

Materialism: An Evolutionary Perspective

Paul Rose and Kyle E. Conlon

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

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### Abstract

Human nature seems to consist of predispositions that lead people to learn to value wealth and luxury more efficiently than they learn to value many other things. The basic human motives to attain security, social status and acceptance within groups, all of which contributed to the reproductive success of our ancestors, appear to predispose people to learn materialistic values in modern consumerist cultures. Moreover, the advantages of material abundance for successful reproduction may have lead people to prefer mates who display a commitment to wealth (especially when a long-term mate is sought, and especially among females pursuing males). These sexual selection pressures may have combined with the pressures of natural selection to contribute to the human inclination toward valuing material abundance. An appreciation of the role of evolutionary processes in predisposing humans toward efficiently learning materialistic values yields research questions that have the potential to enrich our understanding of consumer behavior.

### Materialism: An Evolutionary Perspective

In exchange for a million dollars, would you be willing to keep yourself awake for seventy-two hours? Most of us would. But why? Why should people who have all their basic needs fulfilled, and quite a few of their wants fulfilled, willfully make themselves miserable for any amount of money? Although people vary widely in how much they value wealth and the luxury that wealth can buy, it seems that almost all people are materialistic to some degree. People naturally yearn for more of whatever material resources are prized within their culture, and although researchers have tended to focus on individual differences in materialism, the ubiquity of materialism in the human species begs explanation. With an eye toward inspiring additional research and greater understanding of materialism, in this chapter we explain how evolutionary processes may have contributed to the relative ease with which human beings learn to value wealth and luxury.

#### **What is Materialism?**

Many theorists describe materialism as a value or set of related values (e.g., Richins & Dawson, 1992; Kasser, 2002; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Like other types of values (see Rokeach, 1973; Rohan, 2000), materialism is a relatively enduring orientation toward an end-state (i.e., a lifestyle marked by abundant material resources or money). This orientation necessarily involves the devaluation of competing end-states, because a person can only be oriented in so many “directions” (cf. Kruglanski et al., 2002; Rohan, 2000). (As the truism states, if everything is a priority, then nothing is.) Indeed, a variety of evidence shows that materialistic consumers devalue community contribution, spirituality, quality relationships and other end-states that one might intuitively consider to be inconsistent with a materialistic lifestyle (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Grouzet et al., 2005).

In the modern marketplace, materialism is so commonly expressed, and often so outrageously expressed, that many social commentators have expressed concern about how materialistic many of the world's consumers seem to be (e.g., De Graff, Wann, & Naylor, 2001; Elgin, 1998; Kasser & Kanner, 2004; Schor, 1998). Much of this concern stems from the fact that numerous studies demonstrate correlations between materialism and undesirable outcomes. For instance, materialism correlates negatively with environmental concern (Clump, Brandel, & Sharpe, 2002), and hyperconsumption—a behavioral byproduct of materialism—has obvious detrimental effects on the global ecosystem (Diamond, 2005). Furthermore, among all but the wealthiest consumers, materialism is a predictor of decreasing psychological well-being over time (Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003; see also Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004).

#### **Natural Selection and Motivational Preparedness for Learning Materialistic Values**

However ironic it may seem, we believe that people's valuation of wealth and luxury is influenced by their very nature as organisms shaped by evolution. While elaborating on this claim, we need to forewarn readers about falling prey to what Pinker (2002, p. 162) has termed the "naturalistic fallacy." Not everything that is natural is necessarily good; many phenomena produced by evolution are justifiably regarded as unfortunate, immoral or noxious. Materialism is demonstrably unhealthy in at least some respects (cf. Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Kasser, 2002) and it is damaging to the ecosystem (Clump et al., 2002; Diamond, 2005). But this does not preclude the possibility that entirely natural processes are responsible for why people learn materialistic values much more easily than they learn many other values.

One observation that motivates us to analyze materialism from an evolutionary perspective is the observation that all over the world, most neurologically healthy people place at

least some value on having abundant material resources. These resources may be valued for their intrinsic properties or they may be valued because they can be traded for other, more useful goods. Cultural and ecological variables constrain the ways in which materialism is expressed (e.g., some people yearn for a Hummer while others yearn for a larger goat herd), and cultures certainly vary in their relative emphasis on wealth, but underlying this cross-cultural variability, the human valuation of material abundance seems to be virtually universal. This conclusion does not negate the obvious fact that people differ in the priority they assign to wealth and luxury. There are real, enduring and important individual differences in materialism (cf., Kasser, 2002; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 2004). Our simple claim is that almost all people are at least minimally materialistic, and a consideration of selection pressures that may have contributed to this materialism helps explain why.

