



ON THE INFLUENCE OF INSECURITY ON MATERIALISTIC ORIENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Materialistic orientation has long been related to various aspects of personality development and subjective wellbeing. Literature and research overview provides evidence that a higher level of materialistic orientation is related to increased external motivation (lack of internalisation of goals), extrinsic aspirations (such as possessions, power and image), overall lower levels of subjective wellbeing and physical health. Materialistic orientation also prevents the future exposure to different situations where a person could fulfil basic psychological needs as defined by Ryan and Deci – autonomy, capability and connectedness. People with higher materialistic orientation are easier influenced by advertisement and media, which in itself leads to strengthening of their materialistic orientation. Research in different countries conducted by T. Kasser and Sheldon and colleagues indicates that the materialistic orientation's influence is not limited only to people in developed countries and it could be far worse in developing and underdeveloped countries as the capitalistic models spread throughout the world through the processes of globalization. The current article presents the data from an experiment conducted in Bulgaria applying the protocols from Tim Kasser and Ken Sheldon's experiments in 2001 in the USA. The levels of insecurity of the participants in the experiment group are manipulated by asking them to think and write about their own death. Then all participants are asked to solve a social case by choosing between their own financial benefits and security (greed and fear) or do what is best for the group and others including the environmental sustainability (social interest). The results from the experiment concur with all previous data collected in the USA.

Key words: extrinsic aspiration, Self-determination Theory, Theory of Terror Management, social interest

INTRODUCTION

Materialistic tendencies, orientation, goals have long been a topic of interest for research of many social scientists. Psychology in particular has looked into the topic from different lenses of different theories and continues to search for evidence based prove for its relation to motivation, subjective wellbeing, security, ability to create and sustain quality meaningful relationships and contribute to the common good. Being able to understand the way materialistic orientation affects humans could allow quality and adequate interventions which ultimately lead to higher subjective wellbeing and a better quality of life.

When looking at materialism in the consumer research literature studies explore the correlation between materialism as a personality trait and subjective well-being (1). In such studies, scientists often use materialism as “an individual differences variable reflecting a high relative importance placed on the acquisition and possessions of income, wealth and material goods” (2). For the purpose of this study however, materialism is considered as an aspiration goal - the motivation for striving for money, financial success and image. According to the definition of Materialistic value orientation (MVO) it includes believes in “attaining financial success, having nice possession, having the right image and having a high status” (3). On one hand, previous studies in this direction have considered the relation between such extrinsic motivation and subjective wellbeing. Studies have also taken into consideration the

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difference in cultural and economic status of countries and the influence MVO might have. In a study with college students from various countries, the analysis of the results showed that money was negatively correlated with life satisfaction (4). On the other hand, according to Veenhoven (5), materialistic aspirations for higher income correlate with subjective wellbeing in the cases where money will allow the fulfilment of the very basic physical needs. It is then important to note that the overall desire to meet one's needs for purely physical existence— food, shelter, medicine, safety does not necessarily lead to developing greater MVO. The key is the way need is defined. When looking at the Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci need is defined by what is essential for the optimal growth, integrity and wellbeing (6). Therefore there is a significant difference between fulfilment of basic physical needs and going way beyond that by piling up expensive products- wants (example: a need of a glass of clean drinkable water could save a life and a want of a brand new dress would not do that). The processes of MVO development are explained by Kasser's theory of materialistic values (7). It suggests that there are two main paths to higher levels of material MVO – one is exposure to models of materialistic values, the other one is living through events that prompt feeling of insecurities and of course, there is the third option of having both combines. As a result of increased levels of MVO, people fail to meet their own innate psychological needs as defined by Desi and Ryan (6) connectedness, relatedness and autonomy. Failure to meet the basic psychological needs results in an inability to experience happiness. The unstoppable striving to want, consume and gain more and more, “not only heighten our vulnerability to serious social and environmental problems, but also undermine our ability to work cooperatively in finding solutions to those problems” (3). The opposite of extrinsic aspirations are intrinsic motivation goals such personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community involvement-contribution. Research provides evidence that such intrinsic goals are positively correlated with well-being (8,9). To go even further research have found some evidence of how such aspirations might be affected by parenting styles – parents who are more controlling or are not involved foster the development of extrinsic aspiration while parents who support

the development of authentic autonomy raise children who are more often motivated by intrinsic goals (10, 11).

