AMERICAN MATERIALISM, CONSUMERISM AND SOCIAL VALUES: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ISSUES AND VALUE PRIORITIES

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American materialism is a concept put forth globally as a widely known "social fact"/stereotype (Roberts, 2004; Fox, 2001). However, little sociological research operationalizes materialism, or explores whether social-psychological attitudes of “self” affect materialistic values in the construction of a consumerist identity. Classical sociological and contemporary socio-political theory of culture and values (Baudrillard, 1981) are used to analyze qualitative and quantitative survey data obtained from an exploratory sample of 43 rural American young adults in mid-2001. To examine what socio-cultural values are embedded in consumption, indexes of materialism / consumerism, self-esteem and depression are correlated with the identification and prioritization of social issues, leisure pursuit activities and career aspirations, along with demographic variables such as class, gender, ethnicity and religion. Findings are contextualized within the larger social structural environment and recommendations for future cross-cultural research involving an Australian sample are proposed.

Key Words: Materialism, Consumerism, Social Values, Sociology, Happiness

INTRODUCTION

This paper begins by contextualizing the phenomena of increased economic growth and material comfort within a critical and cultural sociological framework. As changes in social structure may correspond to changes in both social behavior/social interactions among groups/individuals and material objects, which is the principle focus of investigation, I articulate specific instances of leisure time usage and consumption behavior to ascertain whether identifiable relationships exist and/or differ between actions (materialistic and nonmaterialistic), social values (latent and covert) and emotions/varying states of well-being. Next, I proceed to briefly outline the Western counter-movements arising in response to consumerism, expanding the epistemological focus to how the role of "experts" has construed understandings of health and happiness/depression and illness across disciplines by exploring the growth and emergence of the concept “affluenza”. Next, I analyze primary survey data gathered from a small sample of young Americans in a preliminary effort to explore relationships among demographic, attitudinal and behavioral variables, with the ultimate aim being to discern how relative affluence impacts social values and life pursuits.

The inevitability that Americans are consummate consumers who espouse materialist values is a concept put forth globally as a widely known "social fact"/stereotype (Roberts, 2004; Fox, 2001). Despite this promoted stereotype, and much theorizing, little sociological research has either empirically operationalized materialism or social-psychological attitudes (i.e. self-esteem, happiness/depression, and social values/beliefs) shaping/influencing contemporary consumerist behavioral manifestations (i.e. spending behavior and leisure time usage), although broad historical accounts, such as Corrigan’s (1997), exist. In contrast, the fields of marketing, economics and psychology have quantified issues relating to materialism / consumerism for decades. Given that the concepts of “social facts” and “stereotypes” originate from and are foundational to the discipline of sociology, stemming from Durkheim,
it seems fitting that, as a field, sociology is well placed to contribute further to this research topic.

Social Structure, Class and Inequality

Historically, the delineation among social classes was grounded, in a Marxist sense, on ownership of the means production (capital) and one’s relation to/expression of labor power. Manufacturing and industrial based societies were segregated along the, now classical, blue and white collar occupational divide. In contrast, in contemporary Western capitalist societies, the association between capital and labor has been, arguably, fundamentally altered due to technological changes and a rising middle-class. Although causality must be asserted with trepidation at best, the explosion of technology contributed towards a broadening middle-class. This shift in social structure, to ownership of capital as predominantly ownership of shares/stock (van Krieken, et al, 2000), altered the class-based composition of owners. The expansion of the middle class into the stock market offered some the opportunity, and reality of previously unrealized wealth.

Although systemic changes have not lead to economic equality, in Western countries, economic measures of income and wealth distribution do reveal less disparity/stratification. Studies analyzing income distribution highlight the shift from an industrial to a technology-based society has resulted, at least slightly, in less income inequality in 1990 than in 1915 (Saunders, 1992). This is not intended to minimize the difference between wealthy elites and the poor, but rather is intended to reflect the increase in size of the middle class. For instance, as the arguments put forth by van Krieken et al show in regards to Australia, the methodological challenges measuring wealth pose have resulted in inadequate data collection, especially the tendency of the wealthiest to not respond – “although there has been a trend towards decreasing inequality, wealth in Australia is still heavily concentrated, and it remains unclear whether the decrease in inequality can be explained by the improved ability of the very wealthy to avoid disclosure of their wealth holdings” (2000: 47). However, when global data is analyzed, the picture differs considerably to reveal a steady and increasing disparity between the world's wealthiest and poorest countries. For example, in the first paper to calculate world income distribution based on household surveys, Milanovic (2002) found growing increases in inequality among the 91 countries analyzed which he attributes as due to differences in urban versus rural development.

