

SOCIETY

# Materially False: Q&A with Tim Kasser about the Pursuit of the Good through Goods

By **Evan Nesterak**

September 9, 2014



Image: [Devyn Caldwell/Flickr](#)

*This article was originally published on The Psych Report before it became part of the Behavioral Scientist in 2017.*

**A**s Madonna astutely noted in her 1984 song, we live in a material world. Cars, cash, clothes – the allure of stuff promises feelings of success and happiness. It’s a promise that, despite many of us sensing to be an empty one, still wields enormous power over how we structure our lives and define success. Indeed, recent research shows, over the last 30 years, more and more young people are buying into buying.

But do goods really lead to the good life? Are we to believe in Madonna’s Material World where “the boy with the cold hard cash is always mister right?” Or are we to trust Paul McCartney when he sang, “I don’t care too much for money, money can’t buy me love?”

The work of Tim Kasser, a psychology professor at Knox College, suggests the latter. For the last 25 years he has researched how the pursuit of materialistic goals (wealth and status) over prosocial goals (family, community) negatively impacts both individual and societal well-being. His books, *The High Price of Materialism*, and *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* (edited with Allen D. Kanner) not only exposes the illusion that wealth and status equate to well-being, but also shows how the pursuit of materialistic goals can have detrimental effects on others and the environment.

We spoke with Professor Kasser to find out more about the personal, social, and environmental outcomes associated with the pursuit of materialistic goals, talk about the rise of Black Friday, and consider the policy implications of his work. We also touch on his latest book, *Lucy in the Mind of Lennon*, a project much different than his materialism research. In the book, Kasser utilizes methods of psychological science to explore the meaning behind one of John Lennon's most well-known songs, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

**Evan Nesterak: Can you define materialism and describe what materialism means from a psychological perspective?**

**Tim Kasser:** Materialism is a value. It's something that is reflected in what people care about, what's important to them, and what they're striving to accomplish in their lives. There are lots and lots of different values that people can pursue. Materialistic values are those which are primarily focused on trying to make money, trying to have a lot of possessions, [or] trying to attain a particular image. Most of the research we do looks at materialistic strivings within the context of other strivings, so we're interested in how much a person cares about money relative to other things they might care about.

**EN: How are materialistic values related to an individual's well-being?**

**TK:** Despite the claims of consumer culture to the contrary, what research has shown in literally dozens of studies is that the more that people prioritize materialistic values, the less happy they are, the less satisfied they are with their lives, the less vital and energetic they feel, the less likely they are to experience pleasant emotions like happiness and contentment and joy, the more depressed they are, the more anxious they are, the more they experience unpleasant emotions like fear and anger and sadness, [and] the more likely they are to engage in the use of substances like cigarettes and alcohol. So there's a wide variety of different kinds of well-being outcomes which have been shown to be associated with materialistic values over the years.

**EN: Some of your work looks into how materialistic values impact an individual's attitudes and behaviors toward the environment. What other attitudes and behaviors are linked to materialistic values?**

**TK:** Another set of outcomes associated with materialistic values is having more of a competitive, objectifying stance towards relationships. The idea is that if you spend a lot of time thinking about things you might end up treating people like things, and the research bears that out pretty well.

### The High Price of Materialism



We know for example the more that people focus on these materialistic goals they have shorter, more conflictual interpersonal relationships. We know that materialistic people tend to score lower on measures of empathy, [and] when you put them into situations where they can make a choice to compete or to cooperate, they tend to make the choice to compete. We know that materialism is associated with more Machiavellian attitudes; they're more willing to follow the philosophy of the prince and manipulate people when necessary in order to get ahead.

There's even been a few studies recently which have shown that materialistic people have more racial and ethnic prejudicial attitudes, and they also tend to score higher on what's called social dominance orientation. So there's this whole constellation of other kinds of behaviors and attitudes which have been associated with materialism that don't bode so well for civil society.

