

Tamás Kocsis

The problems of consumer society

Materialism and attempts to measure it

From the broad sphere of concepts of materialism I am only going to deal with aspects which are directly related to consumption. Materialism—as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary—is a “*devotion to material needs and desires, the neglect of spiritual matters; a way of life, opinion or tendency based entirely upon material interests*”. According to Russel W. Belk, the best-known researcher of the subject, materialism is “*the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person’s life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction*” (Belk 1984, p. 291).

On the level of society the definition of Chandra Mukerji seems to be the most useful, according to which materialism is a cultural system in which material interests are not subordinated to other social goals and material self-interest is outstanding (Mukerji 1983, p. 8). Several authors note that acquisitive desires have not only emerged in the last few hundred years (see McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb 1982). However, it is without doubt that it has only been in the last centuries that the chance to seek psychological well-being through discretionary consumption has become available for the masses (Belk 1985, p. 265 relying on Mason 1981). This also emphasizes the importance of contemporary research on materialism.¹

To examine the role of materialism in consumer societies attempts to quantify materialism, the researches, which are still at an early stage but are increasingly intensive, serve as a strong basis. It is Belk’s mid-80s attempts that can be considered the first stage of systematic research of materialism (Richins 1999, p. 374; Richins–Rudmin 1994, p. 220), though there are some earlier analyses which have alluded to the subject.² Belk (1985) used three dimensions to describe materialism—possessiveness, nongenerosity and envy—and five-point Likert (agree/disagree) scales to measure the intensity of the dimensions.

¹ Fournier and Richins (1991) describes the relationship between theory and public opinion about materialism.

² For a brief review of them see Belk (1985, p. 267) and Richins–Dawson (1992, pp. 305–7).

The items are listed below in detail, as they are more suggestive than any theoretical description. (An asterisk indicates reverse scored items, that is, the more an individual agrees with it, the less he can be considered as materialistic from that aspect.)

Possessiveness subscale:

1. Renting or leasing a car is more appealing to me than owning one*
2. I tend to hang on to things I should probably throw out
3. I get very upset if something is stolen from me even if it has little monetary value
4. I don't get particularly upset when I lose things*
5. I am less likely than most people to lock things up*
6. I would rather buy something I need than borrow it from someone else
7. I worry about people taking my possessions
8. When I travel I like to take a lot of photographs
9. I never discard old pictures or snapshots³.

Nongenerosity subscale:

1. I enjoy having guests stay in my home*
2. I enjoy sharing what I have*
3. I don't like to lend things even to good friends
4. It makes sense to buy a lawnmower with a neighbor and share it*
5. I don't mind giving rides to those who don't have a car*
6. I don't like to have anyone in my home when I'm not there
7. I enjoy donating things to charities*⁴.

Envy subscale:

1. I am bothered when I see people who can buy anything they want
2. I don't know anyone whose spouse or steady date I would like to have as my own*
3. When friends do better than me in competition it usually makes me happy for them*
4. People who are very wealthy often feel they are too good to talk to average people

³ A revised materialism scale has been published for international comparative studies (see e.g. Ger-Belk 1996, p. 65). In this the possessiveness subscale includes only items 3, 4, 5 as well as item 6 of the nongenerosity subscale (after factor analysis).

⁴ The nongenerosity subscale of the international materialism scale does not include items 4 and 6 but includes item 7 of the possessiveness subscale as well as items 3 and 6 of the envy subscale. It also includes a new item: "I do not enjoy donating things to the needy." (Ger-Belk 1996, p. 65)

5. There are certain people I would like to trade places with
6. When friends have things I cannot afford it bothers me
7. I don't seem to get what is coming to me
8. When Hollywood stars or prominent politicians have things stolen from them I really feel sorry for them* (Belk 1985, p. 270)⁵.

The materialism scale developed by Marsha L. Richins and Scott Dawson includes different questions and focuses on different aspects but—just like Belk's—it clearly describes the nature of materialism. When analyzing separately the five data sets obtained from five locations of the USA with five different sample sizes,⁶ three dimensions (factors) emerged indicating different aspects of materialism. The authors named them success, centrality and happiness. The items of the three dimensions are listed below, the ones marked with an asterisk being reverse scored items. In the survey the above-mentioned five-point Likert scale response format was used.

Success:

1. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and 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*.

Centrality:

1. I usually buy only the things I need*
2. I try to keep my life simple as far as possessions are concerned*
3. The things I own aren't all that important to me*
4. I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical

⁵ The envy subscale of the international materialism scale retained only 1, 4, 5 and 7 of the original items and it also has a new item: "If I have to choose between buying something for myself versus for someone I love, I would prefer buying for myself." The international materialism scale includes a new subscale besides the original three described in the main text. It refers to preservation and includes item 2 of the possessiveness subscale as well as two new items: "I like to collect things"; "I have a lot of souvenirs." (Ger-Belk 1996, p. 65)

⁶ Data was obtained from a medium-sized north-eastern city (144 subjects), two large western city (250 and 235 subjects), a north-eastern college town (86 subjects) and a north-eastern rural area (119 subjects) (Richins-Dawson 1992, p. 309).

5. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure
6. I like a lot of luxury in my life
7. I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know*.

Happiness:

1. I have all the things I really need to enjoy life*
2. My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have
3. I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things*
4. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things
5. It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like (Richins–Dawson 1992, p. 310)⁷.

Both materialism scales are used in practice. The one developed by Richins and Dawson approaches the issue more directly, based on values considered important by people, while Belk's primarily examines relationships between people, which also correlates with materialism, though some experts do not consider them an integral part of materialism (Williams–Bryce 1992, p. 150). The Richins–Dawson scale has proved to be more reliable statistically than Belk's scale (see Ellis 1992). Despite these unquestionable achievements, the research of materialism is rather divided and characterized by the lack of a generally accepted, unified theoretical framework, although there have already been attempts to create one (see Graham 1999).