Post-structuralist Theory, Commodities and Culture

To augment the understanding of economic growth as an explanatory factor for heightened consumption, I shall now draw upon the poststructuralist insights of Baudrillard. As a critic of American culture, Baudrillard uses Marx’s classical concept of commodity fetishism, whereby consumption masks the social processes inherent to capitalistic production, to postulate products as symbolic signs of success. According to Baudrillard, to appreciate and understand commodities, one must transcend economic theory to explore the semiotic relationship between objects and their systemic value. In other words, commodities only possess value relative to other commodities and the meanings people attribute to them: “use value is a quality that is only arbitrarily commensurable with the quality of use value in other products through the medium of exchange value” (Levin, 1981: 16). Hence, in order to explore why "things" are desirable requires an analysis of meaning, since objects exist primarily as signs and their worth is largely symbolic.
Baudrillard’s work tries to abate the structuralism/phenomenology split, bereft by the “subject-knowledge-action problem” (Levin, 1981:10) dividing much sociological theory. Baudrillard’s confrontation of this issue is useful to the research at hand because it conceptualizes the commodity (object) – consumer (subject) dyad as contextualized within and simultaneously influenced by social structure. So, for example, to understand the behavior of consumption, applying this theory implores us to explore the negotiated realities and shared definitions individuals attribute to activities and objects in an identifiable place and time. Such an understanding requires corporations and other agents involved in the creation of consumer culture to be seen as stakeholders involved in imparting consumption with the power to surpass class representation. So, for instance, when you purchase a pair of Nike running tights, you are purchasing much more than exercise gear. You are purchasing a social identity as a member of a social group (say, as health-conscious, athlete or striving to be fit).

Commodities understood as “tokens”, in the Marxist sense, are fetishized objects masking their inherent exchange-value and the inequitable social relations which characterized their production. Consumption in transnational, global societies reproduces the very stratified social order upon which their production is contingent. In other words, commodity fetishism prevails when “workers gradually convince themselves that even though their money is very hard earned, there is nothing inherently wrong with the specific exchange relation….because life…is simply one colossal system of exchange relations” (Tong, 1998: 42).

While Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism is useful for understanding stratification, it prioritizes economic exchange to the exclusion of culture. This is problematic. Like Habermas, Baudrillard critiques Marx’s theory for failing to comprehend and include the role culture and language play in the process of consumption (Levin, 1981). The inclusion of culture into class-based theories of consumption imparts that, via hegemonic ideology, the causes of inequality are masked. As such, in addition to reflecting social status and wealth, consumption enables individuals to acquire social identities, perceived social mobility, and, in a vulgar sense, to buy a thinly veiled, uncritically false selfhood. The ideas expressed by John Stuart Mill convey, “the possession of such and such an object is in itself a social service: as a certificate of citizenship the TV is a token of recognition, of integration, of social legitimacy” (Baudrillard, 1981: 54). In Baudrillard’s (1981: 138-39) own words:

Men are not equal with respect to goods taken as exchange value, but they would be equal as regards goods taken at use value. One may dispose of them or not, according to one's class, income, or disposition; but the potentiality for availing oneself of them nevertheless exists for all. Everyone is equally rich in possibilities for happiness and satisfaction. This is the secularization of the potential equality of all men before God: the democracy of "needs."… in exchange value, social labor disappears. The system of use value, on the other hand, involves the resorption without trace of the entire ideological and historical labor process that leads the subject in the first place to think of himself as an individual, defined by his needs and satisfaction, and thus ideally to integrate himself into the structure of the commodity… use value is best the crown and scepter of political economy: in its lived reality: it is immanence of political economy in everyday life, down to the very act in which man believes he has rediscovered himself.
Thus, it is by exploring the relationship between perceptions of happiness/life satisfaction and materialism/consumerism behavior in the current research project, that Baudrillard’s theoretical assertion that I seek to question whether individuals identify the use value of goods as a potential manifestation for happiness and satisfaction.