Our evolutionary perspective on human materialism builds on the concept of *biological preparedness* (Cummins & Cummins, 1999). The essence of this principle is that organisms may be prepared by natural selection to learn highly specific tendencies—tendencies which would not spontaneously arise without environmental input (cf. Öhman & Mineka, 2001; Seligman, 1971). To illustrate with a typical example, although snakes evoke fear in most people, it is probably not because humans are born with a fear of snakes, but rather because humans learn to fear snakes much more easily than they learn to fear most other objects. Evolutionary processes are likely responsible for this efficient learning, because quickly learning to avoid dangerous creatures was highly adaptive to our ancestors.

We believe that materialistic values are widespread among humans for approximately the same reason. To be clear, we doubt that natural selection has favored a gene or genes that make people materialistic in the absence of any environmental input. After all, there is evidence

suggesting that materialism is learned from parents (Goldberg, Gorn, Perrachio, & Bamossy, 2003) and from watching television (Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2003; Sirgy et al., 1998), and some religious groups seem to be successful in teaching group members to shun materialism (e.g., LaBarbera & Gurhan, 1997). Furthermore, survey data suggest that American consumers have become more materialistic over the last few decades (Myers & Diener, 1995; see also Schor, 1998, pp. 11-19). These findings, combined with evidence of cross-cultural variation in materialism (e.g., Ger & Belk, 1996; Swinyard, Kau, & Phua, 2001), further imply that people learn to value wealth and luxury. It is therefore oversimplified to say that humans are biologically destined to be materialistic, but it is likely that natural selection has favored genes that indirectly facilitate the learning of materialistic values (such that humans learn to value material abundance much more easily than they learn to value many other end-states).

We believe that natural selection has installed in human nature a set of highly adaptive motives which have incidentally prepared humans to efficiently learn materialistic values. Three basic motives in particular may have been both evolutionarily-advantageous to our ancestors and conducive to learning materialism. The first of these is a *motive for security*. A basic orientation toward avoiding injury, hunger, cold and other perilous experiences would have had obvious advantages to our ancestors as they struggled to stay alive long enough to reproduce and competently care for offspring. As a result, it is highly likely that the basic tendency among all healthy humans to avoid excessive dangers is a product of natural selection. The motive for security may also predispose people toward materialism (see Kasser, 2002; Christopher, Morgan, Marek, Keller, & Drummond, 2005). In the past, owning the right goods at the right quantities provided protection, comfort and greater capacity to trade for other needed goods, and this is still true in modern environments. Indeed, a variety of research suggests that a sense of insecurity

(which should induce a yearning for greater security) causes greater materialism. Abramson and Inglehart (1995) have shown that people in poorer countries tend to be more materialistic than people in wealthier countries. Christopher, Drummond, Jones, Marek, and Theriault (2006) have reported a positive correlation between personal insecurity (i.e., chronic self-doubt) and materialism. And when participants in experiments are induced to think about their own death (perhaps the ultimate means of creating a sense of insecurity) they show an increase in materialistic expectations and greedy decision-making (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000).

A second motive that seems well embedded in human nature that may predispose people toward materialism is the *motive for status*. Among ethologists and anthropologists, the idea that organisms of higher status tend to have greater reproductive success is effectively a truism. In preindustrial human societies the positive association between social status and reproductive success is well documented (although in industrial societies the association often does not hold; see Hopcroft, 2006, for a review). Not all humans attain high social status (just as some do not attain much security), but evolution has evidently ensured that all healthy human beings are concerned about their social position within the groups to which they belong (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Cummins, 2005; Hogan & Hogan, 1991; Kenrick et al., 2002; Saad, 2007). Indeed, social hierarchies are in constant negotiation in human (A. H. Buss, 1997) and other primate groups (Mazur, 1985). Status regulation typically involves various forms of displaying dominance, and in modern environments, one such display involves what Thorstein Veblen (1899/1994) termed “conspicuous consumption” (see also Saad, 2007). Several studies document a positive correlation between materialism and various (indirect) indices of status concern such as fame aspirations (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), narcissism (Rose, 2007) and

aspirations for a high-status career (Roberts & Robins, 2000). A devotion to wealth and luxury, therefore, may partly arise out of a concern for maintaining or enhancing status.

