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# **EFFECTS OF FAMILY STRUCTURE AND SOCIALIZATION ON MATERIALISM: A LIFE COURSE STUDY IN MALAYSIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** Consumer researchers have a long-standing interest in understanding and interpreting the development of materialistic attitudes towards consumption and values in different cultural settings. In this context, the ‘life course’ approach is a recent interdisciplinary movement in consumer behaviour research that operates as an important overarching framework to study the development of materialism in Malaysia. A general conceptual background of the life course paradigm is used in this study for discussing, organising, integrating and presenting these consumer research findings on materialism. A survey of young Malaysian adults (18 to 22 years) was undertaken to test hypotheses derived from the life course literature. Consistent with previous research findings, television viewing and peer communication during adolescent years had a significant association with materialistic values held by young Malaysian adults. Family structure and socio-oriented family communication environment were not found to be significantly associated with materialism. A discussion ensued on the future study theoretical implications of materialism on consumer behaviour in Malaysia.

*Keywords:* family structure, socialization, materialism, life course, television.

## INTRODUCTION

The development process of materialistic attitudes and values has long intrigued consumer researchers (e.g., Roberts, Manolis and Tanner 2003; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; John 1999). Two major perspectives – socialization and psychological – are pivotal to any analysis of materialism. The psychological perspective focuses on family, peers and mass media and the psychological perspective concentrates on events and circumstances in a family that might create emotional states by encouraging or discouraging the development of materialistic values. Sociologists, economists, and demographers have been more concerned with examining the economic or marital sequel of parental divorce and other changes in family structures. Existing research on the socialization outlook has two major shortcomings. An enduring methodological concern highlighted by Moschis (1985) is the focus on the mass media to the exclusion of family and peers using samples based predominantly on studies conducted exclusively in the United States of America (Flouri, 1999). Another concern is the scrutiny of the relationship between socialization agents and materialism inferred in different ways in different countries (Kwak, Zinkhan and Dominick 2002; Sirgy *et al* 1998). The other significant lacunae in the existing research is the absence of studies on the role of socialization agents on materialism in different cultural contexts, specifically those that either encourage or discourage materialism.

In this study the influences of family structure and socialization processes are incorporated into the 'life course' perspective. Integration of the literature with the life course perspective facilitates the investigation on the nature of materialism and its impact on consumer behaviour. As a step towards such integration, hypotheses derived from the literature were formulated to analyze data collected on young Malaysian adult (18 to 22 years) respondents. Finally, a discussion is provided on the future study theoretical implications of materialism on consumer behaviour in Malaysia.

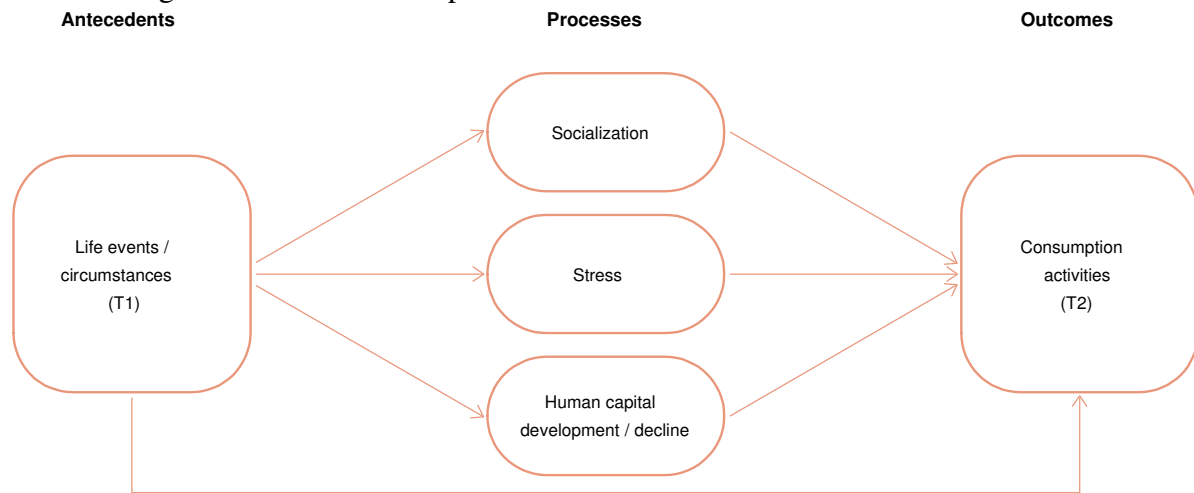
## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Part of the reason consumer behaviour has achieved the status of an evolving and dynamic stream of research is by considering how past events in a person's (consumer) life is accounted for (Moschis 2007). In this context, the life course paradigm (see Figure 1), utilises the perspectives of different social and behavioural sciences (e.g., Abeles, Steel and Wise 1980; Elder, 1995; Mayer and Tuma 1990) which posits that behaviour in any stage of an individual's life is a result of earlier instances and events in the life of the individual as well as the reaction patterns and adaptation of the individual to them. As such, the life course paradigm provides a relevant model to study human behaviour, in this case materialism. The life course paradigm offers a contemporary approach to accommodating and integrating various theoretical views and perspectives into a multi-dimensional theoretical framework (e.g., Pearlin and Skaff 1996; Mortimer and Shahnahan 2003; Elder 1995). In order to appreciate the role played by life course paradigm in explaining the factors influencing materialism, it is important to address the major gaps in the studies conducted into the linkage between childhood and adulthood and their impact on shaping behavioural dimensions of consumer behaviour like materialism.

