

**MATERIALISM, RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, AND MEANING IN LIFE: A
CONFLICTING VALUES PERSPECTIVE**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Materialism, religious beliefs, and meaning in life: a conflicting values perspective. (May 2015)

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I propose to examine students who highly value both religious and materialistic beliefs and if they will experience lowered meaning in life as a result of the potential incompatibility between these value-systems. In many religions, the idea of pursuing personal wealth is potentially incompatible with values associated with religion. This study is among the first to examine how conflicting values influences meaning in life. Based upon empirical evidence, I predict that those who highly value both religious and materialistic beliefs will experience lower meaning in life compared to religious individuals who do not value materialism.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As researchers in the psychological sciences reflect on the twentieth century, a general interest in variables that influence happiness and meaning in life becomes apparent (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Two variables that are associated with the “good life” are religion and materialistic strivings. We live in a society that places substantial emphasis on both religious values and materialistic strivings. However, these two values have the potential to conflict with each other, producing psychological distress. My study explores this possibility by examining how possessing strong religious values and a desire to attain materialistic possessions detracts from one’s experience of meaning in life.

Religion and meaning in life

Meaning in life is a concept that has an essential importance to some people across the world. It can be defined as “...the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (Recker & Wong, 1988, p. 221). Ryff (1998) defined meaning in life as “a sense of one’s life having a purpose or investing time and energy into the attainment of cherished goals.” Meaning can also be sought by adhering oneself or one’s existence to a bigger framework of meaning, such as religion or philosophy of life (Allport, 1961).

When people are asked to reveal a source of meaning in their life, religion oftentimes appears as a prevalent and fundamental component of their meaning systems (Emmons, 2005; Wong,

1998). Religion has the capacity to provide individuals with a core set of beliefs and values, and a deep sense of purpose and direction (Baumeister, 1991). Subsequently, researchers have identified religion as a type of meaning system that motivates individuals to understand themselves and make sense of their world (Park, 2005; Silberman, 2005; Crescioni & Baumeister, 2013). Empirical research supports the relationship between religion and meaning in life. For example, Steger & Frazier (2005) demonstrated a positive relationship between self-reported meaning in life and general religiousness.

Various studies have fixated on the concept that religion provides structure in which it gives life meaning and purpose. Paloutzian and Ellison (1982) developed a measure to evaluate spiritual well-being, which included meaning and purpose in life content on both religious and existential dimensions. They found that religious meaning and purpose in life dimensions correlated positively with meaning in life, self-esteem, intrinsic religious orientation, and negatively with loneliness.

Religious beliefs are present across all cultures, critical to many people's self-concept, and have a consistent relationship with positive well-being and psychological health (Cohen, Shariff, & Hill, 2008). A number of studies have examined the relation of meaning in life to mental health and well-being. Zika & Chamberlain (1992) even argue that religiosity and well-being is mediated by feelings of meaning in life. Accordingly, researchers have identified religion as an integral component to many people's meaning systems. Consistent with these findings, researchers have proposed the association between religion and well-being to be partially explained by meaning in life (George, Ellison, & Larson, 2002). That is, religious people often

report higher well-being compared to non-religious people because their religious beliefs provide their lives with meaning and coherence.

Conflicting values and meaning in life

While religion may bolster one's belief that life is meaningful, it is possible that possessing a conflicting value may undermine this relationship. Materialism represents one of these types of values. Materialism is generally a way of thinking that gives considerable importance to material possessions. Materialism is widely viewed as an important life value (Kasser & Ryan, 1992; Mick 1996; Richins & Dawson, 1992), however past research has shown that high levels of materialism are negatively associated with subjective well-being. According to Burroughs (2002), "a materialistic lifestyle harbors long-term negative consequences." Social scientists have found that individuals that focus on procurement of materialistic goods often report lower life satisfaction, higher levels of depression, and reduced levels of well-being (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002).