A third evolutionarily-endowed motive that may predispose people toward materialism is the *motive to belong* (i.e., an orientation toward being accepted in valued social groups). This motive is distinct from the motive for status, although the two motives frequently function in tandem. (Both motives, for example, may be thwarted by social exclusion.) The motive for status manifests itself in efforts to be *above* others within a group, whereas the motive to belong manifests itself in efforts to be *with* others in a group. For example, the motive to belong may give rise to support-seeking behaviors during difficult times, but the motive for status may give rise to “toughness” displays (to incur others’ admiration or persuade others of one’s strength in the face of adversity, and perhaps one’s ability to lead) in response to the very same difficulties.

The evolutionary advantages of group living and an orientation toward bonding with others have been extensively discussed by scholars from a variety of disciplines (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cacioppo et al., 2000; Silk, Alberts, & Altmann, 2003). Only recently, however, has it become evident that a desire to fit in may predispose people toward materialism. The motive for social acceptance correlates positively with materialism (Rose & DeJesus, 2007). Furthermore, experimentally inducing people to feel socially excluded (which should amplify motivation to achieve social acceptance) causes people to behave in materialistic ways (such as acting selfishly with financial donations and making foolish bets to win more money; Twenge & Baumeister, 2005).

Having argued that three evolutionarily-advantageous human motives—the motives for security, status and belonging—predispose people toward learning to be materialistic, we want to be clear that human nature probably does not independently propel consumers toward

materialistic lifestyles. The obvious influences of parents, peers, and culture in general on value development (Kuczynski & Grusec, 1997) lead us to believe that if selection pressures have influenced human materialism, they have probably done so by endowing us with motives which facilitate our learning of materialistic values. Some of the data we have summarized to substantiate the links between materialism and these three predisposing motives have focused on individual differences. On the surface, data on individual differences may not seem especially relevant when our arguments imply that natural selection has ensured that most human beings strive for security, status and belonging. To clarify, we do believe these three motives are present in all healthy human beings, owing to the evolutionary advantages they provided to our ancestors. Individual differences in the strength of these motives do not preclude the possibility that all humans experience these motives to some degree.

Our evolutionary analysis of materialism should be issued with the caveat that additional research may require an expansion of the brief list of motives we have offered here. It is likely that additional research on materialism and human motivation will extend the list of motives that predispose humans toward the efficient learning of materialistic values; our theorizing is limited by the state of the current empirical literature on materialism. Moreover, additional theoretical work may suggest that other motives which predispose humans toward learning materialism also have an evolutionary basis because they facilitated our ancestors' reproductive success.

### **A Role for Sexual Selection in Human Preparedness for Learning Materialism**

Thus far we have focused largely on how natural selection favored genes which support fundamental human motives that facilitate the learning of materialistic values. In this section we describe how sexual selection, processes involving the selection of mates and competition

between potential mates, may also have played a role in preparing humans to efficiently learn to value wealth and luxury.

Although beliefs about the ideal mate vary considerably from person to person, there are a number of characteristics that men and women in general find desirable in members of the opposite sex (D. M. Buss, 2003; D. M. Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Men and women often look for similar things in a mate (e.g., trustworthiness, intelligence), but in some respects the two sexes have different priorities during mate selection. Women's preferences can be understood in light of the fact that they must invest more in offspring (e.g., gestation, lactation) than men. It is therefore understandable that, across cultures, females tend to prefer males with high social status, wealth, occupational rank and other indicators of dependability (D. M. Buss, 2003; D. M. Buss & Schmitt, 1993). The successful raising of offspring requires the possession of vital resources, and females should feel more comfortable bearing the burdens of reproduction if their mate has high providing potential. Men's preferences, on the other hand, can be understood in light of the fact that reproduction does not require extensive male investment (e.g., men neither gestate nor lactate, and in some circumstances they can leave all the parenting up to the mother). Thus, compared to females, males tend to focus more on indicators of a potential mate's fertility, such as youth and attractiveness (D. M. Buss, 2003; D. M. Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick et al., 2002).

