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Deconstructing materialism – towards a better understanding of its connections with well-being

Abstract: According to the most popular conceptualization of materialism by Richins and Dawson it consists of three components: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success. They are usually combined and an overall indicator of materialism is used commonly in various studies. In the article the three components are examined separately. Differences in their nature are revealed in a theoretical analysis, whereas in two empirical studies the ways they connect with well-being are presented. The results show that the overall materialism explains much less variance of well-being than the three components taken separately. Of the three the possession-defined happiness is the most detrimental to all aspects of well-being. The possession-defined success does not connect with well-being at all. Finally, acquisition centrality elevates hedonic and psychological well-being. The conclusion is that the modest effect of materialism on well-being, usually identified in various studies, is probably at least partly due to conflicting forces existing within the construct.

Keywords: well-being, materialism

Introduction

The most popular conceptualization of materialism in social sciences, by Marsha Richins and Scott Dawson (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 2004), states that materialism is a value that directs people's choices and behaviors (not only connected with consumption), and influences the way people structure their lives and approach various situations. Overall materialism combines three components. The first is acquisition centrality, i.e. placing possessions and their acquisition in the center of one's life, the second – acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, i.e. believing that possessions and their acquisition are essential to one's happiness, and the third – possession-defined success, i.e. considering possession as a criterion for judging one's own and other people's achievements in life. Since these three aspects of materialism correlate – moderately, but significantly (cf. Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 2004; Górnik-Durose, 2016) – they are usually combined and an overall index of materialism is used in numerous analyses. Consequently materialism is treated commonly as a single construct, despite the fact that initially it has been conceptualized as multidimensional. Very few researchers have made an effort to deconstruct

it and examine its three facets separately. Recently only Segev, Shahom and Gavish (2015), while analyzing the antecedents and consequences of the three dimensions of materialism, showed differences in connections between each component and various psychological phenomena, e.g. life satisfaction and innovativeness were associated positively to the centrality component and negatively to happiness, shopping time was positively connected with overall materialism and the centrality component, but negatively with the happiness component, negative affect positively correlated only with possession-defined happiness and was not associated to the remaining two aspects of materialism and overall materialism.

One of the most prominent concerns among scholars in their studies on materialism relates to its connection with happiness and well-being. This relationship has been investigated for almost 30 years. The mounting results of the relevant studies have been summarized in a meta-analysis conducted by Dittmar et al. (2014). The results showed modest negative associations between scores from various measures of materialism and various measures of well-being (the average effect was $-.19$). Although the authors included different measures of materialism in the meta-analysis, in the case of materialism as a value (as

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conceptualized by Richins and Dawson, 1992), they took into consideration only the overall index, thus it is not clear if all components of materialism contribute to this detrimental effect in the same way and to the same extent. The different effects of the three aspects of materialism on well-being had been mentioned in other studies (e.g. Ahuvia & Wong, 2002; Swinyard, Kau, & Phua, 2001; Roberts & Clement, 2007; Pieters, 2013; Segev, Shoham, & Gavish, 2015; Górnik-Durose, 2019), but it was never a main issue, it emerged usually as a by-product of other investigations.

Hence the studies presented in this article concentrate specifically on the neglected issue of the unique contribution of the component of materialism to well-being. The empirical investigations are preceded by a theoretical analysis of the three domains which aims to reveal the differences in their nature and create a theoretical background for further enquiry. The results demonstrate that using the overall materialism index narrows the chances to explain the complex materialism – well-being association.

The psychological nature of the three components of materialism

Materialism relates to people's desire to acquire and possess material assets. According to Richins and Dawson (1992) acquisition centrality, possession-defined happiness and possession-defined success are three facets of materialism that are a unified expression of a high valuation of material goods. However their psychological nature is different. The differences are evident in the context of various functions that material goods fulfill in human lives.

