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Abstract

Perceptions of economic and security threats have recently led to a change in priorities in the Western world, placing the protection of one's own group well-being and safety over the importance attached to the defense of individual rights. Moreover, various studies have shown that such a reversal in priorities is associated to the rise of cold attitudes towards immigrants and minorities. The aim of the present research is to analyze the association between materialistic values and feelings of coldness towards various social groups, by considering the mediation effect of intergroup indifference, defined as being uncaring in regard to arbitrary policies affecting other social groups. The results supported the hypothesis. Materialistic values are indeed positively correlated with cold attitudes towards social groups, and this relationship is fully mediated by intergroup indifference. The results show that the study of intergroup dynamics should consider the role of intergroup indifference as it identifies a strategy of de-responsibilization that may be implemented blamelessly.

Keywords: post-materialism; intergroup indifference; prejudice; mediation; economic crisis

Feelings of Coldness towards Social Groups: The Revert to Materialist Values and the Role of Indifference

Many scholars (e.g. Werts, Scheepers, & Lubbers, 2013) have recently pointed out that in Western democratic societies there has been an increase of intolerance, social exclusion and feelings of coldness towards various social groups and minorities especially. That is, if in the past, as a result of the importance and desirability in pursuing values of inclusion, prejudicial attitudes had shifted from manifest to subtle forms (see Hodson, Hooper, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2005), in recent years intolerant attitudes have been progressively increased. Moreover, some resistance to support policies for reducing intergroup disparities and promoting the social inclusion of minorities is present even among people who declare they embrace egalitarian beliefs (Sritharan & Gawronski, 2010). Indeed, the exclusion of out-groups does not only materialize through the expression of prejudicial attitudes.

In his analysis of the holocaust and the restriction of minorities' rights during Nazi Germany, Bauman (1989) identified the *production of indifference* as one of the processes that exacerbate intergroup conflicts and violence. As confirmed by the analysis of various state-sanctioned violence (e.g. Staub, 2002) and of the role of bystanders in extreme intergroup dynamics (Levine, 2012), the silence of the population and its indifference may indeed work as a complicit factor in non-obstructing or even justifying perpetrators. Recently, some studies (Ellemers & Barreto, 2009; Passini, 2017, 2019a) have focused on attitudes of indifference towards the fate of some minorities that may lead to a silent support backing the implementation of discriminatory policies. The idea of the present research was that the importance attached to materialistic values, as opposed to post-materialist ones, has led many people to focus on the priorities of their own group and to feel a certain indifference towards the fate of other groups, with a consequent increase in feelings of coldness and distance vis-à-vis out-groups.

Back to Materialism

Beginning in 2007 with the US subprime mortgage market meltdown, the recent economic and financial crisis affecting many European countries has led both the institutions in power and the population at large to review the priorities to be achieved as a nation. This change in priorities is exemplified by the reversal in the welcome policy that has seen many countries both inside and outside Europe refusing to aid people in emergency situations because this is seen as secondary with respect to the resolution of the in-group's internal problems. After a time in which the more developed nations have, also as a result of the rising levels of economic development and a subsequent acquisition of greater economic security, undertaken the defense of so-called post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1977), the opposite has been happening in recent years. That is, perceptions of economic and security threats have led to a change in priorities, placing the protection of one's own group well-being and safety over the importance attached to the defense of individual rights.

Based on Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, Inglehart (1977) political-sociological theory of post-materialism is an interesting framework for analyzing national and cultural shifts and their connection with economic growth. One of the most interesting characteristics of this theory – derived from its connection with Maslow's hierarchy of needs – is the analysis of values in a relative rather than absolute way. This approach allows us to consider not how important certain values are in the minds of people, but specifically how individuals define priorities among them (Ippel, Gelissen, & Moors, 2014). In accordance with Inglehart (1977), individuals with post-materialistic values should emphasize self-expression, personal freedom, and participation in government decisions, while those with materialistic ones should give top priority to a personally and economically safe environment.

Hypotheses

The aim of the present research was to analyze the association between materialistic values and feelings of coldness towards various social groups, by considering the mediation effect of

intergroup indifference. Mediation analysis was chosen because the present research seeks to investigate whether the effect of materialism on feelings towards outgroups can be explained by the emergence of attitudes of indifference (intervening variable). As Baron and Kenny (1986) have pointed out, a reason for testing mediation is to try to understand the mechanism by means of which the causal variable affects the outcome. Specifically, it was hypothesized that setting priorities to materialistic values will be positively correlated with unfavorable feelings towards various social groups and intergroup indifference will mediate this relationship.