Phenomena accompanying materialism

Richins and Dawson (1992) carried out a test on a sample of 250 subjects in a large western city of the USA in order to find out whether respondents scoring high in the materialism scale of the authors are less willing to share what they have and rate their personal goals as more important than those of the community. In the survey people were asked what they would do if they were unexpectedly given \$20,000. They were given seven ways in which money could be spent: (1) Buy things I want or need; (2) Give to church organization or charity, (3) Give or lend to friends or relatives; (4) Travel; (5) Pay off debts; (6) Savings or investments; (7) Other.

⁷ The happiness dimension of the Richins–Dawson materialism scale is very similar to the one called consumer saturation in sociology. That asks respondents to define themselves as: "*I have (almost) everything I need.*"

"I have (almost) everything but I would like to replace a lot of them with new ones." "*There are things which I would need and do not have.*" (Sik 2000, p. 339)

The whole sample was divided into terciles based on their materialism scores and the top (most materialist) and bottom (least materialist) terciles were compared. It was revealed that the most materialist tercile would spend three times as much on things for themselves as would the least materialist one, would contribute less than half of what the least materialists would to charitable or church organizations⁸ and would give less than half as much to friends and family.⁹ The measure of nongenerosity developed by Belk—described in the previous subchapter—was also administered in the survey on the same sample and compared to the scale of Richins and Dawson. The correlation between the two scales was 0.25,¹⁰ implying that nongenerous people are more likely to be found among materialists.

James A. *Muncy* and Jacqueline K. *Eastman* intended to find out if materialistic consumers have different ethical standards than others. Materialism was measured using the Richins–Dawson scale, while the lack of consumer ethics was examined based on four dimensions. The first two dimensions are concerned with situations where the buyer benefits at the expense of the seller, e.g. drinking a can of soft drink in a supermarket without paying for it (proactively benefiting), or not saying anything when the seller miscalculates the total in your favor (passively benefiting). The third dimension includes situations where the buyer is deceiving the seller, e.g. returning a product to a shop claiming that it was a gift when it was not (deceptive practices). The fourth dimension refers to situations where the consumer is not thoughtful enough to perceive harm caused to the seller, e.g. copying an album instead of buying it (“no harm, no foul” attitude).¹¹

The survey was conducted in two large American universities and the subjects were 214 students enrolled in various introductory marketing classes.¹² To find out specific relationships between materialism and consumer ethics, simple bivariate correlational analysis was carried out. Based on this sample,

⁸ $p < 0.001$

⁹ $p < 0.01$

¹⁰ $p < 0.001$

¹¹ For more details about measuring consumer ethics see e.g. Vitell–Muncy (1992).

¹² The sample proved to be more materialistic (with about 5–7 points higher average materialism values on the max. 90-point scale) than the ones surveyed by Richins and Dawson. The authors say they had expected it as the respondents were business students (Muncy–Eastman 1998, p. 140). Williams and Bryce (1992) found a similar, almost 8-point, difference when surveying 151 seniors in New-Zealand, some studying commerce, some arts (the latter were less materialistic) (Williams–Bryce 1992, p. 153). The international version of Belk’s materialism scale gave similar findings in Turkey (Ger–Belk 1996, pp. 68–9).

the correlation between materialism and actively benefiting was (-0.35), passively benefiting (-0.28), deceptive practices (-0.35) and no harm-no foul (-0.46).¹³ This shows a relatively strong relationship, the negative correlation implying that higher levels of materialism are associated with a lower propensity to see non-ethical behavior as being wrong (Muncy–Eastman 1998, pp. 141–2). As this is simple correlation, the direction of causality between the phenomena examined cannot be defined. Maybe it is materialists who make ethical compromises when acquiring things they deeply desire, however it could just as well be true that people with lower ethical standards tend to be more materialistic. Both cases raise some interesting questions for marketing. If marketing encourages materialism, which then leads to lower ethical standards, it can well be accused with being socially irresponsible, the authors say. In the other case marketing would not lead to lower ethical standards but one might also question the prudence of advertising tactics targeting consumers with lower ethical standards (Muncy–Eastman 1998, pp. 142–3).

Richins (1987) in another survey intended to discover the relationship between materialism and the influence of media. Before developing her materialism scale, she used a more simple five-point scale for measuring materialistic attitude, during which she separated a general and a personal materialism variable.¹⁴ Another variable examined to what extent people perceived characters in advertisements to be real persons (perceived realism of advertising) and also measured to what extent respondents are exposed to the impact of media (how many hours a week they watch television and how often they pay attention to television commercials). The sample included 252 respondents from a medium-size Sunbelt city of the USA, and was collected to meet quotas of 50% male/female, 50% over age 40 and 50% under (Richins 1987, p. 353). The correlation between media exposure and general material values was not significant, between media exposure and personal material values it was very weak. However, when splitting the sample into two groups using the median¹⁵ of the realism variable, in the group perceiving character portrayals in commercials to be more accurate (high realism subgroup) there

¹³ Even the lowest value was significant at the $p < 0.0001$ level.

¹⁴ Items of the *personal* variable are (measured by a five-point Likert scale): (1) It is important to me to have really nice things. (2) I would like to be rich enough to buy anything I want. (3) I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things. (4) It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I would like. Items of the *general* variable are: (1) People place too much emphasis on material things. (reverse scored) (2) It's really true that money can buy happiness. (Richins 1987, p. 354)

¹⁵ The median of a variable is the value at which the variable has the same amount of lower values as higher values.

was a significant relationship between media exposure and both forms of materialism.¹⁶ It implies that among those who tend to believe in the reality of advertising, the ones who spend more time watching television are more materialistic (Richins 1987, p. 354). The direction of the causality cannot be determined in this case either, nevertheless the relationship is remarkable.

