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## ***“Money Does Not Buy Happiness”*** **Using the Sociological Imagination to Move Beyond Stressful Lives**

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**Abstract:** Using her sociological imagination, in this paper the author applies various sociological concepts and theories (phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, social exchange/rational choice theory, functionalism, conflict theory, and the postmodern perspective) to explore the role played by money, materialism, and media, as sources of undue stress in her life.

Each day, I wake up to the sound of my alarm clock to start my busy day. As I make my breakfast, I run through all the things I need to get done and again look it over in my trusty daily planner that has it all set in stone. For a long time, I have struggled with trying to do too much at once. Between classes, schoolwork, a job, and a social life, my days are full and I hardly ever have time to have a moment to myself to think. Why do I do this to myself? What effects does constantly doing something have on me—not just on me, but also on our society? People are constantly strutting down the street or driving in their cars chatting on their cell phones or checking emails on their Blackberry. Materialism plays a major player in our society. It has become increasingly important to have the right clothes and the newest technology items such as the Blackberry, which contributes to people being busy doing work because they need money to afford these types of items. What

is the point of having more money and stuff than other people? Does it affect the quality of life people have? Why doesn't our society put more emphasis on spending time just thinking or spending quality time with family and friends or even writing in a journal?

There are many ways to spend our time that are much more useful. In her book, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, Louise DeSalvo explains the importance of writing and the benefits it can have for people's lives. Two of DeSalvo's reasons for writing are very related to the topic of busy, stressful lives. DeSalvo reminds the reader that writing is cheap. It does not cost very much to write thoughts and experiences down and it is a positive way of getting feelings out. Also, she indicates that it does not take much time to write either. If an individual only has five minutes a day to devote to something extra, writing can be a great way

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Jillian Pelletier is an undergraduate student majoring in Sociology at UMass Boston. She wrote this paper while enrolled as a junior in the course Sociology 341 (“Elements of Sociological Theory”) instructed by Mohammad Tamdgidi (Associate Professor of Sociology at UMass Boston) during the Fall 2008 semester at UMass Boston.

to use this time because it can give that person a moment to let feelings out, get rid of aggression, or even write down happy feelings. This is something we do not use enough in our society. People can give attention to writing as little or as much as they want (DeSalvo 13). For example, a busy business executive could set aside five minutes of their busy day to write. Keeping a pad of paper and a pen right on top of their desk to jot down something could be helpful for their lives.

Late in her book, DeSalvo writes about her preparation for her daily writing. It is much like the preparation many people make before heading to work or school in the morning. "Each day, I divide my writing time into three distinct phases—preparations, working, concluding. Before I begin working, I prepare to work, often by reviewing yesterday's writing, by browsing through books and notes, by carefully planning my work for that day, by scribbling some phrases and ideas (DeSalvo 134). Although writing can be seen as means for people with busy, scheduled lives to get away from all the planning and stress, at times it can still be a very planned procedure. It can be just as planned and structured as the paperwork that a CEO of a multi-billion dollar company must complete each day.

These are issues I have dealt with much of my life and this is a perfect opportunity to take the chance and look deeper into their causes and see what I can do about them.

Media's influence has definitely played a large role in the stress and materialism in my own life and those of many others in society. Through the use of media outlets, such as television and the Internet, materialism has crept its way into our lives and we do not even realize how much effect it is having on our lives. In the film, *The Matrix*, there is a scene at the beginning when millions of humans are wired inside their little pods, thinking they are free and completely

unaware of what is truly going around them. The people do not realize that they are not controlling their own lives. I believe this scene of the movie can be seen as a metaphor for aspects of our society. It seems that we are sometimes blind to the constant marketing of material products that is going on in our society. People do not even notice it anymore, but it is everywhere and that is how people in our society become obsessed with having the "right" products. For example, Tiger Woods is the most famous and successful golf player and he always wears Nike brand items when he plays. All of his clothing has the Nike symbol on it and there are millions of people watching him wear their brand. A huge Tiger Woods fan may go to the store, without even realizing it; he or she is automatically drawn to the Nike gear over any other brand.