Baudrillard’s inclusion of culture enhances our understanding of materialism by expanding traditional Marxist concepts, such as alienation and false-consciousness, to include a host of non-economic activities that contribute towards the exploitation of labor by capital. Cultural values and capitalism have been wedded for a great portion of American history. Classical sociological work by Weber (1947) reveals that in order to understand capitalism, one must focus on motivation and cultural values, such as the Protestant work ethic. As Worsley (1997: 347) notes, capitalism is not merely based upon economic realities but moreover upon law and cultural values such as “the sanctity of private property and the right to transmit accumulated wealth to one’s kin or any other legatee”. For example, “though the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] is a cultural institution, governments seek to influence or totally control the media (not just the news) because they recognize that the media influence people’s behavior, not just their ideas”. Hence, it is imperative in analyses of materialism/consumerism to include research about social values, as well as to understand culture as both agency/behavior and values/beliefs. Baudrillard more forcefully makes this argument when he writes “consumption…has nothing to do with personal enjoyment…rather it is a restrictive social institution that determines behavior before even being considered in the consciousness of the social actors” (Baudrillard, 1981: 31). From this perspective, consumption is far removed from being an expression of individualism. Indeed, it is the opposite; consumption is proscribed by social class with discrimination resulting from not merely the possession of artifacts but rather from the organization and social usage of commodities. “Consumption…is our most powerful cultural force, helping to shape our attitudes, beliefs, values and lifestyles” (Fox, 2001: 116).

**Consumerism, Popular Culture and Social Behavior**

Having made a poststructuralist argument to define consumerism as a dynamic, interactive relationship between structure and agency, I will now turn my focus to the collective and individual behavioral expressions resulting from the tensions theoretically described. As a precursor to increased consumerism, elevated disposable income, coupled with the growing availability of goods and services, made the acquisition of material objects reach an unprecedented high. According to economists, the distinguishing characteristic between contemporary "new rich" and those of bygone eras is that "today millions of families have tried against the necessity; they are, by any historical standard, rich. So they are ready to pursue happiness, but this is where the problem begins: I don't know where to find it." (The Economist, 2001: 13). Along with the rise in globalization, technological advancement and individual wealth, the nouveau riche, themselves a product of the system, are beginning to exhibit maladaptive socio-psychological tendencies.

One such symptom, "sudden-wealth syndrome", also called "affluenza", was labeled such by two American psychologists (Stephen Goldbart and Joan Di Furia) in 1997 and included such manifestations as "more guilt ridden and sympathetic to the plight of ordinary Americans " (The Economist, 2001: 13). At least two definitions for affluenza have been offered. According to wealth consultant Dr. Ronit Lami defines affluenza as "an unbalanced relationship with money/wealth, or the pursuit of it" (Reiss, 2002: 13). More formally,
Affluenza, as defined by America's primary independent news media station, PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) is:

**Affluenza** n. 1. The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream. 3. An unsustainable addiction to economic growth.

Affluenza arose as a public response to, and rejection of, commodity fetishism and is attributable to post-World War II technological advancements, the subsequent materialism and wealth ensuing during the Eighties as a result of the dotcoms and lottery, advertisers and television, and increasing secularism (Reiss, 2002). As a concept, affluenza was popularized by Graaf & Boe's late-Nineties media production, gaining airplay by America's leftist/intellectual radio outlet, National Public Radio. Complete with its own website, Affluenza "examines the high cost of achieving the most extravagant lifestyle the world has ever seen":

Last year, Americans, who make up only five percent of the world's population, used nearly a third of its resources and produced almost half of its hazardous waste. Add overwork, personal stress, the erosion of family and community, skyrocketing debt, and the growing gap between rich and poor, and it's easy to understand why some people say that the American Dream is no bargain. Many are opting out of the consumer chase, redefining the Dream, and making "voluntary simplicity" one of the top 10 trends of the '90s. (PBS website, 2005)

The aim of this documentary was "to convince the American people that over-consumption is a major cause of both environmental destruction and personal dissatisfaction" (Meadows, 1997: 41). However, as one reviewer notes, "talking to Americans about consumption is like talking to fish about water. Advertising, shopping, getting and flaunting "Drink Pepsi, Get Stuff" - this is the atmosphere we breathe, the information stream we drink from, the source, we are told, of jobs and identity, the measure, we are told, of a good life" (Meadows, 1997: 41). According to at least one "expert", "everyone suffers from affluenza, usually in a mild form: if you focus on 'what do I have?' externally - the car on driving, the house I'm living in, the neighborhood, school, even the whole stigma with universities - it's part of affluenza, it's hidden." (Reiss citing Lami, 2002: 13).