Belk and Pollay (1985) conducted a study on newspaper advertisements from the USA of the first 80 years of the 20th century. They concluded that materialistic temptation of luxury goods and pleasures increased in the period examined. Moschis and Moore (1982) analyzed the impact of media on schoolchildren with a longitudinal study, that is, data were collected about the same children in several times in their lives. They found a significant relationship between the effect of television advertisements and materialistic values. The difference was especially great within the group of children who were initially low in materialism. Those who watched more television were significantly higher in materialism 14 months later than those who watched less TV¹⁷ (quoted by Richins 1999, p. 378).

Following the appearance of reliable materialism scales, an increasing number of studies was published in the 1990s about the relationship between family structure and materialism. Rindfleish, Burroughs and Denton (1997) for example used the Richins–Dawson scale to analyze a sample of adults aged 20–32 in a medium-size city in the American Mid-West, some of whose (165 subjects) grew up in intact families (two parents), others (96 subjects) in disrupted families (parents divorced or separated). According to the survey the ones from disrupted families demonstrated significantly higher levels of material values and were more prone to compulsive buying (Rindfleish et al. 1997, p. 318).¹⁸ The biggest difference between the two groups was in the dimension of centrality of the materialism scale (that is, the importance of

¹⁶ The author used multiple regression analyses in which the predictor was the television exposure (number of hours spent watching television), while the dependent variables were the material values scales. For general material values the beta for television exposure was 0.19 ($p < 0.05$) and for personal material values it was 0.29 ($p < 0.01$). The relationship between attention to advertising (how often the respondents pay attention to television commercials) and the two forms of materialism was not significant (Richins 1987, p. 354). It suggests that how much the respondent watches TV is more important than how much attention he thinks he pays to commercials.

¹⁷ In this case the direction of causality can be determined, that is, it is more time spent watching TV that probably results in higher materialism of children not the other way round.

¹⁸ Based on analysis of the average values of the groups. The correlation with materialism was significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, the correlation with compulsive buying at the $p < 0.0001$ level. For further details on compulsive buying see Faber and O'Guinn (1992).

acquisition and possession in general—see previous subchapter for details). Therefore the authors concluded that people from single-parent families tend to use material objects for substituting absent parents and material values and/or compulsive buying for coping with the stress and insecurity accompanying family disruption (Rindfleish et al. 1997, pp. 320, 323).

Flouri's study (1999) of 246 university students in a medium-size Southern England city could not prove a relationship between materialism measured by the Richins–Dawson scale and family structure. However, students high in materialism talked more to their peers about consumption issues, were more susceptible to interpersonal influence, less often attended religious service, received less parental teaching about how to manage money and were less satisfied with their mother (Flouri 1999, p. 714).¹⁹ The author claims that though his research did not reveal a relationship between materialism and poor socio-economic background, it did prove that financial and *personal* insecurity directly or indirectly relate to materialism.²⁰ Family background can directly encourage the materialism of children if the mother is also materialist and indirectly if their spiritual and intrinsic needs are ignored in order to lead a secular way of life. *“On the other hand—says Flouri—parents who encourage conformity and are cold and unsupportive may lead adolescents to turn to their peers, the interactions with whom contribute to the child's learning of the ‘expressive’ elements of consumption. But also ‘broad’ personality factors, such as neuroticism, which was also related to dissatisfaction with interpersonal relationships and financial insecurity may lead to turning to possessions to compensate for feelings of unhappiness and low self-esteem.”* (Flouri 1999, pp. 721–2)

After examining the notion of materialism and analyzing its social implications, the notion of consumption is going to be dealt with including relevant environmental issues.

¹⁹ The author used a regression analysis in which the dependent variable was materialism. The first three correlation in the main text were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, the last two were significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

²⁰ Flouri (1999) as well as several of her earlier studies revealed positive correlation between materialism and compulsive consumption, susceptibility to neurosis and impulsive (i.e. unplanned) buying, however, there was negative correlation between materialism and self-esteem or self expression. For further details on the measuring of these phenomena and its findings see Mick (1996).

Overconsumption and misconsumption

In an ecological sense the consumption of every living being—including humans—is natural. In order to survive all organisms must consume and in this way degrade resources. This interpretation of consumption is nonethical, according to it all consumption patterns and their consequences are natural, including population crashes as well as expansion of a species at the expense of another. If, however, the interpretation includes human concern for extinction of species, permanent diminution of ecosystem functioning, diminished reproductive and developmental potential of individuals and other irreversibilities, then consumption acquires an ethical aspect and can be evaluated as “good” or “bad”. In order to be able to analyze the problem more thoroughly, I introduce the concepts of overconsumption and misconsumption.

According to Thomas Princen overconsumption is the level or quality of consumption (1) which undermines a species’ own life-support system and (2) for which individuals or collectivities of the species have other choices in their consuming patterns. Overconsumption is an aggregate level concept. It entails that the species overburdens the regenerative capacity of natural resources and the waste assimilative capacity of its ecosystem. For humans it becomes an ethical problem as well since they are the only species that can reflect on its collective existence.

Misconsumption, on the other hand, is interpreted on an individual level. During it the individual consumes in a way that undermines his own well-being even if there are no aggregate effects on the level of population. Consequently, in case of misconsumption the individual uses resources in a way that results in net loss to him. It has several types. On physiological level there is bulimia or drug addiction, psychologically one can fall into the trap of “perpetual dissatisfaction” owing to advertisements, for example, ecologically the construction of a badly founded house or the use of leaded paint harms the resource (the house) itself or the users (developmental problems of one’s children) (cf. Princen 1999, pp. 356–7).

