

## The Relationship between Materialistic Aspirations and Distinct Aspects of Psychological Well-being in a UK sample

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how materialistic aspirations are related to distinct aspects of psychological well-being. Research has consistently found a negative relationship between materialistic goals and well-being, but a review of the literature identified that the measures of well-being used in the majority of studies were measures of what Keyes (2002) describes as “subjective well-being” or “hedonic happiness”. Criticisms of these types of measures are that they fixate too much on the momentary experience of pleasure and don’t take into account what is meaningful and or what contributes to long lasting fulfilment. Very little research was found investigating the impact of materialism on “eudaimonic” well-being, which is found through doing what is worthwhile and realising ones potential and has been found to have a longer lasting impact on overall well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010). To address this gap in the literature, a convenience sample of 113 adult subjects in the UK were recruited through Facebook and asked to respond to the Aspiration Index and the Psychological wellbeing scale. The relative importance placed on extrinsic (materialistic) and intrinsic aspirations was compared to the six dimensions of psychological well-being. In line with previous research, higher importance placed on materialistic aspirations for wealth, status and image were found to be negatively correlated with all aspects of psychological well-being. However, the strongest and only statistically significant negative correlation was between extrinsic aspirations and positive relations with others ( $r = -.256, p < 0.01$ ). Positive relationships with other people form a central component of many theories of well-being and so this negative relationship may help to explain why materialistic aspirations are so consistently found to be negatively correlated to a variety of measures of well-being. Further research is needed to explore this relationship as no causation could be inferred.

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## Introduction

### Materialism and Well-being

The question of whether the pursuit of money and possessions can lead us towards “the good life” has been asked for centuries (Kasser, 2003). Religious sages and philosophers have claimed that focussing on material possessions is a false path to happiness, while at the same time we are bombarded everyday with images on television, adverts and the internet telling us that owning the right products and styling ourselves with the right image will lead to happiness and success (Kasser, 2003). So far the evidence seems to suggest the sages were right after all. At a macro level, the “Easterlin Paradox” has shown us that despite increasing wealth within nations such as the UK and USA over the last 50 years, the wellbeing of these populations has remained stubbornly flat (Easterlin, 1974; Easterlin, McVey, Switek, Sawangfa, & Zweig, 2010). At the individual level, there is now substantial research to demonstrate that although increases in income initially have a large impact on wellbeing, the effect starts to diminish once people have met their basic needs and further increases in wealth have little impact on levels of happiness and wellbeing (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

Kasser et al (2007) have gone on to show that it is not only the *acquisition* of wealth that does not have the desired impact as promised by adverts and magazines, but that by simply adopting the *aims and aspirations* for material success, wealth, fame and image, lower levels of well-being are experienced. There is now a substantial body of research showing that materialistic values are consistently negatively correlated with indicators of wellbeing (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014; Wright & Larsen, 1993). Early studies investigating the relationship between materialistic aims and wellbeing in the 1980’s and 90’s in the US found that individuals who placed higher importance on the acquisition of money and possessions reported lower levels of self actualisation, vitality and happiness and higher levels of

anxiety and depression (Belk, 1984; Kasser & Ryan, 1993a; Richins & Dawson, 1992a). Since then, studies have demonstrated a relationship between materialism and physical illness (Kasser & Ryan, 1996), mental illness (Cohen & Cohen, 1996), positive affect and life satisfaction (Shrum, Lee, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2011) but surprisingly few studies have used multifaceted or eudaimonic measures of psychological wellbeing. The majority of research has used measures of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction and positive affect which, although useful measures, have been criticised for their simplistic and narrow conception of what it means to be psychologically well (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This study aims to address this gap by correlating measures of materialism with the six facets of psychological wellbeing as defined by Ryff & Keyes (1995). This scale was chosen because it is designed to measure a broader, eudaimonic definition of well-being and it is also possible to correlate materialistic aspiration scores with six distinct aspects of psychological well-being which may help to give a more nuanced understanding of this relationship.

