Fine feathers make fine birds: a comparative study of the impact of material wealth on perceived identities in England and Italy

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ABSTRACT

Two studies are reported which examine the impact of material wealth on how people perceive identities. The hypothesis that variations in the material wealth of a Target person, manipulated experimentally by modifying the Target's possessions, will affect the symbolic identity, modified by gender, that the Target person conveys, received strong support in the English, but not in the Italian study. The implications of the findings are discussed, particularly in relation to what is termed the 'idealism–materialism paradox', namely that although subjects systematically maintain that their perceptions of people are unaffected by the material possessions of others, it is nevertheless shown that these have a strong effect on the types of impression they form.

INTRODUCTION

Investigations of the meaning of material possessions maintain that material artefacts are symbolic manifestations of self-conceptions, or concretized identities (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981a,b; Belk, 1986). The gender-related differences in the meaning of personal possessions found by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981a) are further investigated in a recent study on possessions as gender-related self-extensions (Dittmar, 1989) which demonstrates that men tend to view their possessions in an instrumental and self-oriented way, whereas women are more inclined to see them as symbols for their interpersonal relationships. These findings are theoretically underpinned by Williams’s (1984) contribution to social identity theory in which she postulates gender-related processes of identity construction and evaluation. Male identity construction is found to be directed towards differentiation from others and female identity construction towards integration with others.

The above studies maintain that we 'encode' our own identity by way of material objects and, by implication, it may be argued that we also 'decode' another

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0885–6249/89/030195–06$05.00
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Received 9 May 1988
Accepted 23 March 1989
person’s identity via material symbols, a notion also found in consumer research (e.g. Birdwell, 1968; Martin, 1973; Belk, 1980, 1981). Stone’s (1962) symbolic interactionist analysis of appearance is particularly relevant for the rationale of the present studies. He suggests that: ‘In response to his clothes, the wearer was cast as a social object . . . or given some identity’ (p. 92), in the sense of being categorically evaluated with regard to her/his social position and expressively evaluated in terms of the wearer’s values, attitudes and personal qualities (cf. Goffman, 1951). Studies concerned with gender-related differences in the ‘encoding’ of identity via possessions (e.g. Dittmar, 1989) suggest that ‘decoding’ may also differ according to a person’s sex.

The next question concerns the aspects of the Target person’s identity which may be affected by relative wealth. Furby (e.g. 1978, 1980) maintains that a central feature of material wealth is the direct control over the social and physical environment it affords the owner. Isaacs’s (1935) analysis of possessions as regulating and defining interpersonal encounters suggests that qualities which refer to a person’s style of social interaction (assertiveness) may also be related to material context, as well as cooperation and warmth conveyed in interactions. Moreover, interview responses in Furby’s studies (e.g. 1978, 1980) indicate that possessions are seen as means for expressing and enhancing uniqueness and individuality (see also Holman, 1983). Examinations of dominant Western cultural conceptions of personhood (e.g. Bellah et al., 1985; Sampson, 1985; Semin, 1986a,b) further suggest that the notion of individuality is linked to culturally shared concepts of autonomy and independence.

Thus, it was hypothesized that the identity projected onto a Target as a function of relative wealth will vary on five facets: (1) direct control; (2) interactional style; (3) interpersonal warmth; (4) uniqueness; and, finally, (5) autonomy. Deschamps’s (1982) analysis of culturally shared notions as reflections of societal power relations and the findings on gender-related material identities led to the further prediction that the association between increasing wealth and increasing uniqueness and autonomy (differentiation) may only be descriptive of male identity, i.e. hold true only for the male Target, and that different findings would be obtained for the female Target.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, in order to examine the generality of these hypotheses, we conducted the same study in two European cultures, England and Italy.

METHOD

Overview

The two studies resulting from the above considerations used a 3 (Material Condition) × 2 (Sex of Target) × 2 (Sex of Subject) between-subjects factorial design with 10 participants per cell.

Participants

A total of 240 undergraduates participated in these studies on a voluntary basis. Half of the subjects were recruited at the University of Sussex, England, and half at the University of Rome, Italy. Half of all subjects were women and half men.
Procedure

Subjects, taken in small groups (three to eight), were asked to fill in a questionnaire. The first page consisted of a description of the Target person whom the subjects then evaluated with respect to 26 adjectives/short statements. The final page contained questions on subjects' beliefs about their own impressionability by material wealth and the impressionability of others.

Manipulation of Material Condition and Sex of Target

In order to examine the effect of different Material Conditions on the Target's perceived identity, subjects were presented with a vignette which contained a short extract from a novel. The vignette referred to either a male or female Target whose possessions were varied so as to convey either relatively wealthy, average or quite poor material circumstances. These included: dress, room interior, means of transport, accommodation, work equipment.¹

Dependent variables

Twenty-five personal qualities were selected on the basis of a pilot study maximizing the criterion that these were perceived as independent of a person's material possessions: Interactional style (dynamic, assertive, forceful, dominant, knows how to make clear what s/he wants); Expressive individuality (unique, possesses individuality, not an ordinary person, believes in self-development, believes in self-expression); Autonomous individuality (self-contained, self-sufficient, self-made person, self-reliant, autonomous); Direct control (in control of other people, in control of what s/he is doing, in control of environment, in control of life, in control of what goes on around her/him); Interpersonal warmth (warm, friendly, supportive, unselfish, cooperative). These items were presented in a randomized order along with a manipulation check item ('is well off'). All items were in the form of seven-point Likert scales, with 'extremely' and 'not at all' as scale ends.