The first component of materialism – acquisition centrality – refers generally to utilitarian benefits as well as comfort and pleasure derived from buying and using things, to distaste for material simplicity and preferences for luxury. Richins and Dawson (1992) point out that the roots of this component are in understanding materialism in terms of a life-style in which the main purpose of life is a high level of consumption. The high level of consumption provides meaning to life and is an aim for daily endeavors (Daun, 1983). According to the more extreme version of such thinking, expressed by Bredemeier and Toby (1960), materialists worship things, and their love for possessions structures their lives and orientates their behaviors. However the base for such “love” is not clearly explained by Richins and Dawson (1992). Leaving aside some ideological views about consumption and possessing material goods, it has to be said that indisputably material possessions offer a lot of utilitarian and hedonic profits; therefore acquiring them may provide real advantages to their owners. Even the “high priests” of anti-materialism admit: “Certainly each of us has enjoyed a fine glass of wine, a trip to an exotic location, or the clarity of music through high-quality stereo speakers – all experiences that are, to say the least, facilitated by having money” (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004, p. 227). Pieters (2013) suggests that acquisition centrality is in fact the only

component of materialism which may be intrinsically motivated, because it expresses the sheer interest and joy of acquiring and owning material things of certain properties, which may be a source of hedonic pleasure and aesthetic feelings. Possession centrality is also connected with an inclination to luxury, which – as Hudders and Pandelaere (2012) claim – enhances positive and weakens negative moods and increases satisfaction with life.

As Nagpaul and Pang (2017) point out, the concentration on material assets may even be effective in satisfying the basic psychological needs for competence and relatedness (see self-determination theory, Deci & Ryan, 2000). Nowadays technologically advanced material goods are necessary to maintain and improve effectiveness in fulfilling everyday tasks and demands. They provide an individual with the opportunity to practice or expand personal skills. Material assets may also foster social relationships – some goods (e.g. computers, smartphones) may be an effective means of communication between people, and money may facilitate social activities as eating out, going to a concert and travelling. Furthermore Rindfleisch and Burroughs (2004) suggest that consumption can be a liberating and meaningful, experiential and functional collective practice within so-called “brand communities” (i.e. groups of customers who form highly integrated and emotionally supportive communities based on their shared consumption of a branded product) that provide means for building and maintaining personal identity (see also Shrum et al., 2013).

The second aspect of materialism – possession-defined happiness – in contrast to the first one, involves feelings of inadequacy and lack of fulfillment connected with not having the things one desires. It concentrates not on the joy of having possessions as in the case of acquisition centrality, but on the pains of not having things that are perceived as adequate and necessary to be happy. In relation to this component Richins and Dawson (1992) point out that people generally are involved in the pursuit of happiness through various means, but materialists tend to seek happiness mainly through the acquisition of material goods. They expect acquisition to elevate their mood and satisfaction with life. Unfortunately this expectation is usually not realized. The desire for goods can be insatiable, because the pleasures of a new acquisition are quickly forgotten and replaced with a craving for more. As the authors state – referring to Brickman and Campbell (1971) and Scitovsky (1976) – this cycle leads inevitably to dissatisfaction and discontent. Furthermore Solberg, Diener and Robinson (2003) suggest that fulfilling material desires is more difficult than achieving other goals, because material goals seem to be more distant and they move away constantly when being approached, therefore material satisfaction is much more difficult to achieve than satisfaction in other domains (see also Sirgy, 1998). Thus, the belief that happiness is inherent in possessing material goods, especially when confronted with reality, leads to serious disappointment and frustration – material goods cannot bring happiness and the scientific evidence for it is massive (cf. Graham, 2009; Czapiński, 2017).

The third component of materialism – possession-defined success – expresses the admiration for wealth and luxury in connection with the belief that material goods are an appropriate and effective means of signaling social status and success achieved in life. Materialistic measures of one's personal and societal characteristics seem to be widely adopted by members of consuming societies. In cultures that use material goods extensively as a crucial part of a communication code, material things of proper brands and varieties deliver appropriate messages, project a desired self-image and identify one as a participant in an imagined perfect life (Campbell, 1987; Dittmar, 2008). As long as the code is approved, widespread and easily understood, the acquired possessions would be considered as an accepted and effective, effortlessly accessible criterion for judging the "goodness" of a person within consumer society. In contrast to the belief that material things bring happiness, the belief that success is measured by accumulated possessions can be accurate, especially if it is linked to actual ownership (Garðarsdóttir, Dittmar, & Aspinall, 2009), because feelings of success are a realistic outcome of money-making and a high level of consumption (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). On the other hand such a belief accompanied by a failure to do well in the material realm may be a source of serious frustration and disappointment.