The current research was motivated by those findings and is a part of a bigger research project on subjective well-being and how it is affected by materialistic orientation, narcissistic tendencies and empathy in Bulgaria. The political, socio-economic and cultural development in Bulgaria for the last 35 years could be considered a contributing factor to a higher risk for MVO in three main ways. First one is the authoritarian regime which inhibited people's personal freedom and autonomy. Such system leads to experiencing higher insecurity on a personal and group level. Second, with the fall of communism and the capitalism and free-market (as well as misunderstood case of democracy) taking over major aspects of life – economy, healthcare, education, the widely accepted and shared values quickly diminished, faded (and in some cases as a sign of rebellion they were intentionally rejected) and allowed the “quick fixes” offered by commercial TV, media and advertisement to set the tone for the “new way” to be happy. Last but not least – as seen in the research conducted by Ryan and colleagues (12) in Eastern European countries, with the insecurity of job market and income, many parents spend more time working and spending less with their children. This major brake in the family leads to experiencing more insecurity.

METHODS

In research conducted by Kasser and Sheldon (13) participants were asked to think and write about their own death as a part of the experiment. Using the Terror Management Theory, the authors created a situation where the ultimate fear of death could lead to experience perceived insecurity. The results showed that the participants in the experimental group have higher levels of greed and willingness to acquire more than others. Following personal communication with prof. Kasser, the same experiment was conducted in February of 2020 (prior to Covid-19 pandemic) in Bulgaria. The protocol for the experiment was translated and back-translated to ensure the precision of the questions. A small group of 6 volunteers participated in a piloting the experiment and through discussion in a focus group allowed the finalization of the wording of questions. The experiment itself included 36

first-year students in their masters of psychology, and education, as a part of learning about methods of personality research. Their age, personal experience, current professional occupation and values differ widely. Average age of participants was 31 years of age. All of them participated in the experiment voluntarily and agreed to some follow-up questionnaires which were conducted from April to June, 2020. The follow up questions collected information about the group they participated in (control/experiment), if they had noticed spending more/less/the same amount of money since the experiment (if any) sticks out in their mind 2-4 months after.

The questions which the control group had to answer were related to their experiencing emotionally and physically when listening to their favorite music. The experimental group had to do the same but instead of favorite music they had to think, experience and write about their own death. Both groups were selected randomly and they all had the same amount of time to write their short essays. Upon the completion of the task, both groups had filler questions, which allowed moving their attention away from the first part of the experiment. The last part was a social case, which was the same for both groups. As

owners of timber companies, they each had to make decisions which tested their overall greed, fear and yearly bid which reflected their willingness to live a more sustainable or more focused on the materialistic gain way.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The collected data for the control group are presented in **Table 1**. When considering the answers of women in both groups- women in control group show lower levels of yearly bids by 17 acres; the levels of greed seem to stay higher within the control group – women are almost 18% more likely to harvest more trees than other companies and to profit more than others even without experiencing insecurity; women in the control group are also more likely to expect others to bid maximum acres although by a very slight difference of 2 %. The overall statistics for the male participants in both groups show a clear prevalence for the yearly bids for the experimental group by 19 acres; greed levels are higher in the control group by 9 %. The male participants in the control group showed a higher level of fear by 14 %. Comparing the results within each group by gender-male participants have higher results on two criteria - yearly bid and greed in both experimental and control group; while women are more likely to respond to triggers of fear in both groups.