RESULTS

We first examined the effectiveness of the manipulation check by a three-way ANOVA utilizing the question on how 'well off' the Target is. As expected, the Material Condition manipulation was highly successful, \( F(2,216) = 201.74; p < 0.0001 \), with the 'poor' Target being seen as less well off (\( \bar{x} = 2.61 \)) than the 'average' Target (\( \bar{x} = 4.19 \)) who, in turn, was perceived as less well off than the 'wealthy' person (\( \bar{x} = 6.45 \)).

The semantic spaces occupied by the questionnaire attributes were analysed separately for the two linguistic communities by principal-components analysis with orthogonal varimax rotation. Three components, referring to 'control', 'individuality' and 'warmth', emerged for both samples, but included somewhat different clusters of attributes.² Therefore, two separate 3 (Material Condition) × 2 (Sex of Target Person) × 2 (Sex of Subject) between-subjects MANOVAs were

¹ A complete version of the vignette is available from the first author.

² Detailed descriptions of the two factorial structures are available from the first author.
performed, using the factor scores (estimated by regression) of the three respective components in each national sample as dependent variables.

**British Sample**

A strong main effect for Material Condition was obtained for the 'interpersonal control' factor, $F(2,108)=9.22; p<0.001$. The means are in the expected direction showing a steady increase in 'interpersonal control' from the 'poor' ($\bar{x}=-0.27$) to the average ($\bar{x}=-0.24$) to the 'wealthy' ($\bar{x}=0.51$) condition. For the second factor ('Individuality'), the only significant effect was an interaction between Material Condition and Sex of Target, $F(2,108)=3.54, p<0.05$.

As can be seen from the means in Figure 1 the 'wealthy' female Target is regarded as possessing less 'individuality' than both the 'average' and 'poor' Targets, who are not differentiated at all. In contrast, for the male Target, perceived 'individuality' increases from the 'poor' and 'average' Material Condition, which do not significantly differ, to the 'wealthy' Material Condition. Finally, for the third component there is also only one significant main effect, namely for Material Condition, $F(2,108)=5.96; p<0.01$. The 'wealthy' Target is seen as lowest on 'interpersonal warmth' ($\bar{x}=-0.37$), with the 'poor' Target occupying an intermediate position ($\bar{x}=0.00$), and the 'average' Target being seen as highest on this factor ($\bar{x}=0.36$).

**Italian Sample**

The identical analyses showed no significant main or higher order effects for Material Condition.\(^4\)

\[\text{Figure 1. Individuality means by material condition and Target sex}\]

\(^3\) The reported means refer to factor scores which constitute linear, weighted combinations of the original variables which are standardized around a mean of 0.

\(^4\) Indeed, a replication of the experiment with another sample of 120 Italian undergraduates produced not only an identical factorial structure but the same results in terms of the MANOVA, suggesting that the absence of any systematic effects in this case is quite stable.
Examination of the 'Idealism–Materialism Paradox'

Although there is a belief that we ought to evaluate the ‘true’, unique personality of another person without being influenced by material possessions and wealth (a lay ‘idealism’), there seems to be general recognition that material possessions do mediate impressions (materialistic view). If such a ‘materialism–idealism paradox’ exists, we would expect that while others are perceived as influenced in their impressions by a person’s wealth to a considerable degree, people will maintain that they themselves are relatively unaffected by such considerations. The two relevant questions concerned the estimates of (a) subjects’ own impressionability and (b) others’ impressionability by material wealth. A 3 (Material Condition) × 2 (Sex of Target) × 2 (Sex of Subject) × 2 (Nationality) × 2 (Type of Impression) MANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor proved highly significant, \( F(1,216) = 191.95; p < 0.0001 \), and showed that subjects thought themselves much less impressionable by wealth (\( \bar{x} = 3.74 \)) than other people (\( \bar{x} = 5.33 \)).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the two studies provide differential support for the symbolic mediation of perceived identity by a Target’s material wealth.

The two cultural groups differed drastically in their expressive evaluations of the character’s qualities as a function of her/his material wealth. For the British sample, a person’s symbolic identity is strongly affected by material wealth. Both facets of a person’s identity termed ‘interpersonal control’ and ‘interpersonal warmth’ varied significantly when different material possessions were described. Control increased linearly with relative wealth and warmth decreased with wealth, although the averagely well-off person was seen as warmest. With respect to Target sex the expressive and autonomous individuality component differed: the female Target was seen as decreasing in self-expression and autonomy the more well-off she was, in contrast to the male Target. The absence of any Sex of Subject effects implies the existence of consensual gender-related representations about wealth and identity. This particular cluster of personal qualities is the one most closely related to what has been described earlier as the core of gender-related identity construction and evaluation. This may imply that, for a man, autonomy and self-expression are seen as more pronounced as a function of his wealth because his possessions are believed to derive from his active efforts at differentiating himself from others. However, for a woman, her identity is derived from possessions that come from association with, for example, partner or family, and thus imply less autonomy and self-expression.

Despite the success of the material wealth manipulation, the Target’s material possessions did not lead to any differences in the identity ascribed by the Italian subjects. It is possible that the identity dimensions on which Italians are affected by material wealth are different from those selected for the present study.

One of the most interesting findings of these studies concerns the implications of the ‘materialism–idealism paradox’ for people’s beliefs about how identity and possessions are related. These results indicate that the material context in which we ‘encounter’ other people vitally influences the way in which we construct their identities as men and women, even if we believe in the culturally shared assumption that each of us has a ‘culture-free’ individuality uniquely his/her own (e.g. Geertz,
1979; Semin, 1986b). Of particular importance are not only the types of identity facets associated with different levels of material wealth, but also more general beliefs about how 'what one has' and 'what one is' are related. Indeed, there is certainly a need for more detailed and comparative analyses to understand the implications of the materialistic orientation of Western society for the social psychological reality of everyday life.

REFERENCES