### What is Wellbeing?

Research into psychological well-being and what it means to be “well” has been organised into two main streams of enquiry: “hedonic” well-being, which is associated with positive affect and is achieved through the pursuit of pleasure, enjoyment and comfort, and “eudaimonic” wellbeing, associated with realising ones potential and is achieved through seeking to develop the best in oneself (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Keyes (2002) extends these distinctions to encompass two distinct traditions of research, one focussed on *subjective well-being* which includes the evaluation of life between the balance of positive and negative affect and overall satisfaction with life (hedonic happiness), and another focussed on *psychological wellbeing* which encompasses perceived thriving with regards to the existential challenges of life (eudaimonic happiness). There are researchers who dispute the need for distinct constructions of hedonic and eudaimonic happiness

(Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008) and a lack of consensus in the field as to a specific definition of wellbeing has made research into wellbeing difficult to contrast and compare (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). However, Keyes (2002) used factor analysis of data from over 3000 respondents to demonstrate that subjective wellbeing and psychological wellbeing are conceptually similar but empirically distinct. Although both concepts are applied to measuring wellbeing, they have different definitions of what it means to be well and so, he argues, can not be used interchangeably (Keyes et al., 2002).

This study will use Ryff and Keyes (1995) scale of psychological wellbeing which was designed to measure a multidimensional model of what it means to be psychologically well in the eudaimonic sense, rather than using hedonic measures of the experience of positive affect or life satisfaction. Their model of psychological wellbeing comprises of six factors 1) the positive evaluation of oneself (self acceptance), 2) a feeling of growth and development (Personal growth), 3) believing that ones life has meaning and purpose (Purpose in life), 4) good quality relationships with other people (Positive relations with others, 5) the ability to manage ones life (environmental mastery), 6) a sense of determining ones own life (Autonomy) (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

### **How has Well-being been Measured in Materialism Studies?**

In a recent meta analysis of studies investigating the relationship between materialism and well-being, Dittmar et al (2014) examined 753 effect sizes from 259 independent samples and found that materialism had a negative and significant relationship across all measures of wellbeing used in the studies. A wide range of measures were included that cover a variety of topics under the banner of wellbeing. Dittmar et al (2014) divided these into four categories, 1) subjective wellbeing measures which cover cognitive self appraisals of ones life satisfaction and appraisals of positive and negative affect, 2) Self appraisal measures which encompass measures of ones positive or negative

appraisal of oneself (such as self esteem and self doubt) 3) Mental ill health measures, as defined by DSM III (such as depression and anxiety), 4) physical health measures such as headaches and stomach pains and risk behaviours such as smoking or using drugs. It is the first category that falls most naturally into the field of Positive Psychology research as it focuses on well-being from the perspective of measuring a state of positive mental health, as opposed to mental suffering or illness. Of the 323 effect sizes analysed within the first category of "subjective wellbeing", 147 were measuring life satisfaction, 73 measured positive affect, 46 measured negative affect and 57 used composite measures, which were defined as measuring subjective wellbeing through a single measure of a combination of measures (e.g some had combined satisfaction with life and affect measures). Only 1 study contained within the meta-analysis used Ryff and Keyes (1995) scale of psychological wellbeing. Sheldon (2005) found that increases in psychological wellbeing were reported when college students' values shifted towards more intrinsic values, but this study aggregated scores for psychological well-being rather than investigating the relationship between the distinct dimensions. The majority of studies within this meta-analysis have therefore measured constructs that would tend to fall in Keyes (2002) definition of subjective wellbeing.

Of course there have been many other studies into materialism and well-being, most notably perhaps by Tim Kasser which he summarises in his book "the high price of materialism" (Kasser, 2003). Kasser (2003) has investigated the impact of materialism on psychological needs, specifically on our needs for security, feelings of self worth, relationships, autonomy and authenticity and has found a negative relationship between these needs and materialistic values (Kasser, 2003). He suggests that pursuing materialistic goals does not satisfy these needs and so leads to lower levels of wellbeing. Kasser's (2003) overview of psychological needs has some cross over with the concept of psychological wellbeing, specifically in relation to the concepts of

autonomy and relationships with others (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). He does not however seem to have used Ryff and Keyes (1995) psychological wellbeing scale specifically to measure wellbeing. The current research aims to investigate the relationship between materialism and the six facets of psychological wellbeing by comparing which aspects are most strongly impacted in comparison to each other. Before exploring this further, it is important to also be clear about what is meant by the concept of materialism.