Thus, summarizing the differences between the three facets of materialism, the first component – acquisition centrality – refers to certain behavioral tendencies, general life style and consumption preferences connected with the fact that material goods serve as effective tools supporting personal effectiveness, mastery, social identification and belonging, and may be a source of hedonic pleasure and aesthetic feelings. The latter two refer to people's beliefs related to the anticipated psychological and social utility of material possessions and expectations as to what should happen when acquiring certain goods. In one instance goods ought to bring happiness, in the other – construct, express and confirm a proper image. The possession-defined happiness component is filled with negative emotions of frustration and disappointment, whereas the possession-defined success refers rather to cognitive processes involved in social comparisons. The acquisition centrality accentuates valuing material goods because of their potentially utilitarian and instrumental functions in fulfilling a wide array of human needs, the happiness aspect refers to the belief that accumulated possession has a magic power to deliver happiness, and possession-defined success reflects the signaling function of the accumulated possession in relation to 'doing well in life'. This short comparison of the nature of the three components of materialism suggests that they may have a different impact on well-being.

Materialism and well-being

The connection between materialism and well-being seems to be evident (Dittmar et al., 2014; Kasser et al., 2014); however the mechanisms underlying this association are still not explained in a fully satisfactory

way. Over the years scholars pointed out many reasons for the negative relationship between materialism and well-being. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) suggested that materialists experience less happiness and more negative affect than non-materialists, because they face a tension within their value structure, especially between material and collective values. If they try to endorse both, they face a conflict which diminishes their well-being. Solberg, Diener and Robinson (2003) pointed to materialists' poor social life as a source of lower well-being and less emotional gratification derived from striving for material goals than for others, because people are more distant from material goals and least satisfied with what they achieve in the material realm. Shrum et al. (2013) proposed that because materialism is centered on constructing identity through symbolic consumption and this process requires reliance on others to validate the results, materialistic orientation causes vulnerability and psychological instability. There is also evidence that materialism has a negative effect on well-being, because it is associated with low needs satisfaction (Dittmar et al., 2014; Kasser et al., 2014; Unanue, Dittmar, Vignoles, & Vansteenkiste, 2014; Nagpaul & Pang, 2017). Donnelly et al. (2016) suggested that the possible processes that cause unsuccessful pursuits of happiness and satisfaction through the possession of tangible objects are driven by the urge to escape from aversive self-awareness. Recently a potential link between materialism and low well-being through personality (especially neuroticism, which is highly responsible for negative emotions and low well-being) has been successfully tested (Górnik-Durose & Boroń, 2018; Górnik-Durose, 2019).

However – as mentioned before – the scholars, while investigating connections between materialism and well-being, have concentrated on overall measures of materialism and have not paid attention to the content of the construct. There are only few exceptions thus far. Ahuvia and Wong (1995) demonstrated that of the three the pursuit of happiness through acquiring material possession was most strongly associated with life dissatisfaction in various domains; possession-defined success was also related to life dissatisfaction, but only in some domains, whereas the connection between possession centrality and life (dis)satisfaction was fairly weak and not significant. The same authors demonstrated later that the negative relationship between materialism and needs satisfaction was driven exclusively by the happiness component (Ahuvia, Wong, 2002). A similar detrimental effect of the belief that possessing material goods is fundamental for happiness was also revealed by Swinyard, Kau and Phua (2001) and Roberts and Clement (2007). Additionally Pieters (2013) in his study on loneliness showed that the vicious cycle of materialism and loneliness was mostly vested in the expectation that material goods would guarantee happiness and certify personal success, whereas acquisition centrality played a positive role in the cycle decreasing loneliness over time. Also Segev, Shoham and Gavish (2015) in their extended empirical analysis of the three components of materialism found

a weak positive correlation between acquisition centrality and life satisfaction alongside strong associations between life satisfaction (negative), depression, anxiety and negative affect (positive) and the happiness component of materialism. Furthermore the results reported by Górnik-Durose (2019) showed that the three components of materialism are linked differently to well-being and that the most evident negative factor is the belief that material possession is a source of happiness.

