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To have is to be: Materialism and person perception in working-class and middle-class British adolescents *

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Abstract

This study addresses the neglected link between materialism and person perception. It extends recent research into the influence of material possessions on first impressions by investigating how materialism (as a set of socio-cultural representations and as an individual value orientation) affects the way in which adolescents from different social class backgrounds perceive a person who is portrayed as either owning or lacking expensive possessions. One hundred and sixty-eight respondents (93 middle-class, 75 working-class) read one of four vignettes which described the same woman or man in either affluent or less privileged material circumstances. They then evaluated that person's income and personal qualities, and completed Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale. Both working-class and middle-class adolescents formed similar impressions, which favour the person who owns, rather than lacks, expensive possessions. This can be interpreted as a facet of materialism at a socio-cultural level. The impact of individually held materialistic values on impressions was comparatively weak, but they moderated the strength with which materialistic socio-cultural representations about wealth and poverty are reproduced. Future research needs to address further the role of material goods in social perception.

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1. Introduction

A core aspect of materialism is the use of possessions and consumer goods to communicate an individual's personal and social identity (e.g., Dittmar, 1992a). Consequently, materialism should play a significant role for perceiving others in the context of their material goods and relative wealth. This paper starts by outlining different psychological perspectives on material possessions and then examines the link between materialism and person perception from a social constructionist approach which conceptualises goods as material symbols of identity. Specifically, it examines the ways in which adolescents' judgements of hypothetical others are influenced by relative wealth, and whether such impressions are affected by the adolescents' social class background. Here, materialism is examined at a socio-cultural level. But the research presented also deals with materialism on an individual level by assessing how person perception in a material context is influenced by a perceiver's endorsement of a materialistic outlook as an individual value orientation.

2. Theoretical framework

Material goods feature prominently in everyday social life, not only in the many hours of television and advertisements people watch (e.g., O'Guinn and Shrum, 1991), but also in the ways in which they think and feel about themselves and others. Yet the social psychological significance of material possessions and consumer goods has only just begun to be researched systematically and explicitly (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dittmar, 1992a; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; see also special issue edited by Rudmin, 1991), although consumption symbolism has received attention for slightly longer (e.g., Belk et al., 1982; Holman, 1983; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1990; Solomon, 1983).

The psychological research on material possessions to date has tended to be fragmented, but it is nevertheless possible to distinguish three different, broad theoretical frameworks:

(1) *Biological*: The 'acquisitive instinct'.
(2) *Individual-centred*: The functions possessions fulfil for individuals.
(3) *Social constructionist*: Possessions as material symbols of identity.

The usefulness of conceptualising the relationship between people and material goods as the consequence of a biologically-based, acquisitive

disposition has been questioned, both on theoretical and empirical grounds (e.g., Trasler, 1982). Essentially, anthropological, child development, and ethological evidence documents the pronounced historical and socio-cultural diversity of people's relationships with material goods (e.g., Beaglehole, 1931; Belk, 1984; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988), including differences with respect to collecting and gift-giving practices (cf. Belk et al., 1989; McCracken, 1986). Thus, it cannot support more than the inference of a biological substratum to materialistic behaviour at such an abstract and diluted level that instinctual or human sociobiological accounts lose their explanatory power with respect to the psychology of material possessions (cf. Dittmar, 1992a; Trasler, 1982).

The individual-centred framework encompasses a variety of research efforts which examine specific psychological meanings or functions of material goods. This perspective shares with the third, social constructionist, framework the well-supported assumption that possessions are perceived as a part of the self: as self-extensions (e.g., Belk, 1988; Prelinger, 1959). However, in contrast to the last perspective, its level of analysis is intra-individual or, at best, interpersonal. A prominent example is Furby's model, which postulates that the psychological significance of possessions lies mainly in the quasi-physical control they afford their owners over their material and social environment (e.g., Furby, 1978, 1980, 1991). Without a doubt, this approach is valuable in its own right, but it tends to neglect the more explicitly social and symbolic features of material goods. Studies which do investigate individuals, but are nevertheless concerned with the social and symbolic dimensions of material goods are not included under the heading of 'individual-centred' as understood here (e.g., Belk, 1991; Joy and Dholakia, 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988).

