



# Can Thrift Bring Well-being? A Review of the Research and a Tentative Theory

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## Abstract

Contemporary forms of consumer capitalism encourage people to prioritize materialistic values, an orientation associated with lower personal well-being. Such materialistic values stand in contrast to the economic attitude of thrift, which encourages saving, self-sufficiency, reuse of goods, and avoiding debt. This article reviews the existing empirical literature on thrift and well-being, finding it to be very contradictory, with studies showing positive, negative, and null associations between various operationalizations of well-being and of thrift. A need-based theory is presented to explain these inconsistent findings. The theory suggests that thrifty attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles sometimes can work to satisfy psychological needs for safety/security, competence, relatedness, and autonomy (and thus promote well-being) but sometimes interfere with satisfaction of these needs (and thus diminish well-being). Empirical and anecdotal evidence is reviewed in support of this theory, and future directions for testing and refining it are proposed.

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The high levels of consumption required under contemporary American corporate capitalism are facilitated when people believe that happiness, success, and meaning arise (at least partly) from earning a good deal of money and spending it on the products, services, and experiences offered in the marketplace (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). This consumer mindset or ‘materialistic value orientation’ (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004) increases the probability that people engage in behaviors that support consumer capitalism, such as: spending their time shopping, learning about available goods and services, replacing functional but older goods with ‘the latest thing’, paying other people for services that were once taken care of within the household, and buying on credit.

The idea of ‘thrift’ stands in contrast to many aspects of this economic system’s ideology, as it encourages people to save rather than spend, to avoid debt rather than purchase on credit, to reuse or repair objects rather than buy new ones, and to develop their own skills rather than rely on the services of others. While thrift is neither conceptually nor empirically just the opposite of materialism and consumerism (see Kasser, 2005; Lastovicka, Bettencourt, Hughner, & Kuntze, 1999; Tatzel, 2002, 2003; Troisi, Christopher, & Marke, 2006), its historically important place in U.S. culture (Blankenhorn, Whitehead, & Brophy-Warren, 2009) has nonetheless been worn away as consumerism has become increasingly important. Consider, for example, that during World War II U.S. citizens were told it was their patriotic duty to purchase war savings bonds, buy fewer shoes, and grow victory gardens. In contrast, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans were told that ‘going shopping’ was how they could help their country (Carney & Dickerson, 2001). Another example of the predominance of consumerism over thrift concerns the nearly inescapable advertising messages on which corporations yearly spend billions of dollars so as to convince people that products and services will improve

their lives (Richins, 1992, 1995). Estimates are that the average American sees from 3,600 to 5,000 ads per day (Jhally, 1997; Story, 2007); while I have no hard data, it seems unlikely that Americans see anywhere near that many messages per day encouraging thrift.

The shift towards a consumer mindset and away from a thrift ethos has clearly had the desired economic effect: Since the 1950s, the United States' Gross National Product and the average citizen's material standard of living have increased substantially. But despite the plethora of messages suggesting that 'the good life' is 'the goods life', the percentage of people in national polls saying they are very or extremely happy has not changed (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Myers, 2000), while rates of depression (Cross-National Collaborative Group, 1992) and anxiety (Twenge, 2000) have increased. What's more, numerous studies show that to the extent people believe that wealth, money, and possessions are important goals to strive towards, they also report lower life satisfaction and vitality, fewer experiences of pleasant emotions, greater depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, and more frequent experiences of unpleasant emotions (Belk, 1985; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Schor, 2004; Twenge et al., 2010; see Kasser, 2002 for a review).

### **Thrift and Well-being**

Given that consumerism and materialism do not bring people well-being, might thrift? That is, do people experience greater well-being when they focus on the cardinal features of thrift by saving resources, avoiding debt, and repairing and reusing material things (Lastovicka et al., 1999)? I set out to answer this question by reviewing the empirical literature on how various indicators of well-being are associated with how much people hold thrifty attitudes, how much they practice thrifty behaviors, and whether they belong to groups known to vary in thriftiness.

