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Does Our Well-Being Decrease When We Value High Materialistic Aspirations or When We Attain Them?

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the relationships between materialistic and non-materialistic aspirations and well-being (cognitive, emotional, and social well-being). The novelty of this study is that besides examining the relationships between the importance of materialistic and non-materialistic aspirations and well-being, it also tested the relationships between the attainment of materialistic and non-materialistic goals and different aspects of well-being. The findings of the study indicate that both attaching importance to non-materialistic aspirations and their attainment are linked with well-being (emotional, cognitive and social well-being). The relationship between the attainment of materialistic aspirations and well-being is complex; the attainment of financial success fosters well-being (cognitive, emotional and social well-being) and the attainment of popularity inhibits well-being. However, the relationship between the attachment of importance to materialistic aspirations and well-being is insignificant.

Keywords

life aspirations, materialism, subjective well-being, social-well-being



For some time, people have asked the question of what we should value and what we should strive for in order to have a happy life. According to Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996), there are two types of aspirations/goals: materialistic (financial success, popularity, image) and non-materialistic (personal development, relationship with others, community feeling). A number of studies showed that attaching importance to non-materialistic aspirations (goals) enhances well-being but attaching importance to materialistic aspirations (goals) diminishes well-being. However, the attachment of importance to aspirations and attainment of goals are different psychological states. The former reflects one's desires and expectations while the latter reflects the perception of what one has already attained (Ryan et al., 1999).

The current study includes several important contributions. So far, the research has focused mainly on the effect of the importance of materialistic vs. non-materialistic aspirations on well-being. This study extends the scope of the analyses to the effect on well-being of the attainment of materialistic and non-materialistic goals. While most previous research on materialistic aspirations has understood well-being as psychological health, the present study looks at cognitive and emotional well-being. Also, it examines the relationship between the attachment of importance to materialistic aspirations and the attainment of materialistic aspirations and social well-being, which has not been examined before. Finally, to the best of our knowledge, no study has yet tested the relationship between the attachment of importance to the three materialistic aspirations (financial success, popularity and image), the attainment of these aspirations and subjective well-being on Polish samples.

Attachment of Importance and the Attainment of Materialistic and Non-Materialistic Goals and Well-Being – Research Review

Previous research done on US samples has shown that the attachment of importance to materialistic vs. non-materialistic aspirations is linked with lower well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1996); attachment of high importance to materialistic aspirations is linked with a lower level of self-actualization, vitality, life satisfaction, and higher level of anxiety, depression, narcissism and a higher level of ill health. Results indicating a positive relationship between the attachment of importance to non-materialistic aspirations and well-being were similar in Germany (Schmuck et al., 2000), Spain (Romero, Gómez-Fraguela, & Villar, 2012), Poland (Cieślak & Klonowicz, 2004; Górnik-Durose & Janiec, 2010; Zawadzka, Duda, Rymkiewicz, & Kondratowicz-Nowak, 2015), Hungary (Martos & Kopp, 2012), Romania (Frost & Frost, 2000), Croatia (Rijavec, Brdar, & Miljković, 2006), China (Lekes et al., 2010) and South Korea (Kim et al., 2003).

However, the results concerning the relationship between the attachment of importance to materialistic aspirations and well-being are inconsistent. Attachment of high importance to materialistic aspirations is related to lower well-being in American, South Korean, Spanish, German and Russian samples (cf. Kasser & Ryan 1993, 1996; Kim et al., 2003; Romero, Gómez-Fraguela, & Villar, 2012; Ryan et al., 1999; Schmuck et al., 2000). In Hungarian, Croatian and Chinese samples, the attachment of high importance to ma-

terialistic aspirations (e.g., financial success) is linked with a higher level of well-being (cf. Lekes et al., 2010; Martos & Kopp, 2012; Rijavec et al., 2006). In the Romanian sample, no significant relationship between the attachment of importance to materialistic goals and well-being was found (Frost & Frost, 2000). In the Polish sample, the results are twofold. On the one hand, the attachment of importance to materialistic aspirations affects neither satisfaction with life (cognitive well-being measure) nor emotional well-being (Cieślak & Klonowicz, 2004; Górnik-Durose & Janiec, 2010; Skarżyńska, 2003, 2004). On the other hand, it (i.e., popularity aspirations) positively correlates with well-being (i.e., life satisfaction; cf. Zawadzka, Duda, Rymkiewicz, & Kondratowicz-Nowak, 2015).