In response to heightened American consumerism, and the growing cases of affluenza, has emerged a countermovement: The Simple Living Movement. The social trend towards “voluntary simplicity” and “simple living” offers participants several how-to manuals for the "New American Dream". Beginning with the seminal work of Dominguez and Robin, the movement encourages members to live consciously, and simply as a means of reclaiming control over their lives. However, central to the movement are such old-fashioned conservative principles as Puritanical/Federalist notions of frugality, individualism and the pursuit of happiness, which are cloaked in an otherwise politically left agenda. Overall, members are asked to embark upon a transcendental journey in the hope they will discover answers to “meaning-of-life” questions, as the “bible’s” title, Your Money or Your Life?, suggests, en route to becoming less consumerist/materialistic. Although the focus of this research lies not in critiquing the Simple Living Movement, it is worthy to note that one a priori assumption is that affluenza is symptomatic of the American public in a specific historical era, rather being a class-based characteristic of a continually stratified society.
For example, the existence and relevance of affluenza in Australia is evidenced most poignantly by the publication of *Affluenza: When too much is never enough* (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). Like its American counterpart, the Australian strain of affluenza exhibits similar symptoms characteristic to its proper “diagnosis”, to borrow PBS’ metaphor:

Rich societies such as Australia seem to be in the grip of a collective psychological disorder. We react with alarm and sympathy when we come across an anorexic who is convinced she is fat, whose view of reality is so obviously distorted. Yet, as a society surrounded by affluence, we indulge in the illusion that we are deprived. Despite the obvious failure of the continued accumulation of material things to make us happy, we appear unable to change our behavior. We have grown fat but we persist in the belief that we are thin and must consume more (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005, 6).

Preoccupation with “curing” the ills of a postmodern citizenry, through the rejection of consumerism and the evil wants that the multibillion world of advertising would like us to believe we so need (Fox, 2001) has, from a Foucault-ian (1994) perspective continued the medicalization, individualization and pathologicalization of social phenomena. Reducing the complexity of social order into a treatable diagnosis is inherently limited and contributes little towards understanding how any social ill can be “treated”. Moreover, to the degree that the affluenza experts and countermovements focus on individuals to the exclusion/minimization of social structure, contributes towards an ideology of victimization. This shifts blame away from structural variables characteristic of advanced capitalist societies to the personal arena and highlights the need for a poststructuralist sensibility. As the psychological literature reveals, “a decade of research into the relationship between materialistic values and… feelings of self-worth” show

materialistic values are both a symptom of an underlying insecurity and coping strategy taken on in an attempt to alleviate problems and satisfy needs… the arguments and data showed that successfully pursuing materialistic goals fails to increase one's happiness (Kasser cited in Hamilton & Denniss, 2005: 14).

This leads Hamilton & Denniss to conclude increased materialism is expressed via increased consumption as a coping mechanism to alleviate insecurity, which is concurrently characterized by poor interpersonal relationships. To validate the argument further, the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*’ inclusion of compulsive shopping as a manifestation of an obsessive-compulsive disorder is cited (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005: 15). Recent sociological research (Reith, 2004) also draws an analogy between notions of addiction and practices of consumption, coining the term "addictive consumption".

Although seemingly innocuous, focusing on happiness represents a Kuhnian paradigm shift as previous research across disciplines prioritized illness, human suffering and treatment over prevention and well-being. Kuhn identifies paradigms as "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to community of practitioners" (Kuhn, 1970, 57). As Myers’ (2000) review of the literature since 1887 reveals, the discipline of psychology has disproportionately focused on illness over health. Hence, science has continued under normal conditions until the recent awareness of the anomaly that
exclusive focus on disease is insufficient. Thus, "a new scientific pursuit of happiness and life satisfaction has begun" (Myers, 2000: 56).

Developing alongside popular press assertions, market research and the field of psychology, is a growing academic and interdisciplinary body of literature focused on happiness, which can be characterized as suffering from much confusion relating to nomenclature. Whereas sociologists have for quite some time spoken of quality-of-life/life satisfaction research (Theodori, 2001) and “claim[ed] that fundamental social institutions systematically influence people's happiness" (Berkey, 2003: 190), health care providers, educators and policymakers have tended to articulate issues surrounding self-esteem (Hewitt, 1998) and some economists resisted joining the discussion altogether due to the inadequate measurability/imprecise subjectivity of "well-being" (Frey and Stutzer, 2001). Still, irrespective of label, precursory meta-analysis reveals the broad realization that the fundamental issue being questioned is a fuzzy, inarticulate, notion of human happiness. The recent explosion of research on happiness in the fields of sociology, political science and, most notably experimental psychology, are unprecedented (Frey and Stutzer, 2001). Yet, when it comes to materialism, sociology, as a discipline, has tended to posit materialism as a less than desirable consequence of Western progress. Indeed, as Wolf (Wunthrow, 1995) depicts, materialism is often attributed to be a ramification of individual behavior counter-productive to the collective good.

