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Materialism and nature connectedness: an assessment of the relationship to well-being

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Abstract: The assumption that economic prosperity, material achievements, and well-being increase with consumption has long been a common assumption. For both philosophers and psychological researchers, the path to well-being has long been conceptualized in two ways: the hedonic perspective and the eudaimonic perspective. Individuals who experience both subjective and psychological well-being can be described as flourishing. However, achieving well-being is not possible if the environment is not functioning well. Whether we want to admit it or not, we humans are dependent on nature. With that in mind, it would be useful to explore what it means to feel connected to nature and why it can contribute to well-being. Gaining an understanding that the accomplishment of well-being does not necessarily depend on material attainment and that it is more closely linked to a better relationship with nature could provide compelling evidence that the need for unlimited economic growth may not be as vital. Additionally, it might help us instead to realize that it is more important to focus on other things, like taking care of our environment.

Introduction

It is possible to consider that there are different ways and paths to achieve a state of well-being, spending more time with the family, getting the dream job, traveling and so on. Nevertheless, one thing that might have slipped our minds is that the attainment of well-being is not possible if the environment is not functioning well. Whether we like to admit it or not, we as human beings depend on nature. In that sense, it would be sensible to explore what is meant by feeling connected to nature and why it might contribute to well-being as well as also reacting more favorably to the present environmental degradation. The current way of life has led to a decreased interaction with nature. However, if people obtain a sense of well-being from feeling connected to nature, then those individuals who are more connected should experience higher levels of life satisfaction. Some indigenous concepts also describe harmonious relationships with nature. These concepts offer a different angle on the quality of life that dominant conceptions of well-being fall short to achieve. The understanding of humans as part of nature is marked by the transition from an anthropocentric to a biocentric perspective. In that sense one concept that might stand out is Suma Qamaña (the ontological term in Aymara that translates the closest to good living). Its central idea revolves around moving away from an individualistic

understanding towards a collective understanding of well-being. Seen mainly as a principle of equality, its importance is reflected not only in the social sphere but also for the relationship of humans with other living beings.

The belief that economic prosperity, material attainment and well-being grow along with consumption is set to test by assessing how a materialistic behavior may contribute or support attaining well-being. Materialism can be considered as the value an individual places on the acquisition and possession of material objects. Pursuing happiness through material acquisition instead of through other means, like personal relationships, experiences, or achievements is what characterizes materialistic behavior. A materialistic person will be more likely to judge other people's success and even their own by the amount and quality of possessions attained.

Infobox: The conceptualization of well-being

Well-being and the way to obtain it have long been conceptualized in two ways by psychologists and philosophers. The first way would be the *hedonic perspective*, where well-being consists of the experiences of an individual and can be achieved through reaching the maximum possible pleasure and the satisfaction of desires. Understood as one's own satisfactory judgment of life emerges the idea of subjective well-being, which is constituted of an affective component (i.e., having positive emotional experiences and not having negative ones) and a cognitive component (in the psychology field usually called satisfaction with life). Both components of life satisfaction on several or specific domains (like being married, having children or simply being able to study the desired career) are considered to be indicators of hedonic well-being. The second way would be the *eudaimonic perspective*, where well-being is more about following one's most profound values and reaching one's maximum potential. Psychological well-being emerges as a constituent of eudaimonic well-being and according to its proponents is comprised of six dimensions, which are: 'purpose in life', 'personal growth', 'autonomy', 'environmental mastery', 'self-acceptance' and 'positive relationships'. Eudaimonic indicators usually follow a humanistic perspective and therefore relate to aspects of optimal life that are perhaps obviously less pleasant, like owning a purpose in life, being able to personally grow, or feeling independent and also being able to form good relationships with others. Although there exists some confronting history between these two perspectives, indicators of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being usually are positively correlated and may influence each other, indicating that they do not exclude each other but rather overlap and differ. Eudaimonia according to some researchers has been understood as being true to the self or as simply translated from Greek: happiness.

Research gaps and contribution

Individuals who experience both subjective and psychologic well-being can be considered to be flourishing. Due to its more parsimonious nature, subjective well-being has been more extensively explored than eudaimonic well-being. There have been researchers who have assessed the relationship between different values and different measurements of well-being. Nevertheless, the assessments to connectedness to nature have frequently been omitted from this type of work.