The relationship between earlier events in life can be further elucidated by examining the links between childhood thoughts and action with those of adulthood (McLeod and Almazan

2003). This approach has been adopted by psychologists and psychiatrists concerned with psychopathological effects whereas sociologists examine changes in the family structure. However, the link between childhood and adulthood remains under developed in terms of the causative factors, processes and final outcomes (McLeod and Almazan 2003: 400). Essentially this approach scrutinises the space created by the life course approach to research into consumer behaviour. The life course paradigm (Figure 1) presents a general conceptual model which postulates the linking of certain parameters to events and circumstances experienced at a specific point in time (T1) in a person's life course, mediators (processes) resulting from T1, leading to outcomes that occur at later time periods in life course (T2).

Figure 1: General Conceptual Life Course Model of Consumer Behaviour



Adapted from Moschis (2007)

The life course model stresses the adaptation an individual has to make to various circumstances through the processes of socialization, stress and coping responses. These processes are duly moderated by situational variables resulting in three possible life course perspectives; namely 'Normative', 'Stress' and 'Human Capital' (Abeles *et al* 1980).

'Normative' perspectives hold that individuals follow a socialization process, as a natural outcome, learning and acquiring skills and attitudes relevant to the roles as an adaptation to the demands of the environment. Life events (e.g., marriage, divorce, retirement) represent a natural progression into life roles (e.g., spouse, parent retiree) (Mortimer and Simmons 1978).

A 'Stress' perspective posits that the life course is essentially a matter of striving to achieve equilibrium between negative, positive and neutral life events (stressors) (Gierveld and Dykstra 1993). Individuals are seen in this context to be constantly striving to build their own balancing (coping) strategies (Vaillant 1977). These balancing efforts initially require more effort but later become conditional responses resulting in attitudinal and behavioural manifestations.

The 'Human Capital' perspective refers to the efforts (resources, qualifications, skills and knowledge) taken to influence future income and consumption (Frytak, Harley and Finch 2003: 627). However, acquired Human Capital is influenced by factors varying from macro level settings (e.g., culture) to micro level (e.g., family, work) settings. Macro level factors are considered dominant and able to also influence the micro level factors, when individuals

are in regular interaction (Bolger *et al* 1988:2). Human Capital is seen as unique. Its indications are dynamic and dependant on the adaptation process of individual to the environment ranging from maladaptive (e.g., compulsive buyer behaviour, excessive buyer behaviour) to the dynamic course of the process. This perspective recognises the influence of people's choices on outcomes (Mortimer and Simmons 1978).

Materialism is a multi-dimensional construct that is amenable to investigate research questions relating to the life course of an individual in terms of childhood events, lack of economic resources, changes in parent-child interaction and relationships, disrupted socialization and consumer decisions made as an adult consumer (McLeod and Almazan 2003). An overall observation on life course approaches is noticeable as an integrated framework where its parameters are complimentary and reciprocal (Sherrod and Brim 1986). This view is consistent with efforts of contemporary researchers who include variables from different theories to test differential hypotheses (e.g., Elder *et al* 1994, Pearlin and Skaff 1996; Mortimer and Shanahan 2003) providing opportunities for researchers to develop hypothesis/s based on different observations.