#### *Attitudes towards thrift*

Yamauchi and Templer (1982) first explored how well-being relates to thrifty attitudes by using a sub-scale of their Money Attitude Scale (MAS), labeled 'Retention-Time'; it includes items such as 'I am very prudent with money' and 'I put money aside on a regular basis'. High scores on Retention-Time were associated with more fears, guilt, and worries about the future and with more obsessional traits such as being highly organized, clean, and tidy, but were unrelated to anxiety, depression, and somatic concerns. While Norvilitis, Szablicki, and Wilson (2003) found no associations between Retention-Time scores and either life satisfaction or stress, this measure of thrift was negatively associated with self-reports of 'financial well-being', which assessed how much subjects were worried about their debt levels (e.g., 'I worry about repaying my credit cards').

Furnham and Okamura (1999) tested the associations of thrift and well-being by examining two types of 'money pathologies' (Forman, 1987) related to thrift: the 'miser', who is described as hoarding money, being afraid of losing it, and not enjoying it; and the 'bargain hunter', who is described as obsessively pursuing bargains and becoming angry when he or she must pay full price. In a sample of 277 U.K. adults, misers were more depressed and pessimistic, whereas bargain hunters were more pessimistic and reported more negative emotions when they thought of money.

Nation-level data from the World Values Survey are consistent with these negative relations. Minkov (2009) examined the happiness, unhappiness, and life satisfaction of 97

nations as predicted by the percentage of respondents who chose 'thrift' as a quality that children should learn. After controlling for a variety of other indicators (e.g., GDP, individualism versus collectivism), this measure of attitudes towards thrift emerged as a significant negative predictor of the percentage of citizens who reported being very happy. However, thrift bore no significant associations to assessments of national unhappiness or life satisfaction.

In contrast to these generally negative findings, two studies have reported positive relations between thrift and well-being. In a sample of adult college students, Tatzel (2008) found a positive association between life satisfaction and a measure of frugality developed by Lastovicka et al. (1999); no significant associations occurred for happiness, however. Kasser (2005) adapted this Lastovicka et al. measure for use with U.S. adolescents, finding that high scores were associated with greater self-esteem, less cigarette smoking, and less fighting; frugality was, however, unrelated to happiness or anxiety.

In sum, these studies indicate null, negative, and positive associations between well-being and self-reports of thrifty attitudes.

### *Debt and savings*

Because avoiding debt and saving money are key components of being thrifty, I also reviewed literature on whether people who practice such financial behaviors report greater well-being than those who do not.

Some studies suggest that individuals who report high levels of debt suffer from lower well-being. For example, U.S. adults with high credit card debt also report more anxiety (Drentea, 2000) and physical health problems (Drentea & Lavrakas, 2000). Other studies have found associations of high debt with emotional instability (Pirog & Roberts, 2007) and suicide attempts (Buglass, 1976; Hatcher, 1994). On the other hand, Norvilitis et al. (2003) found that college students' debt to income ratio was unrelated to their life satisfaction or stress.

Other studies have assessed how worries or dissatisfaction with debt levels, rather than debt *per se*, relate to well-being. When undergraduate and graduate students are worried about their debt levels or their ability to pay their bills, they also report poorer mental health (Roberts, Golding, Towell, & Weinreb, 1999), more depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Hodgson & Simoni, 1995), and lower life satisfaction and greater stress (Norvilitis et al., 2003). Similar results occur in samples of adults, with more stress (Berger, Powell, & Cook, 1988) and postnatal depression (Reading & Reynolds, 2001) reported by those worried about debt. Although these findings might suggest that thrifty individuals experience higher well-being, it may be thrifty individuals who are less satisfied with their debt levels. For instance, Norvilitis et al. (2003) found that people scoring high in retention-time attitudes (i.e., the thrift scale of the MAS) expressed *more* concern about their debt levels, regardless of the amount of debt they actually had. Thus, it may be thrifty people who report more worries about their debt levels and have lower well-being. This makes sense given that people low in thrift likely have a 'devil-may-care' attitude towards debt, which reflects itself in low worries about debt and relatively high well-being.