Several studies have shown that there is a difference between the relationship between the attainment of materialistic goals and well-being and the relationship between attainment of non-materialistic goals and well-being. Research on American samples has indicated that the attainment of materialistic goals is not related to well-being while attainment of non-materialistic goals is positively related to well-being (i.e., a higher level of self-actualization, vitality, life satisfaction and lower level of depression). Sheldon and Kasser's (1998) longitudinal study showed that the attainment of materialistic goals has no effect on well-being. In another study, they demonstrated that while the attainment of non-materialistic goals increases well-being, the attainment of materialistic goals remains neutral as far as well-being is concerned (Kasser & Ryan, 2001). Niemiec et al. (2009) concluded that the attainment of non-materialistic goals is linked with better psychological health than the attainment of materialistic goals regardless of the importance of both kinds of goals. Similar results were obtained in a Belgian sample. It was found that while the attainment of non-materialistic goals is related to higher well-being (ego integrity and death acceptance), the attainment of materialistic goals in life is linked with lower well-being (despair) (Van Hiel & Vansteenkiste, 2009). In a Russian sample, the attainment of non-materialistic goals is positively linked with well-being, but the results concerning the relationship between the attainment of materialistic goals and well-being are inconsistent: the attainment of materialistic goals is not related to higher levels of self-actualization, vitality and a lower level of depression but it is positively related to satisfaction with life (Ryan et al., 1999).

Subjective Well-Being, Social Well-Being and Their Aspects

Subjective well-being is a broad phenomenon related to psychological aspects leading to satisfaction with life. Diener et al. (1985) systematized the concepts related to subjective well-being and included both cognitive and affective components in its definition. The cognitive component is described as a positive evaluation of one's own life as a whole (general satisfaction with life) or its particular aspects. The affective component is described as experiencing positive emotions and not experiencing negative emotions, which results in positive emotional balance. These aspects of subjective well-being are based on the hedonistic tradition in defining well-being. Besides, subjective well-being could be a result of eudaimonia (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Ryff, 1989). In the eudaimonic tradition, well-being means living well and actualizing one's own human potential.

An important facet of eudaimonic well-being is social well-being (Keyes, 1998). It is comprised of aspects related to:

- a) satisfaction with one's own interactions with others: social integrity (i.e., belief that the individual is an important member of society) and social contribution (i.e., conviction that the individual has something important to offer to society) and
- b) positive evaluation of society as a whole: social acceptance (i.e., positive assessment of the society, incl. interpersonal trust), social coherency (i.e., belief that the social world is meaningful and logical and caring about society in a broad context), and social actualization (i.e., assessment of society as moving in a positive direction in terms of growth and progress) (see Keyes, 1998).

Researchers argue that eudaimonic well-being is always accompanied by hedonistic well-being (Kashdan et al., 2008). However, hedonistic well-being is not always a result of higher eudaimonia. Regardless of complex interplays between hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of subjective well-being, current studies on life satisfaction include both aspects since they constitute two important sources of well-being.

For this reason, in our study we also examine cognitive and affective components of the hedonistic approach to well-being and social well-being as a facet of eudaimonic approach to well-being and analyze their relationship with materialistic and non-materialistic aspirations.