## HYPOTHESES

Cultivation theory posits that the extent of interactions with socialization agents, like television and peers, may possibility shape the perception and belief systems of an individual (Kwak, Zinkham and Dominic 2002). At certain times, and in particular settings, a hyper reality of views and behaviour are shaped and influenced by Cultivation theory (O'Guinn *et al* 1989). However, findings emanating from studies in different countries are mixed regarding the influence of television on materialism (Kwak *et al* 2002). Thus, the influence of television viewing and peers on the formation of materialistic values, by young adults, becomes a relevant aspect to study, leading to hypothesis 1 and 2:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *Television viewing during adolescent years has a positive association with materialistic values held by young adults.*

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *Peer communication about consumption during an adolescent's formative years has a positive effect on materialistic values held by young adults.*

Research on development of materialism has indicated there is a possibility of family disruptive events and consequently the strength of materialistic values indirectly acting as Stress relievers from aversive psychological feelings (Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton 1997). Interaction with groups, other than the family, through exposure to socialization agents like television (mass media) and peers are sighted as methods used by members of disrupted families to provide temporary relief from aversive feelings. These interactions with socialization agents (i.e., television, peers), during adolescent years, are strongly supported by existing research as manifesting need felt towards the importance for material possessions (John 1999; Moschis 1987). There is considerable evidence to indicate that the susceptibility to socialization agents arises from poor adult supervision of children's behaviour during the adolescent years (Hill, Yeung and Grey 2001), results in hypothesis 3:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** *The relationship between disruptive family events and materialism is mediated by a) peer communications, and b) mass media use in earlier life.*

Another important influence of materialism is the family communication environment where an adolescent is raised. Individuals learn consumption values, and imbibe knowledge and skills from their family communication environments (e.g., Moschis 1987). One of the important communication environments in a family is the socio-oriented family communication environment, which advocates its members conform to social norms that

value and assess others keeping fundamental consumption habits. Such an assessment system could lead individuals to use possessions and purchases of other individuals as a sole criterion for assessing their standing in the society. As such, this assessment system leads to materialism being used for assessment purposes and may also possibly create a more materialistic orientation in the youth. Although the scope of existing studies are limited they do indicate a positive relationship between a socio-oriented communication structure and materialism among adolescents (Moschis 1987), providing hypothesis 4.

**H<sub>4</sub>: *The young adult person's exposure to a socio-oriented family communication structure during adolescent years is positively associated with the strength of materialistic values.***

Among the factors playing an important role in influencing materialism, is the socio-economic status (SES) enjoyed by an individual's family during childhood. People in lower SES families have been found to have social roles that conform with the society rather than pursuing one's self interest (Kasser, Ryan, Zax and Sameroff 1995). The parents of families with a lower SES may encourage their children to value demands from other members of the society rather than accede to their own desires. This could lead the members of families with lower SES to aim for betterment in life (a higher paying job) through comparisons with others and hence the felt need for more material possessions in life leading to materialism. Thus, socio-oriented communication can mediate SES and the development of materialistic values. Hence, hypothesis 5 is proposed:

**H<sub>5</sub>: *Socio-oriented family communication style mediates SES effects on materialistic values.***

Young adults raised in lower SES environments are more likely to report higher levels of socio-oriented family communication styles than their higher SES counterparts. In contrast to the debate on socio-oriented communication being a mediator between SES and materialism, the Human Capital perspective views the development of materialism in a different way. Disruptive events in family (e.g., divorce of parents) during adolescence deprives an individual of the opportunity for adding Human Capital (e.g., educational opportunities for better jobs, status and wealth acquisition). Diminished Human Capital enhancement in an economically deprived family may lead to a desire for acquiring material possession that is indicative and symbolic of success and status (O'Guinn and Shrum 1997; Moschis 1987). Thus, the direct relationship between a lower low standard of living and the strength of materialism in the future leads to the final hypothesis suitable for testing.

**H<sub>6</sub>: *The young person's experience of a low standard of living during formative years is positively associated with strength of materialistic values held as an adult.***

## METHODOLOGY

### SAMPLE

A non-probability convenience method of sampling was used in this study. A convenience sample was used involving 101 undergraduate Malaysian students in Stamford College Sdn Bhd., Petaling Jaya, Multimedia University, Cyberjaya and Sunway College, Petaling Jaya aged from 18 to 22. Paper based surveys were self-administered, anonymously in class and stored in a secure location to provide anonymity. Before administering the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted to ensure that all items were well understood and reflected the intended original meanings. Data analysis tools employed were product moment correlation, regression analysis and mediator effects as assessed in Barron and Kenny's (1986) model.