However, precisely what males and females find attractive in opposite sex mates also depends on whether the goal is to obtain a short-term mate or a long-term mate (D. M. Buss & Schmitt, 1993). That females should prefer resource-rich males when seeking a long-term mate is perhaps obvious, as resource-rich males can share resources with their female mates and with offspring. Furthermore, although females pursuing a short-term mate may be relatively less

concerned about a male's wealth (because they may not be expecting to gain many resources from a temporary partner; cf. D. M. Buss & Schmitt, 1993) such concern should not be absent entirely. Even a brief liaison with a resource-rich male (compared to a resource-poor male) can be evolutionarily advantageous. Such mating might increase a woman's material resources to a small degree (because sex can be traded for resources; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) and it might also better position her for a beneficial long-term relationship. In other words, even if a man's wealth is somewhat less important to a woman pursuing a short-term mate, the general pattern should be that women prefer resource-rich men (D. M. Buss, 2003).

It would be optimal for women to mate with men who are genuinely rich in resources (especially in ancestral environments), but in many circumstances, *wealth displays* (whether true or misleading) are all a woman has to go on. One interesting consequence of this is that men should compete with each other in their wealth displays. For example, two men in the same tribe who are both in pursuit of a mate may be motivated to outdo each other in their accumulation of food stashes and weaponry, each trying to signal that he is the best mate available. Because of women's concerns about their own safety during pregnancy and whether their offspring will have adequate protection and resources, it is understandable that women should attend to such wealth displays and choose a mate accordingly. The consequence of this would be that men who are committed to pursuing and displaying wealth would have greater reproductive success, passing on the genes that support the efficient learning of materialism.

In contrast, the weighting of a woman's wealth (in social groups which support women's accumulation of resources) in the minds of mate-seeking males may be somewhat lighter and more varied. A man pursuing a short-term mate may have little concern about a woman's wealth as long as she displays ample evidence of having other desirable characteristics, such as health

and fertility (D. M. Buss, 2007; D. M. Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Although a woman's wealth signals that she should be able to share ample resources with offspring, men pursuing short-term mates tend to be promiscuous, favoring quantity of sex (and offspring) over quality reproduction (D. M. Buss, 2003). (A reproductive strategy favoring quantity at the expense of quality would increase the mortality rate among offspring, but with enough offspring, a promiscuous strategy can still be evolutionarily advantageous.)

However, a woman's wealth may be more important to a man who is seeking a long-term mate (though still not quite as important as it is to a woman seeking a long-term mate; D. M. Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Men seeking long-term mates may attend to wealth displays among women for reasons similar to why women attend to such displays in men. The resource-rich daughter of a clan chief may not only share her abundant resources with her mate, but should also share her resources with her offspring. The man who mates with such a wealthy woman, therefore, may enhance his reproductive success by choosing a long-term mate who is well-positioned to raise viable (and eventually reproductively successful) offspring.

In summary, the effect of wealth on offspring viability is such that males and females should both generally prefer mates who display a command of ample resources or at least a convincing display of commitment to attaining and maintaining such resources. (At times a convincing display of commitment to wealth may be the best one can hope for in a partner, such as when the mate that is sought is too young to have much wealth.) A bias in favor of wealth-committed mates should be stronger among women (because reproduction is more costly for them), but for males seeking a long-term mate in social groups that permit women to accumulate ample resources, at least a weak preference for wealth-committed females would be evolutionarily beneficial. For these reasons, we suspect that sexual selection has also played a

role in the ease with which both males and females learn to value (and flaunt) material abundance.

### **The Socialization of Materialism in a Prepared Species**

Our evolutionary perspective unquestionably assumes that materialism is learned, but it assumes that it is learned by minds that are *evolutionarily prepared*. Babies do not grow into materialistic consumers without teaching and persuasion by parents, peers and broader cultural forces (such as advertising). Such socialization need not be explicit (for instance, probably very few parents have a conscious goal of producing materialistic children), but the sheer volume of materialistic messages in many of the world's cultures (combined with humanity's natural openness to those messages) ensures materialism's spread.