It is exactly these social and symbolic aspects which are given most attention by the social constructionist framework (e.g., Gergen, 1985), which asserts that knowledge about the material world is both socially shared and shaped. From this perspective, material goods are viewed as symbols of identity whose meanings are socially constituted. The term identity is used here in a broad sense to refer to individuals' personal qualities and social locations, as seen by both themselves and others. A Porsche cannot function as a symbol of virile, masculine identity unless at least the owner's reference group shares the belief that the car is indeed masculine. Evidence which supports this social symbolic view comes from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, sociology, gerontology, abnormal psychology or criminology (cf. Dittmar, 1992a). Material goods can thus be

viewed as symbols of various aspects of social identity, including social class, gender, and status. But they also symbolise more personal aspects of identity, such as individual qualities, one's life history, or relationships with others (e.g., Dittmar, 1989, 1991).

Recently, interest in a social-symbolic analysis of material goods has also emerged in consumer research (cf. Cohen and Chakravarti, 1990), although the minutiae of information-processing regarding products and purchase decisions still remain its most predominant concerns (e.g., Wilkie, 1990). This new perspective proposes an analysis of consumption symbolism as a socially shared reality with implications for all aspects of consumer behaviour (e.g., Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1990; Solomon, 1983).

These different developments all lend support to the claim that goods should play a profound role for self-perception, other-perception and social cognition generally. This proposed link between representations about material objects and social cognition is also analysed by Hunt et al. (1992). Their investigation of materialistic, externally-based person schemata as organising principles for impression formation shares many theoretical concerns with this paper, but uses a slightly different empirical focus.

3. Materialism and person perception

With respect to consumption symbolism, one important implication of the particular social constructionist perspective proposed by Dittmar (1992a) is that the identity of others is visible in objectified form, as well as one's own, and that people should evaluate others in a social context in which material possessions and consumer goods form an important part (see also Belk et al., 1982; Burroughs et al., 1991). Moreover, if sets of consumer goods are considered rather than isolated products or brands, possession-based inferences involve, first, categorical judgements about social identity – such as class or occupation – which, in turn, give rise to more idiosyncratic evaluations about personal identity, such as individual qualities (Dittmar, 1992a,b, under revision; Dittmar et al., 1989; Goffman, 1951). Part of the function of such evaluations may be that people can orient themselves in their social worlds and anticipate interactions with others through locating them in a social-material hierarchy.

Both socio-cultural (e.g., McCracken, 1990) and individual-centred analyses (e.g., Fournier and Richins, 1991) of materialism identify as one of its

central themes the evaluation of one's own and others' success and well-being by the number and quality of material possessions owned. Viewing materialism from a socio-cultural perspective by adopting a social constructionist perspective on the meanings of material goods leads to an investigation of socially shared representations about others' identities as a function of material context. Thus, we would expect that a person's possessions will influence our perception of their social standing and, in turn, their personal qualities. A recent study with British adolescents investigated this claim by examining specific hypotheses drawn from two contrasting social psychological perspectives (Dittmar, 1992b). These contrasting perspectives were tested further in the present study.

The first perspective is social identity theory, which essentially postulates that people are motivated to view members of their own and similar social groups in a more positive light (in-group favouritism) than members of 'outgroups', which bolsters their self-image (e.g., Tajfel, 1984). Social identity is defined by a sense of belongingness, rather than regular face-to-face interaction with group members, and thus applies both to clearly circumscribed social groups (college student, nurse) and broad social categories (gender, race, class). Applied to material goods and person perception, this approach would suggest that working-class and middle-class adolescents should form different impressions of people with different degrees of affluence and consumer goods. Specifically, social identity theory leads to the hypothesis that working-class adolescents would perceive a person in a more negative light when portrayed in affluent circumstances than when s/he appears less privileged, whereas the middle-class adolescents would form more favourable impressions of the affluent person than the less privileged one. In statistical terms, this prediction should manifest itself as a significant interaction between the perceivers' class background (working-class, middle-class) and the relative wealth (high, low) of the person about whom they form an impression.