The film, *Affluenza*, which contributed to my choice of topic, deals with our society's issues with materialism and money. Even though Karl Marx uses the term "materialism" in a different sense, that is, as how societies may be organized based on economic interests, arrangements, and modes of production (Wallace and Wolf 81), one may consider *Affluenza* and materialistic culture to be a by-product of a society so overwhelmingly determined by economic motives. The disease of *Affluenza* is a social disease that causes people to want more money and things and will do whatever to get what they want. Many of the people in the film talked about going into credit card debt and working long hours just to afford the "right" stuff. This new phase of capitalist economy and culture all began after World War II, when America gave businesses a "lift" after the Great Depression. This led to America's different, "more positive," view of consumerism to boost American's morale to go out and buy stuff to build up the strength of America's economy. But, too much of something can be very harmful and that is what the case

has been with consumerism.

The cost of economic success is beginning to outweigh the benefits and will only get worse if people do not begin to change their ways. The film *Affluenza*, chronicles this social disease and the types of negative affects that it is having on our society. Affluenza causes more pollution; people's lives become revolved around maintaining things; people are forced to work more to get what they want and remain under constant pressure to have the "right" stuff. Although I do see myself as a conscious citizen when it comes to the environment and the negative impact of materialism, aspects of *Affluenza* do definitely have an effect on me. I also find myself working, not only to pay my bills, but also to have the luxury of buying clothes and other items I want. I am not proud of it, but it is hard to let go of materialism when one is accustomed to a lifestyle defined by "nice things."

In Mitch Albom's novel, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, on the eighth Tuesday, Morrie and Mitch discuss the role money and materialism play in our society. Morrie says, "We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country. Do you know how they brainwash people? They repeat something over and over. And that's what we do in this country. Owning things is good. More money is good. More property is good. More commercialism is good. More is good. More is good. We repeat it—and have it repeated to us—over and over until nobody bothers even to think otherwise. The average person is so fogged up by all this; he has no perspective on what's really important anymore (Albom 124). Morrie here is best describing *Affluenza* and how it makes us feel more is better when it comes to money and things in our society. They become the focus of many people and the truly important aspects of life get pushed down the totem pole, such as spending time with family.

Morrie, as reported elsewhere in *Tues-*

*days with Morrie*, says, "They were embracing material things and expecting a sort of hug back. But, it never works. You can't substitute material things for love or for gentleness or for tenderness or for a sense of comradeship" (Albom 125). This passage brings up the idea that people use things to substitute for love, emotions, and friendship. But, as Morrie stated, these things will not hug you back. Having things in the end is not going to do people any good. When people go through hard times such as losing their job, or getting into a terrible car accident, or even lose a close family member, material things are not going to be able to ease any hurt feelings or be there when you need someone.

Some people believe that having more money and things will give them more happiness, although the exact opposite is true. Studies have shown that there is no positive correlation between money and happiness. It has also been theorized that people with higher incomes are no happier than others with average incomes, and they end up having more tension and stress (Kahneman et al. 2006). The exchange theory of social interaction sheds light on this fact because people weight the rewards and costs of getting the new "thing" and the kind of status it will give them in society. For example, if people see a woman carrying a new Gucci purse, they receive the impression that the woman is rich. Another theory that helps us understand this phenomenon is symbolic interactionism. This theory focuses on the interaction between the individual's internal thoughts and emotions and their social behavior. In this particular case, symbolic interactionism plays a role because the person sees the material objects as serving to make them more desirable and bring forth a certain status to them that they may want to possess. The objects then serve as symbols for how they desire to interact with others.

