

## **Effects of Capitalism/Neoliberalism on Mental Health**

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## Introduction

Today, people live in better living conditions with more material possessions than ever before (DeAngelis, 2004; Meyers, 2001). Despite this increased quality of life, mental well-being has been dramatically declining (Reinert et al., 2021; Zeira, 2021). Nearly 20% of Americans, around 50 million people, experienced a mental illness in the year 2019 (Reinert, 2021). Along with that, suicidal ideation has been steadily increasing each year since 2011 (Reinert, 2021). These numbers are staggering taking into account that treatment for mental illness is more available, with more options than ever before (Ziera, 2021). Psychologist David G. Meyers (2001) commented that, “compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, [but] slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology.” This decline in overall well-being has caused a mental health crisis in the United States (Plakun, 2020). Researchers, psychologists, and others have been seeking to explain and prevent this issue. Some have claimed that the increase in mental distress could be a byproduct of Capitalism and Neliberal ideologies and policies.

“Capitalism, [like] other broad socio-cultural organizations, consists of both an ideology and set of institutions that are set up to encourage certain behaviours and beliefs in individuals who interact with it” (Matheson, 2021). Theologically, capitalism lines up with neoliberalism, “the economic theory that human well-being can be enhanced by individual entrepreneurship and that the government’s responsibility is to create an institutional framework that allows for it” (Ziera, 2021). Policies of deregulating the market and promoting trade and privatization stem from these ideologies. Under capitalism and neoliberalism, overall public spending on social programs has decreased (Ziera, 2021). Because “sociocultural organizations, such as capitalism, affect individuals in profound ways,” psychologists, economists, and others have begun research

on how these ideologies and policies have affected our mental health (Matheson, 2021). Despite this, it is still a very limited topic and has a great need to expand. This article will describe the current literature and research on the topic of how capitalism and neoliberalism has impacted people's mental health.

### **The Effects of Materialism and Consumerism on Mental Health**

Neoliberal societies promote certain values and attitudes. One of these values is materialism (Zeira, 2021). Materialism is defined as “a value system that is preoccupied with possessions and the social image they project” (Bauer et al., 2012). Materialism leads to consumerism. A study done by Media Dynamics, Inc. claims that the average person is exposed to advertisements around 360 times per day (Media Dynamics Inc., 2014). Other experts claim that these numbers go up to 5,000 when including every time you see logos (Story, 2007). Although this number is debated by experts, they all can agree that the amount of ads we see each day is extensive. This constant exposure to product advertisement encourages consumerism and promotes materialistic ideals. Bauer's study used consumer cues, similar to everyday advertisements, to measure the effects (This paragraph isn't finished... still figuring out how to tie these two together).

Although the value of materialism is promoted in Capitalist societies, there is evidence that materialistic individuals have decreased life satisfaction and increased social isolation and anxiety (Bauer et al., 2012; DeAngelis, 2004). Despite research done on this topic, there is a question of correlation. It could be that a low well-being leads a person to be materialistic or it could be that materialism causes a low well-being (Bauer et al., 2012; DeAngelis, 2004). Bauer et al. (2012) performed a series of four experiments to find causation and correlation between

materialism/consumerism and increased negative mental well-being. In the experiments, consumer cues (similar to advertisements) were used to trigger materialistic feelings and attitudes. This simulated a neoliberal reality, as people are constantly exposed to advertisements (Story, 2007). In each of the four studies, those in the consumer cue group reported increased feelings of anxiety and depression. They reported increased feelings of competitiveness and a decrease in trust of others. They reported a decrease in desire for social interaction. And finally, they reported a decrease in feelings of personal responsibility (Bauer et al., 2012). All of these reported feelings and attitudes have adverse mental health effects (Bauer et al., 2012). Both Neilson (2015) and Zeira (2021) discuss how the attitudes and feelings reported in this study lead to an increase in anxiety and depression. “Division, competition, and individualism accord with conditions promoting... anxiety” (Neilson, 2015). “Individualism, materialism, and competitiveness... are not compatible with human needs such as social connection and community, leading to anxiety and depression” (Zeira, 2021). Community and socialization are integral parts of healthy mental health (Esposito & Perez, 2014). Materialism and consumerism decreases the desire for socialization, trust, and community which are basic human needs and directly impact people's mental health (Bauer et al., 2012).

### **Effects of Individualization of Mental Health Treatment (this is honestly my downdraft... i am behind)**

Mental health treatments have been influenced by Neoliberal society. The end goal for mental health treatment at this time is to function according to Neoliberal values. These values include productivity, competitiveness, individualism, and monetary success (cite). This creates an unrealistic goal where people feel that something is wrong with them for not reaching a

neoliberal success state. In reality, people are experiencing symptoms of social and life experiences and responding in a normal way. There has also been a shift to place mental health responsibility on the individual (Esposito & Perez, 2014; Matheson, 2021; Smith, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020). Psychology is very much based on personal responsibility and has shifted away from social psychology (cite). Social psychology is (find definition).. Pretty much it is an approach to psychology that takes into account social situations such as poverty, job stability, etc. Post world war II the United States shifted to a place of social psychology but with increased Neoliberal and Capitalist policies and ideology and an increased importance on personal responsibility and individualism is the most prevalent approach at this time. There has also been an increase in the pathologization of mental health treatment, which has taken away the social aspect of things. When people experience depression and anxiety as a reaction to single parenting, poverty, etc. medical professionals often turn to pathologizing them biologically. When in reality they are reacting to situations caused by society and the economy. There was a study done to see attitudes and biases within those experiencing poverty and those in the medical field treating those who may be experiencing poverty. The study interviewed the different individuals and sorted the things they found into data. Explain the discoveries. The attitude of individualization and self responsibility makes “mental health problems not a result of social risks, such as unemployment or poverty, but an issue of self-care and becoming a responsible/informed consumer” (Matheson, 2021).

### Effects of Capitalism/Neoliberalism on Mental Health

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