Obviously, the overexploitation of the ecosystem is caused by overconsumption, while misconsumption is a social problem. However, when analyzing chances to decrease overconsumption, one has to consider whether it is accompanied by misconsumption or not. The relationship of the two phenomena is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Possible Combinations of Overconsumption and Misconsumption

	There is Over-consumption	There is No Overconsumption
<i>There is Misconsumption</i>	A	B
There is No Misconsumption	C	D

Note: Devised graph by using the description of Princen (1999, p. 357).

As Figure 1 shows the ideal situation is cell *D*, where there is neither aggregate overconsumption, nor individual misconsumption. From environmental point of view it is cell *A* and *C* which need careful attention. If overconsumption is accompanied by misconsumption (cell *A*), there is a possibility of following a win-win strategy, that is, increasing the well-being²¹ of people while reducing the risks to the ecosystem. When, however, overconsumption does not entail misconsumption (cell *C*), sacrifices has to be made, which is to say, an ethical as well as political problem occurs. Subsequently, signs are going to be examined which indicate that in developed countries decrease in consumption *may* be accompanied with an increase in well-being, and that is there is overconsumption as well as misconsumption.

Needs and wants

In this subchapter the *theoretical* possibility of the emergence of misconsumption is dealt with. For this first I am going to examine one of the most widespread psychological theory about basic human needs, which was developed by Abraham *Maslow*. According to the theory six types of basic needs can be differentiated: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, self-actualization needs as well as transcendental needs (Figure 2.2)²². It is important to note that they occur in the above order, each of them appearing after the previous one has been satisfied (Maslow 1954, pp. 15–31, in Hungarian e.g. Magyari Beck 2000, pp. 137–9). This nature of

²¹ Well-being is differentiated from welfare. The latter means the possession of material goods, while the former has a much broader meaning.

²² It has to be noted Maslow's work does not include this type of representation and it is often criticized, as it implies that personal development has an end-point (see e.g. Rowan 1998, pp. 88–90). Therefore I would like to note that I also regard opportunities for personal development as infinite.

human needs is considered universal, regardless of cultural background of any individual.

In the above structure of needs economic goods and services are important only at the bottom (physiological) level—and sometimes at the safety level—so humans have to rely on their natural environment as a resource only at this level. Satisfying the needs for love, esteem, self-actualization and transcendental knowledge depends on social conditions, their fulfillment rarely includes materialistic elements, therefore they have low impact on the environment.²³ In an ideal case individuals can easily satisfy their needs of different levels and in this way achieve their full human potential. In this case they usually do not overconsume either on individual or community level, which means they probably are in the ideal cell *D* of Figure 1.²⁴

The emergence of culturally dependent wants can often cause divergence from the ideal state described above.²⁵ Individuals may get stuck on the bottom level, concentrating and spending all energy on pursuing the acquisition of material goods. As a result, top levels temporarily or permanently become unattainable for them. Another form of the same process is when individuals think their needs of the top levels can be fulfilled by possessing material goods. The messages of companies of growth-centered economies often promise to fulfill some of one's security, love, esteem or self-actualization needs by the goods or services offered by them. However, satisfaction achieved in this way is no more than a fleeting illusion, and disappointment is followed by a pursuit of the next material object. Getting stuck on the bottom level and seemingly

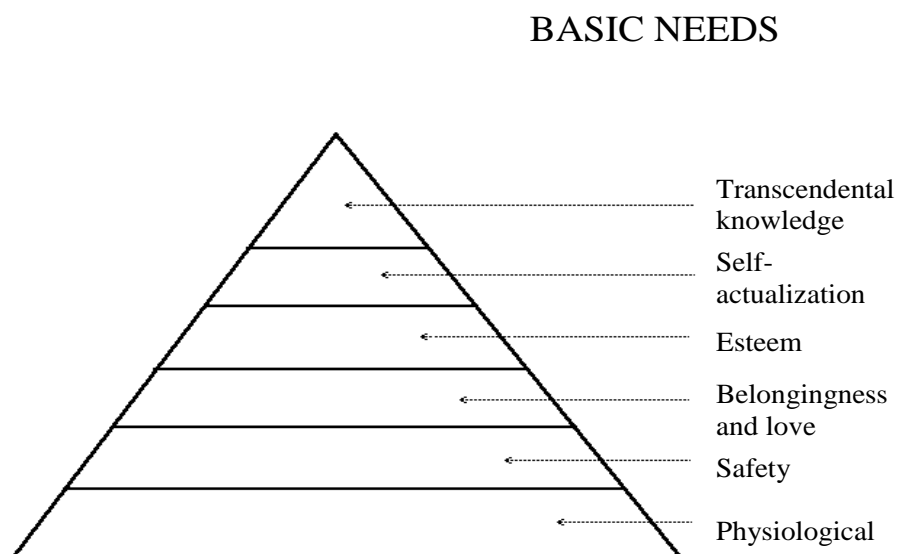
²³ Note that we did not even use all elements of Maslow's model for our argument. For example, it is enough to accept that between the bottom and top levels there is a qualitative difference and that fulfilling (to some extent) the bottom (material) levels is a precondition of reaching the top (immaterial) levels. In this way within the two layers (top and bottom) the order of basic needs and the way of reaching a higher level is insignificant. This will substantially strengthen our arguments against criticism. The distinction between material and immaterial basic needs can also be observed in humanist economics (see e.g. Lutz–Lux 1988, pp. 9–15).

²⁴ In case of overpopulation the community may be in cell *C* but it is not subject matter of the present study.