### What is Materialism?

Materialism has been defined as: “*individual differences in people’s long-term endorsement of values, goals, and associated beliefs that centre on the importance of acquiring money and possessions that convey status*” (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014, p880). A defining characteristic of people with stronger materialistic values is a central belief that their well-being will be enhanced through the acquisition of possessions and status (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002).

A variety of measures have been used to investigate individual levels of materialism such as the Material Values Scale (Richins, 2004; Richins & Dawson, 1992) which has been widely used in consumer research and measures the importance of material possessions in a persons life and the extent to which they believe attainment of material goods will lead to happiness. Another widely used scale is the Aspiration index which measures the *relative* importance of materialistic aspirations compared to other types of goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). The Aspiration Index has been chosen for this study as it has been found that a more accurate understanding of an individuals materialistic tendencies can be understood from using measures that assess the prioritisation of materialistic values relative to other goals (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser, 2014). This is because values do not exist in isolation and so it is argued they can only be understood within the context of their relationship to other values held within an individuals complex value system

(Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002).

The Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) incorporates a variety of materialistic aspirations including financial success, attractive appearance and social status. These are categorised as *extrinsic* aspirations. The relative importance of these values is compared to *intrinsic* aspirations for self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling and physical fitness (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). These definitions are grounded in self-determination theory, which describes two overarching types of motivation that stem from differing underlying attitudes and goals behind an action (Richard M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation, which has been defined as participating in a task for it’s own sake, and extrinsic motivation which leads to a separable outcome such as the attainment of a reward (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) do not claim that extrinsically motivated aspirations are either positive or negative per se, but rather when extrinsic goals are pursued excessively they can distract from the pursuit of intrinsic goals and thus leave psychological needs unmet. This could explain why people who seek happiness through possessions and status, end up having lower well-being overall.

### Why are Materialism and Well-being negatively correlated?

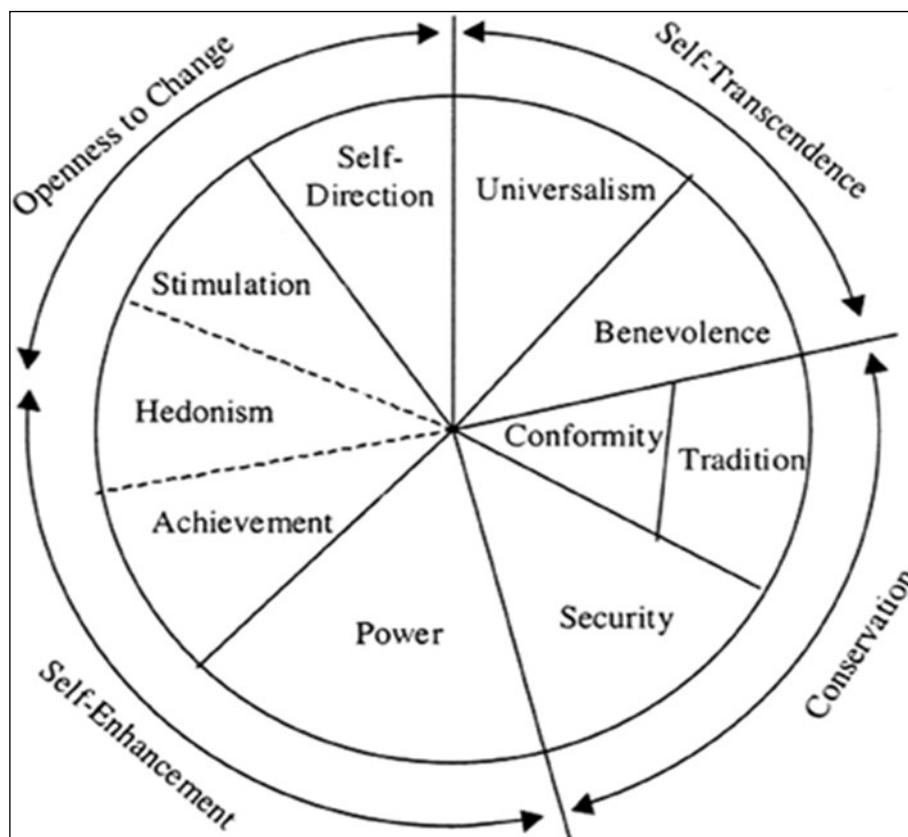
A significant weakness in much of the research into the relationship between materialism and well-being is that the majority of the research is conducted through cross sectional, correlational studies. It is therefore not possible to infer causation as to whether materialism causes lower well-being or whether lower well-being causes increases in materialism or if there is a bi-directional relationship. There are however a range of theories that have been put forward to explain this negative relationship. Humanistic theories suggested that the pursuit of wealth and status resulted in lower well-being as this distracted from the pursuit of self-actualisation (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). For example Maslow (1956) suggested that aspirations for money,

