

Materialism and Other Consumption Orientations

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Materialism is a subject which is enjoying a rebirth of interest on the part of scholars as well as practitioners. This paper briefly reviews some of the problems and approaches associated with efforts to conceptualize materialism.

This paper presents observations stimulated by the author's participation in the recently held Research Workshop on Materialism and Other Consumption Orientations. The workshop which was held in June 1992 in Kingston, Ontario, was sponsored by the School of Business of Queen's University and the Association for Consumer Research. The workshop was not only multi-disciplinary in character (with representation from such fields as advertising, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, sociology, marketing, and law, but international as well (with participants from Canada, Britain, New Zealand, Poland, and the United States). That this workshop was the first of its kind to be held reflects the fact that the cross disciplinary study of materialism as a consumption orientation is in its very early stages. The workshop focused on some of the principal approaches and problems of this young field.

In light of limitations of time and space, this paper will restrict its focus to a discussion of problems and approaches associated with conceptualizing materialism.

Conceptualizing Materialism

As Richins and Dawson (1992) have noted recently, scholars differ considerably in their views of materialism. One of the research pioneers in the area (Belk, 1984, p. 291) defines it as "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions." Two others (Rassuli and Hollander, 1986, p. 10) see materialism as "a mindset...an interest in getting and spending." Murkerji (1983, p. 8), on the other hand, views materialism as "a cultural system in which material interests are not made subservient to other social goals."

While this brief sampling of definitions of materialism does not begin to exhaust the field, it does illustrate the possibilities and the problems in conceptualizing materialism. Some of the dilemmas confronted are as follows:

1. Is materialism a psychological or a sociological concept?

Does materialism describe an individual or a society? As we have just seen, both uses have been evident in the scholarly literature, with both individuals and societies being referred to as "materialistic."

2. Does the concept focus on material in general, or on material wealth in particular?

While a focus on the material world as compared to the spiritual world would seem to define the materialist, many scholars and practitioners find this domain too broad; agreeing with Madonna's "Material Girl" they opt for a conceptualization which concentrates on material wealth. Yet one wonders if this definition is too confining, eliminating as it does from consideration, such interesting phenomena as the voluntary simplicity movement with its emphasis on the beauty and value of simple tools and devices to help one live a more self-sufficient life.

3. Does the concept focus on acquisition or possession?

Acquiring material things would appear to be a major concern and source of satisfaction for materialists but most scholars also stress the importance of possession. In practice it is difficult to separate these two entities in that most of our possessions don't just land on our doorsteps but become ours through an acquisition process. So the joy of owning may in part derive from the joy of acquiring, especially if it entailed something memorable like a gift from a loved one. Yet the two entities are sometimes separated in the real world and such occasions may present research opportunities for social scientists. For example, the professional shopper buys goods for others, and is thus an example of one who may acquire without the objective of ownership. Conversely, the "old money crowd" is said to consist of individuals who are born to wealth and comfortable circumstances, and yet show little inclination to acquire more material goods, especially those associated with affluence.

4. Does the concept focus on instrumental materialism or terminal materialism?

Rochberg-Halton (1986) and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1978, 1981) have proposed two types of materialism based on the intended purposes of consumption. When objects act "as

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essential means for discovering and furthering personal values and goals of life," the materialism is referred to as "instrumental" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1978, p. 8). When, on the other hand, consumption satisfies no objective other than possession, materialism is regarded as "terminal." Needless to say, these terms are hardly neutral, with terminal materialism, like its cancer counterpart, being viewed as an unhealthy human condition. Also of interest are the difficulties in operationalizing the concepts. As Richins and Dawson (1992) have noted, it is not always clear which relationships with objects are instrumental and which are terminal. Also not clear is whether materialistic relationships exist which are neither instrumental nor terminal.

5. Does the concept focus on commercial or non-commercial materialism?

Although claims of increasing interest in materialism in American society have long been made by humanists, supporting empirical evidence has been in short supply. Recently this changed with documentation of dramatic increases in the use of brand names (but not generic names) in popular American novels, plays and music of the post World War II era (Friedman 1991). This finding, along with others, prompted Friedman to propose that the brand-name phenomenon be called "commercial materialism" to distinguish it from its generic name counterpart of "non-commercial materialism." By proposing this distinction Friedman is suggesting that the two types of materialism may not only behave differently empirically but that they may also relate theoretically to different explanatory systems.

The foregoing brief discussion illustrates some of the complexities encountered in attempting to conceptualize materialism. Additional problems arise when one realizes that many of the either-or dichotomies set forth are false in that some scholars have viewed materialism as embracing both categories (e.g., acquisition and possession). Also not considered are the cultural and sub-cultural contexts in which materialism manifests itself. Thus an act viewed as an example of instrumental materialism in one context may be viewed as an example of terminal materialism in another.

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