## MEASURES

The scales and the items used in the study are given in Appendix A. The scale for measuring ‘materialism’ relied on the research findings by Wong and associates (2003) that were tested in Asian countries for validity and reliability. Nine of the fifteen items of the original scale was used in this study, as these items corresponded particularly well to younger people (18 to 22 years old). The alpha reliability of the scale was 0.709, within the acceptable range (Cronbach 1984). Chaffee and McLeod developed socio-oriented and concept-oriented family communication structures four decades ago and have measured the constructs in various ways, in terms of number of items and response formats (e.g., Rubin, Palmgreen and Sypher 1994). Items originally developed by Chaffee and McLeod were used mainly because the longer scales have used the same items and are a part of the same factors (see Rubin *et al* 1994). The reliability for socio-orientation measures was 0.605, consistent with the existing literature on the psychometric properties of the scales.

Peer communication about consumption and television viewing were measured on the basis of items used in earlier studies. Peer communication was measured using 8 items ( $\alpha = 0.819$ ) taken from previous consumer socialization studies. Television viewing was measured using items from earlier studies (e.g., O’Guinn and Shrum 1997; Rubin *et al* 1994). Six disruptive family events were used in study and as per previous studies (e.g., Rindfleish *et al*; 1997 Roberts *et al* 2003) which established a linkage between family and an individual’s emotional well-being. Finally, SES was measured using financial status (4 points scale), home ownership status at the time of birth (2 points scale) and the total number of years of education of parents. The above three measures were standardised and summed. Scores above the mean indicated a higher SES, while the one below indicated a lower SES.

## RESULTS

The results of the study are show in tables 1-5 by highlighting the correlations and regression analysis on the variables in the study.

Table 1: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Variables

	Mean	SD	Materialism	Socio-orientation	Peer communication	Television viewing	Disruptive family events	SES
<b>Materialism</b>	30.4	5.48						
<b>Socio-orientation</b>	11.98	3.22	.068					
<b>Peer communication</b>	26.01	5.05	.252**	.119				
<b>Television viewing</b>	26.27	16.51	.186*	.088	.044			
<b>Disruptive family events</b>	15.78	2.13	.154	-.167	.142	.172*		
<b>SES</b>	0	1.66	-.057	.096	.008	.127	.103	

\*\* Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01. \* Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05.

Table 2: Test of the Mediating Effects of Television Viewing

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Coefficient	p value
Regression 1: Television viewing	Disruptive family events	1.682	.029*
Regression 2: Materialism	Disruptive family events	.328	.205
Regression 3: Materialism	Disruptive family events Television viewing	.287 .024	.278 .483

NOTE: For regression model 1,  $F = 4.88$  ( $p = .029$ ) and  $R^2 = .047$ . For regression model 2,  $F = 1.629$  (ns),  $p = .205$  and  $R^2 = .016$ . For regression model 3,  $F = 1.058$ ,  $p = .351$  and  $R^2 = .021$ .

Table 3: Test of the Mediating Effects of Peer Communication

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Coefficient	p value
Regression 1: Peer communication	Disruptive family events	.342	.150
Regression 2: Materialism	Disruptive family events	.328	.205
Regression 3: Materialism	Disruptive family events Peer communication	.232 .278**	.359 .010

NOTE: For regression model 1,  $F = 2.109$  ( $p = .150$ ) and  $R^2 = .021$ . For regression model 2,  $F = 1.629$  (ns),  $p = .205$  and  $R^2 = .016$ . For regression model 3,  $F = 4.286$ ,  $p = .016$  and  $R^2 = .080$ .

Table 4: Test of the Mediating Effects of Socio-Oriented Family Communication

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Coefficient	p value
Regression 1: Socio-oriented communication	SES	.180	0.356
Regression 2: Materialism	SES	-.376	.255
Regression 3: Materialism	SES Socio-oriented communication	-.412 .199	.214 .246

NOTE: For regression model 1,  $F = .861$  (ns),  $p = .356$  and  $R^2 = .009$ . For regression model 2,  $F = 1.310$  (ns),  $p = .255$  and  $R^2 = .013$ . For regression model 3,  $F = 1.34$  (ns),  $p = .267$  and  $R^2 = .027$ .