²⁵ Needs are considered objective while wants are of subjective nature. It is conceptually possible to need what you do not want or do not know about (e.g. heart surgery). It is also possible to want what you do not need but it is impossible to want something without knowing that you want it (e.g. metallic paint for your car). Wants depend on your subjective state of mind while needs are sometimes defined by somebody else (e.g. a professionally qualified doctor) (Berry 1999, p. 401). The difference between needs and luxury is also related to this subject. Livingstone and Lunt (1992) describe it by using opinions of everyday people.

satisfying top level needs with material objects are clearly two aspects of the same thing, reflecting a difference only in attitudes.

Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Human Needs



In the above-mentioned process goods consumed do not serve to fulfil basic needs any more, they even hinder that, while human efforts are influenced by distorted cultural wants. Supposing that Maslow's theory is correct—and though some of its details are questionable, in general it is not—one can easily realize that the well-being of an individual depends on which level of needs he reached. It follows from this, that modern consumer society can be described by cell A of Figure 1, overconsumption being accompanied by misconsumption.²⁶ Obviously, in this case a possible reduction of consumption could result in an increase in well-being (cf. Jackson–Marks 1999, pp. 439–440).

²⁶ In countries where consumer society has not emerged yet (and only the consumption of a narrow elite is similar to the Western patterns) the community may be in cell B.

The nature of possessiveness

Either we look at accumulation occurring at the bottom, physiological level or at the attempt to satisfy higher level needs with material objects, possessiveness (materialism) is a key element of both. It is possible to group interpretations of possessiveness according to value judgement and origin (see Figure 3).

Selfishness and hedonism connected to material objects are dominant attitudes of contemporary capitalistic cultures, suggesting that possessiveness is innate and desirable. Possessiveness is considered to encourage competition and striving, benefiting both the individual and society. Furthermore, it is innate, part of our genetic heritage, as territoriality is a natural tendency in both man and animals. However, as critics point out, such extreme individualism may distort cooperation between individuals. Also there is an ever expanding need for bigger and bigger pleasures, as one easily becomes adapted to any “level of pleasures”.

Figure 3. Relationship to Possessiveness According to Value Judgement and Origin

	<i>Innate</i>	<i>Acquired</i>
<i>Good</i>	Hedonism	Actualization
<i>Bad</i>	Restraint	Reform

Source: Belk 1983, p. 517.

In the second view, in which possessiveness is judged to be a good, acquired trait, acquiring this trait is recommended and seen as realizing a greater portion of human potential. McClelland (1961) regards possessiveness as one of the most important human drives, which develops in the middle of childhood and is a fixated feature of adult personality. The more ambitious people there are in a society, the bigger economic growth it can achieve. This assumption became especially popular after World War II, when the economy of Western Europe and the United States started to develop fast. The advocates of the idea even tried to make the adult population of less developed regions more ambitious, e.g. by holding training courses for would-be entrepreneurs of India (Belk 1983, p. 518, cf. Gilleard 1999, Székelyi–Tardos 1994).

The third view holds that possessiveness is innate but bad, suggesting that we learn to curb our natural impulses. This is the traditional opinion of most

organized religions. Besides religious concerns three things suggest that people may be socialized to reduce their undesirable materialistic impulses. First, children show an increasing ability to delay consumption as they get older. Second, the ability to share material goods also increases with children's age. Third, their wishes shift from material goods and become more abstract.²⁷

According to the fourth view possessiveness is acquired and bad. It suggests that rather than passively acquiring and then curbing these impulses, causes leading to their forming should be eliminated. This could be achieved in two ways, either by converting society into a less competitive one or by enabling people to value intangibles too.

Obviously, if we aim at reducing the impact of society on the natural environment, we have to regard man's excessive possessiveness as undesirable regardless of it being either innate or acquired. Those who are worried about the integrity of natural (and social) environment therefore have to fight the ideological views of hedonism and actualization, shown in Figure 3. I believe that possessiveness is partly innate, partly acquired, that is why I am first going to consider personal characteristics which play an important role in one's happiness then the influence of one's social environment.

Who is happy?—The role of personal traits

In the first century of its history, psychology was concerned with human suffering and dissatisfaction. In the last few decades, however, positive emotions like happiness and satisfaction have also become subjects of research. They are usually measured by a scale of *subjective well-being*²⁸ and their value is determined by questions referring to people's happiness and their satisfaction with life.

The relationship between wealth and happiness can be examined on three levels (see e.g. Myers–Diener 1995, pp. 12–4). First, *are people in wealthy countries happier than those in not-so rich countries?* A survey including 24 countries discovered a relatively strong, +0.67 correlation between the gross

²⁷ Studies about materialism from childhood to old age are reviewed by Belk (1985, pp. 268–70).

²⁸ For further details about the scale of subjective well-being and different theories of happiness, see Diener (1984) and (in Hungarian) Urbán (1995).

national product (GNP) per capita of a country and the satisfaction of its population. Still, one cannot draw considerable conclusions based on the results, as for example the number of continuous years of democracy showed a +0.85 correlation with average life satisfaction (Inglehart 1990).

Second, *within any country are rich individuals happier than poorer ones?* Obviously, having food, shelter and safety is essential for well-being. Therefore, in poor countries, such as Bangladesh and India, satisfaction with ones financial situation is a moderate predictor of subjective well-being (cf. Diener–Diener 1995). But once one is able to fulfil life’s necessities, the increase in wealth plays surprisingly little role in subjective well-being. It has to be acknowledged though that in the same country the wealthier tend to be happier on average than the less well-to-do.²⁹ Wealth is rather like health: its lack can result in misery, though having it is no guarantee of happiness. This seems to support Maslow’s theory of all other needs being based on the physiological ones.