Regarding savings rates and well-being, satisfaction with savings has been associated with less stress among women (Berger et al., 1988) and was among the strongest determinants of a measure of 'general well-being' for two of three samples of German adult workers (Bergermaier, Borg, & Champoux, 1984). Barnes, Pase, and Van Leeuwen (1999) also found that women who reported that they regularly saved money reported lower stress and were more satisfied in their roles as mothers, wives, and workers.

In sum, this literature suggests that people with high levels of debt and those who do not save oftentimes report more stress and psychopathology. Further, although studies suggest that people report higher well-being when they are satisfied with their levels of debt, some evidence suggests that such satisfaction may reflect less thrifty attitudes.

### *Groups high or low in thrift*

A final approach to understanding how well-being might relate to thrift is to compare the well-being of groups who assumedly differ in their thrift practices from the mainstream. Although such comparisons can be quite informative, care should be taken in generalizing from such findings, as these groups no doubt have other characteristics that might account for the results reported below.

One group of individuals potentially high in thrift include practitioners of 'downshifting' and 'Voluntary Simplicity' (VS), who often leave higher paying, high stress jobs for more meaningful but lower-paying work, and thus practice thriftier behaviors to support life on this lower income (see Elgin, 1993; McDonald, Oates, Young, & Hwang, 2006; Pierce, 2000; Schor, 1993). Indeed, one popular text for such individuals presents a nine-step program with saving money and avoiding debt as key components (Dominguez & Robin, 1992). Studies in North America (Brown & Kasser, 2005) and the Netherlands (Schreurs, 2010) suggest that, compared to mainstream individuals, downshifters and VSrs hold more thrifty attitudes and beliefs, consume less, and engage in more thrifty (and ecologically sound) behaviors such as reusing and repairing items. What's more, Brown and Kasser (2005) found that VSrs reported significantly higher life satisfaction and a higher ratio of pleasant to unpleasant emotions than did mainstream Americans matched on age, gender, and geographical location.

The Amish are another American cultural group known for their plain living and frugal values. Members of this Christian sect live a primarily rural lifestyle that rejects many of the technological advances (such as gasoline powered tractors and television) that characterize contemporary American consumer society (see Hostetler, 1980, 1989). The importance the Amish place on thrift is well documented by Logsdon (1986), who, for example, quotes their sensible saying, "Don't spend more than you make and life will be good to you" (p. 82). Several studies also document the high levels of well-being experienced by the Amish. One study of 12,500 Amish people living in Lancaster, Pennsylvania found that rates of major affective disorders were approximately half the rate typical for mainstream populations; further, alcohol abuse, drug abuse and anti-social behavior were almost nonexistent (Egeland & Hostetler, 1983). Other data show that on a 1 to 7 scale of life satisfaction, the Pennsylvania Amish score a 5.8, tying with individuals on Forbes' list of the 400 wealthiest Americans for the highest mean (Diener & Seligman, 2004).

Another group-based approach to studying thrift derives from two disorders in the psychiatric literature. First are the 'compulsive consumers' who experience strong urges to shop and purchase goods that have little functionality and that replicate goods already owned (Faber, 2004). Compulsive consumers also accumulate large debts; one estimate suggests that around half of their incomes must be used for nonmortgage debt (in comparison to around 20% for most people; Christenson et al., 1994). Such findings clearly suggest that compulsive consumers are low in thrift. A growing literature also suggests that compulsive consumers report frequent experience of negative emotions, low self-esteem, poor self-control, and higher than normal psychopathology (see Christenson et al., 1994; Faber, 2004; McElroy, Keck, & Phillips, 1995). The second form of psychopathology related to thrift is compulsive hoarding. People with this disorder may be *overly*

thrifty, as they often keep enormous amounts of material objects (e.g., clothes, newspapers, and even bath water) for purported future uses that rarely come to pass. Frost and Hartl (1996) reviewed substantial evidence showing that compulsive hoarders suffer from a host of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, and social conflict.

In summary, the research literature comparing the well-being of groups differing in thrift practices is once again rather contradictory.

