

□ Low Self-Esteem and Materialism Go Hand in Hand

“Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need.”

~From the movie Fight Club, based on the novel by Chuck Palahniuk

Everyone's heard the joke about the bigger and redder the sports car, the smaller the... self esteem of the occupant. Researchers have found that low self-esteem and materialism are not just a correlation, but there's also an inversely proportional causal relationship between the two; where low self esteem increases materialism, and materialism can also create low self-esteem. They also found that as self esteem increases, materialism decreases. Even a simple gesture to raise self-esteem dramatically decreased materialism, which provides a way to cope with insecurity.

Whenever people experience a decline in self-esteem (and in many this condition is permanent), the stage is set for the use of material possessions as a coping strategy for feelings of low self-worth.

The paradox that findings such as these bring up, is that consumerism is good for the economy but bad for the individual. In the short run, it's good for the economy when people believe they need to buy an entirely new wardrobe every year, for example. But the hidden cost is much higher than the dollar amount. There are costs in mental health when people believe that their value is extrinsic and conditional. There are also environmental costs associated with widespread materialism.

Most people want more income so they can consume more. Yet as societies become richer, they do not become happier. In fact, the First World has more depression, more alcoholism and more crime than fifty years ago. This paradox is true of Britain, the United States, continental Europe and Japan. Statistically people have more things than they did 50 years ago, but they are actually less happy in several key areas.

There is also the considerable cost of what materialism does to the environment. We don't yet know what final toll that could take in terms of quality of life and overall happiness. What many people don't understand is that if we want to save the environment then at some level we have to buy and consume less. We don't need to buy so much bottled water, for example. Studies have shown it's usually not any purer than city tap water, which doesn't leave mountains of plastic bottles strewn across the nations landfills. It also wastes energy and resources to make those plastic bottles and the many other unnecessary things that both youth and adults alike believe they need to have in order to enjoy life and feel good about themselves.

Studies like this one miss the point by proceeding from the assumption that the reason people want whatever is currently "hot" is because they believe it will contribute towards their satisfaction and happiness in life. This is not the reason. It's not that people believe that buying more and more things will make them happy, (and in fact research has shown time and time again that this simply isn't the case.) It's that people live their lives terrified of what other people will think of them if they don't join in with the 'latest' trend. Their self esteem is entirely dependent on what others think of them. It's a form of enslavement, ruled by conditional regard, based at root on insecurity, and until the reasons are perceived no solution will be forthcoming.

Sources

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