Third, *over time, do people become happier, as society becomes more affluent?* By the 1990s American’s per capita income had doubled compared to 1957 (from less than \$8,000 to more than \$16,000 expressed in the dollar of the 90s³⁰), moreover, they had twice as many cars per person, plus microwave ovens, color TVs, VCRs, air-conditioners and \$12 billion worth of new brand-name athletic shoes a year. Nevertheless, in 1957 35% of them said they were

²⁹ One of the best known studies examining the richest people in the world was conducted by Ed Diener, Jeff Horwitz and Robert A. Emmons (1985). They carried out the research using the 1983 *Forbes* magazine list containing the 400 wealthiest Americans. The sample of 49 subjects was compared to a comparison group of 62 subjects who were selected based on matching by geographical location. The wealthy said they were happy in 77% of their time, for the non-wealthy the rate was 62%. The average of life satisfaction in the wealthy group was 4.77 (on a six-point scale), in the non-wealthy group it was 3.70. This could suggest that money brings happiness. However, in case of the question “How do you feel about how happy you are?” 37% of the wealthy got a lower score than the average of the non-wealthy, while 45% of the non-wealthy reported a higher level of happiness than the mean of the wealthy group ($p < 0.001$). To open-ended questions inquiring the reasons of happiness respondents rarely mentioned money, most often the reason was good family relations, friends, achievements, relationship with God and health (in both groups) although 84% of the wealthy group and 39% of the non-wealthy group emphasized positive aspects of having money. The survey also tested and did not contradict the theory of Maslow (Diener–Horwitz–Emmons 1985).

³⁰ For comparison: per capita GDP in the United States expressed in 1996 dollars was \$12,725 in 1957, \$27,786 in 1993 and \$33,110 in 2000 (see www.EconoMagic.com).

“very happy”, while in 1993 only 32% said the same.³¹ A 1992 survey analyzing other social phenomena resulted in the following findings: since 1960 the number of divorces had doubled, there had been a slight decline in marital happiness of married couples and the teen suicide rate had tripled. It leads us to conclude that Americans became richer but not happier. Research conducted in Europe and Japan has given similar results (cf. Easterlin 1995, pp. 38–40).

Research about the quality of life in countries with annual per capita income of tens of thousands dollars revealed that in spite of more or less continuous increase in GDP/GNP the increase of complex indices of quality of life usually stops after a time or it can even fall. (These indices include, besides material situation, several factors, such as environmental degradation, inequalities of incomes.) Presumably, there is a threshold of wealth above which the quality of people’s life declines (Max-Neef 1995, cf. Daly 1999).

If, however, possessing material goods does not guarantee happiness, then what makes it more likely? According to research happy people tend to have positive self-esteem, feel they have control over their lives, are usually optimistic and extrovert, have several intimate friends, are happily married, have job-satisfaction and are religious (Myers–Diener 1995, pp. 14–7, cf. Kopp–Skrabski–Szedmák 1998). This list does not entail that all these conditions have to be fulfilled for happiness but that people showing these traits more probably believe themselves to be happy. These characteristics are basically immaterial, so psychological studies examining personal happiness seem to prove our prediction that a potential decrease or stagnation in consumption does not necessarily lead to a fall in personal happiness or social well-being in Western countries. It is usually social conditions that determine the influence of change in material goods on personal happiness.

³¹ Andrew J. Oswald thinks the proportion of happy people in the US still grew in the period examined if you take the decreasing number of “*not too happy*” people into consideration. (The questionnaire included the following question: “*Taken all together, how would you say things are these days—would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?*”) The increase in happiness is so small, however, that according to the author the rise in incomes in America is not contributing substantially to the quality of people’s lives (Oswald 1997, pp. 1817–8).

Who is happy?—The role of social factors

In this subchapter the relationship between material goods and personal happiness is examined from the viewpoint of general social conditions. The subchapter also intends to reveal the reasons of the phenomena described in the previous subchapter (i.e. the constant well-being of a nation despite economic growth). First let us carry out a simple thought experiment. Imagine that a person's income increases substantially while everyone else's stay the same. Would (s)he feel better? Most people would. Then suppose that his/her income stays the same while everyone else's goes up substantially. How would (s)he feel in this case? Most people would feel less well off, though their objective financial situation would not change. It is empirically proved that one's subjective well-being varies directly with one's own income and inversely with the incomes of others (Easterlin 1995, pp. 35–6, cf. Mishan 1993, pp. 73–4).

The amount considered as minimum comfort budget in a society is also relevant from environmental point of view. Several studies have shown that this amount increases at the same rate as actual per capita income, that is, the higher the average income of a country is, the bigger amount people perceive as necessary to get along (Easterlin 1995, p. 41).³²

The rise in average income therefore does not increase the happiness of the society as the influence of increased (personal) income on well-being is offset by the increase in material norms of the society. When the increase in personal income is accompanied by the increase of the standard of living considered decent by society, one's "rise in the world" can only occur when the others fall behind compared to him. As the number of the members of high society (defined as the richest 10,000) is limited, this way of achieving happiness can be interpreted as a strategy to acquire positional goods whose supply is limited under any circumstances.³³ Some will acquire positional goods but a whole community cannot, since the supply of these goods is by nature limited and cannot be increased by economic growth. Consequently, increasing the supply of existing material goods in a relatively rich society is a wrong strategy.

³² The same question was examined on a Hungarian sample by Szabó and Szabó (1994) in the early 1990s as well as Sági (2000) in the late 1990s and their findings do not contradict the above results. Relationship between satisfaction and materialism will be discussed in the following subchapter.

³³ For further details on positional goods see Hirsch (1976). Some economists even speak about the negative external cost of higher consumption. The increased consumption of a person will reduce the satisfaction of others living around him (see e.g. Frank 1991).