The second, contrasting theoretical perspective which can be applied to impressions and relative wealth concerns dominant representations. Attributional research on commensense causal explanations for wealth and poverty demonstrates a general tendency for people to use individualistic accounts for why some people are better off than others (e.g., Furnham and Lewis, 1986), at least in the industrialised West with a predominantly individualistic conception of personhood (cf. Markus and Kitayama, 1991) and a capitalist ideology which blames the victims of poverty (cf. Abercrombie et al., 1980). It thus suggests implicitly that representations exist

which are socially shared throughout society (cf. Moscovici, 1988), and according to which affluent people are seen as intelligent, hard-working and skillful, whereas less affluent people are viewed as lazy, unmotivated and lacking in abilities and skills. Such notions can be regarded as dominant representations (see Dittmar, 1992b, for details) in the sense that they reinforce the 'ideology' that the status quo must be fair if wealth differentials are seen as the product of individual merit. Work on political, economic and consumer socialisation indicates that children and adolescents increasingly endorse dominant representations about the social and economic world, often quite irrespective of social class (e.g., Connell, 1983; Dittmar and Van Duuren, 1993). Some American studies have documented social class differences in the perception of consumption symbolism of particular products and brands in adults (e.g., Munson and Spivey, 1981) as well as children and adolescents (e.g., Belk et al., 1982), but these have tended to focus on stereotypes about isolated objects, such as cars, rather than on socially shared representations about constellations of consumer goods which denote different levels of material wealth. Moreover, late adolescence is particularly interesting with respect to dominant representations and social class for two reasons. Adolescents have been shown to lack a strong sense of their own social class position or strong feelings of class allegiance, whilst having reached the end stage – before fully entering the economic world in their own right – of a socialisation process intended to promote the greatly unequal distribution of incomes and goods and to encourage a positive evaluation of the affluent (cf. Furnham and Stacey, 1991). Thus, the hypothesis can be derived from the dominant representations approach that both working- and middle-class adolescents would form similar impressions, which favour affluent individuals, by drawing on a societally shared frame of reference about individuals from affluent or poorer backgrounds. Statistically, this prediction would be supported if impressions differed only on the basis of the portrayed person's wealth (high, low).

In an earlier study (Dittmar, 1992b), adolescents (half working-class and half middle-class) watched one of four short videos, which depicted the same actor (either female or male) in either relatively affluent surroundings or a less affluent context with only basic essentials. The videos were matched tightly in terms of the actor's physical movements, body posture and facial expressions. The adolescents then evaluated the video character's personal qualities. Impressions were shared across social class boundaries: both working-class and middle-class adolescents saw the same person as

more intelligent, more in control and more forceful when s/he was portrayed as wealthy rather than poor. In contrast, when poor, the video character emerged as warmer and more self-expressive. Thus, the proposition was supported that person perception in a material context is influenced by dominant representations about wealth and poverty.

This study dealt with materialism at the level of socially shared representations, but it did not investigate the link between person perception and materialistic values held by an individual. Materialism has also been conceptualised as an individual value orientation (e.g., Richins and Dawson, 1992), which can influence consumers' cognition and emotion. For example, individuals who strongly endorse materialistic values were shown to hold more unrealistic expectations about the supposed psychological and social benefits they would derive from consumer goods and to experience more negative emotions after purchase than do people for whom material possessions play a less central role (Richins, 1991). From this viewpoint of materialism as an individual difference variable, the following hypothesis can be derived with respect to person perception: more materialistic individuals should be more strongly influenced by possessions and wealth in their perceptions of others than less materialistic individuals.