Moreover, besides drawing arguments merely based on knowledge generated by the mainstream academia, my research delved into the input generated by indigenous scholars that contribute to the understanding of the need for affiliation of humans to nature (the Suma Qamaña concept), which gained a lot of attention among the good life academics and other social fields at the turn of this century. Overall, my research puts together concepts that have been assessed separately, like well-being and materialism, or well-being and nature connectedness. It combines them under one context and assesses the relationship that these concepts have also focusing on eudaimonic measurements of well-being. This gives rise to the idea to measure materialism, connectedness to nature, and well-being together, closing this gap among research streams who explore these concepts separately. This research also focused on the relationship that psychologic well-being has with both materialism and connectedness to nature.

Infobox: Aymara

Aymara are the indigenous people originally from South America who have inhabited the Andean plateau of Lake Titicaca since pre-Columbian times. Their settlements stretch between northwestern Argentina, western Bolivia, northern Chile and southeastern Peru. The total population of all these places is estimated to be around 2.3 million. Their ancestors lived in the region for many centuries before becoming subjects of the Inca in the late 15th or early 16th century and later in the 16th century of the Spanish. With the Spanish-American Wars of Independence (1810-25), the Aymaras became subjects of the new nations of Bolivia and Peru. After the Pacific War (1879-1833), Chile annexed territory with Aymara population.

The Aymara are considered to be one of the oldest surviving ethnic groups in the high Andes and, according to current knowledge, are the descendants of the Tiwanaku high culture (existing long before the Incas) (1580 BC to 1172 AD). Culturally, the Aymara share a lot with other peoples of the Andes, for example the Quechua-speaking ethnic groups. This also applies to the Andean religion, many elements of which have survived to this day. Still to this day, the Aymara worship Mother Earth (Pachamama) and Father Sun (Willkatata). Their language, Aymara, is one of the official languages in Bolivia and Peru.

Methodology and analyses used

To assess the relationship that materialism and connectedness to nature have with well-being, a key component was to define and determine how these concepts should be measured. The objective of my research was to empirically demonstrate that exhibiting a behavior that is based on materialism does not have a positive effect on important indicators of optimal human functioning such as psychological well-being, satisfaction with life and positive affect.

To gather data, questionnaires were provided online and links to the surveys were distributed using the snowball approach in order to achieve a greater coverage and increase the possibility of greater participation. The questions were translated into German and Spanish to obtain a heterogeneous and culturally diverse sample. My

sample comprised 3 languages (Spanish, English and German) with a total of 894 valid cases. The age distribution of the sample ranges from 16 to 81 years with an average of just over 35 years. Approximately 53% of the participants were women. The language with the highest number of participants was Spanish with 465 participants, followed by German with 234, and finally English with 195. The country with the highest participation in the survey was Bolivia with 48% of the participants, followed by Germany with approximately 25%.

Results

The assumption that materialism has a negative effect on well-being is supported by research in different fields within psychology, as well as economics, specifically from the point of view of quality of life. It is to be expected that a positive stimulus from the acquisition of material goods will diminish as time goes by and the desire to continue acquiring new material goods to maintain the pleasant sensation of achievement is likely to reappear. From this point of view, it is to be expected that materialistic behavior also has a negative effect on life satisfaction and helps increase negative feelings (in the literature on the subject this is called negative affect). Due to the pleasant effect that the achievement of material goods can have, it would be expected that there would be a positive effect between positive pleasant sensations (positive affect) and materialism, however, the results obtained indicate the opposite to be true.

When trying to find an explanation as to why materialism would not contribute positively to well-being, **experiences** would seem to be a plausible explanation. The intangible experience would seem to be a more powerful hedonic stimulus rather than the acquisition of a physical object. With a constant chronic surplus of aspirations, life satisfaction can be impaired, leaving the individual miserable, even despite having material circumstances in their favor. This endless cycle of satisfaction-dissatisfaction from material possessions termed as the **hedonic treadmill** refers to the adaptation process that people go through in acquiring material goods, rejoicing in achieving it, and after a time reverting to the starting point. This notion of the hedonic treadmill would result in insatiability (much like the hamster wheels that are placed in cages) where the adaptation to the continuous attainment of material goods can be taken for granted.