Table 1. Comprehensive data summary breakdown by groups and gender

Criteria	Control group			Experimental group		
	whole group	female	male	whole group	female	male
Yearly bid	40.11	31.25	46.67	48.56	46.38	66
Greed	5.3	4.88	5.5	2.44	2.31	3.5
Fear	3.2	5.62	2.33	5.06	5.25	3.5

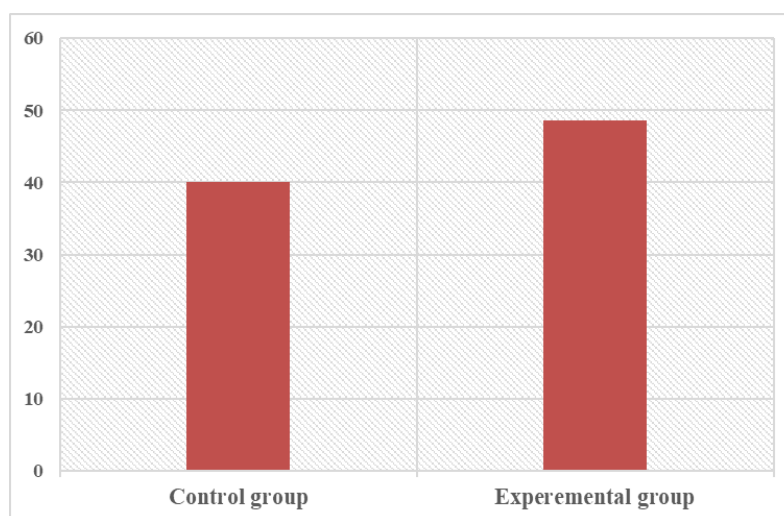


Figure 1. Overall average yearly bid

Figure 1 and Figure 2 present the overall results for the whole sample and they reflect a higher yearly bid for the whole mortality salience group. The greed levels are unaffected

by the experienced insecurity, while the fear levels are up by 13 % in the experimental group

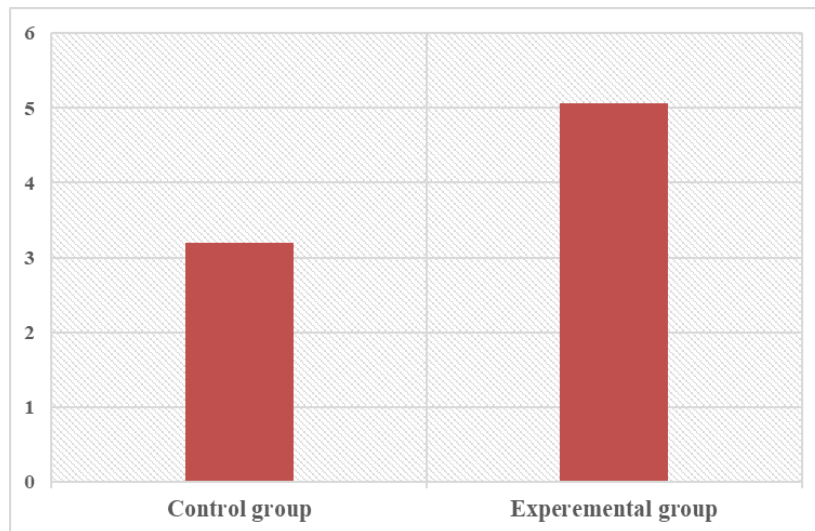


Figure 2. Overall average fear

The overall results presented in **Table 2** show the standard deviation for each category and the statistical significance (*p*-value). Due to the

small sample size, there was no statistical significance to be reported. The experiment has to be repeated with a higher number of participants.

Table 2. Data summary, SD, statistical significance

	control group		experimental group		
fear	5.33	(1.06)	5.05	(1.3)	<i>p</i> = 0.63
greed	3.22	(1.20)	2.44	(0.91)	<i>p</i> = 0.143
year bid	40.11	(22.25)	48.55	(25.54)	<i>p</i> = 0.465

The follow-up questions were related to a very different time and context of life. Since the beginning of March, 2020, Bulgaria was affected (as all other countries) by the COVID-19 pandemic. To a great extent, many of the people did not have to participate in an experiment where they were forced to think about death for life itself provided that real setting. It was interesting to note that the results of those answering the question in the middle of a lock-down shared that they were spending “slightly more” or “more” money than usual. Those who answered the questions during the time when the lock-down was over did not report any difference in their spending habits. When asked what they remember about the experiment most of the participants (80%) remembered the social case they had to provide solutions for and 20% remembered they had to write an essay about death/music.