Methods

Sample

Participants were contacted online, using an Internet questionnaire. An invitation with the link to the questionnaire was emailed to the potential participants by various methods (e.g. mailing lists, newsgroups, social networking services). In particular, a university mailing list was used. Respondents were advised that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. No fee was offered. The questionnaire was drafted in Italian. In order to check and prevent a person from re-entering the survey site, the subject's IP address was monitored. The data were collected in 2017 and were primary data.

A total of 283 Italian citizens (68.6% women) responded by accessing the website and filling out the questionnaire. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 68 years (M = 35.36, SD = 13.48). As regards their level of education, 6% declared they had finished middle school, 48.2% declared they had completed a high school diploma, 39.4% had a university degree and 6.4% a masters or Ph.D. qualification.

Measures

Materialistic values. The complete post-materialism Inglehart index was used. This instrument consists of three forced choice items with four response categories each. In each case, respondents should rate the most and second most important goal for one's own country.

Specifically, the question was: “people sometimes talk about what the aims of Italy should be for the next ten years. Here are a few of them. Which of these would you consider the most important?,” followed by “and which would be the next most important?.” Two of the goals in each forced choice are post-materialist (more say in government, protecting free speech, having a bigger say in jobs, beautifying the cities and the countryside, a more human society, and a society where ideas count) and two are materialist (maintain order, curbing rising prices, economic growth, strong defense, stable economy, and fighting crime). As explained by Abramson and Inglehart (1995), the materialistic index was computed assigning the score 2 for each materialist goal ranked most important, and the score 1 for each one ranked second most important. A mean of the three items was computed (α = .69, no missing data, range = 0-3).

Intergroup indifference. Participants were asked to respond to eight items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): (1) “I am quite indifferent to the news about the rights denied to minorities,” (2) “I’m not interested much in the news about civil rights denied to homosexuals,” (3) “I think that Parliament has other priorities rather than dealing with the rights of certain minorities,” (4) “It makes no difference to me when Parliament issues laws in favour of minority rights,” (5) “There are other problems needing to be dealt with than the labour exploitation of immigrants,” (6) “I am rather indifferent to reports of harassment of and crimes committed against ethnic minorities,” (7) “I don't really care if the police are doing the wrong thing by evicting homeless people from public parks” and (8) “I'm rather indifferent to the fact that the police have maltreated the vagabonds.” An exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood criteria) was conducted. The scree test and a parallel analysis revealed a clear break between the first and second eigenvalue: 4.18, 0.86, 0.67, 0.64, and so on. Hence, only one component was extracted. Cronbach’s α was .87 (no missing data).

Feelings of coldness towards social groups. Participants rated the warmth (*vs.* coldness) of their feeling towards 20 different social groups on a scale ranging from 1 (*very cold*) to 7 (*very*

warm). Thirteen groups were taken from the research by Asbrock and colleagues (2010): atheists, feminists, gay rights activists, mentally handicapped people, obese people, people who cause disagreement in our society, people who criticize those in authority, people who just seem to be losers, physically unattractive people, prostitutes, protestors, psychiatric patients, and unemployed people. Choosing from those who often live on the margins of society, other seven social groups were added: beggars, elderly, homeless, people with AIDS, poor people, prisoners, and refugees. Since this measure was used to tap unfavorable feelings, the scale was reversed: the higher the score, the colder the feeling towards the groups. An index composed by all the groups ($\alpha = .90$, no missing data) was computed.

Results

The participants had low means on both materialism ($M = 1.14$) and indifference ($M = 2.71$), and medium scores on coldness towards social groups ($M = 4.60$). Materialism was positively correlated to indifference ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and coldness towards social groups ($r = .25$, $p < .001$).

In order to test the mediation hypothesis, the analysis was carried out using the PROCESS procedure for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). The mediation procedure was based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. Sobel test was used to assess the significance of the mediation. Gender and education were inserted as covariates. Results (see Figure 1) showed that the total effect of materialistic values on coldness towards social groups ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) was mediated by intergroup indifference (indirect effect $\beta = .14$, sobel test $z = 4.59$, $p < .001$), leaving a nonsignificant direct effect of $\beta = .10$. Both gender and education were non-significant: $\beta = .06$ and $\beta = .08$, respectively.