Based on the results (see Tables 1-4), the inference on various hypotheses formulated for the study are presented herewith:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *Television viewing during adolescent years has a positive association with materialistic values held by young adults.*

Product-moment correlation was used to test the relationship between the two variables. The relationship between exposure to television during adolescent years and the person's strength of materialistic values in early adulthood was statistically significant ( $r = .186$ ), fully supporting hypothesis 1.



**H<sub>2</sub>:** *Peer communication about consumption during an adolescent's formative years has a positive effect on materialistic values held by young adults.*

A product-moment correlation was used to test the relationship between these two variables. The relationship between peer communication about consumption during adolescent years and the person's strength of materialistic values in early adulthood was statistically significant ( $r = .252$ ). Moreover, exposure to peer communication correlates with materialism, fully supporting hypothesis 2.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** *The relationship between disruptive family events and materialism is mediated by a) peer communications, and b) mass media use in earlier life.*

Hypothesis 3 tested the mediating roles of (a) peer communication and (b) exposure to television during adolescence years between disruptive family events and the strength of materialistic attitudes in early adulthood. In order to test the mediating role of these variables, a procedure involving four steps was used (Baron and Kenny 1986). In the first step the direct effect of the independent variable was tested (i.e., disruptive family events) on the dependant variable (i.e., materialism). This regression model was not significant ( $\beta = .328$ ) as indicated in Tables 2 and 3. Thus, the data did not support this hypothesis neither for peer communication nor for exposure to television.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** *The young adult person's exposure to a socio-oriented family communication structure during adolescent years is positively associated with the strength of materialistic values.*

Hypothesis 4 refers to a positive relationship between the person's exposure to a socio-oriented family communication environment during the adolescent years and the materialistic values held as a young adult. A product-moment correlation was used to test the relationship between these two variables. The relationship was not significant ( $r = .068$ ), providing no support for Hypothesis 4.

**H<sub>5</sub>:** *A socio-oriented family communication style mediates SES effects on materialistic values.*

Hypothesis 5 concerned the mediating role of exposure to a socio-oriented family communication environment during the adolescent years on the relationship between SES status and the strength of materialistic attitudes in early adulthood. The link between SES and materialism was not significant ( $r = -.376$ ), again providing no support for hypothesis 5 suggesting no mediating effects.

**H<sub>6</sub>:** *The young person's experience of a low standard of living during formative years is positively associated with strength of materialistic values held as an adult.*

Hypothesis 6 posited a direct effect of a low standard of living during adolescent years on materialism in early adulthood. Baron and Kenny's procedure was used to test the direct effect of the supposed mediating variable, socio-oriented communication, on the dependant variable materialistic values. This relationship is not significant. Thus, the first condition discussed by Baron and Kenny was not satisfied. The regression model with SES and socio-oriented communication as independent variables and materialism as dependant variable was not significant (see Table 4). Thus, hypothesis 6 was not supported.

## DISCUSSION

Efforts to study adult consumer behaviour taking using situational and influencing variables one approach to understand the consumption process involved in adoption decisions. Understanding adult consumption behaviour, as a result of early-in-life socialization experiences, is another that approach offers more insight into the *modus operandi* of

consumer behaviour. Accordingly, this study adopts the overarching conceptual framework of life course paradigm for assessing the impact of family structure (SES and socio-oriented communication) and socialization agents on materialism.

The study has established a significant relationship between television viewing (a socialization agent) and materialism amongst Malaysians, coinciding with the findings of Moschis (1987) and O'Guinn and Shrum (1997) in the USA, who propose that consumption norms are most likely acquired from the mass media. This finding reinforces the global proclivity of adolescents to watch copious amounts of television. Malaysian adolescents, including, ethnic Indian, Chinese and Malay are exposed to television that screens a considerable number of Western and Asian brands commercials. The commercials show various personality reflections of different celebrities (sports and films) and serve as frames of reference for young adolescents. This finding further challenges researchers to analyze other relevant beliefs and constructs that could possibly be implicated in influencing materialism, as opined by the cultivation perspective of O'Guinn *et al* (1989).

Findings in this study mirror previous work which indicates there is a positive association between television viewing and materialism coincides and strengthens the similar observations forwarded by Chung and Chan (1998) using Chinese and Australian samples. However, this outcome does not coincide with findings by Kwak *et al* (2002), who cite the differential role played by cultural and societal values of a particular country in terms of materialism. Hence, there is an opportunity for cultural and societal values to be studied in the future, in terms of their mediating effects on materialism.

