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Wanting Ever More: Accumulation Procedure Motivates Continued Possession Acquisition

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Three experiments show that a piecemeal procedure for acquiring material possessions, whereby a quantity of possessions is acquired gradually through repeated small efforts, is more motivating than a lump-sum procedure to acquire the same amount of possessions. This is because a piecemeal procedure results in a greater sense of achievement.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People incessantly gather and store material possessions. However, the possessions that people accumulate are not always essential to their survival or life quality. Moreover, material possessions beyond people's basic needs seldom improve long-term happiness or life satisfaction (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Diener 1984; Easterlin 1995;Van Boven2005). If excessive possessions cannot bring additional consumption utility or substantially increased happiness, then why are people so obsessed with accumulating them? In this research, we suggest that aside from the status of owning possessions, the process of acquiring possessions may itself be a driver of continued material pursuits. That is, an individual may gather material possessions not only for the purpose of eventual ownership but also for the opportunity to engage in the accumulation process per se.

In real life, the accumulation of possessions almost always happens gradually. We posit that this piece-by-piece increase not only characterizes the accumulation process but also gives rise to the motivating power of that process. We test this prediction by holding constant both the total quantity of acquired possessions and the effort-to-possession exchange rate while comparing two different procedures to acquire possessions: piecemeal and lump-sum. A piecemeal procedure mimics the accumulation process in real life, whereby people gradually acquire possessions through repeated small efforts. A lump-sum procedure does not involve gradual increases, whereby people acquire more possessions at a time through efforts over a longer interval. We show that, compared with lump-sum procedure, piecemeal procedure is more likely to stimulate continued acquiring of possessions because a piecemeal procedure generates a stronger sense of achievement than does lump-sum procedure.

Our proposition is based on the basic need of humans to identify patterns in their behavior (Clary and Tesser 1983; Hastie 1984; Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1981). People exhibit a strong preference for coherence and consistency, and they are predisposed to identify patterns and meaningful interrelationships within a set of stimuli (Whitson and Galinsky 2008). We suggest that piecemeal procedure, whereby individuals engage in a series of similar actions to earn rewards, allows people to identify a pattern in their past and current efforts. Because every action in the piecemeal procedure generates a positive outcome and because the outcome of such effort consistently contributes to an increase in possessions of a certain type (e.g., book collections), people will attribute this increasing trend in the amount of their possessions (Ariely and Zauberman 2003; Loewenstein and Prelec 1993) to their own effort and so derive a greater sense of achievement. Holding all else constant, piecemeal procedure creates an increasing trend in possession accumulation whereas lump-sum creates a sudden increase. This sudden increase does not enable identification of a consistent pattern in one's behavior and outcomes. Therefore, we suggest that, compared with those who work a long time for a relatively larger lump-sum reward, those who earn rewards piece by piece will view their actions more as achievements. In turn, this sense of achievement motivates people to continue their course of action (i.e., acquiring more possessions).

We conducted three experiments to test our hypothesis. Experiment 1 was designed to demonstrate the core effect and test feelings of achievement as the underlying mechanism. Specifically, participates in Experiment 1 worked on five small repetitive tasks to earn product rewards. They either received the products one by one after finishing each task or received them altogether after all five tasks were finished. Then participants were presented with a chance to earn an extra similar reward. We showed that people who received the products one by one (M = 4.11, SD = 1.96) were more likely than those who received the products altogether to continue working for the extra reward (M = 3.29, SD = 2.06), t (77) = 1.80, p = .07, d = .41. In addition, those in the piecemeal condition persisted significantly longer on the extra task to earn an additional reward (M = 303.8, SD = 49.0) than those in the lumpsum condition (M = 246.0, SD = 112.1), t (54) = 2.64, p = .008, d = .67. Finally, a bootstrapping analysis indicates that the effect of acquisition procedure on willingness to work is mediated by perceived achievement.

Experiment 2 continued to test the underlying mechanism. We tested whether piecemeal procedure's advantage over lump-sum procedure would diminish if participants no longer believed that the acquired items resulted from their own effort. Based on the proposition, we predict that accumulating possessions must be achieved through one's own effort. That is, the sense of achievement should arise from feeling that one's behavior has led to preferred outcomes or goals (McClelland 1985; Murray 1938), and it is associated with one's effort and competence rather than with luck or other random factors (Weiner 1986). Thus, if the growth in one's possessions does not reflect applied effort, then the increasing pattern alone will not lead to a sense of achievement. In Experiment 2, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2(acquisition procedure: piecemeal vs. lumpsum) x 2(effort-possession association: yes vs. no) between-participants design. Our analysis returned a significant interaction between acquisition procedure and effort-possession association, F(1,139) = 4.02, p = .046. That is, if the rewards are directly endowed and not earned through efforts, then acquisition procedure will have no effect on people's motivation to acquire still more possessions.

Experiment 3 tested the boundary condition. We posit that an increasing trend is a necessary condition for people to feel achieved and motivated. If the trend is disrupted, such as when possessions acquired later are perceived to be much different from those acquired earlier, then piecemeal procedure would be no more motivating than lump-sum procedure. Experiment 3 participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2(acquisition procedure: piecemeal vs. lump-sum) x 2(additional reward: similar vs. different) between-participants design. The analysis returned a significant interaction between reward similarity and acquisition method, F(1, 121) = 4.85, p = .03, thus providing further support to our hypothesis.

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