Since the present study also addresses the competing hypotheses derived from social identity theory and dominant representations, it involved both working-class and middle-class adolescents as respondents. It therefore provides the opportunity to investigate two further questions (see also Coleman, 1983). Firstly, given that British working-class and middle-class people value material possessions for quite distinct reasons (Dittmar, 1991a), there may be social class differences in the endorsement of materialistic values, although Richins and Dawson (1992) did not find such social class differences in the US. Secondly, in contrast to the lack of class differences in the perceived personal qualities of wealthy and poor people (Dittmar, 1992b), various studies show class differences in other aspects of economic perception, such as adolescents' estimates of a person's income (Emler and Dickinson, 1985).

In summary, then, the following three hypotheses were investigated in the present study:

H1. Systematic social class differences will be found for adolescents' endorsement of materialistic values and estimated income of a person described in a vignette.

H2. Adolescents' perceptions of the described individual's personal qualities will differ only on the basis of his/her relative wealth (dominant representations hypothesis).
H3. Highly materialistic adolescents will be more strongly influenced by possessions and wealth in their perceptions of personal qualities than less materialistic adolescents.

4. Method

4.1. Sample

Ninety-three adolescents attending a school with a lower-upper middle-class catchment area and 75 adolescents at a predominantly working-class school took part in this study on a voluntary, unpaid basis. The schools were selected on the basis of prior information about the social class composition of pupils (e.g., Dittmar and Van Duuren, 1993) and the typical family backgrounds of these adolescents were discussed with the respective head teachers who confirmed the class difference between the two schools, both located in East Sussex, south-east England. About half of each group were female and half male, and all were between 14 and 16 years old.

4.2. Materials and procedure

Short vignettes were created for this study. They described either a young woman or a young man who was introduced as living in Brighton (a middle-sized town). S/he was portrayed in either a relatively wealthy or a less affluent setting (conveyed through different consumer goods, such as car, furniture, housing, kitchen appliances, foods and drink), resulting in four different person descriptions (see Appendix for a sample vignette). Differences between material settings were not extreme, but resembled those between a middle-class and a less affluent context. The adolescents read one of the four person descriptions in their respective schools during class time, and then described and evaluated the person they had read about in terms of estimated income, various dimensions of personal qualities and deservingness of their material circumstances. They also indicated whether they liked the person and whether they aspired to his or her lifestyle. A further question concerning the number of expensive possessions owned by the described person was included as a manipulation check.

Finally, the adolescents completed a measure of materialism as an individual value orientation (Richins and Dawson, 1992), described as a survey on 'personal attitudes'. All questions were presented in the form of 7-point Likert scales, with the exception of estimated income which was assessed by a 5-point measure (1 = less than £8,000 p.a.; 2 = £8–12,000 p.a.; 3 = £12–16,000 p.a.; 4 = £16–20,000 p.a.; 5 = more than £20,000 p.a.). The study was carried out in January 1992.

5. Results

5.1. Materialistic values and perceived income

The materialism scale proved to be internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha = 0.77), and total materialism scores ranged from 18–126, with 64 indicating a neutral position of neither endorsing nor rejecting materialistic values. Working-class adolescents endorsed materialistic values more strongly (mean 79.2) than middle-class adolescents (mean 75.1), as revealed in an analysis of total materialism scores by a 2 (Social class) × 2 (Material setting) × 2 (Target sex) × 2 (Respondent sex) ANOVA, which revealed significant social class differences, $F(1,139) = 4.91$; $p < 0.05$. The fact that the means for both groups were in the mid- to high-seventies showed a general adolescent leaning towards materialistic values.