PRESENT STUDY

My research aims to question the degree to which consumptive practices can be reduced to largely individual causes. This focus seeks to draw out the degree to which structural variables can be identified as imposing upon possible manifestations of affluenza. My critique stems from both a theoretical and empirical basis. The present research project is a rudimentary, exploratory study established to ascertain what social structural variables in contemporary American culture influence a) perceptions of happiness/life satisfaction b) the qualitative articulation of social values, operationalized as the most pressing world issue and social issue rankings, and/or c) if there is an association between materialism/consumerism and self-reported expressions of happiness. An 8 page open and close-ended survey was distributed to a convenience sample of 43 rural American young adults in the State of Virginia mid-2001. Indexes of materialism/consumerism (Appendix A) and social values, along with leisure time usage, hypothetical and real monetary spending, happiness/depression, and self-esteem were created and assessed. This data, plus additional Attitudinal and Behavioral and Demographic variables, is descriptively analyzed to examine: 1) what socio-cultural values are embedded in materialism? 2) are correlated with the identification and prioritization of social issues/values? and 3) which demographic/social-structural variables may be useful to further explore?

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Lack of power to conduct multivariate statistics, due to small sample size (N=43) limits this study’s ability to run rigorous multivariate statistics. Therefore, the statistical measures used are limited to frequencies, descriptive statistics and correlations. Explanatory means comparisons conducted showed no striking differences amongst categories. Small cell size (often N<=5) prevented generalization and extrapolation. Nevertheless, combined with the
qualitative data, this study highlights relationships between variables and provides a foundation for future expansive studies.

**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

**Demographic Variables**

Descriptive statistics reveal a traditional Southern American population from a wealthy, white town in Virginia: a homogenous sample of relatively affluent (average household income ranges from $10-29,000 annually (5%) to more than $130,000 (14%), with the average mean falling in the 70,000-90,000 (55%) range where the majority (93%) live in a house their parents’ own. Most are Caucasian (95%), young (86% between 18-19) females (81%) from dual income households (79% have mothers employed outside the home along with 91% of fathers working full-time). Historically, religion has played a significant role in the Southeast and there tends to be a proportionately larger number of fundamentalists, particularly when contrasted with Northeastern states. In this sample, 79% report some religious affiliation. The largest denomination (28%) is Baptist, followed by Catholic (16%) and Methodist (12%). 58% identify religion as somewhat or very important to their lives and 74% attend religious services. Finally, anticipating that having experienced discrimination may influence social values and behavior, I asked "have you ever experienced any of the following…” for 8 items. The majority of respondents say they experienced some form of discrimination, with the most common being sexism (58%), then prejudice against body size/type (51%), religious prejudice (28%) and domestic violence (26%).

**Attitudinal Variables**

The two main attitudinal variables measured in this study are materialism and social values, controlling for self-esteem/life satisfaction and happiness/depression. The self-esteem/life satisfaction measure is a 10 Item index (Cronbach’s Alpha = .84) showing 70% of the sample exhibit moderately high levels of self-esteem. Happiness and depression are measured by two discrete variables, asking respondents to rate on a scale of 1 (often) to 4 (never) how often they experienced happiness and depression during the past 3 months. 86% say they rarely felt depressed. Consistent with American National Opinion Research, which shows the majority of Americans describe themselves as pretty or very happy (Myers, 2000), this study portrays a self-described image of relatively happy Americans: the majority (100%) report they sometimes or often experience feelings of happiness, with no one reporting rarely or never. Despite this rosy image, when asked about their life satisfaction, 51% agree or strongly agree they would be happier if they owned nicer things. 53% report they feel bothered quite a bit that they can't afford to buy all the things they would like. Interestingly, this perception is not significantly correlated with real income levels. 51% say they admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes. So, what about the social trend towards a simpler lifestyle? In contrast with their desire for an appreciation of commodities, when asked specifically if they try to keep their life simple as far as possessions are concerned, 57% agree. Thus, the young adults surveyed seem genuinely divided about whether materialistic consumption or non-materialistic values are more important to pursue.

**Materialism**

Materialism is measured both attitudinally (via beliefs) and behaviorally (via past actions). First, respondents stated if they agree that Americans are too materialistic. Overwhelmingly, 95% of respondents said yes. Second, respondents completed an 18 item materialism attitude index (Cronbach’s alpha=.77). Scores ranged from 36 (most materialistic) to 76 (least materialistic), with a mean of 58 and a relatively normal distribution. Third, respondents were
asked to think about their career and how important it would be to make a lot of money and if they would feel successful doing work they enjoyed that earned little money. Although 88% said earning a lot of money is important, only 9% said they would feel unsuccessful in a career they enjoyed if it earned only a small amount of money annually.