wealth and status was a sign of an individual forgoing their own actualization in favour of attaining regard from others.

Burroughs and Reindfleisch (2002) propose that materialistic values lie in direct conflict with more collective oriented values such as family and community values and this internal conflict is the cause of lower subjective wellbeing, particularly for individuals who place value on both. This theory draws extensively from Schwartz's (1990) circumplex model of values (figure 1) which shows values found to be closely aligned next to each other and those found to be in conflict opposite each other. Burroughs and Reindfleisch (2002) found that materialism was most strongly correlated with power and so most directly in conflict with values of universalism and benevolence. Using Burroughs and Reindfleisch's (2002) theory of values conflict it could be predicted that out of the six facets of Psychological wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), positive relations with others may be the one most strongly negatively correlated with

higher importance placed on materialistic aspirations. Their research shows materialism to be more closely aligned with self-enhancing values and in direct conflict with values that are more focussed on others such as universalism and benevolence (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002).

Kasser (2003) suggests that materialistic values have a dynamic relationship with psychological needs and that it is the satisfaction of psychological needs (or lack of) that leads to lower or higher psychological wellbeing. Kasser (2003) draws on self determination theory, which suggests that we have three innate psychological needs; for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are satisfied, this leads to good mental health and enhanced self-motivation but when these needs are thwarted, wellbeing will be diminished (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Kasser (2003) suggests that individuals who's psychological needs are not met will be more likely to seek comfort in material goods, for example Kasser, Ryan, Zax, &



**Figure 1:** Schwartz's Circumplex model of values, adapted from Burroughs and Reindfleisch (2002)

Sameroff (1995) found that teenagers who had been raised by mothers who were less nurturing were more likely to place higher value on financial success. Kasser (1993) goes on to argue that when people spend their time and energy chasing after extrinsic goals for money, status and possessions, this crowds out intrinsic pursuits that focus on building competence, autonomy and relationships that are necessary for wellbeing in the long term. A vicious circle is therefore created where individuals seek to meet their needs through acquiring money and status but this detracts from other activities that would be much more likely to meet those needs, thus well-being is diminished.

### Statement of Research Problem

This research is interested in the relationship between materialistic values and the distinct aspects of psychological well-being when well-being is defined in eudaimonic terms. The research also seeks to understand whether materialistic values could have a stronger relationship with some components of psychological well-being than others. This is useful to not only understand if there is a relationship between materialistic values and eudaimonic well-being, but also to gain understanding as to which aspects of well-being are more or less impacted by materialistic aspirations.

The research hypothesis is that 1) higher relative centrality of extrinsic aspirations will correlate negatively with all six aspects of psychological wellbeing 2) that higher relative centrality of intrinsic aspirations will correlate positively with all six aspects of psychological wellbeing. 3) higher relative centrality of extrinsic aspirations will have a particularly strong negative correlation with positive relations with others.

### Method

#### Design

A quantitative correlational design was used where a survey combining the Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) and the Psychological Well-being scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) were sent out to participants using the qualtrics survey platform. The responses to these questionnaires were then correlated to identify if there was a relationship between the centrality of extrinsic aspirations and any of the six facets of psychological wellbeing.