With respect to the person description vignettes, an ANOVA of the same format as above showed that the manipulation of relative wealth had been successful. Both groups of adolescents agreed that one material setting included significantly more expensive possessions (mean 6.26) than the other (mean 3.32), $F(1,129) = 254.33$; $p < 0.0001$. A 2 (Social class) × 2 (Material setting) × 2 (Target sex) × 2 (Respondent sex) ANOVA on perceived income scores yielded a highly significant material setting main effect, $F(1,143) = 205.88$; $p < 0.0001$, as well as an interaction between material setting and class, $F(1,143) = 20.16$; $p < 0.0005$. Not surprisingly, the affluent person was thought to have a much higher income (mean 4.26, corresponding to the £16–20,000 p.a. category) than the less affluent one (mean 2.28; in the £8–12,000 p.a. category). However, the interaction effect shows class-related differences in the perception of at least this particular aspect of the vignette character. The middle-class adolescents saw a greater income gap between the two material settings than the working-class adolescents, of about £10,000 as compared to £4,000 p.a. (see Fig. 1).

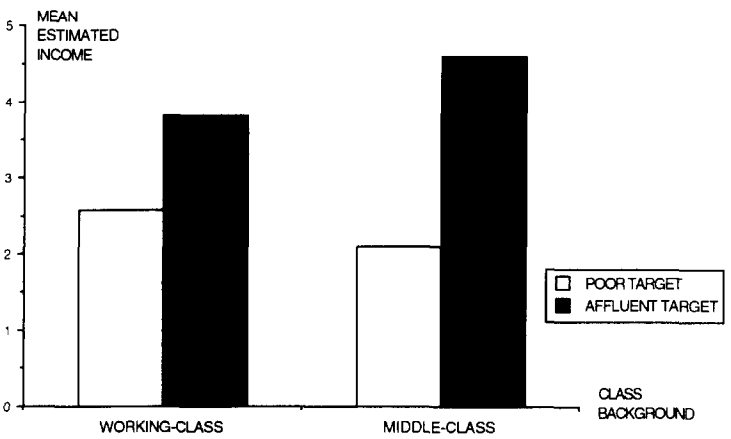

Fig. 1. Perceived income of an affluent and poorer individual by working-class and middle-class adolescents. Income estimates are given in terms of categories where 1 = less than £8,000 p.a. and 5 = more than £20,000 p.a.

Because the 5-point perceived income scale does not fully meet interval criteria, the ANOVA findings have to be treated as an approximation, but a reasonable one.

An ANOVA of the same format, carried out with materialism (individual total score) as a co-variate, indicated that materialistic values were not related to perception of earnings, $F(1,138) = 0.69$; n.s.

5.2. Perceived wealth and person perception

The adolescents evaluated the individual described in the vignette in terms of ten personal qualities. These were summarised into three dimensions (on the basis of principal components factor analysis, orthogonal varimax rotation), which explained 62.8% of the total variance in perception responses (see Table 1).

The first dimension describes an individual's abilities, motivation and resources, whilst the second is concerned with interpersonal warmth and relationships. In comparison to the perception dimensions discussed in Dittmar (1992b), adolescents' indication of how attractive they judged the person they had read about as a potential friend now forms part of the warmth dimension, i.e. how warm they judged the character to be was proportionate to their expressed liking. In a similar fashion, the extent to

Table 1
Three dimensions of person perception

Abilities and personal resources (29.6% explained variance)	
0.846	successful
0.775	intelligent
0.736	desirable lifestyle
0.687	hard-working
Warmth and interpersonal relationships (23.3% explained variance)	
0.847	cares for other people
0.736	attractive as potential friend
0.683	has a lot of friends
0.456	happy
Deservingness and envy (9.9% explained variance)	
0.916	has more than s/he deserves
0.664	is envious of others who possess more

Note: Decimal figures are factor loadings (after rotation), which indicate the strength with which a particular item is linked to the factor as a whole.

which they aspired to the same lifestyle as described in the vignette now forms part of their evaluation of the person's abilities and effort. The third dimension appears to refer to a status-concerned and ambitious person who is envious of others' possessions, despite possessing already more than their fair share.