## A Tentative Theory of Thrift and Well-being

This literature paints an inconsistent picture of how well-being relates to thrift. Across the variety of studies reviewed, thrift bore positive, negative, and null associations with well-being. The variety of operationalizations of thrift and of well-being used by different investigators, the fact that all of the research is correlational or quasi-experimental, and the general paucity of research make it difficult to confidently conclude how thrift and well-being relate.

Another problem with this literature is that no overarching 'theory of thrift' has guided research. To my knowledge, the only extant theory of thrift and well-being was proffered by Tatzel (2002, 2003), who suggested that people experience lower well-being if they are either very tight or very loose with their money, and thus moderation is ideal. To my knowledge, the only test of this sensible proposition failed to support it (Kasser, 2005).

The development of additional theories regarding thrift and well-being may help both to clarify the meaning of the extant findings and to point researchers towards interesting questions to better elucidate how thrift relates to well-being. To this end, below I propose a *tentative* theory of how thrift may, or may not, promote people's well-being. My approach draws on the substantial empirical and theoretical work documenting that people's well-being depends in part on the satisfaction of four psychological needs: (a) safety/security; (b) competence; (c) relatedness; and (d) autonomy (see, e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Epstein, 1990; Maslow, 1954; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Kasser (2002) demonstrated the usefulness of such an approach in explaining the negative associations between materialism and well-being, showing that this relationships could be understood as occurring in part because the more people prioritize materialistic values, the lower their satisfaction of these psychological needs. Given that thrift has been shown to bear inconsistent associations with well-being, a need-based theory would suggest that under certain circumstances thrifty attitudes and behaviors do satisfy people's psychological needs (and thus promote well-being) but in other cases interfere with need satisfaction (and thus diminish well-being). The next four sections explore this possibility.

### *Safety/security*

Safety/security needs concern the basic impulse to avoid that which is dangerous and unpredictable in order to increase the likelihood of remaining alive. Many times, the practice of thrift can help satisfy this need. For example, Maslow (1954, p. 87) proposed that safety needs make themselves known *via* 'the desire for a savings account', a hypothesis supported by Oleson's (2004) finding that nontraditionally aged students who reported higher satisfaction of safety needs also agreed with statements such as 'I budget my money very well' and 'I am proud of my ability to save money'. Thrift may also satisfy safety/security needs by helping individuals feel confident that they have the skills

necessary to take care of their material needs. For example, if individuals know how to grow their own food, sew clothes, and construct basic structures, they would likely feel more confident that they could weather difficult times. Finally, an aversion to debt and a propensity to save might increase feelings of safety and security by removing the anxiety known to be associated with high debt loads and the strain of living on the edge of bankruptcy. Thus, it may be that results reviewed above showing higher well-being among individuals who report low levels of credit card debt and high levels of savings occur because such individuals feel reasonably secure that they are unlikely to fall into deep financial holes and to be unable to materially care for themselves.

On the other hand, problems with the satisfaction of safety/security needs may motivate a strong focus on thrift. Kasser (2002) reviewed studies showing that people with strong materialistic values had past experiences of insecurity (such as growing up with non-nurturant parents or in economically disadvantaged situations) that can lead them to prioritize financial success aspirations. Perhaps the same is true for thrift. As mentioned above, thrifty individuals often worry about their financial status (Furnham & Okamura, 1999; Norvilitis et al., 2003), an observation consistent with anecdotal observations that individuals who grew up very poor often retain thrifty attitudes and behaviors even once more resources are available. Indeed, British citizens over 50 years old who grew up during the difficult economic times of the 1930s and 1940s were especially likely to believe that saving was beneficial (Furnham, 1985); Schreurs (2010) similarly found stronger endorsement of thrifty attitudes among older than younger Dutch study participants. If lingering feelings of insecurity manifest themselves in compulsive hoarding, a strong concern that one's children are thrifty, and or in persistent dissatisfaction with debt levels, this could explain why these indicators of thrift have been previously associated with greater levels of anxiety and stress.