Hypotheses

In the light of the research presented above, which demonstrated that both the attachment of importance to non-materialistic aspirations and attainment of non-materialistic aspirations increase well-being in all the countries mentioned (cf. Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996), we propose the first hypothesis: H1: *both the attachment of importance to non-materialistic aspirations and the attainment of non-materialistic aspirations is positively related to well-being (cf. subjective well-being: cognitive and emotional and social well-being).*

Research done in less wealthy countries that have recently undergone economic transition has also demonstrated that the attachment of importance to financial success may be positively related to subjective well-being (Romania: Frost & Frost, 2000; Hungary: Martos & Kopp, 2012; Croatia: Rijavec, Brdar, & Miljković, 2006). A single study, carried out in Russia, showed that the attainment of financial success may be positively related to life satisfaction (Ryan et al., 1999). Another study, on a Polish sample, showed a positive correlation between the attachment of importance to popularity and life satisfaction (Zawadzka et al., 2015). Consequently, we propose the second and third hypotheses: H2: *the attachment of importance to financial success and the attainment of financial success is positively related to well-being;* H3: *the attachment of importance to popularity and the attainment of popularity is positively related to well-being.*

Method

Participants

180 students, 88 women and 92 men, aged $M = 21.90$, ($SD = 3.44$) participated in the study. They were full-time and part-time students of the University of Gdańsk and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Katowice, who participated in the study in exchange for course credit.

Materials and Procedure

The Aspiration Index was used to measure materialistic and non-materialistic aspirations (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Polish adaptation by Zawadzka et al., 2015). The index consists of 35 goals relating to seven aspirations: three materialistic, three non-materialistic and one aspiration concerning health (which was excluded in the current study). The materialistic aspirations are: financial success (e.g., to be a very wealthy person), popularity (e.g., to have one's name known by many people), image (e.g., to successfully hide the signs of aging). The non-materialistic aspirations are: personal growth (e.g., to grow and learn new things), relationships with others (e.g., to have good friends that one can count on), community feeling (e.g., to work for the betterment of society). Respondents give answers to two questions using a seven-point scale. The first question is "How important is this goal to you?" (from 1 = not at all to 7 = very). The second question is "How much of this goal have you already attained?" (from 1 = not at all, to 7 = very much). The reliability of the importance of each of the aspirations is as follows: financial success $\alpha = .89$, popularity $\alpha = .89$, image $\alpha = .79$, personal growth $\alpha = .62$, relationship with others $\alpha = .83$, community feeling $\alpha = .86$. The reliability of the attainment of each of the aspirations is as follows: financial success $\alpha = .81$, popularity $\alpha = .78$, image $\alpha = .74$, personal growth $\alpha = .61$, relationship with others $\alpha = .68$, community feeling $\alpha = .76$.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule was used to measure the affective component of subjective well-being (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; Polish adaptation by Brzozowski, Watson, & Clark, 2010). The PANAS scale consists of 20 adjectives, half of which describe positive affectivity and the other half negative affectivity. The general affect is measured by asking participants to rate the adjectives according to how they feel. They give answers on a 5-point scale (from 1 = never to 5 = very often). Emotions balance was calculated by subtracting negative affectivity scale from positive affectivity scale and it was used in further statistical analysis. The reliability of the scale is $\alpha = .75$.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Polish adaptation by Juczyński, 2001) was used to measure the cognitive component of subjective well-being. The scale consists of five items measuring general satisfaction with one's life (e.g., I am satisfied with my life). Participants answer the questions on a 5-point scale (from 1 = I disagree to 5 = I agree). Cronbach's alpha for the scale is $\alpha = .82$.

Social Well-Being Scale (SWBS; Keyes, 1998; Polish adaptation by Karaś, Najderska, & Ciecuch, 2013) was used to measure the facet of eudaimonic well-being. The SWBS includes 33 items and consists of five subscales: social integrity, social acceptance, social contribution, social coherency, and social self-actualization. Participants answer the questions on a 5-point scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the scale is $\alpha = .88$.

Students filled in a set of questionnaires in the presence of the researcher. The survey was carried out in groups of 20 to 25 students and took about 30 minutes.