According to value theorists, individuals are in a constant battle to prioritize and coordinate their numerous life values. Based upon empirical evidence, those who hold opposing values are likely to experience value conflict in the form of psychological discomfort. As reported by Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach (1989), inconsistencies in an individual's value system decrease self-satisfaction and drive them to realign their values. In a related vein, Leon Festinger proposed the idea that people holding conflicting beliefs will feel psychologically uncomfortable and as a consequence, attempt to reduce these feelings of dissonance (Festinger, 1962). Emmons (1999)

similarly claims that goal conflict is an underlying “part of the human experience” and that conflicting beliefs can lead to stress or lowered well-being.

Prior research and theory suggest that the basic ideals of materialism (e.g. avariciousness, self-centeredness) should conflict with basic ideals of religious values (e.g. benevolence, selflessness). There is evidence suggesting that when two values fundamentally oppose one another, the conflict should occur more often with greater intensity (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). We predict that the confliction between materialistic and religious values should make life feel less coherent, contributing to diminished meaning in life. For example, a religiously committed individual may sense guilt and distress about engaging in a self-serving lifestyle that is enhanced with materialistic values. In this study, we will examine whether individuals who possess high values in both religion and materialism experience lower meaning in life as a result of these conflicting cognitions.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Participants

Two-hundred and nine individuals (94 female) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform (see Buhrmester et al., 2011) participated in the study and were compensated with a payment of \$1.00. Participants were from the United States only, diverse in age ($M = 35.84$, $SD = 11.51$) and predominantly White (79.4%).

Materials and procedure

After signing up to participate in the study, participants received a link to an online survey to complete, which consisted of the following measures and several general personality questionnaires.

Participants completed the presence and search subscales of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger & Frazier, 2005). Using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all true*; 7 = *extremely true*), participants rated five statements reflecting presence of meaning in life (e.g., "I understand my life's meaning,") and five statements reflecting search for meaning in life (e.g., "I am searching for meaning in my life,"). A composite MIL presence score was computed with higher values reflecting greater MIL ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.54$).

As a measure of mental health, participants completed the depression subscale from the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI; Morey, 1991). The depression subscale consists of

twenty-four items rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *false, not at all true*; 4 = *very true*). Composite scores were computed for depression ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .60$), with higher scores reflecting greater levels of depression.

Next, participants then completed the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10; Worthington et al., 2003). Participants indicated their agreement with ten statements assessing religious commitment (e.g., "Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life," "I enjoy working in the activities of my religious organization,") on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) and composite religious commitment scores were computed ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.26$).

Religious fundamentalism was assessed using the Revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004) in which participants indicated their agreement with each of twelve statements on an 8-point scale (1 = *very strongly disagree*; 8 = *very strongly agree*; $M = 3.19$, $SD = 2.23$).

Intrinsic and extrinsic religion was then assessed using the I/E-Revised scale (Gorusch & McPherson, 1989), which includes the intrinsic, extrinsic-personal, and extrinsic-social subscales. Participants indicated their agreement with fourteen statements assessing these subscales on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). Composite scores for each subscale were computed by averaging the eight items of the intrinsic religion subscale ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .45$), the three items of the extrinsic-personal subscale ($M = 2.45$, $SD = .80$).

Wealth aspirations were assessed using the 4-item financial success subscale (e.g., "You will have a job with high social status.") of the Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Participants

indicated how important they found each aspiration using a 5-point scale (1 = *not important at all*; 5 = *very important*). Composite scores for this subscale were computed ($M = -.07$, $SD = 1.11$).

Finally, we measured individual materialism using the Material Value Scale (MVS; Richins & Dawson, 1992). The MVS has 18 items that constitutes three subscales: material possessions as a standard of success in one's life (e.g., "I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes"), the centrality of material possessions in one's life (e.g., "The things I own aren't all that important to me," reverse coded), and the belief that material possessions leads to happiness (e.g., "I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things"). Responses to each item were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to compute composite scores of the materialistic tendency ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .71$).

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Bivariate correlations among all variables are reported in Table 1. To examine our main hypotheses we conducted two regression analyses. First, we examined the interaction effect of materialistic value system (MVS) and religious status on meaning in life (MIL). Second, we examined the effect of wealth aspirations and religious status on MIL. We found a significant negative correlation between meaning in life (MIL) presence and MIL search.