Aside from questioning materialistic beliefs, this study sought to identify respondents’ consumerist behaviors. Three measures were used to gauge consumerism. First, respondents were asked to rank 1 (most frequent) to 11 (least frequent) how they spend their free time. Figure 1 reveals visiting friends is the most frequent activity, followed by paid entertainment and TV, indicating a combination of “passive” and “active” leisure time pursuits. The least frequent activity is attending church, followed by volunteering and studying.

*Figure 1: Self-Reported Leisure Usage*

Second, respondents were asked to explain how they would use $1000 if they could do anything at all with it. From all of the open-ended responses, 4 broad categories represent how each respondent would use most of the money: 33% would buy things, 30% would give it away to family/friends, 23% would save it and 14% would give it to charity.

Third, respondents were asked how they would use another $1000 if they had to buy 3 things. Figure 2 illustrates the specific items the sample identified, showing clothes (27%) to be the most popular commodity, followed by electronics (19%) and furniture (13%). Additional data from this question reveals 33% would still donate some of the money to charity, 47% would give a portion to their families/friends and 44% would save, indicating that although consumption is the most popular choice, this sample consistently displays behaviors of altruism/charity, which perhaps may be explained by the high importance of religion and social values associated with Christianity.
Social Values
Social values were measured in three ways. First, respondents completed a 10 item social values index (Cronbach’s alpha=.73) answering the degree to which they believed it was important their friends possessed certain attributes. The results revealed a positively skewed frequency distribution indicating the majority (79%) felt it was more important their friends possess quality, non-materialistic “social values” (fun personalities, good education, trustworthy, religious, popular) than material possessions (nice clothes, nice home, good looking, nice car, money). Second, respondents were asked to identify the most important world issue they would like to solve if given no financial constraints. Results (Figure 3) reveal that the most popular (18%) student-generated option was eliminating world hunger. Third, respondents were given a list of 13 social issues and asked to rank them from 1 (most important) to 13 (least important). Similarly to the self-reported data, ending world hunger and creating violent free schools tie as the most important social issue, followed by protecting the rainforests, creating affordable health care and protecting your personal financial investments. Tying for second-to-last place as least important was making abortion illegal and creating cultural, women's and gay/lesbian studies at all universities. Mandatory military service for all citizens was the least popular social issue.
Finally, linking attitudes and behavior, in the past year: 44% donated money to a social, political, or environmental cause, 72% saved at least some portion of their income, 42% “personally spoke out against a racist/sexist/homophobic joke or comment" and 58% volunteered for a non-religion based cause.

**BIVARIATE CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS**

Table 1: Bivariate Correlations for significant variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-Tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materialism Index vs Feel successful earning little</td>
<td>-0.421</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materialism Index vs Its Important to earn a lot</td>
<td>0.465</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think Americans too materialistic vs Its important to earn a lot</td>
<td>-0.345</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income vs Personal wealth</td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income vs Fathers education level</td>
<td>0.552</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income vs Have donated money</td>
<td>0.419</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income vs Importance of religion</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income vs Values index</td>
<td>-0.304</td>
<td>0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal wealth vs Have felt “Blue”</td>
<td>-0.371</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save money vs Have spoken out</td>
<td>-0.313</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save money vs Mothers education</td>
<td>-0.332</td>
<td>0.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Index vs Have felt “Blue”</td>
<td>-0.423</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness Index vs Feel successful earning little</td>
<td>0.308</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Index vs Victim experience</td>
<td>-0.307</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Index vs Religious affiliation</td>
<td>-0.359</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Index vs Fathers education</td>
<td>-0.364</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Index vs Its important to earn a lot</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Index vs Have spoken out</td>
<td>-0.437</td>
<td>0.003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation vs Importance of religion</td>
<td>0.592</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation vs Church attendance</td>
<td>0.582</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious affiliation vs Fathers education</td>
<td>0.388</td>
<td>0.010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church attendance vs Importance of religion</td>
<td>0.732</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<td>Church attendance vs Fathers education</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>0.046</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have spoken out vs Is important to earn a lot</td>
<td>-0.385</td>
<td>0.011</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have spoken out vs Have felt “Blue”</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>0.015</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Findings can be categorized into 2 broad areas: 1) materialism 2) social values & behaviors. Consistent with historical psychological research, this study confirms gender, religion, religiosity, materialism and personal wealth do not predict happiness. However, this does not mean the pursuit of monetary success is unimportant. The materialism index revealed, as expected, young Americans who exhibit high levels of materialism believe it is very important they “make a lot of money” in their career choice (r=.46, p<.002) and they would not feel successful in an occupation intrinsically rewarding yet monetary poor (r=-.42, p<.006). In relation to savings behavior and importance, individuals who exhibit greater materialistic tendencies by spending their leisure time passively (shopping, watching television, eating out and purchasing paid entertainment, such as the movies) report a greater need to save money (r=-47, p<.001) and qualitatively report greater personal wealth. The higher the household income, the more money is reported as being donated annually (r=.41, p<.006) and, consistent with sociological research findings (Bean et al, 1998), religion is inversely correlated with social class: the higher one’s class, the less important religion is to them (r=.37, p<.01) and the less likely they will affiliate with religion at all. Young Americans whose mothers have higher levels of education are more likely to save themselves (p<.05). Further, whereas father’s employment status does not impact articulation of what is an important world issue, mother’s employment status correlates significantly (p<.05).

