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Psychological Needs

But Mom, I *need* that toy.

—Anonymous child

The evidence just presented documents that when people are strongly oriented to materialistic values they also experience low well-being. But why is this true? Do materialistic values cause people's problems? If so, how? Or is it the case that people who are already unhappy focus on wealth, possessions, image, and popularity? If so, why?

The answers to these questions are clearly complicated, and the scientists' mantra, "More research is needed," has rarely been more pertinent. Yet I believe that a sound theory can be constructed to explain much of what researchers have found concerning materialism's "dark side." The theory that my colleagues and I have been developing is based in the idea of psychological needs, and it is with this concept that we must begin.

Psychological Needs

The idea that people have psychological needs is both popular and controversial. Although no one disagrees that all people have certain physical needs (e.g., air, water, and food) that must be met to ensure survival, some social scientists stop there, saying that psychological needs are either impossible to prove scientifically or do not exist. Yet other theorists and researchers apply the concept of psychological needs to understand human motivation and well-being,¹ and even those who eschew the concept per se talk as though certain psychological processes are basic to

human motivation and must operate in particular ways for people to function optimally.²

What then is a need?³ A need, in the sense used here, is not just something a person desires or wants, but is something that is necessary to his or her survival, growth, and optimal functioning. Just as a plant must have air, water, light, and a certain soil chemistry to survive and thrive, all people require certain “psychological nutrients” for their health and growth. Furthermore, just as a plant turns toward light and reaches its roots down to find water and minerals, needs direct us to behave in ways that increase the likelihood that they will be satisfied. Thus needs motivate behavior and require fulfillment for psychological growth to occur.

Even if we agree that needs motivate the basic experiences and behaviors necessary for survival and optimal functioning, students of the human situation still argue about the number of needs we have and about what to call them. On the basis of psychological research and theorizing, I have come to conclude that at least four sets of needs are basic to the motivation, functioning, and well-being of all humans. Described in more detail below, I call them needs for safety, security, and sustenance; for competence, efficacy, and self-esteem; for connectedness; and for autonomy and authenticity.⁴ Each set of needs has been described by theorists from various psychological perspectives, and each has been empirically associated with humans’ quality of life. In addition, as we will see in later chapters, each of these needs appears to be relatively unfulfilled when people hold materialistic pursuits as central in their value systems.

Let us first consider the needs for safety, security, and sustenance. These are the needs we have for food on our tables, a roof over our heads, and clothing to protect us from the weather—the essentials of life. They also reflect the fact that we do not function well when constantly exposed to harmful, anxiety-provoking, and unstable situations. When we are young, these needs often manifest themselves in our desire to know that our parents will care for us and help us survive and thrive. Security needs basically represent our desire to remain alive and avoid what might lead to early death.⁵

The second set of needs involves a feeling that we are capable of doing what we set out to do and of obtaining the things we value. Competence and esteem needs also entail a desire to have a more positive than negative

view of ourselves and to like ourselves. In essence, to fulfill these needs each of us must feel like a competent and worthy person.⁶

The third set of needs is for being connected and related to other people. Humans strongly desire intimacy and closeness with others, going to great lengths to seek out and secure such relationships. These needs lead us to belong to larger groups, such as churches, neighborhood organizations, and teams. We need to feel that we belong and are connected with others' lives, be it as parents, friends, neighbors, or coworkers.⁷

Finally, we need to feel autonomous and authentically engaged in our behavior. We constantly strive for increased freedom and more opportunities to experience life in a self-directed manner. These needs are most apparent in our strong motivation to express ourselves and to follow our own personal interests. Rather than feeling pressured or burdened by our circumstances, we need to pursue activities that provide us with challenge, interest, and enjoyment. By doing so, we can feel ownership of our own behavior, and thus feel both authentic and autonomous.⁸

To summarize, substantial research and theory suggest that people are highly motivated to feel safe and secure, competent, connected to others, and autonomous and authentically engaged in their behavior. This literature proposes that well-being and quality of life increase when these four sets of needs are satisfied and decrease when they are not.

Need Expression and Satisfaction

Although needs provide a basic motivation to do something, they do not tell us exactly how to satisfy them. The way needs express themselves and the extent to which they are satisfied depend on a number of factors, including our personality, lifestyle, values, and the culture in which we live.

For example, if I am hungry, my need for sustenance motivates me to eat. The way that I satisfy this need will vary depending on my personal tastes and on my environment. If I like sweet foods, I might seek out an orange or some candy; if I like salty foods, I might prefer pretzels or potato chips; if I live in Japan, I might eat sushi; if I live in Lebanon, I will be likely to eat hummus. Personality and societal context provide frameworks for need expression and satisfaction by suggesting particular

pathways and behaviors we might follow. In many cases, these frameworks do a reasonably good job of satisfying our needs, and thus of supporting psychological health and well-being.