The second socialization agent adopted for this study on materialism was 'peer communication'. A significant association between peer communication was established (a socialization agent) and materialism consistent with the findings by John (1999) and Moschis (1987). In Malaysian culture, both male and female adolescents have large friendship networks that provide a platform for extensive peer communication.

Mediating the effects of peer communication on the use of mass media (television viewing) were the other important dimensions examined. However, the two socialization agents were found to be not significant in this study. Thus, the role of mediators between disruptive family events and materialism in Malaysia deviated from the observations of John (1999) and Moschis (1987). However, the association between the variable Television viewing and Materialism and Peer communication and Materialism were found to be significant. This finding indicates that disruptive family events in Malaysia are not necessarily manifested and mediated through socialization agents, such as television viewing and peer communication. There is a good possibility of poor socialization or other maladaptation strategies are being employed by the adolescents in mediating family disruptive events and materialism. Such maladaptation can take the shape of excessive addiction to various habits like drinking, smoking and others.

Earlier studies suggest that family communication environments affect the development of the person's consumer values, knowledge and skills (Moschis 1987). Socio-oriented family communication environments that stress conformity to social norms have been found to promote symbolic consumption and hence materialism (Flouri 1999; Moschis 1987). In this context, the association between socio-oriented family communications is prominent during adolescent years on materialism in the Malaysian context. The association has not been

found to be significant, which was again contrary to the findings in earlier studies. This trend could possibly be attributed to the composition of the Malaysia society in tiers classified on the basis of income and education. In Malaysia, there are well-defined social classes, each represented by people, differing on income, education, religious values, beliefs and ethnic origins (Indians, Chinese and Malays). Socio-oriented family communication could be playing a directing role, with ethnic origin and religious values guiding a significant role for this population.

One of the important effects of Human Capital examined in the current study is the Economic Hardship hypothesis. Studies have shown that lower SES and increased conflict over money during adolescent years may increase a young adult person's desire to acquire scarce material possessions that symbolize success and status (O'Guinn and Shrum 1997; Rindfleisch *et al* 1997; Moschis 1987). However, the association between SES and materialism in Malaysia was not found to be significant in this study. In the Malaysian society, differing amount of effort is being expended by members of diverse ethnic origins (Chinese, Indians and Malays) to acquire wealth.

A drive for materialism has not been detected in this study. Malaysians seem to be striving to achieve materialism but at their own pace. Depending on ethnic origins and probably because the material achievements of different races have not been achieved to the level desired. In particular, members of the lower SES tended to become more contented and satisfied with what they have, fearing the competition for wealth gathering posed by their competitor races and the initial platform built by the ancestors of different races for wealth accumulation. In this regard, the Chinese have a higher drive for materialism and are commercially well equipped to achieve this goal because of the proximity and probability of past and continuing success in wealth creation. Hence, future investigations need to determine if the drive for materialism affects the probability of achievement maintained by members of lower-economic status of different racial origins.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **ITEMS USED IN MEASURES**

#### **Materialism**

1. Do you feel that you have all the things you really need to enjoy life?
2. How do you feel about having a lot of luxury in your life?
3. How do you feel about acquiring material possessions as an achievement in life?
4. Would your life be any better if you owned certain things that you don't have?
5. How do you feel about people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes?
6. How much pleasure do you get from buying things?
7. How do you feel about things you own?
8. How do you feel about owning things that impress people?
9. How do you approach your life in terms of your life possessions (i.e., buying and owning things)?

#### **Socio-Oriented Family Communication**

1. Say that their ideas were correct and you shouldn't question them.
2. Say that you should give in on arguments rather than making people angry.
3. Say you shouldn't depend on others if you can do something yourself.
4. Answer your arguments by saying something like "You'll know better when you grow up."
5. Say that the best way to stay out of trouble is to keep away from it.
6. Say that you shouldn't argue with adults.

#### **Television Viewing**

Approximate number of hours spend weekly viewing the following on television: News, soap operas, action and adventure shows, sport events, drama shows, movies, comedy shows, other (write in number of hours)

#### **Family Disruption Events**

The respondent's experience of the following events before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday:

1. Did not live in the same home as both of their biological parents
2. Frequent time periods in which one or both parents were absent
3. Loss (other than death) or separation from a family member or loved one
4. Arguments between parents or other family members
5. Move(s) to a new place of residence
6. Physical abuse by parents or close family members

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