Initially, we planned to conduct our primary analyses using continuous religions measures; however, results across variables, did not reach significance (though, they were trending in the predicted direction). As such, we ran two additional analyses comparing theists to atheists. These analyses are reported below.

Materialistic value system by religious status

To examine our main hypothesis, a hierarchical regression equation was computed. Materialistic value system (MVS) was standardized, Religious Status was dummy coded (0 = *Atheist*; 1 = *Theist*), and the product of MVS and the dummy variable was used as the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1993). The main effects entered on the first step of the regression equation contributed significantly (R^2 change = .082, $p < .001$), with MVS, negatively, ($\beta = 0.193$, $p < .005$), and religious status ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .005$), positively, predicting meaning in life (MIL). Lending support to our hypothesis, the MVS \times Religious Status interaction entered on the second step significantly predicted MIL ($\beta = -.282$, $p = .008$ one-; R^2 change = .032). Supporting

our hypothesized effect, further analyses revealed that MVS ratings were more negatively associated with meaning in life for religious individuals ($\beta = -.359, p < .000$) compared to atheists ($\beta = .025, p = .822$; see Figure 1).

Wealth aspirations by religious status

To further examine our main hypothesis, a second hierarchical regression equation was computed. Wealth aspirations were standardized, Religious Status was dummy coded (0 = *Atheist*; 1 = *Theist*), and the product of standardized wealth aspirations and the dummy variable was used as the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1993). The main effects entered on the first step of the regression equation contributed significantly (R^2 change = .069, $p < .001$), with wealth aspirations ($\beta = -.166, p = .025$) and religious status ($\beta = .228, p = .001$) predicting MIL. Lending support to our hypothesis, the wealth aspirations \times Religious Status interaction entered on the second step significantly predicted MIL ($\beta = -.248, p = .021$; R^2 change = .025). Again, supporting our hypothesized effect, further analyses revealed that MVS ratings were more negatively associated with meaning in life for religious individuals ($\beta = -.300, p < .001$) compared to atheists ($\beta = .036, p = .743$; see Figure 2).

CONCLUSIONS

General discussion

The current research examined how potential conflicting beliefs of religion and materialism could influence meaning in life. We found support for our hypothesis that religious individuals would experience lowered meaning in life if they possessed materialistic values. Together, these findings provide insight into conflicting values and meaning in life and support the importance of religious beliefs in meaning systems of individuals.

Financial success has long been a central element of the American dream, yet as the research findings reveal, a dark side lurks behind this so called “American dream”. According to our study, pursuing materialistic values when one is religious is related to lower meaning in life, which has the potential to influence psychological well-being.

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), pursuing extrinsic rewards (materialistic goods) is neither bad nor good, however when excessive concentration is placed on external rewards, it can distract people from intrinsic endeavors, which can interfere with personal integration and actualization. Moreover, self-actualization has been shown to enhance meaning in life. For example, if one placed a vast emphasis on extrinsic rewards and claims to be religious, do they have lowered self-actualization than one who does not place attention towards extrinsic rewards? Future research should examine how self-actualization interacts with conflicting beliefs, such as religious and materialistic values.

Another means by which future research can continue to explore religious and materialistic conflicting values would be to examine if parental income affects striving for money? For example, if one grew up in poverty, and later strives for wealth, will they similarly experience less meaning in life if they are religious?

There are important limitations to consider with regard to the current research. One limitation is the relatively limited range of religious beliefs represented in the current studies, with Christians representing most of who participated. Another interesting question for further research would be to examine differing religious beliefs with materialism and how these differences influence the experience of meaning in life. The present study lacks depth of individuals who possess non-Christian beliefs to provide a compelling conclusion to this question.

Finally, Amazon Mechanical Turk was used for this study. There are certain implications to take into account, such as the dropout rates and environmental control. Participants are more likely to dropout mid-study and that can skew the results. There is also no environmental control. Participants may be watching television while taking a survey. Just as important, many of these individuals have taken the same surveys more than once, which can effect true responses.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, a number of researchers have come to regard materialism and religion as important yet conflicting values. A vast literature tells us how religious beliefs are associated with higher meaning in life and well-being and how materialism is associated with lowered well-being. Our research attempts to understand the impact of both values on meaning in life. The

present research provides a test of the relationship between valuing both religious and materialistic values and how these variables influence meaning in life and will hopefully serve as a starting point for future research.