#### Participants

A convenience sample of participants was recruited through facebook and by email. The only criteria to participate were that participants had to be at least 18 years of age and be able to speak English as

**Table 1: Labels, descriptions and example items of the seven aspiration domains in the Aspiration Index**

Intrinsic Aspirations	Description	Example item
Self Acceptance	Achieve psychological growth, autonomy and self regard	"You will know and accept who you really are"
Affiliation	Have satisfying relationships with family and friends	"You will have good friends you can count on"
Community Feeling	Improve the world through activism or generosity	"You will work for the betterment of society"
Physical Fitness	Feel healthy and free of illness	"You will be physically healthy"
Extrinsic Aspirations		
Financial Success	Be wealthy and materially successful	"You will have a lot of expensive possessions"
Attractive appearance	Look attractive in terms of body, clothing and fashion	"You will successfully hide the signs of ageing"
Social recognition	Be famous, well known and admired	"Your name will be known by many people"

Adapted from Kasser & Ryan (1996)

the surveys were in English. A total of 135 responses to the survey were received, but 22 were discarded due to extensive missing data. 113 responses were used in the analysis of which 31 were from Males (27.4%) and 81 were from females (71.7%). 1 persons gender was unknown. A wide age range of participants took part with mean ages ranging from 24 (7.1%), 34 (46%), 44 (23.9%), 54 (15%), 60+ (8%). Participants' annual incomes were also diverse, ranging from under £10,000 (13.3%), £10-20k (18.6%), £21-30k (19.5%), £31-40k (14.2%), £41-50k (15.9%), £51-60k (10.6%), over £60k (8%).

**Procedure**

A brief email (see appendix C for a copy of the email sent) describing the purpose of the research was sent out with a link to an online survey using the qualtrics survey platform with a participant information sheet (see appendix D for a copy of the participant information sheet) attached telling them more about the research and providing contact details of the researcher. A consent form was contained at the start of the survey (see appendix E for a copy of the consent form). No ethical concerns were identified in the design of the study, other than ensuring it was only participated in by consenting adults over the age of 18 who had a good enough level of English to understand what they were being asked to do.

**Measures**

**Materialism**

The 42 item Aspiration index (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) was used to assess materialism (see appendix F for the full Aspiration Index questionnaire). This assesses the relative importance of seven types of future goals (4 intrinsic and 3 extrinsic) in relation to each other (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Respondents were presented with 42 suggested goals for the future and asked to rate each item in terms of how important it was to them that they would happen in the future. They rated the importance of each item from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely important). Each item is related to either an intrinsic aspiration, divided into the categories of self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling or physical fitness, or to an extrinsic aspiration, categorised as financial success, attractive appearance and social recognition. See Table 1 for a description of each category with an example item.

Seven subscale scores were obtained by computing the mean of each aspiration sub-type. The relative importance placed on each type of aspiration was found by computing the mean total importance of all aspirations (regardless of content), which was then subtracted from the score for each of the 7 subscale scores. This gave a mean corrected score for each subscale showing the relative centrality of each type of

**Table 2: Pearson’s Correlations between Extrinsic and Intrinsic Aspirations and the Six Facets of Psychological Well-being**

		Self acceptance	Positive relations	Autonomy	Personal growth	Environmental mastery	Purpose
Intrinsic score	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	0.046	.281**	0.172	0.02	0.017	0.061
		0.63	0.003	0.068	0.837	0.863	0.526
		112	112	113	113	112	111
Extrinsic Score	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	-0.156	-.256**	-0.121	-0.109	-0.032	-0.095
		0.1	0.006	0.203	0.25	0.74	0.323
		112	112	113	113	112	111

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 (2 tailed)

aspiration. A summary intrinsic score was then calculated by averaging the 4 intrinsic mean-corrected scores (for self acceptance, affiliation, community feeling and physical fitness) and an extrinsic score was calculated by averaging the 3 extrinsic mean corrected scores. A higher extrinsic score reflecting higher levels of materialism (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