However, thus far there was no systematic analysis of the unique impact of each of the three facets of materialism on well-being. The differences had been stated, but not explained in a satisfactory way. It is possible that the inconsistencies within the construct of materialism distort the link between overall materialism and well-being and are responsible for a relatively modest correlation between them, which was mentioned in the introductory section of this article. It would happen mainly because acquisition centrality, which potentially may even elevate well-being, seems to act antagonistically to possession-defined happiness, which has an indisputably detrimental effect on well-being. Furthermore the association between possession-defined success and well-being seems to depend on additional factors that modify the relationship, e.g. personal wealth. For these reasons looking separately at components of materialism in relation to well-being seems to be more fruitful from both theoretical and practical points of view than simply using the overall materialism index.

Previous research showed also that materialism is associated with various aspects of well-being. In the meta-analysis by Dittmar et al. (2014) twelve well-being outcomes, grouped into four broad categories, were considered. The first category was subjective well-being, i.e. cognitive assessments of overall life satisfaction and satisfaction with different life domains, together with emotional appraisals of one's happiness, and the affective balance. The second category contained individuals' positive and negative views of themselves. The third category included constructs related to mental ill-health (according to *DSM-IV-TR*), such as emotion-based disorders (depression and anxiety), and a dysfunctional relationship to consumer goods characterized by loss of control over buying behavior, preoccupation with thoughts about buying, and the continuation of excessive buying and spending despite harmful consequences. The fourth category of well-being constructs contained measures relevant to one's physical health (i.e. somatic symptoms, such as headaches and stomach aches, health risk behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, or using drugs). The results of the meta-analysis showed that small to moderate negative correlations were observed between materialism and well-being across all categories examined, however some outcomes were associated with materialism more strongly than others. The largest effects emerged in relation to negative self-appraisal, compulsive buying, and health risk behaviors (that may be seen as consumption based and compulsive), smaller – but still significant – in relation to affective well-being and general life satisfaction.

It could indicate that materialism lowers well-being mainly because it is associated with consumption-based, maladaptive attempts of compulsive nature to deal with self-discrepancies or identity deficits (see Dittmar et al., 2014; Donnelly et al., 2016).

Although the effects of materialism on various aspects of well-being seem to be similar, thus far there are no results referring to the potential differences related to its three facets. Looking at the nature of the components it could be assumed that acquisition centrality would be associated with most aspects of well-being – from hedonic to eudaimonic, because it refers to a wide range of functions of possessed goods that could fulfill a wide range of needs – from aesthetic needs, through the needs of effective adaptation to the environmental demands (competence and mastery), to creation and maintaining of personal identity. On the other hand the belief that acquiring material possessions brings happiness as connected with emotions (mainly negative) would link stronger to the hedonic aspects of well-being (i.e. experienced affects and life satisfaction). Possession-defined success on the other hand, related to position and status within society, would correspond rather with social well-being and generally its cognitive aspects, like life satisfaction. There are some indications of such connections in previous findings (e.g. Segev, Shoham, & Gavish, 2015; Górnik-Durose, 2019), but they have not been systematically examined.