The [next] set of outcomes [are] the ecological ones. We know from research that the more that people are materialistic the worse their ecological attitudes; they care relatively less about the earth and environment, tend to engage in fewer pro-environmental behaviors, like recycling, turning off lights, using both sides of the paper, riding a bike, and they also tend to have higher ecological

footprints. If you're materialistic, you want to consume a lot and consuming a lot often times is associated with ecological damage.

I always note that materialistic values are not only bad for people's own well-being, but they lead people to behave in ways which are bad for other people's well-being, as well as bad for the well-being of other species and future generations. It's a pretty damaging set of values at multiple levels according to both our research and the research of others.

**EN: Speaking about the impact of materialistic values on society, what is your take on the recent rise of consumer holidays like Black Friday?**

**TK:** I think that the Black Friday, which now of course has extended into Thanksgiving Day, is a natural outgrowth of our consumer-capitalist society. In the same way that people have values, research suggests society has values. When the society organizes its values around more materialistic aims like economic profit or economic growth, [it] then has lots of different ways in which to encourage those activities in the citizens. It's completely predictable that a holiday like Thanksgiving get's pushed aside in order for financial entities to try to make more profit.

One of the things we know from the research both at the level of personal values and at the level of cultural values is that those materialistic values for money, and status, and profit, and all the rest, tend to stand in opposition to more prosocial, family-oriented, community-oriented, relationship-oriented values. Thanksgiving was a day that was oriented around family relationships, but that's not a set of values which is consistent with Wal-Mart, K-Mart and Target making a profit, because if people are home, they're not shopping.

**EN: Imagine a parent in a Black Friday line, foregoing Thanksgiving, waiting to buy their child a laptop for school. Perhaps the parent can't afford the laptop when it's not on sale. The parent's behavior, it seems, could be viewed both as materialistic, as well as family-oriented. What are your thoughts on these conflicting interpretations?**

**TK:** I go back to what I said at the outset here which is that materialism is one of a set of values. There's a variety of different values that people pursue. The example you used sounds like it might be a mix of some sort of materialistic values along with some prosocial family values; that I want to get my child something that I know they want, that they need. By no means am I trying to argue that one should never buy anything or one should never buy a gift for someone. The issue that becomes problematic for materialism is when it tends to become more and more determinative of one's value system.

The analogy I often use is of a pie. If you think about your value system as being various slices of pie, one slice being materialism, one slice being spirituality, another being family, another slice being hedonism, etc., as the materialistic slice gets larger and larger that's when we start to see these problems arise. In part that's because it's a zero sum game. As one set of values goes up, the others ones tend to decrease in size. The issue is understanding the variety of ways that you are being motivated and when those are materialistic.

We did a study on Christmas years ago, where we surveyed people right after Christmas time. We asked them how satisfied they'd been with their Christmas, how stressed they were, and how happy they were during Christmas. We also asked them how they had spent their Christmas, what kind of activities they had been engaged in. What we found was people who were sort of focusing their Christmas primarily around the materialistic aspects of it, the spending and the receiving, were less happy than people who deemphasized that aspect of the holiday. It was the people who focused more directly on their family, friends and their spirituality who were reporting the happiest and the most satisfying Christmases.

With regard to the example that you used, showing somebody you care about them is from our perspective a very healthy thing to do. It's what we call reflecting the intrinsic values. The issue is that society, the society we're under currently, encourages us to demonstrate our love for others through consumerism. There are lots and lots of ways to show somebody you love them that aren't materialistic. I think the way that our society is set up we get [channelled] into thinking that the way to express our love is through purchase.

**EN: With the recent establishment of the UK's Behavioral Insights Team and the White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team, there is now more of an opportunity for behavioral science research to inform public policy. How do you think your research could influence policy? What should policy makers note about materialism and the psychological outcomes you've discussed?**

**TK:** The first question is would policy makers even want to hear what I have to say, because what I have to say gets at the heart, in a lot of respects I think, of the way that our current system is organized. There's a pretty deep critique of it. No offense to the Nudge people, but nudging people to make it easier to go in this direction versus that direction doesn't say anything one way or another about whether or not our system is healthy or not, right?

To me at some level the whole nudge issue is very much a way to support the system and have the average citizen do what authorities think they should do. Now sometimes what authorities think they should do is fine, sometimes it's not.