### Psychological Wellbeing Scale

The scale of Psychological Wellbeing (see appendix G for the full 18 item scale of Psychological well-being) contains a range of statements about the six areas of psychological wellbeing: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self acceptance (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Respondents were invited to rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 6 where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 6 indicates strong agreement. The 18 item version of the Psychological wellbeing scale (3 items per dimension) was used rather than the longer versions of the scale (up to 12 items per dimension) in order to reduce the burden on participants as this questionnaire was being completed alongside the 42 item Aspiration Index and so participants completed 60 items in total. The 18 item scale has been validated and shown to correspond strongly to the full version of the scale (.70 to .89) (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

### Data Analysis

To ensure that the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic aspirations was supported within the Aspiration Index, a higher order factor analysis was conducted for the seven aspiration subscale scores. Varimax rotation was used and 2 factors were found, with the intrinsic aspirations in one and extrinsic in the other (see appendix H). The analysis therefore supported the theoretical distinction between the two concepts. Cronbach's alpha was .704 for the Aspiration index and .786 for the psychological wellbeing index, which supports the reliability of both scales. Pearson's Correlations were conducted between the summary intrinsic score and each of the six facets of psychological

wellbeing and also with the extrinsic score and each aspect of psychological wellbeing. Pearson's correlations were also conducted between the overall importance of all aspirations to understand if the strength of any aspirations (regardless of which type) were related to the different aspects of wellbeing. The effects of gender on aspirations were examined using independent t tests and no significant differences were found between men and women's relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations.

### Results

Table 2 below reports the correlations between the intrinsic and extrinsic scores and each facet of psychological well-being. As can be seen, intrinsic aspirations related positively to all aspects of psychological well-being and extrinsic aspirations correlated negatively with each facet of psychological well-being. Although many of the correlations are weak these results are supportive of the direction predicted by the hypothesis. The strongest and only significant correlations are the positive correlation between intrinsic aspirations and positive relations with others ( $r = .281, p < 0.01$ ) and the converse negative correlation between extrinsic aspirations and positive relations with others ( $r = -.256, p < 0.01$ ). The weakest correlations are the positive relationship between intrinsic aspirations and environmental mastery ( $r = .017, p < 0.863$ ) and the negative relationship between extrinsic aspirations and environmental mastery ( $p = -.032, p < 0.740$ ). When Pearson's correlations were used to compare positive relations with others with the three extrinsic aspirations separately, the strongest negative correlation was found with aspirations for financial success ( $r = -.267, p < 0.004$ ) then with social recognition ( $r = -.217, p < 0.022$ ) and weakest with attractive appearance ( $r = -.091, p < .340$ ). The strongest positive correlation between positive relations with others and any of the intrinsic aspirations was found with self acceptance ( $r = .242, p < 0.010$ ), then affiliation ( $r = .201, p < .033$ ), community feeling ( $r = .184, p < .053$ ) and physical fitness ( $r = .150, p < .114$ ). The strongest correlation found overall in the study was

therefore the negative correlation between positive relations with others and the relative strength of aspirations for financial success.

Pearson's correlations were also computed for the total importance of all aspirations (whether intrinsic or extrinsic) and the six aspects of psychological well-being. This was done to assess whether the strength of importance placed on aspirations for the future in general had any relationship to psychological well-being. This demonstrated some of the strongest correlations in the study. The strongest correlations with total importance of aspirations are seen with purpose in life ( $r=.389$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), personal growth ( $r=.318$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and self-acceptance ( $r=.297$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) respectively. A weaker and non-significant positive correlation was found between the total importance of aspirations and positive relations with others ( $r=.124$ ,  $p<0.191$ ) and environmental mastery ( $r=.137$ ,  $p<0.151$ ) and a weak negative correlation was found with autonomy ( $r=-.056$ ,  $p<0.557$ ).

particularly strong negative correlation would be found between extrinsic aspirations and positive relations with others. It was also hypothesised that a positive relationship would be found between the importance placed on intrinsic aspirations and all six aspects of well-being.