Who is happy?—the role of materialist attitudes

According to adaptation theory (Brickman–Campbell 1971, quoted by Richins 1987, p. 353) the relationship between material values and happiness is reversed, because people adapt to the level of satisfaction or comfort they have achieved. When a desired goal is obtained, expectations also increase resulting in a gap between actual state and expectations. This gap is a source of dissatisfaction (French–Rodgers–Cobb 1974, quoted by Richins 1987, p. 353). Juliet Schor calls the difference between desires and reality *aspirational gap*. She thinks, this gap has widened because previously people used to rely on their neighbors—who usually have similar incomes—as a standard and reference group, nowadays they compare themselves to their workplace superiors and the upper middle class of the United States, seen on television all over the world (Schor 1999, pp. 43–6).³⁴ In this way people expecting happiness from possessing material goods may be satisfied for a while but partly due to adaptation partly due to their rising references, dissatisfaction will emerge again and again.

Studies described at the beginning of the chapter, examining materialism, supplied empirical data which support the adaptation theory (e.g. Belk 1985, p. 271, Richins 1987, pp. 354–5). One of the most comprehensive studies was conducted by Richins and Dawson (1992) in a university town of the north-east of the USA (with 86 subjects) and in a north-eastern rural area (119 subjects). The researchers examined five aspects of satisfaction with life: satisfaction with life as a whole, amount of fun, family life, income or standard of living and relationship with friends using a seven-point delighted-terrible response scale described by Andrews and Withey (1976). The correlation between the Richins–Dawson materialism scale (see, p. 28) and the indices of satisfaction was the following: -0.39 for satisfaction with income and -0.34 , -0.32 , -0.31 and -0.17 for satisfaction with fun, life as a whole, friends and family life respectively (Richins–Dawson 1992, p. 313).³⁵ This finding shows a moderately

³⁴ In a study on the same subject, Sági Matild analyzed data from a Hungarian sample of 3,800 subjects collected by TÁRKI in 1999. She concluded the following: “*Dissatisfaction with the standard of living (in the 1990s) was not only a result of objective factors, but it was also due to the fact that the reference point of the Hungarians changed after the political-economic changes. They do not compare their standard of living to the financial-material position of the population of other Eastern European countries any more. Instead, the standard of living in Western European countries has become the main reference point, especially for those on the top of the Hungarian income hierarchy. The fact that when their income increases, people tend to change their reference groups and compare themselves to the ones with higher standard of living largely contributes to the general dissatisfaction.*” (Sági 2000, p. 285)

³⁵ All values are significant at the level of $p < 0.01$.

strong, negative relationship between materialism and satisfaction, that is, the more materialistic the respondent was, the more probably (s)he said (s)he was dissatisfied with several aspects of life.

The same authors conducted a survey on a sample of 235 subjects from the western part of the United States and asked respondents to indicate the level of annual household income required to fulfil their needs. Respondents were divided into terciles based on their materialism scores and the desired income level of the top and bottom terciles were compared. Respondents in the top tercile (the highest in materialism) said they needed an annual income of \$65,974 on average (in the early 1990s), while the bottom tercile needed only \$44,761 yearly (Richins–Dawson 1992, p. 311).³⁶ As the surveys revealed, materialists will probably try to reach a higher level of consumption (and in this way make a bigger impact on the natural environment) but at the same time they will be less satisfied with material aspects (income) as well as immaterial aspects (friends, family life) of life than less materialist people.

The role of values

The spread of the phenomenon previously defined as materialism or possessiveness on a national level may considerably depend on the proportion of people in the society believing in materialistic or nonmaterialistic values. Ronald *Inglehart*, who is a key figure in international research on personal values as well as changes occurring in them, has been studying the subject since 1970. From our point of view it is important to define factors which can help one to exchange his/her material scale of values to a nonmaterial (termed postmaterial by Inglehart) one.

Inglehart has two theories connected to the question. One of them is called *scarcity theory*, according to which people tend to set a higher value on things which are scarce. The other is called *socialization theory*, which suggests that the basic values of a person mainly depend on the financial situation he or she has been brought up in. The two theories can be integrated based on the state of western civilization following World War Two. Young people brought up in exceptional wealth and lasting peace after 1945 set a much lower value on economic and physical security than older generations, who experienced bigger

³⁶ The difference between the two groups is significant at the level of $p < 0.001$ ($t = 3.65$, $df = 120.1$). Another survey also revealed a similar relationship between materialism (assessed by Belk's scale, see p. 1) and the money needed for comfortable living (101 subjects, $r = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$) (Wachtel–Blatt 1990, p. 411).

economic insecurity. On the other hand, people born after the war appreciate immaterial values, such as community life and the quality of life more, as these could become rather scarce in a society focused on economy and wealth.

Several studies following the proposal of the theory supported Inglehart's assertions and today we can analyze substantially long time series (Inglehart 1990, Abramson–Inglehart 1995). From the viewpoint of this study it is especially important that Inglehart's theories suggest that peace and prosperity can naturally contribute to the change of values from material to postmaterial, decreasing the impact on the environment as well as acknowledging the unnecessary of ever-increasing economic growth. On the level of society it can be considered as some kind of a negative feedback. However, it is also probable that overdominant economic interests exploit this change in values for their own benefit (and at the expense of other considerations) by promoting sales with the image of products being able to fulfil nonmaterial needs. The success of this attempt may offset the benevolent environmental and social effects of welfare states becoming postmaterial and may eliminate the natural feedback reinforcing sustainability.³⁷

Outside consumer society's birthplace

Research in the 1980s revealed some unusual ethnographic/anthropological facts, which made researchers consider several questions. E.g. why do Peruvian Indians carry rocks painted to look like transistor radios? Why do some Chinese wear sunglasses with the brand tags still attached? Why have cheap quartz watches become part of the traditional ceremonial wedding outfit in Niger? Why do natives of Papua New Guinea add ties to their collarless necks and substitute brand-name pens for traditional nose bones? Why do Ethiopian tribesmen pay to watch the film "Pluto Tries to Become a Circus Dog" and why