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the attachment of importance to materialistic and non-materialistic aspirations and their attainment and subjective well-being. In general, the surveyed group of Polish students valued non-materialistic goals more highly ($M = 5.66$) than the materialistic ones ($M = 4.01$, $t(179) = -19.17$, $p < .001$) and valued the attainment of non-materialistic goals more highly ($M = 4.08$) than the attainment of materialistic ones ($M = 2.82$, $t(179) = -16.77$, $p < .001$). First, a correlational analysis was applied. It indicated a positive relationship between the attachment of importance to non-materialistic goals and social well-being ($r = .41$, $p = .001$). The correlation between the attachment of importance to non-materialistic goals and cognitive well-being ($r = .18$, $p = .02$) was weak, yet significant. Positive relationships were also noted between the attainment of non-materialistic goals and affective well-being ($r = .23$, $p = .002$), cognitive well-being ($r = .23$, $p = .002$), social well-being ($r = .37$, $p = .001$). The correlations between the attachment of importance to materialistic goals and all tested aspects of subjective well-being and also the correlations between the attainment of materialistic goals and the aspects of subjective well-being were non-significant.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the attachment of importance to financial success, popularity and image aspirations and their attainment and well-being. The correlation between the attachment of importance to popularity and

Table 1

Descriptives and Correlations – Materialistic Goals, Non-Materialistic Goals

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Affective well-being	Cognitive well-being	Social well-being
Materialistic Goals					
Importance	4.01	1.14	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Attainment	2.83	.94	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Non-Materialistic Goals					
Importance	5.66	.82	n.s.	.18*	.41***
Attainment	4.08	1.03	.23**	.23**	.37***

Note. $N = 180$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Descriptives and Correlations – Financial Success, Popularity, Image and Well-Being

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Financial success importance	4.62	1.34	-							
2. Financial success attainment	2.72	1.09	.43***	-						
3. Popularity importance	3.27	1.5	.53***	.33***	-					
4. Popularity attainment	2.27	1.12	.25**	.46***	.42***	-				
5. Image importance	4.13	1.31	.49***	.36***	.55***	.22**	-			
6. Image attainment	3.48	1.21	.32***	.43***	.34***	.57***	.65***	-		
7. Cognitive well-being	3.17	.82	.02	.30***	.001	-.07	.08	.06	-	
8. Affective well-being	1.15	.98	.09	.14+	.010	.006	-.04	-.006	.38***	-
9. Social well-being	3.31	.46	-.05	.17*	.16*	.11	.12	.09	.35***	.34***

Note. $N = 180$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. + - tendency.

social well-being ($r = .16, p = .01$) was significant. Positive relationships were also noted between the attainment of financial success and both cognitive ($r = .17, p = .01$) and social ($r = .30, p = .01$) well-being. The correlations between the attachment of importance to financial success and image and all tested aspects of subjective well-being were non-significant and so were the correlations between the attainment of popularity and image and all the aspects of subjective well-being.

Next, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied to verify the hypotheses. In the first step, the relationships between materialistic and non-materialistic aspirations (both the attachment of importance and the attainment) and the three measures of well-being (affective, cognitive and social well-being) were analyzed using AMOS 22 software (maximum likelihood method of analysis; see Figure 1).

Adopting Kasser and Ryan's theoretical model (1993, 1996), we assumed in our model that there are correlations between the attainment and the attachment of importance to materialistic and non-materialistic aspirations (see Figure 1). Well-being was represented in the model as a latent variable, with three indicators: satisfaction with life, affective balance and social well-being. We allowed for a correlation between errors of satisfaction with life and affective balance, as these two measures represent (hedonic) subjective well-being and therefore are strictly related to each other (Diener, 1984). Based on former research we assumed a positive relationship between non-materialistic aspirations and subjective well-being and a negative relationship or lack of relationship between materialistic aspirations and subjective well-being.