Discussion

The main aim of the present research was to analyze the relationship between the importance attached to materialistic values and feelings of coldness towards various social groups, and the mediation effect of so-called intergroup indifference. Firstly, the results support those studies (see Van Hiel, Cornelis, & Roets, 2010) that have shown that prioritizing materialistic over post-

materialistic values is connected with unfavorable feelings towards the out-groups. As recent analysis of the 2008 financial crisis (Bukowski, de Lemus, Rodriguez-Bailón, & Willis, 2016; Passini, 2015) has shown, people affected by the crisis tend to search for targets to blame for their situation.

Secondly, as hypothesized the mediation analysis shows that intergroup indifference fully mediates the direct effect of materialistic values on feelings of coldness towards social groups. This result suggests that a setback of individual priorities towards more basic and self-centered needs may lead to nurture attitudes of social distance and exclusion via the simple disregard of the entitlements and rights of groups different from one's own. This may be particularly true in Western democratic societies in which prejudicial attitudes and behaviors are usually disapproved as in open conflict with the founding principles of democracy (Hodson et al., 2005). In this sense, indifference may be used as a subtler strategy of excluding the others and denying minorities' rights without feeling blame and/or shame (see Passini, 2019b).

This study has some limitations that should be borne in mind for future research. First of all, because the data are correlational, causality can only be inferred. Thus, future studies using longitudinal data are needed to confirm directions of effects. Secondly, another measure of unfavorable attitudes should be used, as many of the out-groups proposed in the current scale may be an in-group for some participants. Thirdly, considering the affinities between subtle and hidden forms of prejudice and the concept of indifference outlined here, it might be interesting to analyse what the similarities and differences between these two constructs are. Moreover, the measure of indifference should be improved, because currently whether a person is indifferent to the news, the denied rights or the minorities might be ambiguous.

Notwithstanding these limitations and also in view of the caution required in generalizing data from a small number of participants, the results are promising and highlight some important implications for the study of intergroup conflicts. Firstly, the concept of post-materialism may be an

interesting instrument for analyzing the current political and social situation of so-called Western world in which many people are supporting blatantly nationalistic and chauvinistic parties. The issue of being a scale focusing on a ranking of values instead of absolute values forces people to think about their priorities in their daily lives and reveals those people who may not consider themselves intolerant but who, when faced with a choice, put the rights of their own group before those of others.

Secondly, the mediation analysis underlines that the study of intergroup and interpersonal dynamics should consider the impact and the role of indifference towards the restrictions of rights of other social groups. Indifference towards the fate of groups other than one's own is indeed a less undesirable way of pursuing the interests of one's own group to the detriment of others and it identifies a strategy of de-responsibilization that may be implemented blamelessly. As the analysis of past intergroup conflicts has shown, the production and enactment of indifferent attitudes and behaviors act as a real accomplice in the execution of profound injustices that undermine the core values of democracy.

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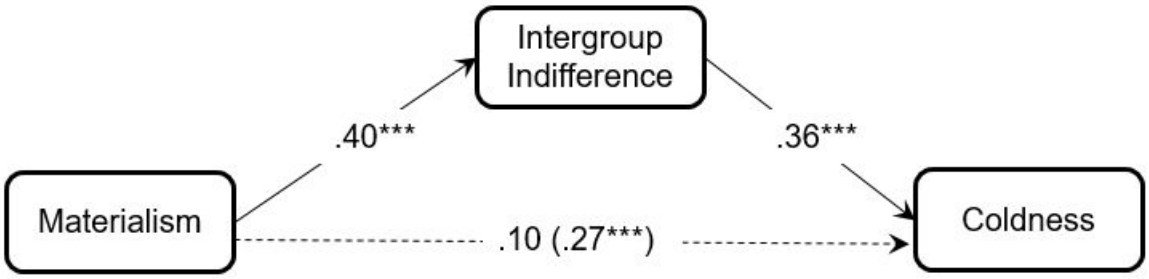
Figure 1. Path analysis of the effects of materialistic values on coldness towards social groups, mediated by intergroup indifference. Indirect effects in parentheses.