The kinds of things I'm talking about in terms of critiquing materialism go right at the heart of corporate America, go right at the heart of a government which is at this point deeply beholden to the rich, especially after the Citizens United Supreme Court decision in 2010. So while I would love to have the ear of policy people, I think that I would just have to acknowledge that from my perspective there's lots that needs to be changed.

Let me start with what the basic philosophy is. The basic philosophy I have in terms of thinking about any kind of intervention, whether it's policy or not, has to do with, first off [knowing] what causes materialistic values, and you need to decrease those causes. The second thing you need to do is know what are the values which promote well-being, which promote a healthy society, which promote a healthy environment, and you need to encourage those values.

### **Financial Security**

We know that people tend to be more materialistic when they're insecure. So that approach suggests policies that increase the social safety net. One of the policies that I would support very strongly would be a living wage rather than a minimum wage. Anybody who's working ought to be able to be making enough to meet their basic needs. That would get at a security kind of issue.

### **Advertising**

Some policies that I've written about a fair bit has to do with advertising. Advertising is one of the main ways that people get materialistic messages in this culture. At present any money that a business spends on advertising is tax deductible. So just like when you do your taxes, you can write off your charitable deductions, any business can write-off the money that it spent on advertising.

Given that advertising is one of the things that fuels materialistic values, I would start by saying that we need to revoke the tax subsidy on advertising, and instead replace it with some percentage tax. You're talking billions of tax dollars, tens of billions of untaxed dollars at present. If you tax that at 1% or 5% or 10%, call it a pollution tax, and tax it at 20%, you've got enormous amounts of revenue which then can be used in order to promote security or in order to promote healthy values.

I would also remove any marketing to children. Other countries have banned marketing to children. We have marketing to children in just about every place possible, including [to] little babies. We know that marketing to children not only increases materialistic values, but it's also associated with increased obesity, with increased eating disorders, more smoking, more drinking of

alcohol, on and on and on. So that would be kind of the first half of the set of some of the policies that I would engage in.

## **Alternative Indicators**

Right now all of our indicators, that most of us pay attention to and that most government people pay attention to, [are] all economic indicators. There's all kinds of different indicators out there, like the Kingdom of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness, or redefining progress as Genuine Progress Indicator, which deprivilege materialistic values and take out some of the "bads" that are often involved in economic growth, environmentally and socially.

What we know is that the values that stand in opposition to materialistic values and that are associated with being happier and having better functioning interpersonal relationships and being more sustainable, those are what we call intrinsic values. Those are values for your own personal growth, for having close relationships, and being close to the community.

From my viewpoint, and I think the Kingdom of Bhutan is right on with a lot of this, what government optimally would do would be to develop policies and ways of measuring success at those policies, which is not so focused on economic growth and materialistic values, but instead [figure] out ways to help people be happier and healthier, closely related to the people they love, and [have] more time to be involved in their community.

## **Vacation and Family Leave**

One [policy] would be to change our laws about vacation. We're one of the only two or three nations in the entire world that does not have paid vacation, paid minimum number of vacation weeks. Research suggests that especially poor people go most of their lives without a paid vacation. Vacation is a time to connect with your family, it's a time to rejuvenate, it's a time to do the things you love, and it's also associated with better health.

Another kind of time policy I would have is family leave. We're one of again very few nations in the world that does not have a mandatory paid leave for a new mother. It's six weeks unpaid in the United States, which is just a travesty. I mean most nations in the world give a mother more like 3, 4, 5 months paid. Some nations give 2 years at half pay. And when you have a new child that's about your family values, right? But instead what we tell parents is get back to work. Put your kid in daycare because that provides a job for somebody else. It's about economic growth, it's not about the intrinsic values of being around your family.

Those are the kinds of policies that I'd be interested in and that definitely fall out of the kind of work that I do.