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APPENDIX

Table 1.

Bivariate correlations among variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. MIL presence	-								
2. MIL search	-.31**	-							
3. MVS	-.20**	.16*	-						
4. Wealth	-.10	.26**	.57**	-					
5. religious commit	..37**	-.07	-.23**	-.07	-				
6. rf	.32**	-.13	-.12	-.04	.78**	-			
7. intrinsic	.20**	-.05	-.15*	-.08	.69**	.65**	-		
8. extrinsic	.15*	.05	-.08	.04	.63**	.48**	.66**	-	

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Figure 1. Meaning in life as a function of materialistic value systems (MVS) in relation to atheists and theists

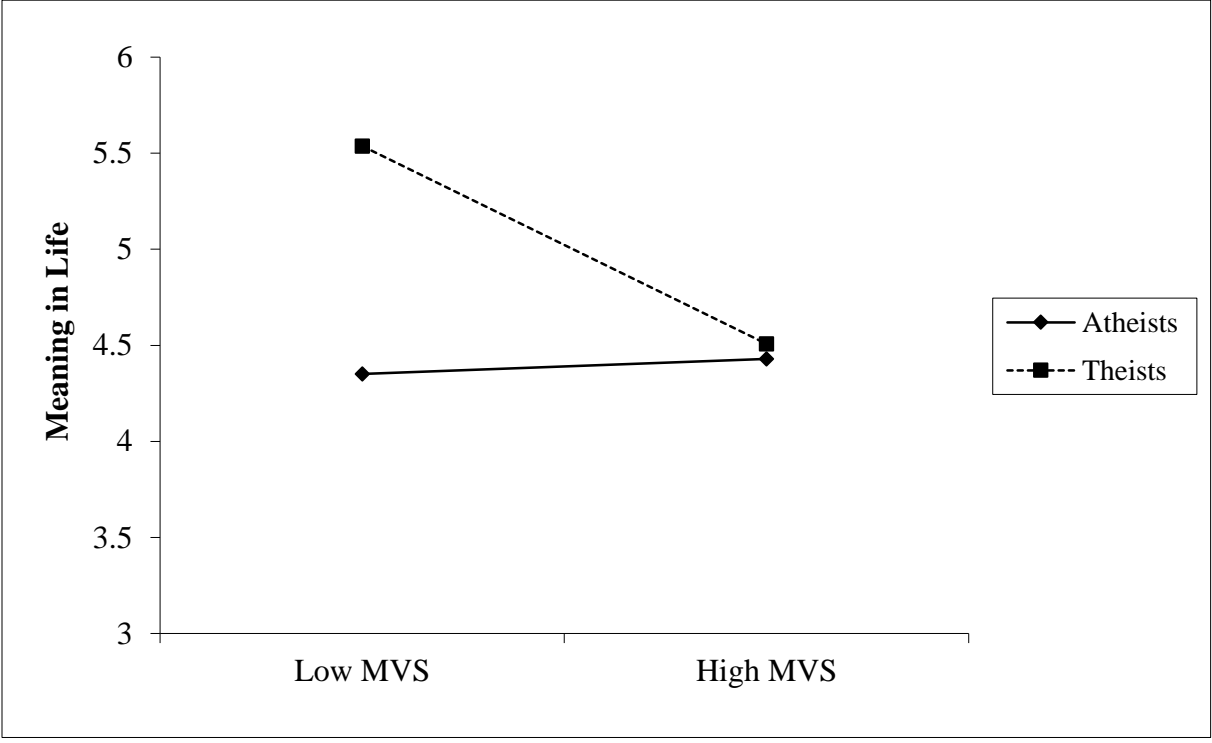


Figure 2. Meaning in life as a function of wealth aspirations in relation to atheists and theists

