letter to Monoseceus. In J. L. Saunders (Ed.), *Greek and Roman philosophy after Aristotle* (pp. 49–52). New York: Free Press.
- Fordyce, M. W. (1977). Development of a program to increase happiness. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 24, 511–521.
- Fordyce, M. W. (1983). A program to increase happiness: Further studies. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 30, 483–498.
- Frank, R. H. (1985). *Choosing the right pond: Human behavior and the quest for status*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frank, R. H. (1999). *Luxury fever: Why money fails to satisfy in an era of success*. New York: Free Press.
- Frederick, S., & Loewenstein, G. (1999). Hedonic adaptation. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 302–329). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fromm, E. (1976). *To have or to be?* New York: Harper & Row.
- Headey, B., & Wearing, A. (1989). Personality, life events, and subjective well-being: Toward a dynamic equilibrium model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 731–739.
- Kahneman, D. (1999). Objective happiness. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 3–25). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kammann, R., & Flett, R. (1983). Affectometer 2: A scale to measure current level of general happiness. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 35, 259–265.
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. (1993). A dark side of the American dream: Correlates of financial success as a central life aspiration. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 410–422.
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. (1996). Further examining the American dream: Differential correlates of intrinsic and extrinsic goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 280–287.
- Kivetz, R., & Simonson, I. (2002). Self-control for the righteous: Toward a theory of precommitment to indulgence. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, 199–217.
- Larsen, R. J., Diener, E., & Emmons, R. A. (1985). An evaluation of subjective well-being measures. *Social Indicators Research*, 17, 1–18.
- Lichter, S., Haye, K., & Kammann, R. (1980). Increasing happiness through cognitive retraining. *New Zealand Psychologist*, 9, 57–64.
- Lucas, R. E., Clark, A. E., Yannis, G., & Diener, E. (2004). Unemployment alters the set point for life satisfaction. *Psychological Science*, 15, 8–13.
- Lykken, D., & Tellegen, A. (1996). Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon. *Psychological Science*, 7, 186–189.
- Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Social Indicators Research*, 46, 137–155.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370–396.
- Mitchell, T. R., Thompson, L., Peterson, E., & Cronk, R. (1997). Temporal adjustments in the evaluation of events: The “rosy view.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 33, 421–448.
- Nickerson, C., Schwarz, N., Diener, E., & Kahneman, D. (2003). Zeroing in on the dark side of the American dream: A closer look at the negative consequences of the goal for financial success. *Psychological Science*, 14, 531–536.
- Richins, M. L. (1994). Special possessions and the expression of material values. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21, 522–533.
- Richins, M. L. (1995). Social comparison, advertising, and consumer discontent. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 98, 593–607.
- Richins, M. L., & Dawson, S. (1992). A consumer values orientation for materialism and its measurement: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19, 303–316.
- Roese, N. J. (1997). Counterfactual thinking. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121, 133–148.
- Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Schwarz, N., & Strack, F. (1999). Reports of subjective well-being: Judgmental processes and their methodological implications. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 61–84). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Sheldon, K. M., Kasser, T., Smith, K., & Share, T. (2002). Personal goals and psychological growth: Testing an intervention to enhance goal-attainment and personality integration. *Journal of Personality*, 70, 5–31.
- Skitovsky, T. (1976). *The joyless economy: The psychology of human satisfaction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Solnick, S. J., & Hemenway, D. (1998). Is more always better? A survey on positional concerns. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 37, 373–383.
- Stone, A. A., Shiffman, S. S., & DeVries, M. W. (1999). Ecological momentary assessment. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 26–39). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2003). Temporal construal. *Psychological Review*, 110, 403–421.

- Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*, 1193–1202.
- Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2004). *The social costs of materialism*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Colorado, Boulder.
- Van Boven, L., Roese, N. J., & Alvero, C. (2004). [Counterfactual thoughts, regret, and disappointment with experiential and material purchases]. Unpublished raw data.
- Watson, J. J. (2003). The relationship of materialism to spending tendencies, savings, and debt. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, *24*, 723–739.
- Weaver, D., & Brickman, P. (1974). Expectancy, feedback, and disconfirmation as independent factors in outcome satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *30*, 420–428.

Received September 25, 2004

Accepted September 26, 2004 ■