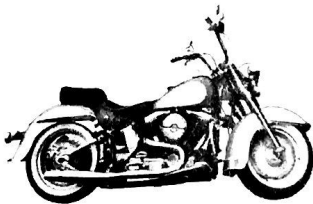




*from* **FRAGILE SELF-WORTH**

*from* The High Price of Materialism

**Tim Kasser**



**C**onsider an individual whose goal is to make a million dollars. This is what she conceives of as ideal, having been exposed throughout her life to countless messages claiming that wealth is the primary sign of success, and that the purchase of particular goods and services will make her life meaningful and happy. At the moment, she is worth only about \$100,000 and, instead of living in the lap of luxury, she works long hours at a job she does not particularly like, commuting forty-five minutes each way in her six-year-old sedan to and from her comfortable but far from opulent single-family dwelling in the suburbs. Clearly this woman has a discrepancy in her life and, to the extent that her materialistic ideals are central, she is probably dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction motivates her to pursue her materialistic ideals even more strongly, which perpetuates her value system and her unhappiness.

Although no single study, to my knowledge, has yet simultaneously verified all the links in this cycle, empirical research does exist that supports each individual link. And as I will show, this vicious cycle can operate even when people's ideals are less immoderate than extreme wealth.

To begin, materialistic individuals seem to have overly inflated, unrealistic ideas about the worth of wealth and possessions. For example, Shivani Kharina and I asked United States students about qualities that characterize wealthy individuals. Respondents with strong materialistic values were likely to believe that a significant majority of rich people were "smart," "cultured," and "successful in everything." Such inflated ideals about what it means to be wealthy likely set up discrepancies for materialists, most of whom will feel they fall short when they assess these qualities in themselves.

One of the main reasons materialistic individuals have unrealistic ideals about wealth and possessions is that they frequently view such images in the media. In searching out messages that reinforce their value system, they spend many hours watching one primary agent of this value system: television. Research studies using different materialism scales and conducted with individuals in Australia, Denmark, Finland, Hong Kong, India, and the United States have shown that materialistic individuals watch a great

◀ **discrepancy**

(di skrep'ən sē) *n.*  
difference; being  
in disagreement

◀ **empirical**

(em pir'i kəl) *adj.*  
based on observations  
and experiments  
rather than theory

deal of television. Although this fact is interesting in some other regards, the main point here is that the minds of materialistic people become saturated with shows and ads exhibiting levels of attractiveness and wealth well above the norm, and thus beyond the level of attainment of the average viewer.

In particular, advertisements on television (and elsewhere) are specifically designed to present idealized images of people who own or use a particular product, in the hope that by pairing these images with the product, viewers will be convinced to purchase the product. We see that a newly improved laundry detergent has better chemicals than our older, dull detergent lacks, and that the woman who uses this detergent has a family pleased with their crisp, clean clothes; whereas, our family never has a word to say about their washed clothes, except to complain. We see that this year's new cars have many improved features compared with our automobile—although it is only two years old—and that people who drive these new cars live in nice neighborhoods, travel to fun places, and have happy spouses. Put in terms of discrepancy theory, ads create an image (being like the person in the ad who has the product and a great life) that is different from our actual state (being ourselves, sans product, with an average life). Marketers and businesspeople are banking that advertisement-induced discrepancies will convince us to buy the new improved detergent or take out a lease on the new car, so that our discrepancies can be reduced, and so their bank accounts can be enlarged.

The consequences of believing that the wealthy have wonderful lives and of frequently viewing idealized ads are that people become frustrated with their current state and thus less happy. In a series of studies, Joseph Sirgy, H. Lee Meadow, and Don Rahtz<sup>1</sup> have explored the interrelations of materialism, television, discrepancies, and life satisfaction. In some of this early work, conducted with large samples of elderly Americans, people who watched a lot of television reported low satisfaction with their lives and low overall morale, and also compared themselves unfavorably with other “people in your position.” Watching television presumably made viewers feel that they measured up less favorably than other people because they could not live up to what they saw on television; thus, they experienced increased discrepancies and low overall life satisfaction.

In another project, Sirgy, Meadow, Rahtz and their colleagues surveyed over 1,200 adults from the United States, Canada, Australia, China, and Turkey about life satisfaction, their levels of

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1. Joseph Sirgy, H. Lee Meadow, and Don Rahtz Sirgy and Meadow are professors of marketing at Virginia Tech University; Rahtz is a professor of marketing at the College of William and Mary.

materialism (using the Richins and Dawson scale), and the extent to which they watched television. Participants also reported how favorably they felt in comparison with people they saw on television by responding to statements such as, "I am more well off financially than most people shown on television commercials," and "I consider

Marketing professors Marsha Richins and Scott Dawson developed this scale as part of their 1992 study on materialism. It has since become a key tool for researchers.