³⁷ There is an apparent contradiction between the findings Inglehart, interested mainly in social and intercultural issues and the findings of research examining the individuals of a certain culture (Belk, Richins), as the former suggests decreasing the latter ones suggest increasing materialism in industrial countries. The contradiction can be resolved theoretically by referring to the distorting effect of the media and advertising on personal values (cf. Richins 1999, pp. 376–7) as discussed in the main text. Jackson and Marks (1999) supplied empirical evidence by analyzing consumption data from Great Britain between 1954 and 1994, that people spend increasingly more money on their immaterial needs but these still remain unfulfilled. This could answer criticism of Maslow's theory (e.g. Belk 1988, p. 116) saying that it mistakenly predicts the decrease in material values of developed Western countries based on the fulfillment of physiological needs.

does the native band play 'The Sound of Music' when a Swazi princess marries a Zulu king?³⁸

The worldwide spread of Western goods has several detrimental effects on traditional cultures. There is often a tendency that demands for cheaper and similar (or higher) quality local products decreases when prominent Western goods appear on the market. In Brazil, with the appearance of Western luxuries and aggressive marketing, household indebtedness increased and people reduced their consumption of necessities, particularly food.³⁹ Furthermore, the bad health consequences of certain goods (like cigarettes or medicines) are not so well-known in developing countries.⁴⁰ Development priorities also change, e.g. building an expensive network of roads for the benefit of a narrow elite subgroup owning automobiles instead of investing in basic welfare. The interpersonal safety net of being able to rely on others is deteriorating and is being replaced by a reliance on things and money (Belk 1988, pp. 117–9). Money increasingly substitutes for people and some governments are urged by the West to offer consumer goods to consumers willing to be sterilized (Freedman 1976, quoted by Belk 1988, p. 120).⁴¹

The excessive spread of consumer society does not seem to be the answer to environmental problems. Even if we disregard these problems and concentrate on society, there are still several other questions about the development of the Third World to answer. Surveys described in the subchapter about the relationship between materialism and happiness revealed that the correlation between these two phenomena is not positive: materialistic attitudes are usually accompanied by higher level of dissatisfaction. The fact that these results are obtained from wealthy, developed countries should not be considered as reassuring since the gap between material dreams and reality in a poor country is even wider, resulting in

³⁸ The examples are quoted from Arnould and Wilk (1984), Curry (1981), Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) and Sherry (1987) by Belk (1988, p. 117).

³⁹ Belk (1988) mentions several examples which prove that hedonic consumption of Western products is even characteristic of the poorest social groups of Third World countries. They often choose Western goods at the expense of satisfying basic needs.

⁴⁰ Silverman (1976) examined how 40 prescription drugs sold by 23 transnational companies were described to doctors. It turned out that in Latin American countries the same drugs were recommended for far more diseases than in the United States, while the contraindications, warnings and potential adverse reactions were not given in as much detail as in the US (quoted by Jenkins 1988, p. 1366).

⁴¹ According to popular slogan economic growth is the best contraceptive. However, some questions remain unasked, says Herman Daly, e.g. is it necessary for per capita consumption to rise to the Swedish level in a developing country for fertility to fall to the Swedish level, and if so what happens to the ecosystem of this country as a result of that level of total consumption? (Daly 1999, pp. 20–1).

bigger dissatisfaction (Belk 1988, p. 121). In this case just the spread of consumer society in the Third World poses a problem apart from difficulties described above. Though it does not answer the reason of spread, it is still remarkable to note that the rapid expansion of major advertising agencies happened in the decade between 1961 and 1971. During this time they established almost five times as many foreign subsidiaries as in the preceding 45 years (UNCTC 1979) and in the Third World more than two-thirds of all advertising agency revenue was controlled by foreign advertising agencies (Chudnovsky 1979, quoted by Jenkins 1988, p. 1366). It seems, it is not only their branded products that Western countries export to the Third World but also their time-honored advertising techniques to create desire for these products.

A series of surveys for comparing the materialism of different cultures based on the international version of Belk's materialism scale (see p. 9) yielded important findings. The respondents were business and MBA students from 13 countries (1729 subjects altogether) (Ger-Belk 1996, pp. 59–60).⁴²

The reliability of the materialism scale (based on the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient) was higher in Western countries, which made the researchers conclude that the materialism inherent in consumer culture arose in the West and has diffused from the West to other parts of the world. The absolute value of materialism, however, was not so obvious. The Romanian, US, New Zealander and Ukrainian samples proved to be the most materialist, the German, Turkish, Israeli and Thai subjects were moderately materialistic, while the Indian and non-Germanic Western European students scored low in materialism (Ger-Belk 1996, p. 70).⁴³ The authors suggest that the relatively low materialism of India and non-Germanic Western Europe is explained by the stability of these societies, while the high materialism of subjects in post-communist countries may be due to a sudden release from former systematic consumer deprivation. The relatively high level of materialism in Germany and Turkey may also be the result of drastic social changes. "*Social change and accompanying mobility and confusion in norms coupled with the spread of Western influence and globalization seem to impel materialism*", the authors conclude (Ger-Belk 1996, p. 74).

⁴² Though the sample makes it possible to compare the findings, it does not indicate precisely the materialism of the whole nations involved.

⁴³ The statement that, for example, the materialism of Norwegian students is low according to the sample does make sense only in comparison with the other students of the other countries in the sample. The level of materialism that can be regarded as normal in a certain country remains unanswered. From this aspect it is possible that the Norwegian level, which was lower than the American or the Romanian one, in itself is still too high from a social point of view.

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