The current studies

Problem and hypotheses

The results of the former research listed in the previous section together with the content analysis of the construct of materialism from the first section of this article suggest that it is worth deconstructing the concept of materialism and exploring separately its three components in relation to various well-being outcomes, because the effect of materialism on well-being may be inherent in the construct. Consequently it may not be the acquisition and possession of material goods *per se* that are detrimental to well-being, but the thoughts and beliefs, motives, meanings and functions that are associated with them. Thus the hypotheses tested in current studies are as follows:

- H₁: The three components of materialism are better predictors of various aspects of well-being than overall materialism.
- H₂: Of the three components of materialism the belief that possessing material goods brings happiness is the strongest negative predictor of well-being outcomes, whereas acquisition centrality may be associated with well-being positively (or not at all). No assumption is made in relation to possession-defined success.
- H₃: Acquisition centrality is connected to all aspects of well-being, whereas possession-defined happiness links most strongly to its hedonic aspects. Following the second hypothesis (H₂) no assumption is made in relation to possession-defined success in connection with various aspects of well-being.

The hypotheses were verified in two separate studies. In both Richins and Dawson's (1992) conceptualization of materialism with its three components is utilized. Each study however refers to a different concept of well-being. In Study I the approach to well-being endorsed by Keyes (2013) is applied, whereas in Study II satisfaction with life taken from the concept of subjective well-being by Pavot and Diener (1993) is examined. According to the first concept well-being is equated to mental health and consists of three aspects – hedonic, psychological and social (the latter two are considered as aspects of eudaimonic well-being). The hedonic aspect is emotional in nature and associates well-being with feeling good about one's life and experiencing more positive than negative emotions. Psychological well-being refers to the assessment of how well an individual functions in life taking into consideration such criteria as: purpose, contribution, integration, autonomy, intimacy, acceptance, and mastery (Ryff, 1989). Finally, social well-being is an appraisal of one's circumstances and functioning in society, characterized by social integration, acceptance, contribution, actualization, and coherence (Keyes, 1998). According to the second concept life satisfaction is a cognitive component of subjective well-being alongside the emotional attitude to one's life. It is a conscious judgment of the entire life, in which an individual assesses its quality on the basis of their own criteria (Pavot & Diener, 1993).

The two different concepts of well-being were utilized in order to demonstrate that the effect of materialism on well-being does not depend on the way well-being is conceptualized (see also Dittmar et al., 2014). Such an approach also follows a method of systematically modified (self) replications which cross-validate research findings and helps to avoid incidental results going unquestioned over time (Wojciszke, 2011).

The importance and novelty of the current studies lies in their systematic approach to the problem. As mentioned before, thus far there was no research dedicated particularly to the examination of associations between facets of materialism and well-being. The findings mentioned in the previous section have been derived from published reports that were concentrated on other issues. In this article the problem is named explicitly and the empirical investigation is directed exclusively to answer the questions about the relationships between acquisition centrality, possession-defined happiness and possession-defined success and well-being in its hedonic and eudaimonic aspects.

Method

Participants

In Study I the participants were 488 adults (75% were women) aged 17–59 ($M = 24.59$; $SD = 6.00$). In Study II 545 adults participated (81.4% were women) aged 19–64 ($M = 25.12$; $SD = 7.33$). In both studies the participants were recruited by cooperating students via their private social networks. The introductory invitation containing a brief description of the study along with a web link to the survey was posted by the students on Facebook.

The participants were asked to complete an online survey. No incentives were given for the participation.

Measures

Materialism

In both studies the 9-item Material Values Scale – as recommended by Richins (2004), in the Polish version by Górnik-Durose (2016) was used to measure materialism. Items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The three subscale scores (i.e. centrality, e.g. “*I like a lot of luxury in my life*”; happiness, e.g. “*My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have*”; success, e.g. “*I like to own things that impress people*”) as well as the overall materialism score were computed. In the current studies internal consistency of the whole scale and the subscales, indicated by Cronbach's alpha were between .84 (overall materialism) and .58 (centrality subscale). It replicated the indices obtained in previous studies (cf. Górnik-Durose, 2016).