The tested model (see Figure 1) demonstrated a moderate fit to the data: $\chi^2(10, N = 180) = 21.20, p = .020$; $\chi^2/df = 2.12$; CFI = 0.96; NFI = 0.94, RMSEA = .08, pclose = .125. When assessing goodness-of-fit, CIMIN χ^2/df should be $0 \leq \chi^2/df \leq 2$ for good fit and $2 < \chi^2/df \leq 3$ for acceptable fit (cf. Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003); RMSEA should be lower than .05 for good fit and .08 for moderate fit; both NFI and CFI should

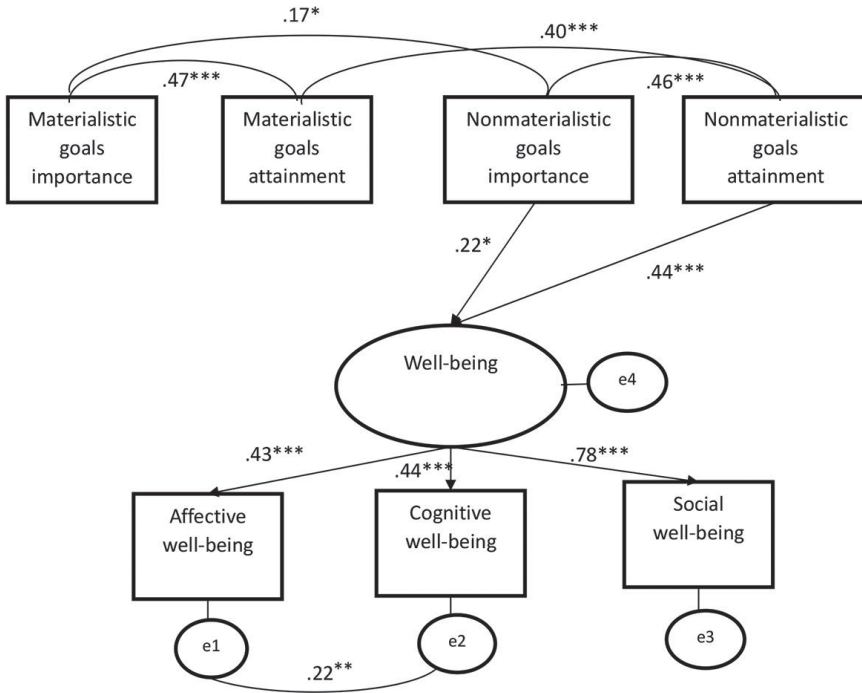


Figure 1. Structural equation model of factors associated with well-being and materialistic aspirations (importance and attainment) and non-materialistic aspirations (importance and attainment) (standardized estimations).

Note. $N = 180$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

be higher than .95 for good fit and .90 for moderate fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The effect of non-materialistic aspirations, of both the attachment of importance ($\beta = .22, p < .05$) and attainment ($\beta = .44, p < .001$), on well-being was statistically significant. But the effect of materialistic aspirations on well-being was insignificant. Therefore, we excluded the relationship between materialistic aspirations and well-being from the final model. This tested model is congruent with findings from former post-transitional countries and contrary to the original assumptions of Kasser and Ryan's theoretical model (1993, 1996). The results of correlational analyses and SEM show that the first hypothesis, H1 is confirmed in this study.

In the second step, another SEM model was applied to examine direct relationships between specific materialistic aspirations and well-being, i.e., independent effects of each of the three materialistic aspirations: financial success, popularity and image, considering both their importance and attainment, on well-being. The goodness of fit for SEM indicated that the model provided an acceptable fit to data: $\chi^2(16, N = 180) = 34.36, p = 0.005$; CFI = .96, NFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.08, pclose = 0.085 (see Figure 2).