### *Competence*

Satisfaction of the need for competence is facilitated by feeling efficacious (Bandura, 1977; White, 1959), positively evaluating one's self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965), and believing that one's skills bring about positive results (Rotter, 1966). Of the four needs, competence appears most consistently satisfied by thrifty attitudes and behaviors. For example, adults who hold more thrifty attitudes and have lower debt also report higher self-esteem, greater self-efficacy, more satisfaction of esteem needs, and stronger internal locus of control (Livingstone & Lunt, 1992; Oleson, 2004; Tokunaga, 1993). Similar results have been reported with younger samples, as Kasser (2005) found that U. S. adolescents with higher self-esteem also reported more frugal attitudes. Further support for the idea that thrift is facilitative of competence comes from studies which show low self-esteem among compulsive consumers (i.e., those assumedly low in thrift; Faber, 2004).

While people who feel competent may become thrifty, such an ethos might also help satisfy the need for competence by building life skills (Bandura, 1977; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) and providing intrinsic satisfactions (De Young, 1996). Whereas few money skills are developed by wantonly spending money or by charging whatever one desires to a credit card, saving and avoiding debt require the development of money skills such as carefully watching one's income and spending, planning how one will use money, and practicing self-restraint. Such skills are not only likely to result in lower debt and greater savings, but to build a sense of competence that can then support the positive well-being outcomes known to be associated with such healthy financial behaviors. Thrift might also satisfy competence needs through the development of skills that support reusing,

repairing, and other do-it-yourself behaviors instead of purchasing replacement items or paying for others' services. For example, more self-sufficient (and very satisfied) people like the Amish and some Voluntary Simplifiers often make many of their own clothes, raise much of their own food, and engage in other tasks that develop skills and reinforce the feeling that one is competent. Contrast these skills with those developed by the consumerist mindset: shopping for what others have produced and searching the Internet for someone to repair or build what one desires.

### *Relatedness*

Theoretical and empirical work clearly documents that people experience higher levels of well-being when they have close, intimate relationships with spouses, family, and friends, and when they feel connected and involved with others in their broader community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1954; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thrift appears to frustrate this need for some people, while for others, thrift seems to be associated with greater satisfaction; this duality may help account for the inconsistent associations between thrift and well-being.

Part of the problem with thrift is that it runs counter to a mainstream culture that emphasizes spending and purchase rather than saving and reuse. As such, thrifty individuals may feel alienated from the majority, who focus on the values of consumer culture. Indeed, significant portions of downshifters and VSrs report, at best, mixed reactions from other people and, at worst, clear disapproval, suspicion, derision, and anger (Pierce, 2000; Schreurs, 2010). For example, one downshifting man who resigned from a successful, upwardly mobile career was told by co-workers that his decision was 'unacceptable and irresponsible', as well as 'subversive' (Pierce, 2000; pg. 143). Other VSrs report a growing distance between them and many of their friends. Such a mismatch between the values of thrifty people and those in their social surroundings clearly works against feelings of relatedness and connectedness (Sagiv, Roccas, & Hazan, 2004) and could perhaps explain the depression and stress associated with thrifty attitudes in some studies.

At the same time, other people seem to experience thrift as a boon to relationships. Schreurs (2010) and Pierce (2000) report on individuals who disengaged from the work-spend-work lifestyle and found they had more time to be with their children, spouses, and friends, as well as to volunteer in their community. Said differently, a thrifty lifestyle provided more time to satisfy the need for relatedness, which would in turn yield the high levels of satisfaction and low levels of psychopathology reported by thrifty individuals in some studies.

The relational benefits of thrift might account for the particularly high levels of well-being reported by the Pennsylvania Amish (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Unlike most VSrs and downshifters, the Amish practice thrift within a community that both supports and bolsters such efforts. Consider Logsdon's (1986) report of a barn-raising in Ohio by the members of the Amish community. Whereas it took the Amish only a few weeks and cost \$30,000, a mainstream building contractor estimated it would have taken his crew all summer and cost \$100,000. The fascinating point is that the barn-raising not only saved the Amish farmer money, but it also built community: He said "We look forward to raisings. There are so many helping, no one has to work too hard. We get in a good visit" (Logsdon, 1986, p. 75).