Individuals who reported speaking out against a racist/sexist/homophobic joke/comment reported greater happiness (r=-.36, p<.01), which may indicate a relationship between agency/taking control over injustices and overall well-being. Whether or not there is a class-based difference in social action is a question transcending this research project, but it is interesting those who report no savings (r=-.31, p<.04) and money as unimportant (r=-3.85, p<.01) were also more likely to speak out against social injustices. Young Americans who were direct victims of discrimination are more likely to support the need for tolerant behavior, expressed as freedom of speech (p<.05), even when that means they disagree with what is being said.

Finally, although this research did not set out to divulge the religious practices and preferences of young Americans, religion continuously proved to be a significant variable. Perhaps this is because, as Marty (Wuthnow, 1995) points out, in the US since colonialism, materialism has been tied to religion and American belief systems, often being advocated as foundational to material wealth rather than antagonistic. Still, in contrast to Berkey (2003), who found income, home ownership, and religious meeting attendance were associated with increased levels well-being, the present study did not find religious meeting attendance correlated with home ownership or well-being. Religious individuals were no happier or more/less materialistic than those with no religious affiliation. However, this research confirms fundamentalists, particularly Baptists, attend religious services more frequently than individuals belonging to non-fundamentalist religions (r=.58, p<.000), believe religion is very important (r=.59, p<.000) and, those who report religion as very important attend religious services more frequently (r=.73, p<.000). Religion is associated with social class: higher social class = less fundamentalist. For instance, the higher the level of father’s education, the less likely their offspring will be Baptist (r=.38, p<.05); the lower the level of father’s education, the more frequently their children attend religious services (r=.30, p<.04). And, as one would expect, the higher the level of father’s education, the greater the overall household income (r=.55, p<.000). Finally, the higher the household income, the less importance religion assumes. However, if this contributes towards young Americans’ life satisfaction and/or levels of materialism, lies beyond the scope of this research.
CONCLUSION

This exploratory study provides elementary answers to the complex relationship between materialism/consumerism, social values and happiness/life satisfaction. It identifies perceptions of career satisfaction, commodities’ ability to make one happier and ability to purchase things (buying power) as issues influencing young American’s ideas about the social value of material wealth. The importance of making money as vital to career satisfaction is confirmed and supports the previous research finding that 3 out of 4 university students, from the quarter million surveyed, believe “a "very important" reason for their going to college was "make more money" (Myers, 2000: 58). This study supports Myers’ conclusion that “for today's young Americans, money matters”, yet suggests qualification. While on one hand money matters, on the other respondents’ identification of multiple, non-material values and preferences relating to careers, leisure time pursuits and spending behavior puts forth a possible realization that money cannot buy happiness. Although respondents readily articulated goods they would like to purchase if given $1000, the consistent distribution of money between commodities and friends/family and charity shows young Americans as other than consummate consumers, a stereotype often put forth by the media and other social institutions.

The lack of connection between money and values complements other happiness research revealing that initially increased levels of income are correlated with greater expressions of individual happiness, yet, over time, this correlation disappears due to the principle of relative income whereby individuals readjust and adapt their goals in alignment with new levels of wealth (Frey and Stutzer, 2001; Diener, 2000). “Once comfortable…more money provides diminishing returns on happiness" (Myers, 2000: 59). Given the mean household income in my sample, respondents may be described as economically “comfortable” relative to global income statistics. Therefore, in principle, happiness should not be related to money, as the present study confirms. Perhaps this is a partial explanation for the existence/attributed importance of other social values - friends/family, volunteering, donating money, active leisure pursuits and religion. Additionally, discrepancy among answers may indicate the existence of a social desirability effect regarding answering questions about materialism and consumption. For instance, on the one hand, young Americans seem to value money and material possessions yet, on the other hand, they seem aware that it is socially undesirable to be materialistic, as evidenced by stronger agreement with the statement "Americans are too materialistic", and the majority's agreement that they ought to pursue a “simple life” without excessive possessions.