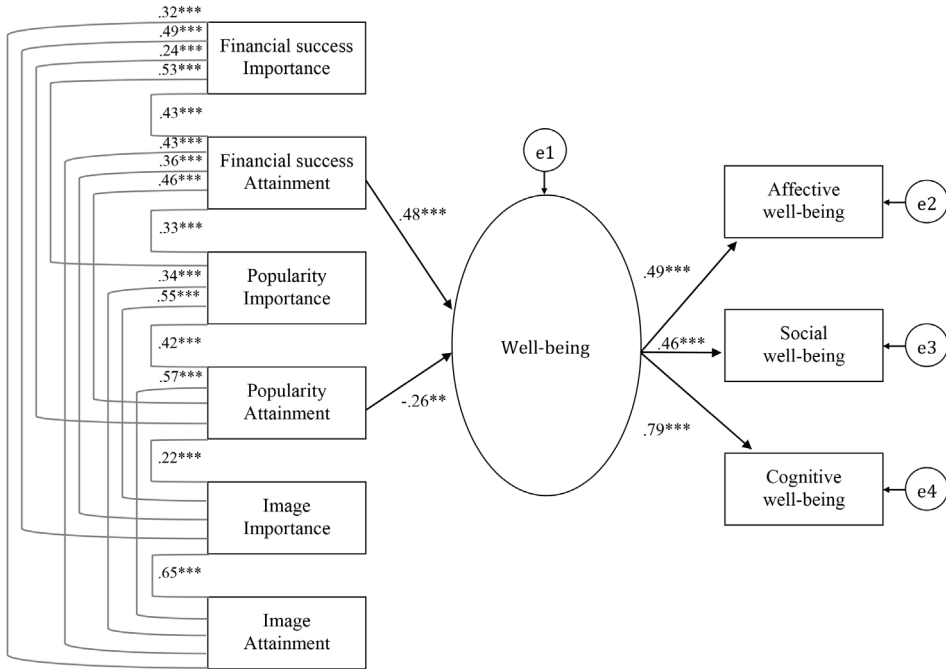


Figure 2. Structural equation model of factors associated with well-being and financial success aspirations (importance and attainment) and popularity aspirations (importance and attainment) (standardized estimations).

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2 shows the standardized model as estimated by AMOS. The results demonstrated a significant and positive relationship between the attainment of financial success and well-being ($\beta = .48, p < .000$). In turn, attainment of popularity was significant, yet negatively related to well-being ($\beta = -.26, p < .02$). Furthermore, well-being was based mainly on the assessment of cognitive well-being ($\beta = .79, p < .001$) and to a lesser extent, was based on affective ($\beta = .49, p < .001$) and social well-being ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). Contrary to our expectations, no significant relationship was found between well-being and importance of financial success or between the attachment of importance to and attainment of popularity and well-being. Also, no empirical support was found for relationships between well-being and the attachment of importance to and attainment of image (see Figure 2). The presented SEM analysis shows that H2 is partially confirmed: the attainment of financial success is positively related to well-being, but H3 is not supported in this study.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current research confirmed previous studies and showed that the attachment of importance to non-materialistic aspirations (cf. Cieślak & Klonowicz, 2004; Frost & Frost, 2000; Górnik-Durose & Janiec, 2010; Kasser & Ryan 1993, 1996; Kim et al., 2003; Lokes et al., 2010; Martos & Kopp, 2012; Rijavec, Brdar, & Miljković, 2006; Romero, Gómez-Fraguela, & Villar, 2012; Schmuck et al., 2000; Zawadzka, Duda, Rymkiewicz, & Kondratowicz-Nowak, 2015) and the attainment of non-materialistic goals (cf. Niemiec et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 1999) are linked with higher levels of subjective well-being. This is the first study to demonstrate that the attachment of importance to non-materialistic goals and their attainment result in higher levels of social well-being. This means that the higher the importance of non-materialistic goals and their attainment, the more positive the evaluation of society and the better the relations with others.