**EN: Finally, I do want to give you a chance to talk about your book, Lucy in the Mind of Lennon. This project was clearly different than your materialism work, as it examines John Lennon and the meaning behind one of his most famous and controversial songs, Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds. What made you decide to write the book?**

**TK:** It's a book I've been working on for probably fifteen years in one way or another. This is a project that just kept sticking for me that kept making me wonder, and I think one of the first reasons is that it's really unlike anything I've ever written about before.

It was fun, it was challenging, it was different, and I needed that at this particular stage in my career. Not to say I'm giving up materialism work, I'm still working on lots of materialism stuff, but I just wanted to do something different for awhile.

I think a second [reason] is that Psychology is a very reductionist way of trying to understand things. Reductionism is fine and a lot can be learned from a reductionist paradigm, but reductionism can only take you so far. I teach a class on dreams, for example, [and] I teach a class on studying a person in depth, and there's something about the holism of working with that kind of material that my field has by and large neglected, but that I think is ultimately necessary in order to have a science of people.

Our science of the people needs to include the science of a person. Not just the science of comparing 40 people assigned to do this, versus 40 people in the control group; or correlations of ten variables in a sample of 300 undergraduates. That's all fine and good, and can reveal a lot, but it can't reveal everything. So I was really interested in the intellectual question, as a psychologist, of how do you understand why one person did one thing when they did it. How do you make sense of that. Instead of just saying, well there's a correlation between this and this, why did so and so do that then, that's a perfectly valid question for a psychologist to ask, but it's one that we don't ask very often and thus we don't have very good approaches for answering. And so part of the challenge for in this book was seeing how can you have a scientific approach to answering those kinds of questions.

*Read an excerpt of Lucy in the Mind of Lennon*



## Evan Nesterak

Evan Nesterak is the editor-in-chief at the *Behavioral Scientist*. In 2013, he co-founded the non-profit psychology news website *The Psych Report* and in 2016 he helped launch the Philadelphia Behavioral Science Initiative. Evan earned his B.A. from Swarthmore College in 2009, where he studied psychology and statistics.

---

## Further Reading & Resources

- [Kasser, T. \(2002\). \*The High Price of Materialism\*. MIT Press.](#)
- [Kasser, T. E., & Kanner, A. D. \(2004\). \*Psychology and consumer culture: The struggle for a good life in a materialistic world\*. American Psychological Association.](#)
- [Kasser, T. \(2013\). \*Lucy in the Mind of Lennon\*. Oxford University Press.](#)
- [Kasser, T., Rosenblum, K. L., Sameroff, A. J., Deci, E. L., Niemiec, C. P., Ryan, R. M., ... & Hawks, S. \(2014\). Changes in materialism, changes in psychological well-being: Evidence from three longitudinal studies and an intervention experiment. \*Motivation and Emotion\*, 38\(1\), 1-22.](#)
- [Twenge, J. M., & Kasser, T. \(2013\). Generational Changes in Materialism and Work Centrality, 1976-2007 Associations With Temporal Changes in Societal Insecurity and Materialistic Role Modeling. \*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin\*, 39\(7\), 883-897.](#)
- [Hurst, M., Dittmar, H., Bond, R., & Kasser, T. \(2013\). The relationship between materialistic values and environmental attitudes and behaviors: A meta-analysis. \*Journal of Environmental Psychology\*, 36, 257-269.](#)
- [Kasser, T., & Sheldon, K. M. \(2002\). What makes for a merry Christmas? \*Journal of Happiness Studies\*, 3, 313-329.](#)
- [Duriez, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Soenens, B., & De Witte, H. \(2007\). The social costs of extrinsic relative to intrinsic goal pursuits: Their relation with social dominance and racial and ethnic prejudice. \*Journal of Personality\*, 75\(4\), 757-782.](#)
- [Kasser, T., & Ahuvia, A. \(2002\). Materialistic values and well-being in business students. \*European Journal of Social Psychology\*, 32\(1\), 137-146.](#)
- ["The "40-Hour" Workweek Is Actually Longer -- by Seven Hours" \(2014\). Lydia Saad, \*Gallup.com\*.](#)
- ["Unhealthy and Unregulated: Food Advertising and Marketing to Children" \(2012\). American Heart Association.](#)