Well-being

In Study I Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2013) in Polish adaptation by Karaś, Ciecuch, & Keyes (2014) was applied to assess well-being. MHC-SF consists of 14 items that represent hedonic (emotional – e.g. “*How often did you feel happy?*”) and eudaimonic (psychological – e.g. “*How often did you feel good at managing the responsibilities of your daily life?*”) and social – e.g. “*How often did you feel that you belonged to a community?*”) facets of well-being. The 6-point answering scale (ranging from 1 – “never” to 6 – “everyday”) relates to the frequency of experiencing various symptoms of well-being during the past month. The three subscales scores as well as the general score of well-being were computed and used in the analyses. In Study I internal consistency of the whole scale and the subscales, indicated by Cronbach's alpha were between .94 (general well-being) and .88 (social well-being).

Life satisfaction

In Study II the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) in Polish translation by Jankowski (Seligman, 2005) was used to measure life satisfaction. The scale is composed of five items (e.g. “*In most ways my life is close to my ideal*”) measuring global life satisfaction on the 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The total score is a sum of the participants' responses. In Study II internal consistency of the scale was .86 (Cronbach's alpha).

Results

The descriptive statistics of variables from both studies together with zero-order correlations between materialism and its components and various aspects of well-being are presented in Table 1.

The correlation coefficients indicate hypothesized associations between variables. Overall materialism cor-

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations

| STUDY I (N = 488) | Overall materialism | Materialism – centrality | Materialism – happiness | Materialism – success | Well-being – general | Well-being – hedonic | Well-being – psychological | Well-being – social |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>M</i> | 27.46 | 9.47 | 9.49 | 8.51 | 46.41 | 11.11 | 21.36 | 13.94 |
| <i>SD</i> | 7.08 | 2.48 | 3.17 | 3.02 | 15.07 | 3.92 | 7.52 | 6.34 |
| Pearson's zero-order correlations | | | | | | | | |
| Well-being – general | -.17*** | -.02 | -.27*** | -.08 | | | | |
| Hedonic well-being | -.17*** | -.01 | -.27*** | -.10* | | | | |
| Psychological well-being | -.15*** | -.001 | -.27*** | -.08 | | | | |
| Social well-being | -.13*** | -.06 | -.20*** | -.05 | | | | |
| STUDY II (N = 543) | | | | | | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 26.81 | 9.25 | 9.24 | 8.32 | 21.13 | | | |
| <i>SD</i> | 6.84 | 2.38 | 3.37 | 2.84 | 6.56 | | | |
| Pearson's zero-order correlations | | | | | | | | |
| Satisfaction with life | -.27*** | -.05 | -.38*** | -.16** | | | | |

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

relates modestly, but significantly, with all aspects of well-being. Of the three components possession-defined happiness is linked consequently to all aspects of well-being, and possession-defined success is weakly associated to hedonic well-being and life satisfaction. All correlations are negative.

In order to establish the predictive power of materialism and its components in relation to various aspects of well-being a series of regression analyses were conducted. One regression model included only overall materialism as a predictor regressed on various aspects of well-being (Model I), the second – included three components of materialism as predictors (Model II). The results for both studies are presented in Table 2.

Although the components of materialism were correlated (r between .33 and .58), the collinearity statistics in both studies were acceptable. In Study I VIF values were between 1.32 (centrality subscale) and 1.60 (success subscale), and in Study II – between 1.54 (centrality subscale) and 1.76 (success subscale).

The regression results show that models with overall materialism as the only predictor in all cases were significant, however they only explained a small percentage of variance of various aspects of well-being – from only 1.7% in the case of social well-being to 7% in the case

of life satisfaction. In the models that included three components of materialism the explained variance was at least doubled or even tripled and varied from 4% in the case of social well-being to 14% in the case of life satisfaction. Generally materialism and its aspects were stronger predictors of satisfaction with life than of well-being understood in terms of mental health, especially of social well-being. The first hypothesis was verified positively – the three components of materialism appeared to be better predictors of various aspects of well-being than overall materialism, because they explained much more variance of well-being.