The desire to have a certain persona, to be a certain way in the eyes of society can

play a huge role in shaping how a person relates to himself or herself and to others. It can confuse their identity and how they see themselves. According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination enables us to “take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions” (Mills 348). I believe this concept sheds light on how people see themselves amid a materialistic and status-conscious culture. The concept of class comes into play here. Karl Marx identified class as a group of people that share similar positions in terms of property ownership of the means of production. Being in a higher class not only can give more access to material resources and political power in society, it also brings forth more purchasing power to buy nice things to raise one’s status in the eyes of others in society. And this comes at the expense of exploiting other people’s labor powers. The CEO of Kellogg Cereal, for instance, being at the top of the production and financial hierarchy in the company, receives the most benefits while having other people do most of the work to produce the cereal. Those with the money and power tell others what to do and how to do it, and receive all the benefits. Conflict theories, such as that of Marx, help us better understand our society and its materialistic culture known as Affluenza.

In his study of Affluenza titled “Affluenza: Television Use and Cultivation of Materialism,” Mark Harmon focuses on the effects of television viewing on the spread of materialistic culture. According to Harmon, surveys have shown a very strong link between television viewing and materialism. Television is a prime outlet to show off the “goods” life. Harmon believes that “[c]ultivation of materialism also can be seen as a mass media extension of symbolic interactionism” (Harmon 407). On television, many shows help exemplify the ideal lifestyle. They show people with fancy cars, clothes, and a “perfect” life. But, as we all

know, this is not reality, but we still strive toward having a life like the one depicted on television. Harmon further writes, “Television illustrates a thousand times each hour how branded objects are dovetailed together to form a coherent pattern of selfhood, a lifestyle. If you are successful and happy you drive a new car, you wear designer clothes, you have a house full of branded appliances, you have an entertainment center, you travel a lot, you have a cell phone or whatever new gadget is making the rounds” (Harmon 406).

What Harmon brings up can be related to phenomenological sociology. Edmund Husserl first defined this phenomenology as an “interest in those things that can be directly apprehended by one’s senses” (Wallace and Wolf 263). In a materialistic culture, the phenomenon of our everyday life is saturated with having a nice car and nice clothes. We are overwhelmed with things that we can touch and see with our senses. But what kind of role do such things actually play in our lives? Our senses see and use them, but that is really all they are for. They should not define who we are or what we are. But television and other technological services have become parts of our society such that they substitute for having direct interaction among ourselves. For example, as Wallace and Wolf point out in *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, “Presidential candidates communicate by television commercials, not by hour-long speeches to large crowds (and Romeo and Juliet could use mobile telephones today). Change has been very rapid: for the first edition of this book we shared typed manuscripts and depended on the mail service, but now we collaborate by e-mail and send whole documents electronically to our publishers” (Wallace and Wolf 188). It is true that television and technology are not in and of themselves bad, but they can be very harmful when they are misused.

In his article, Mark Harmon also discusses some of the common mechanisms

and gimmicks that marketers and companies use to get people to purchase their products—most widely used, is the credit system, or “buy now, pay later,” which make people buy any product, such as a car or a couch, while thinking it is free...for now (Harmon 6). But, a few months down the road, bills start to come for this stuff and the consumer may not have the extra money in their budget to pay them. This often results either in further use of the credit card and subsequent accumulation of more debt, or, in case of bankruptcy, to not being able to pay at all. These types of common mechanisms and their associated marketing gimmicks are regularly used by companies and marketers to attract consumers to a particular product. Many furniture stores use these gimmicks. Many commercials feature huge bedroom and living room sets that are a few thousand dollars, but you do not have to start making payments until a year later. This pulls in the consumer, even if they do not have the money at the moment; to them, at the time, it does not matter, since they won't have to worry about paying for them until a year later. Pursuing such purchasing decisions often comes as a result of people making comparisons between their own lives and those of “the Joneses.” In regard to how sociological theory has shed light on this social phenomenon, Harmon writes, “The cultivation of materialism approach complements several theoretical traditions. It most closely follows social comparison theory, the contention that people compare their lives with idealized images portrayed in advertising” (Harmon 3).