If by nature people are quick to accept materialistic messages as we have suggested, they can hardly be blamed for doing so. In some circumstances, wealth and luxury may indeed help a person fulfill their desires for security, status, belonging and a suitable mate. People with abundant material resources, for example, can afford to distance themselves from common dangers. The rich also need not worry as much about malnutrition and starvation. Moreover, people with abundant material resources are often able to leverage their wealth as a tool for enhancing social status. People who become politicians, for example, sometimes acquire their wealth first and then use their popularity as a wealthy person to get elected. Abundant material resources might also have a small positive effect on a person's acceptance within valued groups. Children and adults both try to own the "right" products (such as fashionable clothing) to prevent ostracism, and such strategizing is not wholly misguided; norm violators do often incur rejection (Sripada & Stich, 2007). And finally, some degree of wealth clearly facilitates successful mating. In groups that make wealth displays a prerequisite to courtship (e.g., in cultures that use dowries

or arranged marriages) wealth has a direct effect on mating success. But even in cultures that do not directly incorporate wealth displays in the courtship process, wealthier individuals tend to have more mating options. Given these realities of human social life, it is understandable that organisms endowed with fundamental desires for security, status, belonging and successful reproduction would be quick to accept most of the materialistic messages of their culture.

### **A Few Hypotheses Based on An Evolutionary Perspective of Materialism**

We have argued that both natural and sexual selection pressures have operated on the ease with which humans learn to value wealth and luxury. However, the chief virtue of any perspective such as this is its ability to inspire specific hypotheses that, when tested, enhance understanding. In this section we offer a small sample of testable hypotheses derivable from our evolutionary perspective while hoping that our ideas will inspire many more hypotheses that enhance our understanding of materialism.

If we are correct in our contention that fundamental human motives facilitate the learning of materialism, it would follow that people who experience these motives as unfulfilled should value materialism to a greater extent than people who feel more fulfilled. There are already some supportive data along these lines (see Kasser, 2002), but additional research is needed to explore the nuances of these ideas. For instance, we do not know whether the motives for security, status and belonging operate as independent predictors of materialism. Nor is there any longitudinal work (of which we are aware) suggesting that individual differences in these motives precede the development of materialism. In the future, researchers might profitably focus on whether, within consumerist cultures, these three motives (and perhaps others) are independent predictors of increases in materialism over time.

An additional line of work that could be derived from our perspective is one focusing on whether making people feel secure, accepted or high in status tends to reduce their valuation of wealth and luxury. When these three motives are fulfilled, people ought to place a higher priority on values other than materialism (and incur the mental health benefits of not being overly materialistic). It may not be realistic to expect people who are induced to feel secure, accepted and high in status to become extremely non-materialistic (because there are many reasons people have for valuing wealth and luxury), but people who have these motives fulfilled should express at least somewhat lower materialism. Some preliminary evidence is consistent with this view: In the United States, European Americans, who tend to have higher social status, spend less on conspicuous luxuries than comparable minorities, who tend to have lower social status (Charles, Hurst, & Roussanov, 2007).

According to our evolutionary perspective, an additional way in which people might be helped to be less materialistic is to persuade them that there are better means of achieving security, status, belonging and a mate. The successful pursuit of wealth and luxury might help a person achieve these end-states, but in some ways it may also backfire. Materialism can play an indirect role in undermining a person's financial security (cf. Rose & Segrist, in press) and it appears to be harmful to relationships as well (Kasser & Ryan, 2001). Thus, for people who are desperate for love, or for people who are so hungry for security, status and belonging that they can not be easily satisfied, perhaps the best means of reducing materialism is to teach these people that there are more direct and less psychologically detrimental ways to fulfill these motives.

In our explanation of the role of sexual selection in facilitating the learning of materialistic values, we discussed evidence that women generally prefer men who have and

display wealth (e.g., D. M. Buss, 1989, 2007). From an evolutionary perspective, this finding is understandable, because wealthy men should have access to abundant vital resources that can support offspring. However, we are not aware of research testing our hypothesis that men who are in pursuit of long-term mates should show a slight preference for wealthy females. This hypothesis seems reasonable in light of the many benefits a wealthy woman chosen as a long-term partner could provide to offspring. As previously suggested, however, we would expect men to show little preference for wealthy women when pursuing a short-term mate, because men pursuing a short-term mating strategy tend to focus on quantity of sex at the expense of quality reproduction.

### **Conclusion**

Evolutionary psychology has become a dominant meta-theory in the behavioral sciences, generating a range of hypotheses that have illuminated our understanding of numerous psychological phenomena (D. M. Buss, 2003; Gangestad & Simpson, 2007; Pinker, 2002). Only recently, however, have evolutionary principles been used to further our understanding of consumer cognition, affect and behavior (Saad, 2007). Our greatest hope in writing this chapter is that it facilitates innovative empirical work that might otherwise be neglected if researchers tried to understand materialism without viewing it in the context of human evolution.

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