What this story makes clear is that thrift is not only *supported* by the Amish community, but may help *strengthen* the ties of the community. Whereas a person in mainstream consumer culture would hire strangers to build a barn, the Amish farmer and

his neighbors 'get in a good visit'. There are many other ways that community is weakened by the solutions and practices offered by consumer culture, when it could be strengthened by thrift. For example, most Americans drive to big chain hardware stores to buy tools, rather than share with neighbors or join a local tool co-op. Most buy frozen peas manufactured by big agri-businesses rather than join a community garden and celebrate harvest with a 'shucking party'. While these consumer-oriented practices may be good for our current conception of economic growth, they encourage behaviors that avoid close interpersonal relationships. In contrast, when thrifty practices are embedded within a community's shared vision, it may become easier for individuals both to feel thrifty and to satisfy their relatedness needs.

### *Autonomy*

The final psychological need to consider is autonomy, the experience of freely choosing one's behavior rather than feeling forced or compelled. Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) characterizes autonomous behavior as occurring when people engage in an action for the enjoyment, interest, or challenge it brings (i.e., intrinsic motivation) or when people have reflected and come to the conclusion that a behavior, while perhaps not fun, is worthwhile because it fits their values (i.e., identified motivation). These autonomous reasons stand in contrast to 'controlled' reasons for behaving that occur when people coerce themselves so as to avoid feeling guilty, anxious, or ashamed (i.e., introjected motivation) or when people feel forced by the promise of rewards or the fear of punishment (i.e., external motivation). Substantial research documents that satisfaction of autonomy promotes well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, 2002). As was the case for relatedness, autonomy needs are only sometimes satisfied by thrifty attitudes and practices.

Recall, for example, that people scoring high on the retention-time subscale of the MAS (Yamauchi & Templer, 1982) also report greater worry and anxiety about money. Such results suggest that thrift may be driven by introjected motivation; they also fit with anecdotes about the anxiety-driven thrift of people who seem obsessed that they may not have enough money in the future and of hoarders who compulsively keep old, worthless items. As such, it seems clear why anxiety has sometimes been associated with thrifty attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles. An SDT-based analysis can also help explain why the 'involuntarily simple', i.e., the poor, often report less happiness than the middle class (Diener & Seligman, 2004): they have little choice but to be thrifty. Indeed, Schreurs (2010) found that compared to those who downshifted voluntarily, those who involuntarily downshifted reported more negative and fewer positive experiences associated with their thrifty lifestyles. Of course, not all poor people are thrifty and low in well-being, but to the extent that people feel forced to be thrifty because of poverty, their thrift-relevant behaviors are likely motivated by external reasons, rather than by choice, resulting in the decrements to well-being noted in some studies of thrift.

Thrifty practices can also be motivated for autonomous reasons, however. De Young (1996) showed that many intrinsic satisfactions arise from being thrifty, as such behaviors often provide enjoyment and challenge as people find their own self-sufficient ways of solving material problems. Schreurs (2010) also reported that many downshifters feel that their thrifty lifestyles have helped them be more adventurous, autonomous, and creative. High levels of identified motivation with regard to thrift might also occur because many of those who downshift or practice VS have deliberated about their rejection of materialistic values and adoption of their new lifestyle (Elgin, 1993; Pierce, 2000). Similarly, built



into the Amish socialization system is a period when teenagers decide whether to remain in the sect or to enter the mainstream culture; as such, those who join the Amish church typically have voluntarily adopted the lifestyle (Hostetler, 1980). The process of carefully choosing one's lifestyle, rather than automatically following standard culture patterns, would facilitate feelings of autonomy, which would in turn help account for the findings that VS practitioners and the Pennsylvania Amish report higher well-being than mainstream Americans.

### Summary and Future Directions

Can thrift bring well-being? This review suggests that the best answer is 'Sometimes'. The existing literature on the associations of well-being to thrifty attitudes, practices, and groups is quite contradictory, but application of a need-based psychological theory seems to help explain the inconsistent findings. Essentially, it appears that thrifty attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles sometimes satisfy the psychological needs required for well-being to occur but other times frustrate those very same needs.