### **Sample items from Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale.**

#### **Success**

- I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.
- Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.
- I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects a person owns as a sign of success.\*
- The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.
- I like to own things that impress people.
- I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own.\*

#### **Centrality**

- I usually buy only the things I need.\*
- I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.\*
- The things I own aren't all that important to me.\*
- I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical.
- Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.
- I like a lot of luxury in my life.
- I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.\*

#### **Happiness**

- I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.\*
- My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.
- I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.\*
- I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.
- It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.

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Participants are presented with these statements and asked how strongly they agree or disagree with them. Items with a \* are scored so that disagreement indicates more materialism.

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my family to be lower class compared to the typical family they show on television.” Finally, participants expressed how satisfied they were in general and with their standard of living or income on the whole.

People with a strong materialistic orientation were likely to watch a lot of television, compare themselves unfavorably with people they saw on television, be dissatisfied with their standard of living, and have low life satisfaction. Using a statistical technique called structural equation modeling, the investigators showed that by watching a great deal of television, materialistic individuals are exposed to images of wealth and beauty that make them dissatisfied with their current economic state. This dissatisfaction with the material realm of their lives “spills over” into their overall sense of satisfaction with their entire life. Of note, most of the support for these results came from the United States sample....

We have seen thus far that materialistic individuals are likely to over-idealize wealth and possessions, and as a result, they are likely to be dissatisfied with aspects of their life, as their actual state cannot measure up to their ideals. The next step in the cycle occurs when this discrepancy drives people to engage in further materialistic behavior. Evidence for this comes from a set of experiments in which Ottmar Braun and Robert Wicklund<sup>2</sup> tested whether people lay claim to materialistic status symbols when they feel that their identity is incomplete (their actual state is below their ideal). In one study, first-year United States college students were more likely to report owning articles displaying the name of their university than were fourth-year students. Similarly, inexperienced German adult tennis players were more likely to prefer certain brands of tennis clothing than were experienced tennis players. In both cases, less experienced individuals were likely to feel that they had not yet reached their ideals (graduation, proficiency in tennis); as a result, they compensated by possessing material symbols to bolster their identity.

In two experiments Braun and Wicklund actually made people feel incomplete in their identities. In one experiment, German law students were randomly assigned to answer questions that made it clear that they had not yet successfully reached their goals; that is, of experience, how many conventions they had attended, how many papers they had published, and so on. Participants in the control group were asked about more routine matters unlikely to heighten

2. **Ottmar Braun and Robert Wicklund** Braun is a professor of psychology at the University of Koblenz in Germany; Wicklund is a professor of psychology at the University of Bergen in Norway.

awareness of the discrepancy between their ideal and actual states. Next, all subjects reported where they were going on vacation the coming summer and rated how prestigious and “in fashion” their vacation spot was. Students who felt committed to becoming lawyers (really wanted the goal) and who had been made aware of the discrepancy between their actual and ideal states were especially likely to report that their vacation spot was prestigious and in fashion. This was not the case for students who were uncommitted to becoming lawyers or who were not made more aware of the discrepancy. This study was conceptually replicated by a similar experiment with German business students.

What these results show is that when people realize that they have not reached an ideal they hold, they desire material means of conspicuously demonstrating that they are in fact high-status, worthy individuals. This is compatible with the argument about the ways people who feel insecure sometimes compensate by pursuing materialistic aims. Furthermore, it provides the final piece of evidence for the vicious cycle outlined above: materialistic people over-idealize wealth and possessions and therefore experience discrepancies that cause them to feel dissatisfied and to want further materialistic means of feeling good about themselves. But the satisfactions from this compensation only temporarily improve their sense of worth, and soon they return to another cycle of dissatisfaction.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### **Tim Kasser** (b.1966)

Tim Kasser is a psychologist and a professor of psychology at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. He has written numerous books and articles on materialism and aspiration. He has also served as an associate editor for the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Discussing his work, Kasser says, “My primary interest concerns people’s values and goals, and how they relate to quality of life.” On the subject of materialism, Kasser comments, “My colleagues and I have found that when people believe materialistic values are important, they report less happiness and more distress, have poorer interpersonal relationships, contribute less to the community, and engage in more ecologically damaging behaviors.”