The results support the hypotheses as higher relative importance placed on extrinsic aspirations (and so higher levels of materialism) was negatively correlated with all six aspects of psychological wellbeing, with the strongest correlation being found for positive relations with others. Although the correlations were weak in most areas, the general pattern of results are in line with many other studies that have found a consistently negative correlation between materialistic values and well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014b; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1993a, 1996a; Wright & Larsen, 1993). The majority of previous studies have measured well-being through measures of life satisfaction and positive and negative affect and this

**Table 3: Pearson's Correlations between Total Importance of all Aspirations and the Six Facets of Psychological Well-being**

		Self -acceptance	Positive relations	Autonomy	Personal growth	Environm-ental mastery	Purpose
Total importance of all aspira-	Pearson Correlation Sig (2-tailed) N	.297**	0.124	-0.056	.318**	0.137	.389**
		0.001	0.191	0.557	0.001	0.151	0
		112	112	113	113	112	111

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 (2 tailed)

### Discussion

This purpose of this study was to gain insight into the relationship between the relative importance placed on extrinsic (materialistic), aspirations for money, status and image and the six distinct components of psychological well-being (self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery and purpose). It was hypothesised that there would be a negative relationship between higher importance being placed on extrinsic aspirations and all aspects of well-being but that a

study sought to understand which aspects of well-being were more or less impacted by materialistic values by using a multi-faceted measure of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

The results clearly show the strongest relationship is between the relative centrality of extrinsic or intrinsic goals and positive relations with others, with higher value on extrinsic aspirations having a detrimental impact on relations with others. This result supports the theory that materialistic values are opposed to collective values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Schwartz's

(1990) circumplex of values demonstrates that values focussed on self enhancement lie in direct conflict with values that are “other” oriented (benevolence and universalism) and the results of this study support the theory that someone who places relatively high importance on wealth, status and image may have poorer relations with others. This could be because someone who spends more time focussing on the pursuit of wealth, status and image has less time to spend on nurturing relationships or conversely, it could be that someone who has less nurturing relationships seeks to find security in material comforts and seeks to build their self esteem through status (Kasser, 2003; Kasser et al., 1995).

The results from this study support self-determination theory but suggest that materialism has a much stronger relationship with positive relations with others than with autonomy or competence. It was also clear that there was a much stronger negative relationship between aspirations for financial success and status and positive relations with others and aspirations than there was for image. It is not possible to infer causation from this study and so further research into why aspirations for financial success and status equate to poorer relations with other people would be useful. It could be that placing more importance on wealth and status aspirations give less time and attention to their relationships, or it could be that people who have poorer quality relationships seek to make themselves more attractive to others through their wealth and status.

The fact that positive relations with others showed up as the most strongly negatively correlated aspect of psychological well-being with higher materialistic values is interesting as positive relationships are such a central component of many theories of well-being (Carr, 2011; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Harter & Arora, 2008). For example, positive relationships is one of the five components of Martin Seligman’s PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement) model of well-being (Seligman, 2011).

Research has also shown that placing importance on other people is valuable for our own well-being, for example, studies have demonstrated that showing kindness and compassion to others brings benefits to our own well-being, health and longevity (Post, 2005) and that spending money on others is more beneficial for our emotional health than spending it on ourselves (Aknin et al., 2013). Other research has demonstrated that the relationship is bi-directional as it was found that people were more likely to engage in helping behaviours if they were experiencing positive emotions themselves (Isen & Levin, 1972) and that when we experience more positive emotions, we are likely to feel more close social connections to others and even show less racial bias (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005). All these strands of research demonstrate how important our relationships with others are for our psychological well-being and so a negative relationship between materialism and positive relations with others could explain why materialism is consistently correlated negatively with so many aspects of well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014)

Ryff and Singer (1995) also describe positive relations with others as being one of the primary features of human health, along with purpose in life, due to their pervasiveness across ethical, philosophical and social science formulations of health. They suggest it is an individuals sense of purpose and deep connections to others that build and maintain self acceptance, autonomy, mastery and personal growth which then serve to enhance the primary features of purpose and positive relations with others (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Interestingly, when the total strength of all aspirations (regardless of content) was correlated with the six facets of psychological well-being, the strongest relationship was with “purpose”. The results of this study would therefore suggest that simply having aspirations for the future is positively related to one of the primary facets of positive psychological health (purpose) but in order to meet the other primary feature (positive relations with others), it is better to ensure that those goals are intrinsic in nature. Once again causation cannot be inferred, as it

cannot be seen whether people who have more aspirations in life feel more purpose in life or whether people have more purpose are more likely to adopt stronger aspirations in life.