The types of lifestyles that are idealized on television leads people to compare their own lives to those of others, resulting in life plans that may not have otherwise come about. For example, *Beverly Hills 90210* was an extremely popular television drama that was watched by millions. It was about a group of teenagers growing up in the privileged area of Beverly Hills. They all

had the newest clothes, fancy cars, and lived in enormous mansions. This show depicted their way of living as normal. It made it seem like shopping on Rodeo Drive was a normal activity and everyone should be doing it. Personally, I watched this show growing up and I dreamed of shopping on Rodeo Drive and living in a mansion. I know this is not reality and a very small percentage of people live in this manner, but television gave me the outlet to see this kind of lifestyle and brainwashed me into trying to have one just like the one portrayed in the film. It was presumed that this kind of lifestyle would bring happiness.

Our society's issues with materialism and stress can be changed, according to the Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann and their Social Construction of Reality theory. According to this theory, social life is a constructed reality that can be changed to benefit cultural and economic structures (Wallace and Wolf 271). In his movie, *The Big One*, Michael Moore uses his book tour for his book *Downsize This* as an opportunity to show his viewers how companies engage in “downsizing,”—which involves laying people off and sending their jobs overseas for cheap labor. Paying an employee fifty cents instead of ten dollars an hour makes these companies a lot more money, and in the corporate world profit is the most important thing. Moore also talks about people in America, “earning and spending.” What makes downsizing possible, in other words, is not only how cheaply things are produced by exporting jobs overseas, but that also there are people who are able to spend their money in buying those products. In order to challenge the problem of downsizing so as to socially reconstruct the social realities of unemployment and poverty that it brings about, one can also question and limit the extent to which one's purchasing behavior contributes to maintaining the existing conditions. This is exactly what marketers and companies want people not to do. Instead, they

want them to get that paycheck on Friday, and head to the mall and spend it on materialistic items.

Many people use consumption in their everyday lives to maintain a certain lifestyle. Goffman's dramaturgical theory of society and of everyday life sheds further light on how we behave in a culture whose plot is significantly shaped by materialistic culture. He regards everyday life as a theater where people act according to the roles and positions they occupy and the behaviors these roles and positions require. **Impression management**, according to Goffman, is "the ways in which the individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her" (Wallace and Wolf 238). In their everyday interactions amid a materialistic culture, people try to give the impression that they are of a higher social status and for this, they use props and status symbols such as nice clothes, a big house, and a nice car in order to make their intended impressions on others. These products are what the individual uses to "guide" others toward seeing them in a certain light.

Affluenza is a disease that many people are unaware of, but has a huge impact on our society. Children are especially vulnerable in this process. Marketers use children as their "captive" audience and go to great lengths to grab children's attention and hold onto it. Children are the most influential consumers in our society and marketing agencies use them to their advantage. For instance, David Siegel, a marketing professional, in his book, *Great Tween Buying Machine: Capturing Your Share of the Multi-Billion Dollar Tween Market*, gives pointers and powerful information for other marketers to use to promote their influence in the materialism of children. Siegel acknowledges that children influence their parents into buying items for them, goods ranging from food to toys. Once parents buy a specific product for their children, there is a very strong chance that the

parents will buy the item again for their child. This creates a cycle in which the child has "taught" their parents to purchase the item and will continue to do so (Siegel 67). Affluenza has a specially large impact on children because they are at the ages in which they learn the most and are the most influenced. Marketing to children on television and through other means promotes their wanting to buy things, influencing their parents to buy them, and continuing the vicious cycle of Affluenza.