Dimension factor scores (estimated by regression) were analysed by a 2 (Social class) × 2 (Material Setting) × 2 (Target sex) × 2 (Respondent sex) MANOVA to reveal systematic influences on person perception. Instead of differences between the working-class and middle-class adolescents, the MANOVA results indicated that impressions differed only on the basis of the material circumstances described in the vignette. Highly significant differences were found at the multivariate level, $F(3,137) = 53.47$; $p < 0.0001$, which have to be interpreted in terms of the univariate findings for the three perception dimensions. Means are presented in Fig. 2 with the label 'non-adjusted'.

Both working-class and middle-class adolescents saw the affluent vignette character as much more intelligent, successful and hard-working than the less well-off person, $F(1,139) = 69.97$; $p < 0.0001$. Moreover, s/he had the lifestyle all adolescents aspired to. In contrast, the affluent person was seen as less caring, having fewer friends, less happy, and less attractive as a potential friend, $F(1,139) = 16.59$; $p < 0.0005$. Compared to the less well-off vignette character, the affluent person was also seen as somebody who definitely had more expensive possessions than they deserved, but who

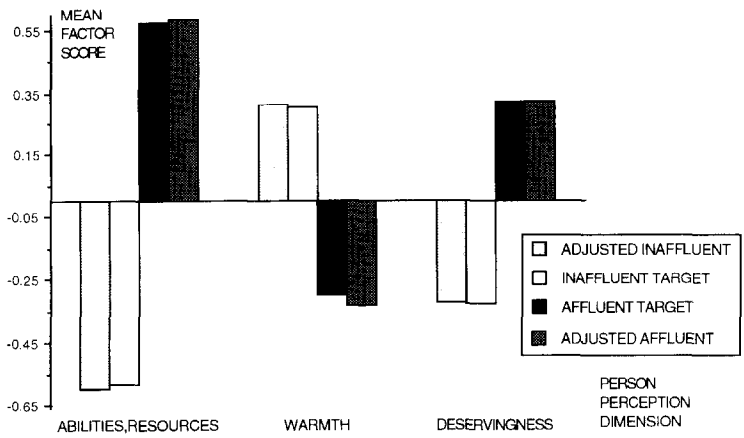

Fig. 2. Three dimensions of person perception and relative wealth (means are given with and without adjustment for materialism).

was nevertheless envious of others who possessed more, $F(1,139) = 14.14$; $p < 0.0005$.

5.3. *Materialism and person perception*

The third question addressed in this study concerns the potential impact of materialistic values on the impressions the adolescents formed. The $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ MANOVA described above was rerun with materialism (individual total score) as a co-variate. If materialistic values are an important influence on person perception, the co-variance analysis should reveal systematic relationships between materialism and impression dimensions, as well as altering the findings of the original MANOVA because the impact of materialism is now held constant statistically. In this fashion, the impact of individual differences (i.e. materialistic values) and independent variables (e.g., material setting in the vignette) on person perception can be disentangled. The impact of materialism on person perception just failed to reach the conventional significance level at the multivariate level ($F(3,132) = 2.44$; $p < 0.07$), but was nevertheless deemed sufficient for further attention, given that it is likely – on the basis of the materialism literature – that some person perception dimensions are more closely linked to materialism (e.g., abilities and effort) than others (e.g., warmth). Indeed, at the univariate level materialistic values were related significantly only to the first impression dimension ($F(1,134) = 4.02$, $p < 0.05$), although the strength of

the relationship is moderate, $r = 0.17$. Thus, it is likely that endorsing a materialistic outlook does influence impressions overall, but is related significantly only to the perception of such personal abilities and resources as success, intelligence or hard work. Perceptions concerning warmth, interpersonal relationships and deservingness are not related to endorsement of materialistic values. However, the impact of individually held materialistic values on person perception is comparatively minor when contrasted with the effect of the relative wealth cues given in the vignettes, described in the previous section. The actual pattern of impressions remained virtually unaltered even when the impact of individual materialistic values was controlled statistically (see 'adjusted' means in Fig. 2).