Results of multiple regressions that involved all three components of materialism revealed that the strongest negative predictor for all aspects of well-being was possession-defined happiness (beta values between $-.24$ for social well-being and $-.41$ for life satisfaction). Also acquisition centrality was a significant, but noticeably weaker, predictor of hedonic and psychological well-being, and – marginally – of life satisfaction (beta values between .08 and .12). In all these cases the relationship was positive. Possession-defined success was not linked to any aspect of well-being. Thus, the second hypothesis was also fully confirmed. The third hypothesis was not fully supported – possession-defined happiness was associated equally

Table 2. Results of regression analyses for well-being (Study I) and satisfaction with life (Study II)

| Predictors | MODEL I | | MODEL II | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Overall materialism | Materialism – centrality | Materialism – happiness | Materialism – success |
| STUDY I | | | | |
| Well-being – general | R^2 | .03 | | .08 |
| | F | 13.60*** | | 14.94*** |
| | β | $-.17^{***}$ | .04 | $-.33^{***}$ |
| Hedonic well-being | R^2 | .03 | | .08 |
| | F | 14.18*** | | 15.13*** |
| | β | $-.17^{***}$ | .12* | $-.32^{***}$ |
| Psychological well-being | R^2 | .02 | | .08 |
| | F | 11.72** | | 15.62*** |
| | β | $-.15^{**}$ | .12* | $-.33^{***}$ |
| Social well-being | R^2 | .02 | | .04 |
| | F | 8.62** | | 7.76*** |
| | β | $-.13^{**}$ | .002 | $-.24^{***}$ |
| STUDY II | | | | |
| Satisfaction with life | R^2 | .07 | | .14 |
| | F | 42.14*** | | 31.22*** |
| | β | $-.27^{***}$ | .08 ⁺ | $-.41^{***}$ |

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; + $p < .1$.

strongly to all aspects of well-being – not only hedonic, whereas acquisition centrality was linked modestly only to hedonic and psychological well-being.

Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained showed that the overall materialism index which is commonly used in studies on materialism and well-being conceals much more complex associations between the two phenomena than are usually considered. Taken separately, the three aspects of materialism act differently in relation to well-being. Of the three the belief that acquisition and possession of material goods is a crucial condition of achieving happiness in life is the most detrimental to well-being in all its aspects. The results show that the second materialistic belief – that possessing material goods could be a good sign of achieving success in life – do not connect with well-being at all. The concentration on material goods, i.e. acquisition centrality, seems to elevate hedonic and psychological well-being. Thus, the modest effect of materialism on well-being, usually identified in various studies (cf. Dittmar et al., 2014), is probably partly due to conflicting forces existing within the construct.

The dominant position of possession-defined happiness in diminishing well-being is easily explainable. Such expectations do not survive confrontation with reality. As mentioned before there is an abundance of empirical evidence proving that material possession is not a good base for happiness. Interestingly, this belief is associated not only with hedonic aspects of well-being – as hypothesized, but also with all remaining aspects. This is predominantly the expectation that material goods may make people happy that diminishes psychological well-being depicted as finding purpose and meaning in life, achieving autonomy, intimacy, acceptance, and mastery, as well as lowers the appraisal of one's effectiveness of functioning in society (social well-being).

The lack of connection of possession-defined success with well-being requires further investigation. Probably defining success by the quality and quantity of accumulated possession may be a viable option, particularly in consumer societies, however there is no direct translation of such a concept into well-being. In the case of wealthy materialists this belief may elevate well-being, because the wealthy have met the social standard for a successful life, whereas in the case of poorer individuals the belief may lower well-being, because they fail to attune with social requirements. Without controlling personal wealth – assessed both objectively and subjectively – as a moderator it is impossible to answer the question about the link between the belief in possession-defined success and well-being.