Future studies may wish to apply Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” as a potentially enhanced explanatory theory. Whereas Baudrillard speaks of the restrictive function of consumption leading to fetishized and addictive consumption, a more fruitful approach might be to ask: what are the characteristics of well-adjusted/adaptive consumption?, instead of pursuing the negative, deterministic and disease-based track of associating consumption with perversion and simplicity/anti-consumption with salvation. Respondents’ identification and ranking of social issues exhibits a concern for national and global issues while simultaneously looking out for their own best financial interests, both which are significantly correlated with mother’s education and employment status. This connotes a possible socialization effect which future studies may wish to explore. Personal experience with discriminatory behavior seems to make individuals more aware of the need for tolerance, more likely to be socially active less materialistic.
In conclusion, the insights provided by this exploratory study point us back to Weber’s imperative that to understand capitalism (or materialism/consumerism) we must look at underlying motivations and cultural values. This project has begun the task and established the initial parameters. Now, one path ahead is to question whether this is yet another instance of “American Exceptionalism”vi (which I would resist), or, to ascertain in global terms the characteristics of new world citizens and consumers to ask if there exists an identifiable global culture of consumption and/or systemically identifiable materialistic behaviors, values and beliefs.

**FOOTNOTES**

i materialistic (whether Americans in general are too materialistic), materialism/consumerism, happiness/depression, self-esteem, tolerance (whether freedom of speech should be upheld for all groups, including groups proclaiming hate and non-American values), career success (in relation to many), world issues (value of political left vs right and neutral world issues), leisure time usage, commodities sought.

ii mothers’ and fathers’ education level, mothers’ and fathers’ employment status, gender, age, discrimination/victim status (of domestic violence, sexism, racism, or discrimination based upon sexuality, physical disability, body size, and/or class – as a welfare recipient), religion (fundamentalist, non-fundamentalist, no religion), church attendance, income, saving behavior

iii Items = domestic violence, sexism, racism, homophobia discrimination against religion, body size, physical disability and/or welfare recipients.

iv self-esteem was measured by a 10 Item index using a 4 item Likert scale. Items included a. On the whole I'm satisfied myself b. at times I think I'm not at all c. I feel that I have a number of good qualities d. I'm able to do things as well as most other people e. I feel I do not have much to be proud of f. I certainly feel useless at times g. I feel I am a person of worth at least one equal plane with others h. I wish I could have more respect for myself i. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I'm a failure j. I take a positive attitude toward myself

v Social issues from most to least important = world hunger and violence free schools, protecting rainforests/arctic, affordable health care for all, animal rights, ending gay/lesbian discrimination, regulating corporate pollution and promoting the death penalty, cultural women’s and gay/lesbian studies in all universities, mandatory military service for all citizens.

vi American Exceptionalism is the "notion that the United States was created differently, develop differently, and thus has to be understood differently - essentially on its own terms and within its own context… in political, economic, religious, or cultural life” (Shafer cited in Tilman, 2005:178). More specifically, American Exceptionalists (Frederick Jackson Turner, Werner Sombart, Antonio Gramsci, and Thorstein Veber) "argued that American capitalism... was less conducive to class consciousness, class struggle, and ideological politics than Europe” due to a Western Frontier mentality, availability of land for agricultural, rapid economic growth and individual prosperity resulting in satisfaction and minimal class conflict, capitalistic values, an intellectual elite coupled with ideological hegemony of the upper middle-class which produced political control, and practices of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste that led to social bonding (Tilman, 2005:177-178). The degree to which the political, social and economic experiences of America are independent to experiences of Western nations elsewhere in the world, and specifically Australia, is arguable. For instance, books (Maddox, 2005) have been written comparing/contrasting the American and Australian political systems (in light of British heritage), noting the degree to which the two country’s experience and development of democratic governance, federalism, the establishment of constitutions, political parties,
capitalism in an age of globalization, etc, differ/are similar. Finally, the breath and scope of multinational corporations which transcends the boundaries of nation states is an issue worthy of further exploration.

REFERENCES


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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A: MATERIALISM INDEX**

1. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars & clothes
2. Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions
3. I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success
4. The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life
5. I like to own things that impress people
6. I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own
7. I usually buy only the things I need
8. I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned
9. The things I own aren't all that important to me
10. I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical
11. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure
12. I live a lot of luxury in my life
13. I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know
14. I have all the things I really need to enjoy life
15. My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have
16. I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things
17. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more
18. It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I’d like