The way in which materialistic values inform impressions about abilities and resources becomes clearer when the responses of adolescents highest and lowest in materialism are compared. From each social class, the 16 adolescents with the highest materialism scores and 16 with the lowest materialism scores were selected (overall $n = 64$). As neither respondent sex nor target sex had revealed any effects in the previous MANOVAs, they were omitted for this analysis in order to preserve sufficiently large numbers of respondents in each cell. A 2 (Social class) $\times$ 2 (Material setting) $\times$ 2 (Materialism) ANOVA revealed, as expected, that the affluent material setting led to inferences of much greater abilities and effort (mean factor score 0.41) than the poorer setting (mean factor score -0.46), $F(1,54) = 14.51$; $p < 0.0001$. Of more interest with respect to the third hypothesis is the finding that the ANOVA also showed a significant interaction between material setting and materialism, $F(1,54) = 3.80$; $p = 0.05$ (see Fig. 3 for means).

It appears, then, that the more materialistic an individual's outlook, the more he or she perceives a link between a person's abilities and effort, and their relative wealth. Moreover, two planned comparisons for simple effects (e.g., Keppel et al., 1992) were carried out to assess the perceived differences between the affluent and the poor target, separately for adolescents low and high in materialistic values. The first comparison revealed that the small discrepancy in intelligence, success and hard work the non-materialistic adolescents see between affluent (mean factor score 0.04) and less well-off individuals (mean factor score -0.41) was not significant statistically, $F(1,54) = 1.31$, n.s. They did not actually infer the presence of these qualities from expensive material possessions attributed to a person, given that their mean for the affluent material setting is close to the neutral midpoint of 0. In contrast, the highly materialistic adolescents saw a

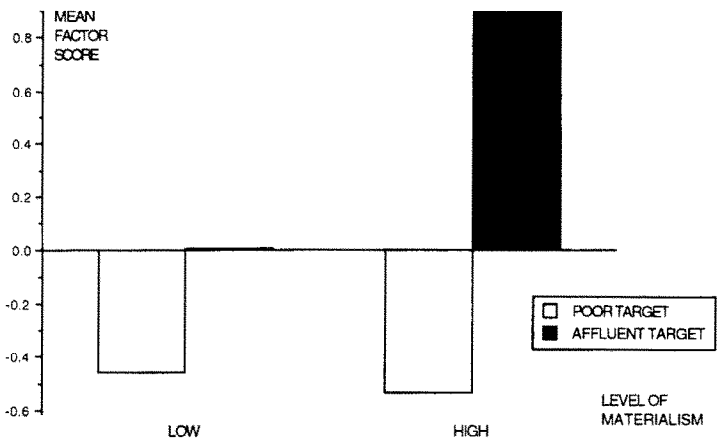

Fig. 3. Perceived abilities as a function of an individual's wealth and perceiver's materialism.

discrepancy between the two material settings three times as large as the non-materialistic teenagers: they strongly inferred intelligence, success and hard work from a person's expensive possessions (mean factor score 0.78), and described these qualities as not present when a person lacks expensive consumer goods and wealth (mean factor score −0.49). The second comparison showed that this difference was highly significant, $F(1,54) = 14.76$; $p < 0.01$.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This study provides empirical support for all three hypotheses examined, thus corroborating the general claim that materialism plays an important role in social perception. This study has examined first impressions about hypothetical others which did not involve actual encounters, where more non-possession-related information would be conveyed. However, the power of such stereotypical beliefs in shaping subsequent interactions should not be underestimated and has been demonstrated empirically in social psychological work on stereotypes as self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., Snyder, 1984). Moreover, this study aimed explicitly at eliciting socially shared representations through the use of an impression formation methodology.

The social class differences in materialistic values and perceived income illustrate that a person's socio-economic location influences his or her

representations about the economic world in certain respects. The finding that working-class adolescents endorsed materialistic values more strongly than their middle-class counterparts fits with earlier research on class-related orientations towards material possessions in Britain (Dittmar, 1991). The fact that working-class adolescents perceive less pronounced inequalities in wage differentials than middle-class adolescents also corroborates earlier research (Emler and Dickinson, 1985), and one likely reason may be the middle-class adolescents' greater familiarity with the material goods that are affordable in higher wage brackets. The findings also fit with those of Belk et al. (1982) that middle-class adolescents show a greater concern with making status-related inferences from consumption symbolism.