The most intriguing result however refers to acquisition centrality which – acting contrary to possession-defined happiness – seems to raise hedonic and psychological well-being. This result supports the reflection of Arndt, Solomon, Kasser and Sheldon (2004), and also Pieters (2013) that material things undeniably provide

hedonic benefits such as physical comfort, and joy and pleasure derived from their extended functionality and aesthetic properties. If – in addition – material goods can be used to construct and maintain personal identity (Campbell, 1987; Dittmar, 2008; Shrum et al., 2013), an access to proper things may support basic components of psychological well-being, like having purpose in life (see also Rindfleisch, & Burroughs, 2004) and feeling of autonomy and mastery (see also Belk, 1988; Nagpaul & Pang, 2017). This finding is also in line with the discussion with the so-called “Easterlin paradox” (Easterlin, 2001), i.e. the observation that while within countries wealthier people are on average happier than poor ones, happiness rises with income up to the point and not beyond it (Graham, 2009). Some scholars (Deaton, 2008; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008) however demonstrated a clear relationship between incomes per capita and average happiness with no sign that the correlation weakens as income increases over time. One of the proposed explanations is that wealthier people are better able to enjoy their income than the poor ones – they seem to learn how to enjoy and utilize acquired wealth to their benefit (see Graham, 2009).

The general conclusion from the present studies is that it is necessary to look at all components of materialism while investigating its connections with well-being. However, further research requires a closer look at mechanisms linking the three components and various aspects of well-being and finding factors which would better explain this relationship. It is not enough to state that materialism is detrimental to well-being. In the face of technological development, which influences the relationship between people and the “tools” they use, and results in changing attitudes to material aspects of life, a more detailed analysis of beliefs about functionality of material possessions in human life and the quality of this life is needed. People expect that acquired possessions will provide functional satisfaction of their needs at the cultural standard (Kilbourne, 1991). It means that in order to be effective in the changing world they want to have advanced instruments that are well adjusted to the external demands and internal standards. This is why people may concentrate on acquisition of material possessions and this concentration does not decrease their general well-being. Almost two decades ago Carver and Baird (1998) asked in relation to materialism: “is it what you want or why you want it that matters?” and then Srivastava, Locke and Bartol (2001) stated “it's not the money, it's the motives” (see also Garðarsdóttir, Dittmar, & Aspinall, 2009). These questions are still valid. Thus the analysis of motivation to acquire material goods seems to be necessary to explain the association between people's desire for material possessions and their well-being. Such motivation would vary in the case of acquisition centrality, whereas it is obvious in the case of acquisition as a pursuit of happiness and acquisition as a sign of success or other personal characteristics (see Shrum et al., 2013). The previous studies showed also that low needs satisfaction or needs frustration connected with materialism are responsible for the diminishing wellbeing

(Dittmar et al., 2014; Unanue et al., 2014), however Nagpaul and Pang (2017) gave evidence that of the three basic human needs, only the frustrated need for autonomy mediates the relationship. The need for competence and relatedness were not significant. As the authors claimed, acquiring proper material goods could even be beneficial for those two needs. This result supports the view that looking at the functionality of material possessions and motivation to acquire is crucial in order to understand the complex relationship between materialism and well-being. If the reason for acquiring is fully extrinsic, it is difficult to achieve happiness and fulfillment (see Kasser, 2002). On the other hand, if the goods are only instruments to fulfill intrinsic goals well-being may be achieved. So far it could be stated that simply not having and acquiring material possessions cause frustration, disappointment and diminished well-being, but believing that it is a prime source of happiness.

Limitations

The findings of the studies, presented in this article, are clear, but the studies have some limitations which should be overcome in future research. First of all both studies were conducted on convenience samples, dominated by women and relatively young participants. It limits the generalizability of the results. The more systematic studies on representative samples from different cultures are then necessary to verify these findings. In addition these studies did not concern economic and demographic factors on national and individual levels; they should be taken into consideration as potential moderators of the described relationships. Both variables – materialism and well-being are sensitive to age and income (cf. Dittmar et al., 2014). Also education level may influence the relationship, mainly because better educated people have bigger potential to use material assets to their advantage (Graham, 2009). Therefore further research on deconstructed materialism and well-being needs to go beyond traditional mediating and moderating factors and take into consideration changing standards of consumption in the contemporary world and individual motivation to possess and consume material goods.

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