### Limitations of the Research

Another caveat to this research is also that the Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) classifies certain goals as intrinsic and certain goals as extrinsic, but self-determination theory states that types of goals are not necessarily inherently extrinsic or intrinsic in themselves but rather the reason for pursuing them is what makes them intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example someone could say they want to “work for the betterment of society” (classed as an intrinsic goal) because they think it will make them look good to others (an extrinsic motivation). There are a number of other limitations to the research. Firstly it is based on self-reported aspirations and levels of well-being and so could be prone to respondents responding in a socially desirable way. A further limitation is that a relatively small sample was used from within the UK only and so the results are not cross culturally generalizable.

### Directions for Future Research

This research adds further weight to the association between materialistic values and lower psychological well-being but a logical next question to come out of the research is *why* some people place more value on goals for wealth, status and image than on intrinsic goals like the quality of their relationships. Kasser (2003) offers two possible explanations to this question, one based on psychological needs in that when our needs for security, autonomy, competence and positive relations are not met, we seek comfort in material goods as a method of trying to meet these needs. His second explanation is that the current dominant economic system of American Corporate Capitalism (ACC) encourages and promotes a set of values that are grounded in self interest, a desire for financial success, high levels of consumption and a competitive interpersonal style and so it is not surprising

that many people adopt these values (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). Considering the wealth of evidence demonstrating the negative relationship between these values and well-being, further inter-disciplinary research into alternative economic models that could promote values more conducive to well-being could be of great value. Marks (2011) suggests that Positive Psychology can have a greater social impact if the field connects with other disciplines such as economics and sociology and if the dominant values being promoted in society are being shown to be detrimental to well-being, perhaps this is an area ripe for inter-disciplinary research.

A key criticism of Positive Psychology as a discipline is that there is too much emphasis on an individual's influence on their own well-being whilst ignoring wider political, economic and cultural factors that can significantly impact on an individual's well-being (Becker & Marecek, 2008; Ehrenreich, 2010). The strong consumerist messages inherent within a capitalist economic system striving for constant economic growth will clearly have an impact on the values adopted by individuals living in such a system and so research into the links between materialism and well-being must take the macro systems into account.

O'Brien et al. (2012) suggest that decoupling happiness and well-being from over consumption could be one of the most important contributions Positive Psychology can make to societal well-being as the relationship between materialism and well-being is not only linked to the improvement of individual's psychological well-being but also to the issues of environmental degradation and climate change. The lifestyles and levels of consumption of the richest countries are causing wide scale environmental degradation, which has the greatest impact on poorer nations and so there are far reaching wider implications of demonstrating the negative relationship between well-being and over consumption in terms of environmental sustainability (O'Brien et al, 2012). Further research into *why* individuals adopt more materialistic aspirations and

how they can be supported to adopt more intrinsic aspirations could be useful to help influence economic and environmental policy as well as to support individuals enhance their own well-being.

## Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the negative relationship between materialistic aspirations and well-being does seem to extend beyond subjective well-being and into the realm of eudaimonic well-being. It has also shown that there is a particularly strong relationship between materialistic values and poorer relationships with other people. This is perhaps one reason why research has found materialistic values to be negatively related to a multitude of well-being indicators (Dittmar et al., 2014). The importance of positive relations with others to well-being is so well documented in Positive Psychology research that when Chris Peterson was asked to summarise Positive Psychology in two words or less he famously responded with: “other people” (Seligman, 2011, p. 20). The negative relationship between materialistic values and well-being is of course not a new revelation discovered by social scientists, but one that has been at the core of messages from philosophers and religions for centuries, as summarised simply by His Holiness the Dalai Lama: “The ultimate source of happiness is not money and power, but warm-heartedness” (Dalai Lama, 2015).

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