Yet, despite these class-related differences, and in contrast to supposed social identity concerns, both working-class and middle-class adolescents perceived the personal qualities of affluent and less affluent individuals similarly. The present findings regarding perceived abilities and warmth replicate Dittmar (1992b), notwithstanding the use of written vignettes rather than videos as stimulus material. Moreover, these socially shared notions can be described as dominant representations because they depict affluent individuals in a more positive light – as more intelligent, hard-working and successful – than the less well-off. However, it also emerged that representations about the wealthy contain ambivalent elements: impressions of warmth and interpersonal relationships favoured less affluent individuals. Yet, given the importance accorded to individual abilities, qualities and self-betterment within the current Western notion of identity (e.g., Samson, 1988), such attributes as 'warm' may well be seen as pleasant, but somehow less important aspects of a person. Being granted such attributes certainly does not threaten the privileged position and positive identity of the economically advantaged, and may make the unequal distribution of wealth appear less unpalatable. In conclusion, it could be argued speculatively that an important facet of materialism at the socio-cultural level are dominant representations about the personal qualities which supposedly accompany wealth and poverty.

In terms of materialism at an individual level, the findings empirically demonstrated one of the defining characteristics of materialism as described by Richins and Dawson (1992): highly materialistic individuals showed a stronger tendency to judge the personal qualities of others in terms of the number and quality of material goods possessed. More specifically, materialism as a value orientation seems to lead individuals to draw more strongly on dominant representations about the personal quali-

ties of people at different levels of the socio-economic hierarchy. In terms of person perception, an individual's materialistic value orientation could thus be regarded as the extent to which s/he subscribes to the socio-cultural materialistic representations discussed above, and reproduces them when forming impressions.

In conclusion, this study corroborates the usefulness of a social constructionist approach to belief systems associated with the socially shared, symbolic meanings of material goods. It supports a dominant representations perspective of socio-cultural materialism, but suggests that its impact is moderated by materialism as an individual value orientation. However, the generality of these findings needs to be assessed. Firstly, similar studies on materialistic values could investigate the representations of respondents other than adolescents, including adults and children of different ages to chart developmental changes. Secondly, Western industrialised cultures other than Britain need to be examined. An even stronger test would entail cross-cultural comparisons with non-Western, non-materialist societies. The documented link between materialism and person perception in British adolescents calls for future research if we hope to move closer to a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of our materialistic consumer orientation for social perception.

Appendix

Sample vignette: Affluent woman

Note: Possessions used for the less affluent condition are given in parentheses; in the male vignettes the name *John* was used and pronouns changed.

Liz Davies works for a large chain of supermarkets. She is quite tall with short black hair and blue eyes. She is 29 years old although she looks younger than her age. Liz left home when she was 18 and now owns a large flat (small rented flat) in Brighton, which is well furnished (adequately furnished) with comfortable furniture (secondhand furniture). She is particularly proud of a new 3-piece suite (a set of chairs) which she recently bought from Harrods (at an auction and painted herself). She passed her driving test when she was 20 and now drives a BMW convertible (an old, but reliable Fiesta). On a typical day, Liz returns from work, feeds the cat and then chooses a ready-prepared meal from the freezer and heats it in

the microwave (cooks a simple meal in her kitchenette). She may also select a vintage wine to enjoy with her meal (sometimes she picks up a bottle of wine from the supermarket on her way home). Before sitting down to eat she often picks a few compact discs from her large collection (records from her collection) to listen to. Having eaten, Liz puts the dishes in the dishwasher (washes up) and, if the day has been particularly stressful, she likes to relax in her new jacuzzi (in a long hot bath). Afterwards, she usually decides to go out with a friend or to settle down to watch a video (in front of the TV) for the rest of the evening.

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