The attachment of importance to materialistic aspirations, when analyzed collectively, had no effect on either subjective well-being (emotional and cognitive) or social well-being. This is contrary to results previously obtained in research conducted in more wealthy countries (cf. Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Kim et al., 2003; Schmuck et al., 2000; Romero, Gómez-Fraguela, & Villar, 2012; Ryan et al., 1999) since they showed that materialistic aspirations lower subjective well-being. However, it should be noted that the findings are consistent with other results previously obtained in other less wealthy post transitional countries (cf. Frost & Frost, 2000; Ryan et al., 1999) and on other Polish samples (Cieślak & Klonowicz, 2004; Górnik-Durose & Janiec, 2010; Skarżyńska, 2003, 2004). With regard to the attainment of materialistic goals, when analyzed collectively, it neither increased nor decreased subjective well-being in the surveyed sample. Nevertheless, when the attachment of importance to and attainment of all three materialistic aspirations are looked at separately, the relationships between them and well-being are more complex. The results showed that the attainment of financial success increases well-being, whereas the attachment of importance to financial success has no significant relationship with well-being. They can be interpreted as indicating that the attachment of importance to financial aspirations does not necessarily lead to negative consequences for well-being (cf. good mood, life satisfaction and social well-being). The findings differ from those obtained in wealthier countries, where negative relationships were found between the attachment of importance to financial success and cognitive well-being (cf. Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Niemiec et al., 2009, Ryan et al., 1999), and those obtained in poorer countries, where positive relationships were observed between the attachment of importance to financial success and cognitive well-being (cf. Lokes et al., 2010; Martos & Kopp, 2012; Rijavec et al., 2006).

Moreover, the results showed that the attainment of financial success increases well-being (cf. positive emotional balance, satisfaction with life and social well-being). The findings of this study suggesting that the attainment of financial success leads to an increase in well-being may be explained by the fact that the attainment of financial suc-

cess creates opportunities for individuals (e.g., to provide for one's family or to develop one's career by attending a university course) which in turn fosters well-being. The results showed that the attainment of popularity decreases well-being. These results differ from the results obtained in previous research on another Polish sample (Zawadzka et al., 2015), which showed that an increase in popularity correlates with an increase in satisfaction with life. However, in spite of the discrepancies between the obtained results, it can be deduced that aspirations concerning popularity may play a role in the well-being of Poles.

The current research has its limitations, too. In order to expand the generalizability of the results, supplementary research should be carried out to examine the attachment of importance to and attainment of materialistic vs. non-materialistic goals in different age groups. Also, the research should be conducted in an experimental setting, as this one is a questionnaire-based study. Bearing in mind that there are discrepancies between the results obtained in more and less wealthy countries concerning the effect of the attachment of importance to financial success on emotional and cognitive well-being, future research should be extended to include a measurement of social well-being. This will allow testing of whether the obtained result, which indicates that the attachment of importance to financial success lowers social well-being, relates to countries of various wealth levels or is specific to particular countries only (e.g., like Poland). In order to explain the inconsistency occurring in the results of Polish samples, the relationship between the attachment of importance to popularity and well-being and the relationship between the attainment of popularity and well-being should be analyzed further.

In conclusion, the results obtained in the current study demonstrated that materialistic aspirations (e.g., financial success) may have different effects depending on whether it is their attributed importance or their attainment that is considered – while the attachment of importance to materialistic goals may lower well-being, the attainment of materialistic goals may raise well-being. This study also showed that the relationship between the attachment of importance to and attainment of materialistic aspirations is more complex than previously assumed in the Kasser and Ryan model. Accordingly, materialistic aspirations may produce different effects on well-being, as shown in this study, so in order to acquire a better understanding of their influence on well-being, they should be analyzed independently. Furthermore, it is recommended that in future research on the influence of materialistic aspirations on well-being, countries' socio-economic conditions be taken into account as a possible moderator of the relationship.

Supplementary Materials

Data for this article are available at PsychArchives: <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.785>

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Competing Interests

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