A second round of the experiment was planned with a larger sample of 120 students in technical majors (mostly male students) and pedagogy (mostly female) but due to the pandemic was not executed. Once the restrictions for classes are removed, the experiment will be conducted.

To some extent the results from the presented experiment repeat the results with previous data from the USA. Indeed, the experimental group show higher yearly bid by the people who experienced insecurity while thinking and writing about their own death. The levels of greed and fear however are not showing the same patterns. There are many factors which have to be considered when analysing the results. Starting with the sample size and the timing of the experiment. The sample itself is hugely skewed for the number of female

students in college for this particular major is much higher. The number of students themselves is quite low. The experiment was conducted at the last day of regular classes for the students and many of them had already given signs of being tired, uninterested or simply did not read the instructions properly. When the participants began the experiment, those who had to write about death visibly showed signs of anger or/and disapproval. Most of the essays were not very detailed, they barely touched on the visualization of the processes related to death. Part of this could be because Bulgarian culture is filled with superstitions. One of the ways to manage the fear of death is by not thinking about it, not mentioning it; the believe that when you talk about death you “call upon it” is very popular in Bulgaria (going to an attorney to prepare your will, or even have a life-insurance are not very common practices). So although those people were asked to think and write about death, chances are they really did not experience the levels of insecurity which people from other cultures could have experienced when faced with the same fears. Another reason for difference in results might be related to the perception of being financially stable and perceiving oneself as being able to provide for the physiological needs. Keeping the specifics of the current social and economic situation in Bulgaria it is possible that many of the participants did not perceive themselves as able to provide for their basic needs the striving for higher income could not necessarily mean that they would experience a higher levels of MVO. It is also important to note that the fear of not being able to provide for one’s self and family could lead to experiencing a constant strong sense of insecurity which will explain the high levels of fear and greed in the control group as well. Going back to the theory of MVO, if we are to assume that in general Bulgarians do not see themselves as able to provide for their physical needs, aspiration for a higher income will not be detrimental to the subjective well-being, but the constant insecurity will make Bulgarians vulnerable to be more influenced by materialistic models, values and extrinsic motivation. The forecast for then becomes rather gloomy- when all the factors are self-perpetuating and combined to experience more insecurities, to lead to more poverty and a drastic gap between poor and rich and to allow the strong hold of commercialism driven

capitalistic economies to spread extrinsic values and be reinforced by the overreaching invisible hand of media.

CONCLUSION

It is not possible to write about insecurities and not note the changed reality we are faced with currently. Since February, 2020, there has been a greater sense of threat and insecurities for all humans. As a result, more division and polarization has developed within countries and among the countries themselves. Many people are facing psychological problems and issues as a direct result from this situation. Experiencing insecurities leads to increased levels of MVO and pulls away from the intrinsic basic psychological needs of connectedness, personal growth and development, meaningful relationship and ability to contribute, prevents us from experiencing opportunities to fulfil those needs and experience happiness. The insecurities which each person goes through affects the ways one thinks, feels and decides about their actions/reactions. When faced with the idea of death – the ultimate end, people do tend to think about themselves first and then about the others. The current global pandemic requires a different solution. According to Alfred Adler it is exactly the opposite of pulling away and doing what is best for me only, that would help the world survive through the major challenges and obstacles we face. During his life time, Adler was a witness to many events which caused sense of insecurity. Some of them are the WWI and Spanish Flu Pandemic. During that time Adler was a doctor in WWI’s field hospitals he observed the atrocities of death from first hand, caring for the sick and wounded. And yet, this is the time when he reached the conclusion that there is a meaningful way humanity could overcome the horror of war, sickness and death. He called it social interest- interest in the interest of others, as the only way to overcome, recover and continue to thrive as humans (14). In order to be able to develop such social interest children from youngest age have to be exposed to models of behaviour which show interest in the interest of others; having the courage to face life-challenges despite the chance of failure or imperfect outcome. Such models require active and conscious efforts on the part of adults-parents, teachers, all responsible for the care of children; require interventions which provided the necessary tools for developing and modelling social and emotional skills; require

social equality implemented on all levels of life and throughout borders. The goal then might be to learn to overcome insecurities by developing stronger social interest which would call for changing at least one of the roads leading to MVO.

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