Consider what would happen, however, if every time I was hungry I ate chocolate cake; many of my body's physical needs for certain nutrients would remain unfulfilled, and my health would surely suffer. In a similar manner, it is not necessarily the case that our personalities and culture provide healthy pathways that adequately satisfy psychological needs. Instead, aspects of our personalities and life circumstances sometimes lead us to try to satisfy our needs in ways that are ultimately unfulfilling. And sometimes our environments fail to furnish many opportunities for healthy expression of our needs, and thus lead us astray from the ways of life that could really help us to be happy.

When we look around at contemporary consumer culture it is clear that people are constantly bombarded with messages that needs can be satisfied by having the right products. Feel unsafe on the road or in your home? Buy the right tire or lock. Worried that you will die young? Eat this cereal and take out insurance from that company just in case. Lawn look bad in comparison with your neighbor's? Buy this lawnmower and fertilizer. Can't get a date? Buy these clothes, this shampoo, and that deodorant. No adventure in your life? Take this vacation, buy that sport utility vehicle, or subscribe to these magazines. Consumer societies also provide many role models suggesting that a high quality of life (i.e., need satisfaction) occurs when one has successfully attained material goals. Heroes and heroines of consumeristic cultures are on the whole wealthy, good-looking, and often famous. These are the people, we are told, who are successful, whose lives we should strive to imitate and emulate.

In the face of messages glorifying the path of consumption and wealth, all of us to some extent take on or internalize materialistic values. That is, we incorporate the messages of consumer society into our own value and belief systems. These values then begin to organize our lives by influencing the goals we pursue, the attitudes we have toward particular people and objects, and the behaviors in which we engage.⁹

Almost all of us place at least some importance on possessions, money, and image, but materialism takes hold of the center of some people's value systems. As a consequence, their experiences will be changed. To

illustrate, take two people, one who values material wealth more than helping others, and another with the opposite set of priorities. When confronted with a decision about what career to pursue, the materialistic individual will be likely to seek out a high-paying, high-status job with many opportunities to earn a great deal of money. In contrast, the less materialistic individual will be likely to accept a lower-paying job if it will benefit others. Or imagine that both individuals are presented with a special issue of *Forbes* magazine about how wealthy people obtained their riches. The materialistic person will likely read the magazine with interest, while the other individual will likely become quickly bored. What these examples show is that the two people's lives, and thus the experiences they have, are quite different as a result of their values.

The different experiences of these two individuals will influence the extent to which their needs are ultimately satisfied. Just as a person who eats junk food will be less healthy than one who eats many fruits and vegetables, an individual with relatively central materialistic values will have fewer chances to fulfill the needs required for psychological growth and happiness. As we will see in chapters to come, materialistic values lead people into a style of life and way of experiencing that do a rather poor job of satisfying their needs. Taking our nutritional metaphor a bit farther, consumer society sells junk food, promising that it tastes good and makes us happy. As a result, many people buy it. Alas, they are full for only a short time, as the promise is false and the satisfaction is empty.

Individual Differences in Internalization

Given that most of us are exposed to similar cultural messages encouraging materialism, why is it that some of us internalize these values more than others? Why did the first individual in the example above care more about wealth and possessions than the second person? One explanation involves the extent to which people have been exposed to the messages of consumer culture. For example, people are likely to be materialistic if they watch a great deal of television and if their parents value materialistic goals.¹⁰ So part of the answer is that some people simply learn this attitude or outlook because of their environment.

But it is also the case that people's preexisting level of need satisfaction causes them to value certain outcomes differently.¹¹ As Abraham Maslow

wrote, when people have a particular need that is not well satisfied, their “whole philosophy of the future tends also to change. For our chronically and extremely hungry man, Utopia can be defined simply as a place where there is plenty of food. He tends to think that, if only he is guaranteed food for the rest of his life, he will be perfectly happy and will never want anything more.”¹² The same dynamic seems to occur in the case of materialism. Individuals who have not had their needs well met in the past come to think that wealth and possessions will bring them happiness and a good life. Part of this belief is due to the fact that society tells them the material path will make them feel secure, and part is because our bodies require some material comforts to survive. In any case, a strong focus on materialistic values is often a symptom or manifestation of a personal history characterized by a relative failure in need satisfaction. These unmet needs thus lead people to be unhappy and to develop materialistic values.

Summary

In this chapter I proposed that people have needs that must be satisfied for them to have a high quality of life. Materialistic values become prominent in the lives of some individuals who have a history of not having their needs well met. Thus, one reason these values are associated with a low quality of life is that they are symptoms or signs that some needs remain unfulfilled. But materialistic values are not just expressions of unhappiness. Instead, they lead people to organize their lives in ways that do a poor job of satisfying their needs, and thus contribute even more to people’s misery.

The next four chapters review scientific evidence supporting these ideas. As shown in chapter 4, materialistic values become prominent when people’s needs for safety and sustenance are inadequately satisfied. Chapter 5 reveals that needs for esteem and competence suffer due to several dynamics associated with materialistic pursuits. Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate that such values interfere with achieving high-quality relationships and feelings of freedom and authenticity in life. The literature reviewed in these chapters thus not only supports the theory my colleagues and I developed, but extends evidence showing that materialistic pursuits fail to bring about an optimally meaningful and high-quality life.