This is one of the main consequences of materialism and Affluenza in our society. It starts when people are young children, when their brains are learning the most. The want for things starts at a young age and continues throughout their lives. This is one of the reasons I enjoy things and have some personal problems with materialism. Watching the television as a child, I was also bombarded with the type of marketing Siegel is talking about. If I see an item, such as a purse or a pair of shoes, I will spend money on them, even if I should be saving my money for more important things such as rent. If I continue this bad habit, I could put myself into lots of debt and start my future on a negative path for the rest of my life. David Siegel also discusses the relationship between happiness and children. According to him, research indicates that 95 percent of children are happy and expect to have a better life than their parents. This is a statistic that many marketers use to develop their marketing tools for children. They always will show children happy in commercials and print ads, and especially happy when they are involved in the product they are trying to sell (Siegel 87). If you ever spend time watching a television show on a channel for children, such as Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel, there is constantly marketing going on. I have experienced this marketing to children first hand because I work as a nanny to two young girls. I baby-sit them three days a week, and they enjoy watching tele-

vision on both of these networks. Recently I decided to sit and study the programs and commercials they were watching. Every single commercial break was filled with happy children, playing with all different kinds of toys and eating tons of sugary foods that children on the other end of the television would beg their parents to buy. One particular example was a Friendly's restaurant commercial that had kids laughing and enjoying their fried food, and telling everyone to have their parents bring them to Friendly's where they can make their own sundaes. This commercial showed happy children enjoying delicious food, and explicitly telling the children on the other side of the television to ask their parents to bring them to the restaurant. After conducted this exercise, it now does not surprise me that children are considered such important targets of marketing campaigns. They have the power to influence their parents into continually buying them all of these items because they are the ones with the money.

Ethnomethodologists study how ordinary people make sense of their everyday activities. Obviously much of our everyday activities are normally taken for granted, so the question of making sense of them is not even raised (Wallace and Wolf 269). This implies that because people do not question their daily lives, their work, and their busy schedules, nothing will ever be done about them if they are not questioned. People take their work overload and other daily activities for granted and think that this is the only way to do things. If people question their lives, there may find that there other other ways of conducting it. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, for example, Mitch and Morrie reminisce about a class in which the professor, Morrie, came into the classroom and sat down without saying a word. He just stared at the class without saying a word and the students became uncomfortable. Mitch tells of how many of them stared at the clock, and did other

things to cope with the uncomfortable atmosphere that the the professor's silence had created. By acting out of the norm, and "breaching" the routine, Morrie had made the students question what they took for granted, their habits of automatic talking, of filling time with empty words, and not taking the time to remain silent and thoughtful about our everyday lives, which we often do not engage in.

This example from *Tuesdays with Morrie*, brings me back to the idea that people do not spend enough time in their lives to focus on the important things that matter most. Mitch Albom was one of sociologist Morrie Schwartz's favorite student, who went on to become very successful sports writer. But he did not originally keep in touch with Morrie as he promised he would. When he heard that Morrie was dying, he went to visit him and Morrie taught him his "last lessons"—not about death, but about living. Morrie helped Mitch realize the important things of life and how to love and live life fully. These lessons helped Mitch realize that he should not be spending all of his time focusing on work and article deadlines, but should pay attention to other important aspects of his life, including his feelings toward and relationship with his girlfriend. Morrie advised Mitch: "...by throwing yourself into these emotions, by allowing yourself to dive in, all the way, over your head even, experience them fully and completely. You know what pain is. You know what love is. You know what grief is. And only then can you say, 'All right. I have experienced that emotion. I recognize that emotion. Now I need to detach from that emotion for a moment'" (Albom 104). Morrie was showing Mitch how important it is to let oneself experience a variety of emotions while not being consumed by them.

On his deathbed, Morrie taught Mitch an important lesson about life, one that goes to the heart of the thesis of this paper as well: "Money is not a substitute for ten-



derness, and power is not a substitute for tenderness. I can tell you, as I'm sitting here dying, when you most need it, neither money nor power will give you the feelings you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have" (Albom 125).

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