To comprehend the results a little better, it is important to consider that respondents with low levels in materialism appear to report a higher life satisfaction, and a decreased negative affect, but it also takes some toll on the positive affect. This could be due the negative relationship between materialism and positive affect, a result that was expected to go in a different direction given the hedonic effects that consumption might have. However, high-materialism respondents will tend to report lower life satisfaction, higher levels of negative affect but also lower levels of positive affect. At the same time, the negative relationship between psychologic well-being and materialism is no surprise. Many thinkers and philosophers have always warned that the continuous search for goods only leads to dissatisfaction. The results obtained in this research provide empiric evidence that proves this to be true.

The importance of the **role of money in a good life** is undeniable. That is also clear in people's behavior— with money one can acquire goods and services necessary to continue existing. Apart from the essential, with greater economic resources one can access a certain level of convenience: more comfort, more entertainment, less waiting time, better health care, among others. Switching to the ecological perspective, the attitude regarding economic growth (product of consumption), technology (understood as the means to produce and dispose goods) and politics (the systemic decisions made by society to organize itself), it can be perceived that although people might express concern for the environment, they still cling to an anthropocentric behavior which may constitute an important contributor to the disconnection between materialistic behavior and the perceived connection to nature. Materialism was expected to have a negative effect on the perceived connection to nature, but according to the data obtained there was no significant effect between the two concepts either.

The effects that a perceived connection with nature can have on well-being are supported by theories that even encompass our **evolutionary past** in which a better connection to nature also implies better chances of survival, and could be closely related to leading a good life. Human beings began to inhabit urban areas with less contact to nature at a relatively late point in history and prior to this they spent most of the evolutionary history communing with nature; therefore, all the evolutionary experiences and knowledge stay within us and somehow, we feel the need to stay in touch with nature. The convergence of the concept of the Aymara good life and connectedness to nature can be compared to theories such as degrowth, frugality and even the biophilia hypothesis. A life with happiness and meaning which could be complemented and that shows a good relationship with nature as indicated by the Aymara conceptions of the good life might sound appealing to pursue.

In this way, a greater connection to nature will have a positive effect on our well-being, our satisfaction with life, and our positive affection. The surprising phenomenon about the results obtained comes from the notion of believing that increasing a connection with nature could also help reduce our negative affect, however, apparently it does not seem to have any significant effect at all. In the results obtained from the states of affect, according to the literature, happiness can be manifested as a trait but also as a state of mind. And if happiness comes as a trait it comes with a predisposition to experience certain levels of affection, so in that regard there is something missing to close the gap between reducing a negative affect state and experiencing a connection to nature. Nevertheless, in an aggregate way of interpreting these affective states, the score obtained in positive affect and satisfaction with life were higher than those obtained for negative affect. This provides evidence that the levels of life satisfaction and positive affect are experienced more intensely than the levels of negative affect when in contact with nature.

Conclusions

With the results obtained in my research, I could add empirical evidence that a materialistic behavior does not benefit subjective well-being. Individuals who have a strong connection to nature will also have greater subjective well-being and that

despite materialistic behaviors possibly requiring more resources, they do not seem to affect the perceived connection to nature.

Within the post-development thought, concepts such as degrowth and thrift economy are also becoming increasingly more appealing. Which may indicate that there is a predisposition to leave the common practices of linear development. There is enough evidence that, if we base decision-making or establishing policies on fostering well-being, it will allow us to live in a way in which we can re-evaluate how we work, interact, and live for a more positive outcome. This becomes even more relevant seeing that the destruction of the environment also has a direct impact on our own well-being. Slowing down the developmental career and to stop focusing excessively on efforts for economic growth are vital measures. Taking this statement one step further, based on the evidence obtained in this research and various others, material persecution does not bring greater well-being. It is not necessary to dedicate so many efforts on the pursuit of material attainment. It may not be necessary to consume so many resources to achieve well-being. Although people might not only seek happiness as their final goal, the challenge lies in achieving a balanced well-being which does not compromise the well-being of others, nor harm our environment. This may require reducing our obsession with the material world and start reformulating our needs, without confusing them with wishes. If we can achieve well-being with less, why not lower our expectations and give others the opportunity to achieve the same standard.

Instead of pushing economic growth and environmental degradation, ideally, society could find a middle path. Developed countries could return to simpler ways of life and less developed countries could focus more on satisfying their population's most urgent needs without compromising their environment.

Reference:

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