In cases that thrift successfully satisfies psychological needs, well-being seems to result. Sometimes people use thrifty financial practices to increase their feelings of security and to develop skills that help them to feel competent. They also find ways to manage their relationships so as to avoid alienation from those in mainstream consumer culture, and instead use thrifty practices to maximize opportunities to be connected to others. Finally, some people practice thrift autonomously, doing so because of the fun, challenge, interest, and meaningfulness such practices can bring.

People experience lower well-being, however, when they practice thrift in ways that work against the satisfaction of their psychological needs. They may be thrifty in order to manage feelings of insecurity, and thus rarely feel satisfied with their levels of debt or savings. Such individuals also seem less likely to develop the skills and sense of competence that can derive from thrifty practices, and more likely to feel disconnected from others as a result of the mismatch between their ethos and that of mainstream consumer culture. Finally, some thrifty people may feel coerced to be thrifty by internal compulsions (e.g., feelings of anxiety) or external demands (e.g., poverty).

These characterizations, while based in research findings, clearly require further empirical scrutiny. Ideally, large scale studies could sample from a cross-section of people (perhaps over-representing groups such as the Amish and VSrs), measure thrifty attitudes and practices, determine how well people's needs are satisfied from those attitudes and practices, and assess a variety of indicators of personal well-being. Such studies would also do well to test the possibility of curvilinear relations between thrift and well-being (Tatzel, 2002, 2003) and to control for the bevy of other person-level factors that might be relevant to both thrift and well-being, including age, socio-economic status, personality traits, etc. Longitudinal studies could also examine whether changes in thrift (and thrift-related need satisfaction) are associated with changes in well-being; for example, does people's well-being improve when they move from a mainstream lifestyle to one focused on VS? Are such changes associated with changes in thrifty attitudes and behaviors? Experimental investigations could also test the causal pathways implied in this model. For example, youth could be randomly assigned to a control group or to an intervention designed to increase thrifty attitudes and practices in need-satisfying ways; support would be obtained for the proposed model if thrift, need satisfaction, and well-being increased in the intervention group more than the control group.

Another direction for future investigation is to examine how thrifty practices relate to *other people's* well-being. Perhaps thrift exerts a negative influence on others' well-being by leading thrifty individuals to hoard their money and donate less generously to charitable organizations. Thrift might also lead people to discount the ecological sustainability and social justice characteristics of goods in a search for 'cheap' products. On the other hand, thrift might lead individuals to respect limited resources in ways that promote positive environmental outcomes (Fujii, 2006), thus leaving more resources available to support the well-being of future generations.

Several potential benefits could accrue if psychologists conducted more research on these and other questions relevant to thrift and well-being. For example, tests of the model presented in this manuscript could expand the known applications of need-based theories (such as SDT) to yet another domain of people's lives. Second, better understanding of the conditions under which thrifty attitudes and practices satisfy people's psychological needs could contribute to both the literatures on economic psychology and the burgeoning work on the determinants of people's well-being. Finally, if future studies can identify the approaches to thrift that benefit people's well-being, feasible practical alternatives to today's consumer culture could be developed that are both more personally satisfying and ecologically sustainable than the current strong focus on the accumulation of money and possessions.

### Short Biography

Tim Kasser, PhD is Professor and Chair of Psychology at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, USA. He has authored numerous scientific articles and book chapters on materialism, values, goals, ecological sustainability, and quality of life, among other topics. Tim is also the author of *The High Price of Materialism* (MIT Press, 2002), co-editor of *Psychology and Consumer Culture* (APA, 2004) and co-author of *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity* (WWF-UK, 2009). He spends a good deal of his time working with activist groups that protect children from commercialization, that promote ecological sustainability, and that encourage a more 'inwardly rich' lifestyle than what is offered by consumerism. Tim lives with his wife, two sons, and assorted animals in the Western Illinois countryside. This article was commissioned by the Institute for American Values and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, and was made possible by generous support from the Templeton Foundation.

### Endnote

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